Populism as Political Mentality Underlying Conspiracy Theories

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In the current political climate, citizens frequently are confronted with fake news and alternative facts. Such alternative portrayals of reality often take the form of conspiracy theories, which have been particularly salient during the 2016 US presidential election. Donald Trump propagated a range of conspiracy theories such as that climate change is a hoax perpetrated by the Chinese, that Obama was not born in the US (and hence should never have been president), that the pharmaceutical industry suppresses evidence for a link between vaccines and autism, and that Hillary Clinton was part of a major conspiracy to cover up illegal activities. It is quite plausible to assume that Trump got elected not despite but *because* of these conspiracy theories, particularly in light of findings that large portions of normal, non-pathological citizens endorse such theories (Sunstein & Vermeule 2009; Oliver & Wood, 2014). Other impactful political developments were also clearly associated with conspiracy theories. For instance, belief in conspiracy theories was a major predictor of a "Leave" vote in the UK Brexit-referendum: Polling shortly before the referendum revealed that 64% of supporters of the populist UKIP expected the referendum to be rigged. Moreover, over a third of 'Leave' voters believed in a conspiracy between MI5 and the UK government to prevent the Brexit.[1]

These examples are consistent with the idea that conspiracy theories are associated with populist political movements. Indeed, empirical findings reveal that radical political ideologies predict a tendency to believe conspiracy theories. For instance, political extremists at both the left and right of the ideological spectrum are more likely to believe conspiracy theories than political moderates (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015; see also Imhoff, 2015). Likewise, political extremists at

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[1] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/eu-referendum-poll-brexit-live-leave-voters-mi5-conspiracy-government-a7092806.html

both the left and right are less trustful of societal institutions than moderates, a finding that was observed following an analysis of Eurobarometer survey data in five out of six investigated countries (Inglehart, 1987).

Complementary findings from various scientific disciplines further support a link between radical political ideologies and conspiracy theories. For instance, historians have observed that the radical regimes that our world has seen in the past century (e.g., communism; fascism) are characterized by excessive conspiracy theorizing (Pipes, 1997). Moreover, content analyses of the writings and speeches of over 50 ideologically radical—and sometimes even violent—fringe groups in society (e.g., Neo-Nazis; Anti-globalization extremists; religious fundamentalist groups) reveal that such extremist documentation typically contains excessive conspiracy theorizing (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). One may wonder, however, what these insights imply exactly for the relationship between populism and conspiracy theories. Not all populist currents are ideologically extreme, and moreover, little is known about the underlying psychological processes that may account for a possible relationship between populism and conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories are commonly defined as beliefs that a group of actors colludes in secret in order to attain goals that are widely seen as malevolent (Bale, 2007; Zonis & Joseph, 1994). Although many conceptually different conspiracy theories exist—ranging from theoretically possible or even plausible (e.g., it can be rational to suspect corruption among certain power holders) to completely outlandish (e.g., conspiracy theories that the world is ruled by alien lizards disguised as human)— accumulating research suggests that different conspiracy theories emerge through similar psychological processes. For instance, an excellent predictor of belief in one conspiracy theory is belief in a different conspiracy theory (Abalakina-Paap,

Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Lewandowski, Oberauer, & Gignac, 2013; Swami et al., 2011; Van Prooijen & Acker, 2015). Even beliefs in mutually incompatible conspiracy theories are positively correlated (e.g., the belief that Princess Diana faked her own death vs. the belief that she was murdered; Wood et al., 2012). People hence differ in the extent to which they have a conspiratorial mindset—that is, a general propensity to explain impactful geopolitical events through conspiracy theories—which is shaped by a range of personal, situational, and ideological factors (Goertzel, 1994).

Irrational conspiracy theories can be harmful, as they are associated with a range of detrimental psychological and societal outcomes including negative emotions, destructive health behaviors (e.g., vaccine refusal; decreased contraceptive use), decreased civic virtue, climate-change skepticism, and aggression (Grebe & Nattrass, 2012; Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Thorburn & Bogart, 2005; Swami et al., 2011; Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015). Also in a political context certain conspiracy theories can be dangerous, as underscored by the 2016 incident where a Trump-supporter opened fire in a pizza restaurant assuming it to be a Democrats-run center for pedophiles (the "pizza-gate" conspiracy theory). It is therefore important to establish the psychological and political variables that predict citizens' susceptibility to conspiracy theories.

