

**Mutual Suspicion at the Political Extremes:
How Ideology Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories**

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People frequently are suspicious of other groups. One societal group that is particularly target of substantial distrust are power holders, notably politicians, bankers or CEOs. Across the EU trust in politicians is low, and people endorse a variety of suspicious perceptions and beliefs pertaining to such powerful leaders (e.g., Andeweg, 2014; Fiske & Durante, 2014). Also, other societal groups may be target of suspicious perceptions among large groups of citizens, such as ethnic minority groups. Frequently, such suspicious perceptions take the form of conspiracy beliefs: The belief that other groups are conspiring in secret agreement to plan and execute an evil goal (e.g., Zonis & Joseph, 1994). Whereas conspiracy beliefs sometimes are sufficiently bizarre to remain obscure (e.g., the belief that the world is ruled by lizards disguised as humans), other conspiracy beliefs are adhered to by rather large portions of citizens, such as the belief in a 9-11 conspiracy (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009), and conspiracy beliefs pertaining to the assassination of John F. Kennedy (Pipes, 1997).

Many of these well-known conspiracy beliefs have a political element in them, as they assume an active role of elected officials in a scheme designed to deceive the public. As such, it stands to reason that political ideology should be related to conspiracy beliefs. At a very basic level, it has indeed been noted that the political left is inherently suspicious of the political right, and that the political right is inherently suspicious of the political left (Inglehart, 1987). An interesting study in this regard was conducted by Wright and Arbutnoth (1974), which investigated Democrats' and Republicans' perceptions of the Watergate affair. These scholars collected their data while Watergate was still unfolding: The Senate hearing had not taken place yet, and Richard Nixon's personal involvement was not yet known to the public. Their

findings revealed that Democrats were more likely than Republicans to believe that Richard Nixon was personally involved in the Watergate affair. This example is ironic in the sense that the conspiracy theory that was under investigation eventually turned out to be true. But for Wright and Arbutnoth's final conclusion that fact was beside the point: It was ideology that predicted who endorsed or debunked conspiracy beliefs about evil activities committed by others—of a different ideological conviction—in a relevant political context.

While this mutual left versus right distrust certainly is plausible, one may wonder whether the relation between ideology and conspiracy beliefs is best described by such a simple linear relationship. As a first observation, many conspiracy beliefs are politically neutral and could potentially be adhered to by both the left and the right (e.g., the widely-held conspiracy belief that many politicians are connected to organized crime). Second, and perhaps more importantly, a common research finding is that many people have a 'conspiratorial mindset' that generalizes to various conspiracy theories on a range of societal and political issues. The best predictor of belief in one conspiracy theory is belief in a different conspiracy theory (Goertzel, 1994), and indeed, one conspiracy theory can reinforce a general worldview of how conspiracies dominate political decision-making.

It has been noted that conspiracy beliefs frequently are part of a 'monological belief system': an organized set of cognitions about the world that assume the existence of many conspiratorial networks (Goertzel, 1994). Consistent with this assertion, belief in conspiracy theories can be predicted by various stable personality traits, or by relatively stable individual differences (e.g., Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Lewandowski, Oberauer, & Gignac, 2013; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010; Swami, Pietschnig, Tran, Nader, Stieger, & Voracek, 2013). Moreover,

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research reveals that there is a *positive* correlation between conspiracy beliefs that are in fact mutually incompatible (e.g., the belief that Princess Diana staged her own death and is still alive vs. the belief the Princess Diana was murdered by the Secret Service)—and belief in these incompatible conspiracy theories is mediated by an overall belief in the deceptiveness of authorities (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012).

How can we reconcile the insight that specific ideologies predict specific conspiracy beliefs, with the insight that there seems to be a general predisposition that makes one susceptible to such beliefs? An interesting suggestion was given by Inglehart (1987) who argued that general susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs is not necessarily predicted by the *content* or direction of one's ideology, but rather, by the *strength* of one's ideology. In other words, an important predictor of a conspiratorial mindset may be political extremism. The extreme-left might believe in different specific conspiracy theories than the extreme-right, but for both extremes such beliefs are deeply embedded in an underlying predisposition to be suspicious of the root causes of impactful societal events, and to assume an active and intentional role of out-groups in plotting actions that threaten one's own community. To illuminate, the extreme-left might believe more strongly in conspiracy theories about for instance capitalism (e.g., the belief that various wars were actually started by oil companies, and that bankers and large companies conspire together to start economic crises in order to suppress wages), and the extreme-right might believe more strongly in conspiracy theories about for instance science, or immigration (e.g., the belief that climate change is a hoax used only to extract research funding, or the belief that there is a Muslim conspiracy trying to implement traditional Sharia-laws in the EU)—but both extremes share a general tendency of suspiciousness towards power-holders, and to develop conspiracy theories when confronted with societal crises.

