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Authoritarian Leaders Share Conspiracy Theories to Attack Opponents, Promote In-Group Unity, Shift Blame, and Undermine Democratic Institutions

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Abstract

Although many virtuous leaders are guided by the ideal of prioritizing the need and welfare of their subordinates, others advance their self-interest at the expense of the people they purport to serve. In this article, we discuss the relationship between leadership and the spread of conspiracy theories. We propose that leaders spread conspiracy theories in service of four primary goals: 1) to attack opponents; 2) to increase support from their ingroup members; 3) to shift blame and responsibility; and 4) to undermine institution that threaten their power. We argue that populist and conservative leaders are most likely to spread conspiracy theories during periods of instability.

Keywords: conspiracy theories sharing, leadership, authoritarian leaders.

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Democracy is in danger. Conspiracy theories legitimize false narratives about powerful elites or outgroups who surreptitiously advance their own outcomes at the expense of the innocent and vulnerable. Beliefs in these theories misdirect attention, polarize and even radicalize individuals, and erode democracy (Sternisko et al., 2020). In addition, the spread of conspiracy theories have harmed our ability to address global challenges, ranging from the COVID pandemic to climate change (Pummerer et al., 2022; van der Linden, 2015; Enea et al., 2022*). This trend has motivated scholars to investigate why conspiracy theories are prevalent (e.g., see Van Bavel et al., 2020 and Biddlestone et al., 2021 for a review). This work has found that people share conspiracy theories not only because they believe them (Van Bavel et al., 2020), but also because they are inattentive (Pennycook et al., 2020), motivated to affiliate with their ingroup (Enders & Smallpage, 2018), keen to gain social attention and reactions (Ren et al., 2021), and in some cases are even motivated to promote chaos (Petersen et al., 2020).

The act of disseminating conspiracy theories merits special attention for one class of individuals in particular: leaders. When leaders disseminate conspiracy theories, they have greater influence than average conspiracy theorists because they reach a wider audience than most people (Barbera & Zeitzoff, 2018), their positions lend greater credibility to misleading claims (Umeogu, 2012), and they normalize the spread of misinformation (Spector, 2021).

In this article, we describe the relationship between leadership and the spread of conspiracy theories. We first explain what leaders stand to gain from them, arguing that leaders spread conspiracy theories in service of four primary goals: to attack opponents, increase support from their ingroup members, shift blame and responsibility, and undermine institutions that

threaten their power. Second, we unpack which types of leaders are most likely to generate and popularize conspiracy theories.

Table 1

Leaders' Motives for Sharing Conspiracy Theories

Motive	How Conspiracy Theories Help Leaders Achieve This Motive
Attack opponents	• Conspiracy theories trigger intense emotions, causing followers to become less likely to engage in analytical processing and more likely to engage in impulsive, violent acts.
Promote in-group unity	• Conspiracy theories depict outgroups as common enemies that threaten the ingroup's welfare. The perceived threat galvanizes ingroup members. • Conspiracy theories create a salient contrast between the virtuous purity of the ingroup and the corrupt nature of the outgroup. The contrast facilitates group cohesiveness.
Shift blame	• Conspiracy theories target powerful individuals and are hard to falsify. Therefore, leaders can manufacture a culprit for their followers' problems without providing factual evidence.
Undermine democratic institutions	• Leaders can use conspiracy theories to discredit institutions (e.g., the free press or democratic elections) that might challenge their power.

Sharing conspiracy theories to attack individual opponents

Leaders often seek to undermine potential competitors (Georgesén & Harris, 2006; Mead & Maner, 2012; Maner & Mead, 2010). To do so, they may derogate opponents by spreading conspiracy theories, guiding followers to focus on a purported (and false) wrongdoing perpetrated by a rival. For example, during the 2016 Republican Party primary race, Donald Trump claimed that Ted Cruz's father, Rafael Cruz, had been actively involved in Lee Oswald's assassination of President John F. Kennedy. By attacking rivals, leaders elicit intense emotions, such as anger and outrage (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). This may prevent followers from engaging in deliberative processing, causing them to be more vulnerable to believing myths that discredit the integrity or stature of opponents (van Prooijen et al., 2022; Kahneman, 2011). As such, followers are more likely to undermine opponents or even take aggressive action against them without scrutinizing the ethics of their leader's agenda.

Leaders who are adept at using conspiracy theories motivate their followers to build a tight association between the conspiracy and their opponent. This can cause thin slices of information about the opponent — such as images from the news or even the mere mention of their name during a political rally — to elicit strong moral emotions such as disgust (Rozin et al., 1999). Once followers are in a state-of-mind dominated by strong emotions and minimal analytical processing, they are poised to undermine their leader's opponents rather than scrutinize the leader's shortcomings. In this way, leaders can exploit conspiracy theories to mobilize followers toward the denigration of opponents.