The present chapter seeks to increase understanding of the psychological and political roots of conspiracy theories by examining how belief in such theories is related with populism. Are citizens who support populist movements more likely than others to be susceptible to conspiracy theories, and if so, why exactly? For this purpose, in the following I will first illuminate what populism is by defining the term and identifying its underlying psychological dimensions. Then, based on the research

literature I will assess how each of these dimensions predicts belief in conspiracy theories. At the end I integrate these insights, and conclude that populism is a key political mentality underlying conspiracy theories.

What is Populism?

While populism is a popular and highly prevalent term in news reports and public discourse, social scientists have not yet reached consensus about its definition or underlying psychological dimensions (e.g., Judis, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016; Oliver & Rahn, 2016). What different conceptualizations of populism share, however, is that populism is a political mentality that construes society as a dichotomous struggle between "the people" versus "the establishment". As such, populism is not a novel political phenomenon, but has had an impact on society throughout the past few centuries (e.g., the French Revolution was inspired by strong populist sentiments). Of importance, this definition implies that populism is not exclusive to the political right or left. As noted by Müller (2016), populism is not an ideology but a way of thinking about politics, and can in principle occur everywhere at the political spectrum. In practice, however, populism is most common at the edges of the political spectrum (i.e., the left and right extremes; see Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Popular media frequently portray 'populism' within the same breath as 'right-wing', and indeed, at present populism predominantly occurs among right-wing political movements in for instance the US (e.g., Trump; the Tea Party) and Northern Europe (e.g., UKIP in the UK; AfD in Germany; Front National in France; PVV in the Netherlands). It would be a mistake, however, to assume that populism is a right-wing political phenomenon only. In various Southern European countries strong left-wing populist movements exist (e.g.., Syriza in Greece; Podemos in Spain).

Furthermore, in various Latin-American countries populism is mostly a left-wing political phenomenon. A prime example of a left-wing populist leader is Hugo Chavez, who was president of Venezuela from 1999 to 2013, and was succeeded by the left-wing populist leader Nicholas Maduro. Examples of other Latin-American countries that currently have strong left-wing populist movements are Ecuador, Bolivia, and Brazil. Furthermore, some political leaders are clearly populist yet not clearly left- or right-wing, such as Duterte in the Philippines.

Furthermore, the political signature of populist movements is culturally flexible and therefore subject to change. For instance, in various Eastern European countries—that have been under communist rule for decades—populist movements have recently emerged at the political right (e.g., Poland; Hungary). Moreover, in the US and Northern Europe left-wing populist movements appear to be gaining momentum: In the US, the relatively extreme segment of Bernie Sanders supporters expressed an unwillingness to vote for Hillary Clinton, who in their view represented the political establishment ("Bernie or Bust"). Likewise, in the 2017 French presidential election, Jean-Luc Mélenchon of the populist left-wing party 'La France Insoumise' acquired over 19% of the votes in the first round; in the second round he indicated to not support Le Pen, but also that he refused to support Macron. In sum, populism is widespread, culturally subject to change, and although left- and right-wing populist movements have obvious ideological differences (some of which will be illuminated below), populism occurs at both the left and right end of the political spectrum.

What are the underlying psychological dimensions that characterize populism? In the present chapter, I propose three related but distinct factors that together provide a parsimonious model to predict whether citizens will support populist movements.

The first two factors are drawn from Müller (2016), and are referred to as anti-elitism and anti-pluralism. Furthermore, based on an integration of empirical political psychological findings (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010; McGregor, Prentice, & Nash, 2013; Van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eendebak, 2015) with macro-political insights (Midlarsky, 2011) I propose a third factor, which I tentatively label threatened nationalism. Below I will define and illuminate these three dimensions.

Anti-elitism means that populist leaders and citizens have a deep-rooted distrust of the ruling political and societal elites. Left- and right-wing populists may differ in what specific societal elites they distrust most, depending on ideological differences. For instance, left-wing populists are likely to distrust 'capitalist' elites, such as CEOs and bankers (e.g., the "Occupy Wall Street" movement). Right-wing populists are likely to distrust mainstream media (which often are perceived as left-wing), scientists, and labour union leaders (for related arguments, see Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2015; Chambers, Schlenker, & Collison, 2013; Wetherell, Brandt, & Reyna, 2013). Left- and right-wing populist movements share an aversion against mainstream politicians: For instance, across Europe left- and right-wing populist parties are EU-skeptic. Intriguingly, such anti-elitism persists even when populist leaders seize power and effectively become part of the establishment themselves: A case in point is Trump's aversion of certain media that he believes to produce 'fake news' (e.g., CNN) (see also Müller, 2016).