In the present chapter, we examine the possibility that political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories and that extremists on all ends of the political spectrum more strongly believe in conspiracy theories than political moderates. To this end, we first provide a few macro-political, historical observations about paranoid responses in different politically extremist regimes. After this, we describe contemporary psychological insight about politically extreme beliefs, and develop a theory of why the political extremes are most prone to believe in conspiracy theories. We then review a few of our own recent findings on this topic, and discuss implications and conclusions.

Historical Observations on the Extremism-Conspiracy Link

One basic feature of paranoid responses that are at the core of conspiracy theories is the belief that a different group poses a direct threat to one's own group (e.g., Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; Kramer & Schaffer, 2014; Van Prooijen & Van Lange, 2014; see also Van Prooijen & Van Dijk, 2014). Can we identify such paranoid intergroup perceptions in some of the extremist regimes that the world has seen in recent history? In this section we illuminate conspiracy thinking in a few of the most infamous extremist regimes of the 20th century. All the historical observations that follow are well known, and well documented by many sources.

One pertinent observation that emerges from the actions of politically extremist regimes is that the extreme left and the extreme right both are highly susceptible to conspiracy beliefs. As Pipes (1997) puts it, "Right and Left engage in similar forms of conspiracism because they share much with each other—a temperament of hatred, a tendency towards violence, a suspiciousness that encourages conspiracism—and little with the political center" (p. 155). Let us examine this

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statement separately for extremely left-wing and extremely right-wing regimes. A typical feature of extreme-left (e.g., communist, socialist) states is a paranoid stance towards the actions of citizens. Secret services in (for instance) the former Soviet Union and the former DDR (KGB; Stasi) closely monitored civilians, and frequently spied upon them to determine whether they were a threat to the community.

Ceausescu's regime in Romania had informants everywhere, frequently even within one's own family. Authorities in these regimes were particularly weary of the possibility that citizens might criticize political leaders and/or have affiliations with the capitalist West—and such affiliations would easily be interpreted as evidence that one was an enemy of the state, or a spy. Any sign of sympathy for the capitalist West could get citizens into serious trouble. The authorities were hence very alert of the possibility that citizens were conspiring against the government, to pursue goals that would compromise the goals of the communist state (e.g., Robins & Post, 1997; Pipes, 1997).

Another (potentially even more pernicious) illustration of such extreme-left paranoia is the radically communist Khmer Rouge regime that enforced a bloody rule over Cambodia during the late '70s. They endorsed the ideology to go back to a rural, communitarian way of life that was uncontaminated by outside influence of the capitalist West. Any remote association with the Western way of life—if only speaking English, or wearing reading glasses—was seen as a potential threat to the utopian community that the Khmer Rouge was trying to build, and could get citizens killed. Clearly, the Khmer Rouge was highly suspicious of what they saw as a possible infiltration of a hostile group (the Western world) in their idealistic community (Robins & Post, 1997). One might object that the former Soviet Union, the DDR, and Cambodia under the rule of the Khmer Rouge are hard to compare, as

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each of these cases had different histories, different political and socio-cultural backgrounds, and many other different cultural, sociological, and psychological dynamics. But what is striking for the current discussion is that these left-extremist regimes, despite their differences, also shared a common denominator: A deep suspiciousness of anyone that was considered “not-us”, and that seemed somehow connected with the ‘evil’ capitalist enemy.

Among the most infamous extreme-right regimes was Nazi-Germany, as well as Italian Fascism under Mussolini. As a case in point, conspiracy theories were often part of Hitler’s speeches, and an influential mechanism to fuel hatred against Jews among the German public that ultimately escalated into the Holocaust. Hitler for instance warned that Communism was a Jewish conspiracy for world domination (at the time also referred to as “Judeo-Bolshevism”—a conspiracy theory that also constituted a substantial part of the justification to wage war against Stalin’s Soviet Union; see Pipes, 1997). Likewise, Hitler frequently blamed the Jews for deliberately causing the German defeat in World War I. As such, he singled out a sizeable minority group in German society (i.e., the Jews) and gradually exacerbated a feeling of intergroup threat among the German population by spreading conspiracy beliefs about this group. Jewish people have been a frequent victim of conspiracy theorizing throughout history, but the conspiracy theories spread by Hitler are a very dramatic example, with devastating consequences (see also Midlarsky, 2011; Robins & Post, 1997).

Another example of an extreme-right regime was the dictatorial military “Junta” under Jorge Videla that reigned Argentina during the late ‘70s and early ‘80s. The Videla regime was keen on protecting Argentina against the threat of communism, and was therefore particularly suspicious of politically left-wing groups

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such as labor union leaders, left-wing intellectuals, or other people suspected of having left-wing ideologies. This intergroup paranoia led to the disappearance (and killing) of thousands of people (e.g., Robben, 2007). One might again argue that the Argentinian Junta was in many ways incomparable to Nazi-Germany; yet despite all their differences, both extreme-right regimes uniformly shared the characteristic of being highly suspicious of the potential threat embodied by different societal groups that were considered “them”, “not-us”. In sum, although the content of left- and right-wing ideologies differ enormously, both the extreme left and the extreme right contributed substantially to the major atrocities that the world witnessed in the 20th century—and a lot of these atrocities were inspired by paranoid, conspiratorial beliefs about competing out-groups, that seemed to flow directly from the extremist ideologies that were endorsed.

