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Abstract

In recent years, it has been argued that conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes are two sides of the same coin. Despite some theoretical similarities, the empirical evidence supporting the link between conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes remains scarce. Across three studies, we examined the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and populist attitudes. Study 1 (Greece, *N = 275*) and Study 2 (United Kingdom, *N = 300*) revealed that belief in conspiracy theories is positively associated with populist attitudes. These studies further showed that this relationship is mediated by political cynicism, feelings of powerlessness and zero-sum thinking. Based on the presumption that conspiracy beliefs are driven by a sense of political powerlessness and cynicism, in Study 3 (USA, *N = 300*, pre-registered), we use a fictitious country vignette paradigm to experimentally show that having a newly-elected populist party in power (as compared to a well-established party) reduced participants tendency to believe in conspiratorial terms about that country. More specifically, we found that a newly elected populist party *empowered participants*, made them less *politically cynical* and less likely to think along the lines of *a zero-sum game.* Beyond documenting a positive relationship between conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes, this research suggests that at historical moments that populist parties are in power belief in conspiracy beliefs *may decrease*. Our results challenge the mainstream view of populist support as an unequivocally negative and threatening phenomenon to trust and democracy.

Introduction

"There was something about the populist imagination that loved the secret plot and the conspiratorial meeting."

—Richard Hofstadter (1955)

In his seminal essays, *The Age of Reform* (1955) and *The Paranoid Style* (1964), Richard Hofstadter defined populism as "a paranoid style of politics", where conspiracy theories thrive. Focusing on the People's Party in the late nineteenth century US, Hofstadter pronounced the populist supporters as extreme, marginal, and backward looking, often anxious about their status in society and certainly prone to conspiracy theories (Hofstadter, 1955, p. 71). Likewise, he classified individuals endorsing conspiracy theories as "harmful deviants", "delusional people" who by

"undermining necessary trust in public institutions rip apart the fabric of our societies" (Hofstadter, 1964).

Almost half a century later, Hofstadter's work remains rather influential in academic and popular conceptions about the association between conspiracy beliefs and populism. Many social scientists today tend to treat conspiracy theorists as violent and dangerous extremists who are a threat to the world order (Pipes, 1997; Swami et al., 2011; Darwin et al., 2011; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).[1] Likewise, recent accounts of 'the populist temptation' seem to greatly reflect Hofstadter's thesis:

> One way to make the term less ambiguous is to think of populism as a democratic *pathology* in two senses: as a pathology, first, of electoral-representative democracy and, second, of counter-democracy. Populism is not just an ideology. *It is a perverse inversion of the ideals and procedures of democracy*. (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 265)

Undeniably, Hofstadter's work has not only been influential to the populism literature, but also to the mounting literature on conspiracy theories. The analogical use of 'paranoid style' has gained prominence, because it offers a normative description of both conspiracy theories and populism as necessarily extreme and marginal, symptoms of a decaying democracy (Muller, 2018; Bergmann, 2018). In this regard, populism and conspiracy theories are instantaneously met with skepticism and disdain, floating around as a menace to society and are, by definition, always "bad".

Recently, scholars have started unraveling the socio-political consequences of believing in conspiracy theories, as subscribing to conspiracy theories can affect people in many ways (Butter & Knight, 2020). In the social-psychological literature, the main focus is often on the negative consequences of endorsing conspiracy theories, such as reducing intentions to vote (Jolley & Doulgas, 2014), increasing every day crime (Jolley et al., 2019) and tax evasion (Imhoff, Dieterle, & Lamberty, 2021) to name a few (see Butter & Knight for a review). However, far too little attention has been paid to the potential positive aspects of believing in conspiracy theories (Moore, 2016; Raikka, 2018; Dentith, 2018).

As Hawkins and Rovira-Kaltwasser put it, "*Despite the fact that various scholars have pointed out the link between populism and conspiratorial thinking…, there is a dearth of empirical research on this argument"* (2017, p. 530). Only recently have social scientists begun examining the effects of conspiracy beliefs on democratic attitudes (Dentith, 2021; Raikka & Ritola, 2020), and more specifically on support for direct democracy, suggesting a positive relationship between the two (Pantazi, Papaioannou & van Prooijen, 2021). The evidence shows that a system with direct democracy (as compared to one with representative democracy) may empower citizens and reduce belief in conspiracy theories, suggesting that conspiracy beliefs are not necessarily associated with decreased support for democracy in general, but with decreased support for the currently established type of representative democracy.

[1] Mark Fenster (1999) was one of the first to move away from the focus on paranoia and treated conspiracy beliefs as a populist theory of power, an expression of populist protest. Through this lens, Fenster recognizes that conspiracy theories can function as a tool of the weaker groups in society, an expression against inequality and powerlessness.

Populism

Despite the widespread use of the term, populism has long been creating confusion. Thus far, the term has been used to refer to a discourse (Laclau, 2005), a (thin-layered) ideology (Mudde, 2017), a political phenomenon, a form of radical democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 2014; Dahl, 2008; Kaltwasser, 2012) and even a (paranoid) syndrome (Hofstadter, 1964; Muller, 2017).