Anti-pluralism means that populists tend to believe that they—and they alone—represent the true voice of 'the people'. For instance, after the first results of the Brexit referendum came in—predicting a majority for "Leave"—UKIP leader Nigel Farage gave a speech in which he literally proclaimed the following:

"This, if the predictions now are right, this will be a victory for real people, a

victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people. We have fought

against the multinationals, we have fought against the big merchant banks, we

have fought against big politics, we have fought against lies, corruption and

deceit. And today honesty, decency and belief in nation, I think now is going

to win."

Put differently, according to Farage the 48% of UK citizens that voted "Remain" were

not real, ordinary, or decent people, but instead represented the voice of the corrupt

elites (Müller, 2016). Relatedly, Marine Le Pen tends to present herself as "La voix

du peuple" ("the voice of the people"). Finally, Dutch PVV leader Geert Wilders

often proclaims to be the spokesperson of "Henk and Ingrid", which are typical Dutch

names to model 'the people', that is, the large group of ordinary citizens that—

according to Wilders—have been forgotten or exploited by the 'corrupt elites'. A

direct implication of such anti-pluralism, however, is that populists are particularly

likely to perceive their own beliefs are morally superior and are hence intolerant of

different views. After all, if only they speak on behalf of 'the people', dissenting

voices necessarily represent the 'corrupt elites'. Empirical findings are consistent with

the notion that populists at both the left and right are less tolerant of different views

than politically moderate citizens (Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017; see also Crawford

& Pilanski, 2014).

Finally, *threatened nationalism* means that although populists are strongly

nationalistic and believe in the intrinsic superiority of their own country, they also

believe that this national glory is under threat by external forces. This insight is

consistent with the political-historical analysis of Midlarsky (2011), who studied the

rise of politically extremist regimes across the world in the 20th century. He found

evidence for a societal condition termed "Ephemeral Gains" as main precursor of

increased populist and extremist sentiments. Specifically, populist and extremist political movements are most likely to rise to power in societies that first experience a short-lived period of collective gains (e.g., economic prosperity; territorial expansion) that is followed by a period of critical losses. Under those circumstances, citizens are susceptible to populist leaders who promise to reinstall their country's previous glory through a set of straightforward policies. Ephemeral gain theory resonates well with typical populist oneliners (e.g., Trump's "Make America great again"; Farage's "We want our country back"). More importantly, it is consistent with empirical studies within the domain of political psychology, that for instance found a relationship between political extremism and feelings of uncertainty or fear (e.g., McGregor, Prentice, & Nash, 2013; Van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eendebak, 2015), combined with findings that uncertainty increases both group cohesion (Hogg, 2007; Schmid & Muldoon, 2015), and group members' preference for rigid and radical leaders (Hogg et al., 2010).

Such threatened nationalism may take different forms for left- versus right-wing populist movements. For instance, Judis (2016) speculated that differential threats may explain differences in the ideological signature of populist movements across the EU. Specifically, due to their wealthy economies Northern European countries (as well as the US) are relatively attractive for immigrants, stimulating right-wing populist movements that focus on anti-immigration policies. Southern European countries, in contrast, face more economic hardship and are therefore relatively sensitive to financial and economic threats (e.g., EU austerity measures), stimulating left-wing populist movements that promise financial security for people who are poor, unemployed, and low educated. Put differently, social-cultural threat may particularly stimulate right-wing populism and economic threat may particularly

stimulate left-wing populism, a prediction that awaits further testing. What left- and right-wing populist movements share, however, is the perception of an external threat that causes the downfall of their nation's previous glory.

In sum, populism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and only recently researchers started to recognize populism as a political mentality that is conceptually distinct from ideology (e.g., traditional liberal-conservative distinctions). In the following, I will utilize this three-dimensional structure (i.e., anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, threatened nationalism) to examine the relationship between populism and conspiracy theories.