We pause here briefly, to note that these historical observations should be interpreted with two interrelated and important caveats in mind. First, it is hard to collect research data from people actually living in such extremist regimes (although there are exceptions; see for instance McFarland, Ageyev, & Abalakina-Paap, 1992). One should therefore be careful not to over-interpret research findings on political extremism—of which the data often were collected in the US or in modern EU countries—as evidence suitable to fully understand the beliefs of citizens that are actually living in such extremist regimes. In addition, the examples above show primarily how elites portrayed a threat by an out-group, and there is no way to say how broad these conspiracy theories were believed by ordinary citizens. Second, and relatedly, we wish to emphasize that the relatively radical currents in modern EU countries (at least the ones that have actual political significance in democratic elections) are far more moderate than 20th century communists or fascists. As such,

we do not at any point argue that citizens who are currently voting for populist parties in the EU resemble Nazis—such a characterization would be unfair, irresponsible, and inaccurate.

Instead, the historical events described here raise the empirical question whether there are structural psychological features that are inherent to relatively extreme political viewpoints, predisposing people to paranoid beliefs about other political groups. We thus seek to examine whether people that lean relatively more towards the political extremes within a specific country are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than people who oscillate relatively more towards the political center. Put differently, what does contemporary knowledge within psychology teach us about the roots of extreme ideologies, and can we use these insights to make predictions about increased conspiracy beliefs among the relatively more extreme currents that are currently prevalent in the EU (e.g., anti-immigrant populism) and the US (e.g., the Tea Party)?

The Psychology of Ideological Extremism

One common proposition is that ideological extremism is rooted in underlying feelings of uncertainty and fear (e.g., Castano et al., 2011; Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Hogg, Kruglanski, & Van den Bos, 2013; McGregor, Prentice, & Nash, 2013; Midlarsky, 2011). This proposition fits into a more general research agenda on the psychological origins of political ideology. It has frequently been proposed that particularly right-wing conservatism is associated with uncertainty and fear (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). This “rigidity of the right” hypothesis is not necessarily ‘alternative’ to an association between extremism and uncertainty, however, as radicalization into one’s ideological beliefs, and the specific content of

right-wing ideologies, can both independently contribute to managing uncertainty and fear. There is a lot of evidence suggesting that the link between ideology and uncertainty or fear is nonlinear, even when it may be skewed relatively more towards the right. For instance, whereas the political right tends to score higher on indicators of uncertainty and fear in Western societies with a dominant capitalist ideology (Jost et al., 2003), this pattern has been found to reverse in samples collected in the former Soviet Union, a society with a dominant communist ideology (McFarland et al., 1992). Moreover, in a recent large-scale sample ($N > 7500$) that we conducted in the Netherlands, we found that the curvilinear relation between political ideology and socio-economic fear (i.e., fear that one's well-being is compromised by current societal and economic developments)—revealing more fear at the extremes—was strongly significant, explaining variance above and beyond a simple linear model asserting more fear at the right side of the spectrum (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eendebak, in press). Given our interest in extremism, as well as our empirical findings on conspiracy beliefs, in the following we will specifically focus on the relation between extremism and uncertainty.

There is a paradox in the notion that there is an association between uncertainty and extremism, as the political extremes are particularly confident (i.e., certain) of their own ideological viewpoints (Toner, Leary, Asher, & Jongman-Sereno, 2013). This paradox is addressed and resolved in theorizing about 'compensatory conviction', which stipulates that underlying feelings of uncertainty and fear instigate meaning-making processes that lead to increased conviction in one's own ideological viewpoints (McGregor, 2006). People thus mentally "compensate" for underlying uncertainties by an increased conviction in their ideological beliefs. This assertion is consistent with theoretical perspectives positing

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that uncertainty and fear are associated with sense-making processes designed to regulate such aversive feelings by promoting a sense of understanding the world (Park, 2010; Van den Bos, 2009). The idea that uncertainty and fear drive ideological extremism is also consistent with macro-political insights. For instance, Midlarsky (2011) analyzed what factors predict the rise of extremist regimes, and found evidence for a crucial role of “ephemeral gains”: Extremist regimes are particularly likely to rise to power in countries that first experienced a brief period of sizable collective gains (in terms of for instance economic prosperity, or territorial expansion) that is followed by a period of critical losses—thereby causing substantial uncertainty among large parts of the population.