Sharing conspiracy theories to foster a stronger sense of ingroup identity

Rather than targeting an individual opponent (e.g., a single rival for power), leaders often spread conspiracy theories to manufacture conflict between groups. By spreading conspiracy

theories, leaders can support two related goals, each of which engenders a stronger sense of ingroup identity. First, conspiracy theories help groups converge their attention, emotion, and energy on a common enemy who threatens the interests of the ingroup. Toward this end, many conspiracy theories depict outgroups engaging in covert activities to harm the welfare of the ingroup (Jolley et al., 2020*). For instance, Palestinian leaders used official news outlets to spread a conspiracy theory that Israel had been using rats to drive Arab families from the Old City of Jerusalem. The ability of conspiracy theories to direct attention and emotion toward a common enemy can be galvanizing. The perceived outgroup threat triggers anger and anxiety (Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2015), causing ingroup members to band together to fight the outgroup rather than become stifled by intragroup competition (Maner & Mead, 2010). The perceived distinction between “us” and “them” strengthens the ingroup’s cohesiveness and resolve.

Second, conspiracy theories create a sharp contrast between the virtuous purity of the ingroup and the corrupt nature of the outgroup. The conspirators are branded as having warped ends. Further, they are often viewed as Machiavellian, corrupt, surreptitious, and hypocritical (Biddlestone et al., 2021), making their behavior easier to condemn because it is not merely their ends that are problematic, but also the means. Ultimately, this helps preserve the belief that one’s own group is virtuous and functionally led (Douglas, Sutton, et al., 2019; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008; however, see Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020). This strategy is likely to be sustainable even when group members are confronted by outgroup members who appear to undermine their claim to virtue by casting doubt on their theories: given that followers do not have to worry about their theories being falsified, they can confidently confront outgroup members who express doubt. Accordingly, they can interpret the outgroup members’ skepticism as an affront to their group’s identity. In short, leaders can use conspiracy theories to generate a contrast between a virtuous

ingroup and an outgroup that exhibits unacceptably antagonistic behavior. This inflates their own group's sense of virtuousness.

The effect that conspiracy theories have on strengthening ingroup identity has beneficial consequences for leaders. During periods of threat, collectives not only become more cohesive, but rally around strong leaders (Baekgaard et al., 2020; Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017). This is consistent with cultural research, which has established that more tight-knit collectives typically have steeper hierarchies and stronger leaders (Pasa, 2000; Basabe & Ros, 2005). In this way, leaders can use the galvanization of their ingroup's identity as an opportunity to prop up and maintain their own power. Moreover, leaders can channel a collective sense of threat to cement themselves as the protector of their ingroup's traditions and morés. By sharing conspiracy theories, leaders express outrage towards outgroups and create the impression that they are dedicated to protecting the welfare of their ingroups, even at the cost of hurting outgroups. Since individuals have a preference for leaders who are "one of us" and "doing it for us" (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Sternisko et al., 2020; Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), followers are more likely to endorse leaders who appear to prioritize ingroups' interest, especially during tumultuous times (Halevy et al., 2012; Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017). In sum, the strengthening effect of conspiracy theories on ingroup identities can help leaders consolidate power.

Sharing conspiracy theories to dodge blame and shift responsibility

Leaders may seek to retain power by using conspiracy theories to shift blame and responsibility. Conspiracy theories often provide people with a clear and convenient explanation for their problems. This is corroborated by the reality that many conspiracy theories clearly attribute blame to an identifiable source, which helps to reduce uncertainty (Douglas et al., 2017; van Prooijen, 2019). By spreading conspiracy theories, leaders suggest that negative and

unexpected events (e.g., a pandemic) can be attributed to other powerful human agents rather than random, uncontrollable factors or to their own, bungling leadership failures. In a classic example of this, in 64 AD Emperor Nero blamed the Christian community for the Great Fire of Rome; this conspiracy theory helped to motivate the Roman Persecution that lasted for centuries.

Accusations embedded in conspiracy theories are often hard to falsify, because they typically attribute blame to human agents who have the power and resources to conduct invidious and surreptitious crimes. Further, evidence that contradicts conspiracy theories can be interpreted as an attempted cover-up by these powerful agents (Douglas et al., 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2015; Vermeule & Sunstein, 2009; Douglas, Uscinski, et al., 2019). By harnessing the weak falsifiability of conspiracy theories, leaders can manufacture a culprit without providing factual evidence.