Populism and Conspiracy Theories

Empirical research has established a relationship between radical ideological beliefs and conspiracy theories (Inglehart, 1987; Imhoff, 2015; Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015), and hence conspiracy theories are more likely to flourish among populist instead of moderate political movements. Furthermore, in their dichotomous perception of the world populists often perceive 'the establishment' as a direct enemy of 'the people', setting the stage for allegations of corruption and conspiracy theories (Müller, 2016). It is yet unclear, however, what specific aspects of populism stimulate conspiracy theories. In order to reach a more fine-grained understanding of the relationship between populism and conspiracy theories, in the following I review empirical findings that connect the dimensions of populism with belief in conspiracy theories.

Anti-elitism

Particularly the dimension of anti-elitism has straightforward implications for conspiracy theories: If one deeply distrusts societal and political elites, it is a small step to also assume those elites to pursue malevolent goals by forming conspiracies.

To clarify, distrust and conspiracy theories are conceptually distinct, as one can easily distrust an authority or institution without perceiving a conspiracy. Distrust refers to an abstract, uncomfortable feeling that undermines perceivers' willingness to accept vulnerability in their relationship with another person or group; a conspiracy theory, however, is a concrete and specific allegation of immoral, and often criminal conduct (Van Prooijen & De Vries, 2016). Nevertheless, it stands to reason that perceivers are more likely to accuse distrusted rather than trusted authorities of conspiracy formation. Consistently, distrust and conspiracy beliefs are moderately but significantly correlated, indicating distinct yet related constructs (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Goertzel, 1994).

If anti-elitism is associated with belief in conspiracy theories, two key predictions follow. The first prediction is that people who generally are uncomfortable with powerful groups in society are more likely to believe conspiracy theories. In line with this prediction, feelings of alienation from politics predicts conspiracy beliefs (Goertzel et al., 1994). Furthermore, a study by Imhoff and Bruder (2014) specifically investigated the relationship between negative stereotypes of high- versus low-power groups and conspiracy mentality, that is, a general propensity to perceive conspiracies in the world. Their results revealed that negative stereotypes of powerful groups (e.g., Americans; Capitalists; Jews), but not negative stereotypes of powerless groups (e.g., Roma; Muslims) predicted conspiracy mentality. These findings generalized to stereotypes of discrete societal groups that are powerful (e.g., politicians; managers) versus powerless (e.g., drug addicts; homeless people).

Two conclusions emerged from the study by Imhoff and Bruder (2014). First, conspiracy mentality is conceptually different from the ideological variables Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), which

were statistically associated particularly with negative stereotypes of power*less*
groups. Second, and more important for the present purposes, these findings suggest
that people who have negative stereotypes about power holders—and hence would
score high on the anti-elitism dimension—are more likely than others to perceive a
world full of conspiracies.

The second, and closely related prediction is that conspiracy theories are prevalent
particularly among citizens who feel powerless in society. This prediction was first
raised by Hofstadter (1966), who theorized that conspiracy theories occur mostly
among citizens who feel powerless or voiceless. Perceivers hence need to classify
themselves as part of the powerless "people" to endorse conspiracy theories that
implicate the ruling "establishment". Empirical findings reveal that people are more
likely to believe conspiracy theories to the extent that they feel more powerless in
society (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999). Furthermore, conspiracy theories occur more
frequently among relatively powerless societal groups (e.g., ethnic minority groups;
Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; Goertzel, 1994; Thorburn & Bogart,
2005) as well as among the lower educated segment of society, a finding that is
partially mediated by feelings of powerlessness (Van Prooijen, 2017).

A common explanation for this relationship is that the subjective state of
powerlessness is closely associated with negative emotions such as anxiety, feelings
of being out of control, and uncertainty. These aversive emotions instigate a desire to
make sense of one's social environment, prompting conspiracy theories to explain
complex societal events that are difficult to understand otherwise (Hofstadter, 1966;
see also Bale, 2007). Experimental findings support a causal effect of these aversive
emotional experiences on belief in conspiracy theories. For instance, threatening
people's feeling that they can control their environment increases belief in conspiracy

theories (Sullivan et al., 2010; Van Harreveld, Rutjens, Schneider, Nohlen, &

Keskinis, 2014; Van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008).

Furthermore, aversive societal events that are highly consequential (e.g., a politician

is assassinated), and are hence likely to elicit such negative emotions, elicit stronger

conspiracy theories than aversive societal events that are not particularly

consequential (e.g., the assassination attempt fails; McCauley & Jacques, 1979; see

also Van Prooijen & Van Dijk, 2014). The effects of these aversive emotions on

conspiracy theories occur only in the context of power holders that one considers to

be immoral (Van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013).