Various complementary lines of research examining the micro-level, psychological process of radicalization indeed support the idea that uncertainty and fear increase extremist beliefs. For instance, a study by McGregor and Marigold (2003) reveals that the experience of uncertainty increases peoples’ ideological conviction about unrelated societal issues. Moreover, research within the tradition of Terror Management Theory examined how thinking about one’s own death (i.e., mortality salience)—thereby activating existential fear—influences political ideology. This theory would predict that existential fear makes people cling more strongly to their ideological worldview, thus increasing extremism in either direction (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999). Indeed, Castano and colleagues (2011) found that mortality salience increased belief in liberal viewpoints among liberals, and it increased belief in conservative viewpoints among conservatives. Likewise, Weise and colleagues (2008) found that mortality salience has the potential to increase support for both Democratic and Republican presidential candidates, depending on participants’ attachment style. Finally, a different line of evidence

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comes from a study by Hogg, Meehan, and Farqueharson (2010) who investigated the effects of uncertainty on group preference. They found that uncertainty increases people's preference for radical groups (operationalized as groups with a rigid internal structure, a strong norm for consensus, and strong leadership), but not for moderate groups.

The process of radicalization has two interrelated implications. A first implication is that, once radicalized, people have a mental rigidity that promotes intolerance towards other-minded groups (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). Ideologies pertain to moral judgments of right and wrong, and hence almost by definition, extreme faith in the correctness of one's own ideological viewpoints imply that groups endorsing different ideologies are considered morally inferior, factually incorrect, or otherwise a threat to one's community. As such, both extremes tend to be more prejudiced about, and less tolerant of, other-minded groups in comparison to political moderates.

Consistent with the previous discussion of the rigidity of the right hypothesis, prejudice traditionally has been associated with right-wing ideologies (e.g., Jost et al., 2003; Sears & Henry, 2003). Recent studies have called this truism into question, however. Specifically, studies reveal that the political left can also be substantially prejudiced, albeit about different societal categories (Chambers, Schlenker, & Collison, 2013; Whetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013). Examples of social groups that typically are the target of right-wing prejudice are immigrants, Muslims, and homosexuals; examples of social groups that typically are the target of left-wing prejudice are business people, Christians, and bankers. In fact, a survey conducted among highly educated, and predominantly liberal social psychologists (conducted at the SPSP conference) indicates that the more extremely these academics endorsed

liberal values, the more strongly they indicated a willingness to discriminate against openly conservative colleagues, in terms of hiring decisions, symposium invitations, and reviews of grant proposals or papers (Inbar & Lammers, 2012).

The study by Chambers and colleagues (2013) reveals that prejudice among both sides of the political spectrum is mediated by the perception that the other group is dissimilar from one's own ideological group (e.g., the political right's prejudice about immigrants is predicted by their belief that immigrants would mostly vote left-wing; and the political left's prejudice about Christians is predicted by their belief that Christians would vote mostly right-wing). These effects were linear, such that more extreme ideology towards either the left or the right was associated with more prejudice about the relevant social categories. Given that prejudice is an important aspect of feelings of intergroup threat (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006), it is likely that such prejudice is closely coupled with suspicious beliefs and conspiracy theories about these social groups (Crocker et al., 1999; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Van Prooijen & Van Lange, 2014).

A second (and related) implication of the process of radicalization is that political extremists embrace a relatively simplified mental processing style, that is characterized by black-and-white thinking in which social stimuli are rigidly and dichotomously classified as positive or negative, good or bad, and the like (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003). Of particular importance here is the notion that extremists tend to believe in relatively simple solutions for social problems, and hence ignore the complexities that are inherent to many issues that are subject to intense political debate (Fernbach, Rogers, Fox, & Sloman, 2013; Hardin, 2002; Tetlock, Armor, & Peterson, 1994). To illuminate, the extreme left might be more prone to believe that an economic crisis can be solved simply by increasing taxes for rich people; likewise,

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the extreme right might be more prone to believe that simply limiting immigration can solve high crime rates. Such a belief in simple political structure is functional to regulate uncertainty: After all, a world where societal problems are easy to understand and solve is comprehensible and predictable; moreover, it is relatively easy to optimize opportunities for success and minimize chances of harm in such a simple and dichotomous world (see also Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006).

One illustration of belief in simple political structure among extremists can be found in a study by Fernbach and colleagues (2013). These authors measured extremism by assessing the extent to which participants had polarized attitudes on a number of policy issues (e.g., the healthcare system). Furthermore, they asked half of their participants to explain how the policy issue in question worked exactly. This intervention confronts people with gaps in their knowledge, and increases awareness of the potential complexities that are associated with such policy. In other words, by having to elaborate and explain how the policy works, peoples' ideological certainty about the policy issue decreases; and as a consequence, the participants in the study by Fernbach and colleagues showed a decreased polarization compared to the control condition. The point here is that extremism is associated with a relatively simplistic, snap-judgment about social policy—a judgment that is open to more nuance when forced to carefully explain the issue in question.