Sharing conspiracy theories to undermine democratic institutions

Unbiased electoral systems and the free press can safeguard democracy by ensuring the peaceful transition of power and illuminating corrupt behavior (Brunetti & Weder, 2003). Leaders may use conspiracy theories to undermine the credibility, legitimacy, and authority of these institutions, however, if they perceive these institution to be a threat to their authority. For example, Jair Bolsonaro claimed that the Brazilian media was over-reporting Covid deaths because the media was controlled by covert, malicious agents keen on overriding his authority. This may be an especially effective tactic if their own claim to power is illegitimate or controversial. Moreover, since exposure to conspiracy theories reduces followers' confidence in democratic institutions (Albertson & Guiler, 2020; Berlinski et al., 2021**), leaders may even mobilize followers to engage in violent actions that further undermine these institutions (e.g., disputing an election defeat by initiating riots or mobilizing military forces).

Which leaders are more likely to share conspiracy theories?

Not all leaders will be attracted to conspiracy theories. We argue that the leaders most amenable to the use of conspiracy theories will be those who have a preference for authoritarian leadership (Wood & Gray, 2019**), lead populist groups, and possess Machiavellian traits (Hughes & Machan, 2021). Authoritarian leaders who encounter threats to their status are more likely engage in subterfuge and self-serving behavior during periods of uncertainty and structural change (e.g., elections, economic transitions, pandemics; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). During these times, such leaders face hierarchical instability and status threats (Maner & Mead, 2010) and may privilege gaining and retaining power over other concerns, such as honesty and safeguarding institutions.

Additionally, authoritarian leaders are more likely to attract followers who are open to conspiracy theories. The nature of conspiracy theories – as instruments that bind a collective around a set of non-falsifiable and often patently implausible beliefs that attribute blame to outsiders (Biddlestone et al., 2021) – suggests that they are more likely to fester among the following: followers who are willing to suspend disbelief for the sake of their collective’s welfare (Sternisko et al., 2021*); people who value loyalty and the preservation of their leader’s stature (Wood & Gray, 2019); and people who are easily repulsed by outgroup members who are deemed to have impure or corrupt motives. These attributes reflect “binding” moral foundations that are emblematic of groups that have conservative belief systems with leaders who use dominance rather than competence to exhibit personal agency and maintain legitimacy (Haidt, Graham, & Joseph, 2009). If a leader has a contingent of loyal followers who are inclined to defer to the leader’s ideology and public narratives, then it will be easier for the leader to persuade followers of non-falsifiable claims.

Additionally, conspiracy theories are more likely to be endorsed by people who feel slighted or wronged by powerful institutions (Mao et al., 2020); people who are skeptical of traditional sources of power; people who hold Unjust World beliefs (Furnham, 2021); people who do not value verifiable and observable evidence for truth claims (Stasielowicz, 2022; Furnham & Grover, 2021; Leman & Cinnirella, 2013); and individuals who have little trust in outgroups. These are common attributes of poorly educated populist groups, especially those that exhibit national narcissism, Xenophobia, and a mistrust of outsiders (Sternisko et al., 2021; Cichocka et al., 2015). Groups with these attributes are typically open to authoritarian leaders because they preserve order, reduce uncertainty, and privilege the ingroup's interests over outside threats.

Conclusion

We postulate that leaders use conspiracy theories as a tool to advance their self-interest, especially when they encounter threats to their status. They use conspiracy theories to damage the reputations of opponents, increase support from their ingroup members, divert blame and responsibility, and undermine institutions. Certain leaders – especially those who lead conservative or populist movements during periods of instability – are especially likely to capitalize on the features that distinguish conspiracy theories from other types of beliefs, including their non-falsifiable nature, the cynical connotations they attach to established institutions, and the belief that powerful forces are corrupt and seek to harm them.

Future research should build on this framework to consider not only how leaders use conspiracy theories, but also how followers experience them and carry the burden of their consequences. For example, when leaders spread conspiracy theories, they can advance their own goals, but often at a significant cost to the welfare of others. As leaders broadcast

conspiracy theories, they harm the ability of others to distinguish fact from fiction. In a similar vein, leaders who make regular use of conspiracy theories may undercut the extent to which their followers are motivated to acquire accurate and complete information over the long-term. Moreover, conspiracy theories can reduce trust and escalate conflict between groups (Jolley, Meleady, & Douglas, 2020). The bedrock of democratic institutions are a set of common values and a common ideology. Conspiracy theories – by undermining opponents, stoking fear, solidifying intergroup tensions, redirecting blame, and attacking the legitimacy of democratic institutions – enable leaders to erode the very basis of this foundation.

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