In sum, the populist dimension of anti-elitism has clear implications for

conspiracy theories. Both negative stereotypes of power holders, and the experience

of powerlessness, increase the likelihood of endorsing conspiracy theories. In a

dichotomous struggle between the powerless 'people' and the powerful

'establishment', perceivers attribute many harmful events in society to the intentional

actions of powerful and malevolent conspiracies.

Anti-pluralism

The dimension of anti-pluralism often reflects itself in an inability to reach

compromises, and intolerance of competing beliefs (Müller, 2016). Consistently,

radical political views predict increased attitudinal certainty (Brandt, Evans, &

Crawford, 2015; Toner et al., 2013; Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Emmer, in press), a

decreased ability to compromise (Tetlock et al., 1994), and a tendency to reject, and

consider as inferior, any ideological belief that differs from one's own (i.e., dogmatic

intolerance; Van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017). It is likely that such anti-pluralism is

associated with conspiracy theories: Anti-pluralism implies a worldview in which

citizens who disagree with populist rhetoric are part of the establishment, suggesting

that such dissenting citizens either conspire with, or are string puppets of, the establishment. Although no research has yet directly tested for a relationship between anti-pluralism and conspiracy theories, empirical findings support two predictions that indirectly follow from the idea that the anti-pluralism dimension of populism is related with conspiracy theories.

The first prediction that can be inferred from the anti-pluralism dimension is that the more strongly citizens believe that their own political preferences represent the simple and only solution to the complex problems that society faces, the more strongly they endorse conspiracy theories. Research reveals that such belief in simple political solutions mediates the relationship between radical political beliefs and conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015). It is plausible that this finding is at least partly related with the insight that conspiracy theories emerge from feelings of uncertainty and fear: After all, simple solutions offer clarity, which may mitigate these aversive emotions. But above and beyond that, a rigid belief in simple solutions is also related with people's analytic thinking capacities. Decreased analytic thinking predicts belief in conspiracy theories (Swami, Voracek, Stieger, Tran& Furnham, 2014), and belief in simple solutions mediates the link between analytic thinking and conspiracy beliefs (Van Prooijen, 2017). These findings suggest that conspiracy theories emerge from an inability or unwillingness to consciously reflect on multiple points of view.

The second prediction that follows from the anti-pluralism dimension is that the more strongly people believe conspiracy theories, the more likely they are to respond with hostility when their beliefs are threatened. This prediction is consistent with Hofstadter's (1966) notion that conspiracy theories occur mostly among people who have an "angry mind", as reflected in increased hostility and suspiciousness

towards others. Various complementary research findings support this prediction. Belief in conspiracy theories is empirically related with increased hostility (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999) as well as with disagreeableness, a personality trait frequently associated with conflict and aggression (Swami et al., 2011). Furthermore, belief in conspiracy theories is correlated with narcissism—an individual difference variable characterized by an inflated self-view, which often determines a tendency to respond with hostility and aggression when one's beliefs are challenged (Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec De Zavala, 2016). Finally, a strong predictor of belief in conspiracy theories is interpersonal paranoia, that is, a general tendency to be suspicious of possibly hostile intentions of others in one's direct social environment (Darwin, Neave, & Holmes, 2011). Taken together, these findings suggest that an increased susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs is associated with relatively conflict-prone interpersonal relationships.

Behavioral data is currently lacking in empirical psychological research on conspiracy theories. Yet, evidence from different disciplines suggests a link between conspiracy theories and aggression. Historians have noted that most—if not all—wars that have been fought in recent history showed excessive conspiracy theorizing about the enemy group at both sides of the conflict (Pipes, 1997). Furthermore, in their content analysis of radical fringe groups in society, Bartlett and Miller (2010) examined possible differences between violent versus nonviolent groups. While they did not find evidence for a direct link between conspiracy theories and violence—in the sense that both violent and nonviolent fringe groups strongly endorsed conspiracy theories—they did find evidence for a role of conspiracy theories as "radicalization multiplier". Specifically, conspiracy theories accelerate the processes through which ideological groups turn radical, and through which radical groups turn violent.