In sum, due to feelings of uncertainty and fear, people radicalize into extreme ideological viewpoints; and, these extreme ideologies lay the foundations for prejudice about different-minded groups, as well as a mental simplification of the political world. Hardin (2002) noted that these processes are further perpetuated by a “crippled epistemology” that characterizes politically extremist groups. Such a crippled epistemology entails that once radicalized, people only trust information

from their own extremist in-group, and naturally distrust any outside information that challenges, or puts some perspective to, their beliefs. This crippled epistemology makes politically extremist beliefs self-sustaining. If extremists only are willing to listen to other extremists with similar beliefs, and are not exposed to different views, there is little basis for de-radicalization and moderation.

Implications for Conspiracy Beliefs

We propose that, taken together, these processes provide a strong psychological foundation for belief in conspiracy theories. As a first and general notion, the uncertainty-regulating function of political radicalization has also been identified as a core predictor of belief in conspiracy theories. The classic work by Hofstadter (1966) already noted that conspiracy beliefs constitute a mental attempt to develop causal explanations for events that are hard to understand otherwise. It is no coincidence that conspiracy beliefs surge particularly following distressing events, such as 9-11 or the assassination of JFK, as people are strongly motivated to find coherent explanations of such impactful uncertainty-eliciting events (Van Prooijen & Van Dijk, 2014; see also Bale, 2007). The assertion that conspiracy theories emerge in response to threatening, uncertainty-eliciting events is consistent with generic insights on sense-making motivation, stipulating that uncertainty and threat are potent factors for people to start mental sense-making processes aimed at understanding the social world (Park, 2010; Van den Bos, 2009; see also Kossowska & Bukowski, this volume). These sense-making processes are closely tied to political paranoia. For instance, Kramer (2008) noted that sense-making processes are at the heart of what he termed “paranoid social cognition”, that is, a suspicious state of mind that is particularly attentive to the possible evil intentions of others. These arguments

suggest that political radicalization and belief in conspiracy theories serve a similar underlying psychological function, which is to make sense of the world as a means to regulate the uncertainties that people encounter in their life.

Various research studies indeed support the idea that conspiracy beliefs particularly flourish in uncertain situations. For instance, Whitson and Galinsky (2008) found that the experience of lacking control increases people's tendency to perceive illusory patterns, including seeing patterns in random noise, seeing patterns in random stock market information, and perceiving conspiracies. Sullivan, Landau, and Rothchild (2010) found that lacking control leads people to perceive their enemies as more influential. Such exaggerated influence is also part of many conspiracy theories, which frequently attribute superhuman power to the alleged conspirators (Bale, 2007). Finally, various studies found effects of inducing subjective uncertainty on belief in conspiracy theories (Newheiser, Farias, & Tausch, 2011), a finding that is moderated by the extent to which the implicated authorities are considered to be moral or immoral (Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013).

Additionally, the two mentioned psychological features of extremists—prejudice and belief in simple political structure—are likely to be strongly related to conspiracy beliefs. It has been noted that conspiracy beliefs essentially are a form of intergroup threat—that is, the perception of an evil out-group (e.g., politicians, CEOs) posing a direct threat to one's in-group (e.g., fellow citizens, fellow employees) (Kramer & Schaffer, 2014; Van Prooijen & Van Dijk, 2014; Van Prooijen & Van Lange, 2014). Consistent with this perspective, empirical evidence reveals that particularly cohesive groups that face realistic threats in society—such as ethnic minority groups that are frequent victims of stigmatization—are particularly susceptible to conspiracy beliefs (Crocker et al., 1999). As argued by Riek and

colleagues (2006), an important feature of perceived intergroup threat is a prejudiced perspective of the out-group, and such intergroup threat is particularly exacerbated when a perceiver considers the out-group to be powerful. Prejudice allows one to characterize other-minded people as an “evil out-group”—a group that cannot be trusted, that might be potentially dangerous, which could secretly be plotting to cause serious harm on the in-group and hence should be closely monitored. It is therefore likely that prejudice is associated with conspiracy beliefs that imply an accusation of the target out-group (see also Cichocka, Golec de Zavala, Marchlewska, & Olechowski, this volume; Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012).

Related to prejudice are the implications of belief in simple political structure for the suspicious assumptions that people make about a threatening out-group. In a dichotomous, simple, and rigid world, the problems that one’s in-group faces (e.g., an economic crisis) can be attributed solely to the suspected evil actions of a despised out-group, instead of to a plethora of interdependent situational factors (e.g., complex political and economic developments that jointly influence international trade and markets). In other words, belief in simple political structure facilitates scapegoating of different groups to explain social problems. Consistent with this assertion, there is evidence that people are more likely to blame other groups for social problems if they experience uncertainty. A study by Rothchild, Landau, Sullivan, and Keefer (2012) reveals that people scapegoated different social groups more strongly in conditions where they experienced a lack of control. The black-and-white thinking that is inherent to political extremism is also part of belief in conspiracy theories, in which “they” are simply identified as a homogeneous group and uniformly bad.

The above review illuminates the theoretical basis for a strong association between ideological extremism (in either political direction) and belief in conspiracy

theories. Both phenomena are a natural response to the uncertainty and fear that can be elicited by distressing socio-economic developments. Ideological extremism prompts prejudice and belief in simple political structure, and these interrelated processes are both highly likely to fuel belief in conspiracy theories. And in fact, it has been noted that the crippled epistemology that characterizes extremist groups is also inherent to conspiracy believers, who often only trust information provided by other conspiracy believers (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009; Swami et al., 2013). All these cues point towards the theory that belief in conspiracy theories is rooted in similar psychological processes as political extremism, and that a conspiratorial mindset closely matches the rigid thinking style that characterizes political extremism. Building on these theoretical insights, it is now time to evaluate empirical data. In the following, we review the findings of recent empirical studies on the association between political ideology and belief in conspiracy theories that we conducted.

Empirical Findings

Based on the above review, we propose that there are three possible hypothesized relations that may emerge between political ideology and belief in conspiracy theories. All three hypothesized effects are quadratic relations, and they are displayed graphically in Figures 1a, 1b, and 1c. The pattern depicted in Figure 1a represents left-wing conspiracy beliefs. This is the pattern that might be expected for conspiracy beliefs about societal topics that match a right-wing ideology, but violates a left-wing ideology. A possible example would be conspiracy beliefs pertaining to powerful multinationals (e.g., beliefs about malevolent practices of the pharmaceutical industry in third-world countries). Importantly, the pattern is nonlinear, as the slope becomes steeper to the extent that ideology moves more to the

left end of the political spectrum. In other words, left-wing conspiracy theories are expected to be particularly prominent among the *extreme* left.

---Insert Figure 1a to 1c about here ---

The pattern depicted in Figure 1b represents conspiracy beliefs about societal issues that are not clearly left-wing or right-wing. Such politically neutral conspiracy beliefs may pertain to a wide range of issues, including relatively abstract, global beliefs (e.g., the general belief that there are a lot of secret meetings between powerful societal actors behind closed doors, to pursue some evil goal), or issues such as natural disasters, plane crashes, or political issues that both extremes are suspicious of (e.g., the transition of power from national governments to the EU).

Finally, the pattern depicted in Figure 1c represents right-wing conspiracy beliefs. This is the nonlinear pattern that might be expected for conspiracy beliefs about issues that match a left-wing ideology, but that violate a right-wing ideology. A possible example would be conspiratorial climate-skepticism (e.g., the belief that scientists deliberately create panic about climate change to further their own career). Of course, this nonlinear pattern reflects the reverse pattern as for left-wing conspiracy theories.

In a study conducted on US participants, Van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet (in press) tested the linear and quadratic relations between political ideology (scored on a scale ranging from extreme left-wing to extreme right-wing) and two conspiracy beliefs: Conspiracy beliefs about the financial crisis (an example item is “the financial crisis was caused by some banks to win the competition from other banks”) and conspiracy beliefs about climate change (an example item is “Do you believe that scientists are pressured to portray climate change differently than is actually the case?”). Results on the endorsement of conspiracy theories about the financial crisis

did not reveal a linear effect of ideology. The results did show a quadratic effect, however, matching the hypothesized pattern depicted in Figure 1b. At first glance this finding might seem surprising, given that banks are mostly associated with capitalism; and unlike the extreme right, particularly the extreme left has negative stereotypes about bankers (Chambers et al., 2013). This would suggest a pattern corresponding with Figure 1a. However, these data were collected shortly after the crisis, and people at both the political left and the political right were financially hit—and hence threatened—by this development. Put differently, also people from the political right lost a lot of money due to the financial crisis, possibly explaining why the extreme right endorsed this conspiracy theory as well.

On conspiracy beliefs pertaining to climate change, results indicated both a linear and a quadratic effect. The linear effect is non-surprising: The political right endorsed climate conspiracy theories more strongly than the political left. The quadratic effect, however, closely matched the pattern depicted in Figure 1c, although it must be added that in the specific case of climate conspiracies, the effects were driven by right-wing extremist men—a finding that future research might further elaborate on. One might be tempted to say that belief in a climate conspiracy theory is a right-wing phenomenon. But these findings suggest that it would be more accurate to say that that belief in a climate conspiracy theory is an *extremely* right-wing phenomenon. To give an example, there is a lot of climate-skepticism within the Tea Party—the relatively extreme branch of the Republican Party in the US. This does not mean that the entire Republican Party is climate-skeptic. In fact, John McCain—a relatively moderate Republican senator, and 2008 Republican presidential candidate—wrote an opinion piece in the Boston Globe together with political independent Joe Lieberman, in which they for instance stated that “There is now broad consensus in

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this country, and indeed in the world, that global warming is happening, that it is a serious problem, and that humans are causing it” (February 13, 2007).