In sum, the more strongly people believe that their own ideology represents the simple and only solution to the problems that society faces, the more likely they are to endorse conspiracy theories. Furthermore, ideological disagreements are particularly likely to lead to conflict, hostility, and aggression in encounters with people who strongly believe conspiracy theories. Although at present somewhat circumstantial, the available evidence is consistent with the notion that the anti-pluralism dimension of populism predicts belief in conspiracy theories.

Threatened nationalism

The dimension of threatened nationalism implies that the glory of one's own nation is under threat by external forces. Due to such threatened nationalism, populist movements at the political right typically have strong anti-immigration sentiments. Furthermore, threatened nationalism leads populist movements at both sides of the ideological spectrum to reject international trade treaties, oppose financial cutbacks and economic austerity measures, embrace protectionism, and to be skeptical of powerful multi-nation political alliances (e.g., the EU; the NATO). At a psychological level, it stands to reason that such threatened nationalism predicts belief in conspiracy theories, for two complementary reasons. First, the belief that one's nation is under threat is a likely source of uncertainty and fear, which stimulates conspiracy beliefs (e.g., Van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). But in addition to that, conspiracy theories by definition involve intergroup dynamics where "they" (i.e., the powerful conspiracy) collude in secret to harm "us" (e.g., fellow citizens; fellow employees). As such, it might be reasoned that feelings of uncertainty and fear increase conspiracy beliefs only in situations where one can realistically blame a suspect outgroup for the problems experienced by a valued ingroup.

Building on these insights, it can be predicted that conspiracy theories flourish

when people associate feelings of uncertainty and fear with a valuable but vulnerable ingroup. Multiple studies support this prediction. In a series of experiments participants read a newspaper article about the political situation in an African country. Half of the participants were asked to take the perspective of the citizens of that country while reading the article, and to imagine that they themselves were born in that country. The purpose of such perspective taking was to increase the extent to which participants would align themselves with the target group in the article. In the control condition, participants were asked to read the article as objectively as possible. Then, the article described how a political opposition leader, who was likely to win the upcoming elections in this African country, was involved in a car crash. Half of the participants read that the opposition leader died (high threat) and half of the participants read that the opposition leader miraculously survived the car crash (low threat). Results revealed stronger belief in conspiracy theories—suggesting that the car crash was not an accident but an assassination attempt by the government—in the high as opposed to low threat condition. This effect emerged only among participants who took the perspective of the citizens of the African country, however, and not among citizens who read the article in a detached fashion. These findings suggest that threatening societal circumstances only increase conspiracy theories among perceivers who feel close to the affected citizens (Van Prooijen & Van Dijk, 2014).

Additional findings further support the idea that threatening events increase conspiracy theories only among people who experience strong interpersonal connections with the people who are harmed by the events. In a series of studies, Van Prooijen (2016) found that feelings of self-uncertainty predicted belief in conspiracy theories, but only among participants who were primed with feelings of inclusion, not

among participants who were primed with feelings of exclusion. Furthermore, conspiracy theories are driven mostly by feelings of ingroup superiority (i.e., collective narcissism), and not by regular ingroup identification (Cichocka, Marchlewska, Golec de Zavala, & Olechowski, 2015). This latter finding is consistent with the notion of threatened nationalism, which assumes one's own country to be superior as compared to other countries.

Finally, Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2013, 2015) found support for these intergroup dynamics in the context of Indonesian citizens' conspiracy theories about the causes of terrorist attacks in their country. Their results revealed that identification with the Muslim community predicted a tendency to believe conspiracy theories suggesting that the Western world was behind these terrorist attacks. These effects only emerged, however, among citizens who considered the West to be threatening to their Islamic identity. In the context of distressing societal circumstances (i.e., frequent terrorist strikes), the specific combination of perceiving a threatening outgroup (i.e., the West), along with strong affective connections to the ingroup that one considers to be under threat (i.e., the Muslim community in Indonesia), stimulates belief in conspiracy theories.

The findings reviewed here together support the idea that the threatened nationalism dimension of populism is associated with belief in conspiracy theories. While high levels of regular ingroup identification does not shape belief in conspiracy theories per se, conspiracy theories emerge from vulnerable forms of ingroup identification (i.e., collective narcissism), or from situations where high identifiers are confronted with distressing events that cause feelings of fear and uncertainty. Conspiracy theories flourish particularly among citizens who believe that external forces damage the greatness of their country.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter I sought to examine the relationship between populism and belief in conspiracy theories. The research literature supports such a link not only through findings that radical political ideologies in general predict belief in conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015) but also through findings that more specifically address the underlying dimensions of populism. Conspiracy theories are related to (a) an aversion towards power holders, and feelings of powerlessness (i.e., anti-elitism), (b) a tendency to perceive simple solutions to complex problems, and a tendency to respond with hostility if one's beliefs are challenged (i.e., anti-pluralism), and (c) a tendency to believe in the superiority of one's nation, and the perception that a valued but vulnerable ingroup is under threat by external forces (i.e., threatened nationalism).