Van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet (in press) also conducted two independent studies with samples nationally representative for the Dutch voting population. In both samples, belief in conspiracy theories was measured by a series of statements about various conspiracy beliefs (cf. Douglas & Sutton, 2011), some referring to politically neutral beliefs (e.g., the belief that many politicians have connections with organized crime), some referring to politically left-wing beliefs (e.g., the belief that the political arena was infiltrated by oil companies when waging war on Iraq), and some referring to politically right-wing beliefs (e.g., belief in a climate conspiracy). Together these very different beliefs formed a highly reliable scale, which is consistent with the proposition that conspiracy beliefs are part of a mono-logical belief system (e.g., Goertzel, 1994; Lewandowsky et al., 2013; Swami et al., 2010, 2013). The results did not reveal a consistent linear effect of ideology: In the first representative sample the linear association between political ideology and belief in conspiracy theories was not significant, and in the second representative sample the linear effect was significant, pointing towards slightly stronger conspiracy beliefs at the right end of the political spectrum. But more important was that the results consistently indicated a quadratic effect, matching the hypothesized relation displayed in Figure 1b. On such a composite scale assessing participants’ belief in various conspiracy theories, the extreme left and the extreme right displayed more political paranoia than political moderates.

In both these nationally representative samples, we included a measure of participants’ belief in simple political structure (i.e., participants’ agreement with the statement “With the correct policies, most societal problems can be solved very

easily”). Results also revealed a quadratic effect on participants’ belief in simple political structure, matching the hypothesized relation of Figure 1b. This finding is consistent with the assertion that both political extremes have a relatively simplistic political worldview (Fernbach et al., 2013; Hardin, 2002; Tetlock et al., 1994). More important for the current purposes, however, were the results of a curvilinear mediation analysis. Unlike linear mediation analysis that only yields one confidence interval—or Sobel test—for the entire mediation model, a curvilinear analysis tests for mediation at various (usually three) points of the regression line¹ (Hayes & Preacher, 2010). Results in both samples revealed that belief in simple political structure mediated the association between political ideology and conspiracy beliefs among participants at the left extreme ($-1\ SD$) and among participants the right extreme ($+1\ SD$) but not among participants in the political center. These results are consistent with the assertion that the rigid thinking style that characterizes the political extremes is closely coupled with the psychological processes that produce belief in conspiracy theories.

Implications and Conclusions

The present chapter sought to illuminate the relation between political ideology and conspiracy beliefs. The main conclusion that we draw—based on a combination of historical observations, theoretical arguments, and empirical data—is that the political extremes are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than political moderates. There are, of course, typical “left-wing” conspiracy theories and typical “right-wing” conspiracy theories—but even for such theories extremism is a potent factor to take into account, as the relation seems to be nonlinear also for topics

¹ The statistical logic behind this is that, in a linear regression model, it does not matter for the mediation statistic where on the regression line the test is performed given that the regression line is equally steep at all points of the model—which is different if the regression line is nonlinear (Hayes & Preacher, 2010).

of which opinions, sentiments, and suspicious beliefs are likely influenced by the content of one's ideology (cf. Figures 1a and 1c). Thus, whereas specific ideologies may predict what specific conspiracy theories a perceiver endorses, it is strength of political ideology—not direction—that predicts whether or not people have a general conspiratorial mindset that is reflected in a tendency to perceive the world as being filled with evil conspiracies.

The present chapter was inspired significantly by the seminal chapter of Inglehart (1987) that first raised the idea that political extremism predicts conspiracy beliefs. As such, it is interesting to note that Inglehart proposes a different explanation for this extremity-conspiracy link than we do. Inglehart specifically reasons that extremist groups often operate at the fringes of society, which explains their suspiciousness towards societal events, as well as their suspiciousness towards more mainstream ideologies. People at the political fringes will also have a general suspicion of the major power-holders in society. Certainly we concur that this assertion has merit, at least when explaining the ideologies, beliefs, and behaviors of relatively obscure extremist groups (e.g., contemporary groups of Neo-Nazis). Empirical research suggests that being in a minority group is an important predictor of belief in conspiracy theories (Crocker et al., 1999). At the same time, we argue that the minority status of extremist groups is unsatisfactory to fully explain the conspiratorial mindset among the political extremes. Various populist parties in the EU are quite remote from “the fringes of society” as they receive substantial and broad support in democratic elections (see Krouwel, 2012), yet we find increased conspiracy beliefs in our data among participants that voted for such parties compared to participants that did not vote for such parties. Moreover, we also described how some of the most infamous extremist regimes of the 20th century had a suspicious,

conspiratorial attitude towards specific societal groups. These regimes were not ‘at the fringes of society’— but were the main power-holders with broad national support.