One might speculate about the causality of these effects: Does populism increase belief in conspiracy theories, or do conspiracy theories increase populist sentiments? Some of the findings reviewed here were experimental, indicating causal effects of populism dimensions on conspiracy theories (e.g., Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2015; Van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; Van Prooijen & Van Dijk, 2014; Swami et al., 2014; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). At the same time, these findings do not exclude the additional possibility that conspiracy beliefs also increase populist sentiments. Conspiracy theories may be a source of uncertainty and fear, and such negative emotions are associated with radical political beliefs (Van Prooijen, Krouwel, Boiten, & Eendebak, 2015). Moreover, empirical research suggests that the relationship between populist voting and discontent with the political elites is bidirectional: Anti-elitism stimulates populist voting, but the rhetoric of populist leaders also stimulates anti-elitism among the public (Rooduijn, van der Brug, & De Lange, 2016). Finally,

recall that conspiracy theories may serve as radicalization multiplier, hence causally

contributing to the process of radicalization (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). Integrating

these arguments, it is plausible that the relationship between populism and conspiracy

theories is bidirectional and self-reinforcing. Consistent with this view, it has been

argued that conspiracy theories may be an unavoidable and intrinsic aspect of

populism (Müller, 2016).

Throughout the chapter, I have used the terms 'populism' and 'extremism'

somewhat interchangeably. To some extent this reflects conceptual pragmatism that

can be justified by the notion that most present-day populist movements are situated

at the far-left or far-right end of the political spectrum (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

It should be noted, however, that extremism and populism do not always converge. In

fact, some popular political leaders are populist yet not politically extremist. A well-

known example in recent history is Silvio Berlusconi, who had all the characteristics

of a populist leader, yet was commonly conceived of as ideologically center-right but

not far-right. An interesting question for future research, therefore, is whether

populism or extremism more parsimoniously explains the relationship between

political attitudes and conspiracy theories.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that many differences between

populist movements exist. One should be particularly careful not to overgeneralize

contemporary populist movements with the ideologies of some of the most infamous

extremist regimes of the 20th century. For instance, following the inauguration of

Donald Trump in January 2017, Pope Francis warned against global populism by

drawing a direct comparison with the rise of Adolph Hitler in the 1930s. Such a

comparison may be tempting but is historically ill-informed. Although Hitler certainly

would qualify as populist, there are many important ideological differences between

the Nazis and present-day populist leaders like Trump, Farage, Le Pen, or Wilders.

For instance, contemporary populist movements tend to be protectionist (i.e., they

wish to better protect their country's existing borders); the Nazis, however, from the

very beginning were expansionist in their ideologies (i.e., they wanted to *expand*

Germany's borders). Naturally, Nazi expansionism made war inevitable, which is not

a given for present-day populist protectionism (Judis, 2016).

These qualifications notwithstanding, the arguments of the present chapter

suggest that the recent electoral successes of populist movements are reason for

concern. Our world is facing real challenges, including climate change, epidemics,

poverty, inequality, terrorism, and war. Such challenges require rational, science-

based political solutions, and constructive collaborations between national

governments. Populist movements, however, approach such challenges with irrational

and far-fetched conspiracy theories, leading to impoverished decision-making and a

deterioration of the international relationships that are needed to effectively address

these challenges. Specifically, populist movements have—more so than mainstream

political movements—an alternative perception of reality that is poorly grounded in

reason or science. This may manifests itself in dismissing real solutions to global

problems, as underscored by the anti-vaccine movement's rejection of decades of

immunological research and the decreasing number of citizens that have their children

vaccinated. But besides rejecting real solutions, alternative perceptions of reality may

also lead one to deny the existence of real problems that threaten our existence (e.g.,

denial of anthropogenic climate change). Conspiracy theories typically are part of

such alternative facts, and society may therefore benefit from interventions that

promote rationality among the public.

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