There is another group-related aspect of politically extremist groups that we have not explicitly addressed yet, and that is nationalism. Many extremist political parties—particularly on the right—are highly nationalistic, as for instance reflected in EU-skepticism that rejects the transfer of sovereignty to European institutions, and a negative attitude to factors that threaten one’s national identity (e.g., immigrants) (see Startin & Krouwel 2013). This observation matches well with the arguments presented earlier. Specifically, we noted that conspiracy beliefs essentially are a form of intergroup threat (Kramer & Schaffer, 2014; Van Prooijen & Van Dijk, 2014). We propose that there are two aspects of intergroup threat relevant here. One is a more negative (e.g., prejudiced) perception of the relevant competing out-group. But the other aspect is a stronger psychological tie to the in-group that one cares about. The assertion that intergroup threat increases in-group identification follows directly from classic social-psychological theories such as realistic intergroup conflict theory (Sherif & Sherif, 1969) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It has been noted that, paradoxically, conspiracy beliefs might be pro-socially motivated, in the sense that such beliefs reflect a parochial desire to protect an in-group that one cares about against factors—including out-groups—that one considers threatening (Van Prooijen & Van Lange, 2014; see also Cichocka et al., this volume). The notion that the extremes have relatively stronger nationalistic values are in line with this reasoning.

The intergroup nature of conspiracy beliefs is also reflected in the type of paranoia that can be observed among the extremes. In the previously discussed study

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that we conducted on a US sample, we also included the 20-item paranoia-scale by Fenigstein and Vanable (1992). This paranoia-scale differs from conspiracy beliefs in that it assesses people's feelings that they *personally* are being persecuted (Example items are "I sometimes feel as if I'm being followed" and "I have often felt that strangers were looking at me critically"). Such a conceptualization of paranoia is relatively more in line with how paranoid beliefs are conceptualized in the clinical sciences that study a range of mental and psychiatric disorders (i.e., persecutory delusions; see for instance Bentall, Corcoran, Howard, Blackwood, & Kinderman, 2001). These personally paranoid beliefs are different from conspiracy beliefs, as they lack an intergroup element stipulating (for instance) that fellow citizens also are being deceived by the authorities. Of interest here is that political ideology did not show a linear or a quadratic relation with such personal paranoia. The extremes did not feel personally persecuted any more or less than political moderates did. Apparently, the political extremes only experience increased intergroup paranoia that is focused specifically on the root causes of social and political events.

Admittedly, the present chapter highlighted mostly the harmful side of extremism, and the rigid thinking style that is associated with it. In that respect, we urge to note that not all extremist rigidity is "bad", and can sometimes even be essential for moral progress. An excellent case in point is offered by Tetlock and colleagues (1994) who content-analyzed speeches about slavery by political leaders shortly before the US civil war. They found that not only the speeches by extreme advocates of slavery, but also those of extreme abolitionists were characterized by low integrative complexity, at least according to scientific definitions ('slavery is wrong and can never be allowed, period'). The more "nuanced" political center displayed more integrative complex reasoning—but with it, also an increased

willingness to compromise on this issue. Sometimes, it can be necessary to stand up for basic human rights by taking an extreme, uncompromising ideological position about pressing societal issues.

One challenge for further research is establishing causality. The data collected thus far are correlational, and it is hence impossible to draw conclusions about cause and effect. Theoretically, either causal direction for the extremism-conspiracy relation is conceivable: Belief in conspiracy theories can be a potent source of uncertainty and fear, which may prompt radicalization into extremist political beliefs. At the same time, radicalization promotes a rigid thinking style that has many commonalities with the conspiratorial mindset, as argued in this chapter. As such, we suspect that the relation is bidirectional and self-reinforcing. But we lack the data to support this bidirectional hypothesis. A fruitful avenue for future research would therefore be to examine both these possible causal relations between politically extreme ideologies and belief in conspiracy theories. One way to achieve this would be a longitudinal research design, where participants' political radicalization and de-radicalization is tracked over time, along with their belief in conspiracy theories.

In closing, much research on political ideology has focused on the question how the left versus the right differ from one another psychologically (e.g., Jost et al., 2003). Identifying such differences between specific ideologies is important, as it may further scientists' understanding of the origins of the various belief systems that people endorse. In the present chapter, however, we took a somewhat different perspective on these issues by paying attention not only to the differences, but also to the similarities between the left and the right. One such similarity may be found in the politically paranoid mindset that produces belief in conspiracy theories. Our review consistently suggests that there is a remarkable convergence between the

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psychological processes that drive radicalization into extreme left- and right-wing ideologies, and the psychological processes underlying conspiracy beliefs. It is concluded that suspicion is strongest at the political extremes.

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