Part of this terminological confusion stems from the fact that people, groups, and parties hardly ever identify themselves as populists, but rather they are labeled as such by political opponents, academics, and the media. Usually, such labeling comes with a negative connotation and diverse pejorative associations. Through this lens, populists are described as being 'socially backward', 'lacking an understanding of reality', being 'paranoid' and 'a threat to democracy'. Simply stated, populism on many occasions has been defined through anti-populist discourse (Stavrakakis et al., 2018).

Thus, over the past few decades, populism has been used to describe a series of heterogeneous phenomena. Such phenomena are not restricted to the European far-right in countries like –among other– the Netherlands (Geert Wilders), France (Marine Le Pen), and Hungary (Viktor Orban), but expand to the Latin American left-wing governments (the so-called Pink Tide) and the European South, featuring in both governments and the opposition (Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain). North America is no exception to this rule, with candidates from both major parties (Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders) classified as populist leaders. As is evident from the listed examples, populism has not been exclusively related to either left or right-wing political support, nor to political agents and parties exclusively in opposition (or in government for that matter).

Beyond the lack of consensus in the literature as to the defining attributes of populism, a basic-level agreement exists that populism includes some kind of appeal to "the people" and a denunciation of "the elite". In our work, we combine elements from Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as a "thin-layered ideology" according to which society is split into two homogeneously antagonistic groups, with the discursive model of populism developed by the Essex School (Laclau, 1977; 1980; Stavrakakis, 2004). On the one hand, Mudde's definition suggests that powerful elites are seen by populists as "homogeneous corrupt groups that work against the general will of the people", and that they "continue to hold on to illegitimate powers to undermine the voice of the people" (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013, p 503). On the other hand, the discursive model maintains that individuals hold a highly polarized representation of society (which goes against the orthodox view that highlights the continuity of the social fabric) and that a confrontational attitude is essential to make individuals' voices heard and influence decision-making (Stavrakakis et al., 2017).

Through this lens, populism mandates that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde 2004: 543) and promotes a model of democracy in which the people should lie at the core (Stavrakakis, 2018). Another phenomenon that has been recently associated to political attitudes holding the people at the core of politics are conspiracy theories. As previously mentioned, recent work

demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs are positively linked with support for direct (as opposed to representative) democracy (Pantazi et al., 2021). Populist attitudes and especially populist anti-elitism have been indeed argued to be positively associated with conspiracy beliefs (Muller, 2017; Bergman, 2018).

Conspiracy theories

Despite the common usage of the term, the definition of what constitutes a conspiracy theory is varied in the literature (Moore, 2018) and here too there is some terminological confusion (Butter & Knight, 2020). The meaning of this term has changed and evolved considerably over time. A precise definition of conspiracy theories has proved rather elusive and challenging (Moore, 2018; Raiika, 2018). Some of the early research on conspiracy theories treated the term and the people who endorse such theories, as fringe, extremists, and even delusional and paranoid (Hofstadter, 1954). However, scholars today have moved away from such pejorative connotations and from associating those people with pathological mental health issues (Butter & Knight, 2020). This is partly owed to growing evidence suggesting that conspiracy theories are widely accepted among the general population around the world (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Douglas et al., 2017) and partly because social scientists have systematically raised concerns about the use of the term and its various definitions (c.f. Coady, 2017, 2019; Moore, 2016; 2018, Raiika, 2018; Blanusa & Hristov, 2020).

Historically, the term "conspiracy theories" has been used to refer to attempts to explain prominent political and societal events (e.g., the assassination of prominent politicians, terrorist attacks and so on) through the lens of malevolent plots by hidden and powerful agents. Usually, those agents are part of well-established elites, whose aim is to promote self-interest to the detriment of the general population (c.f. Keeley, 1999, Douglas et al., 2017). Others have argued that conspiracy theories are explanations that reject the dominant narrative and the 'official' version of those events (see Butter & Knight, 2020 for a review of the various definitions) and point out an epistemological deficit (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009). Through this lens, scholars have argued that people who endorse conspiracy theories "*typically do so not as a result of a mental illness of any kind, or of simple irrationality, but as a result of a "crippled epistemology," in the form of a sharply limited number of (relevant) informational sources*" (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 204)[2].

What appears to be common in those definitions is that believing in conspiracy theories seems to serve and satisfy an intrinsic sense-making (cognitive) process. In the literature, two such processes have been identified as crucial (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018); (a) *pattern perception* (people have an innate drive to identify meaningful and causal relationships around them) and (b) *agency detection* (people tend to identify intentional agency to various phenomena and stimuli around them). Through this lens, conspiracy theories are defined as "explanatory beliefs" and can serve a set of individual needs. Specifically, individuals endorse conspiracies as an attempt to give meaning to their collective experiences, reduce uncertainty for the world they live in (van Prooijen &

[2] For a criticism of the 'crippled epistemology' thesis, see Coady (2017).

Joostman, 2013), strengthen in-group belonging (Douglas et al., 2017), restore control (van Prooijen & Acker, 2015) and fulfil a need for uniqueness (Lantian et al., 2017) to name a few.

Belief in conspiracy theories has been associated with some kind of a conspiracy mind-set or a so-called 'conspiracy mentality' (Bruder et al., 2013). Conspiracy mentality is considered a relatively stable trait that is not expected to alter throughout one's life. By contrast, other studies argue in favour of the primacy of social context in influencing the degree and extent to which people endorse conspiracy theories. For example, there has been considerable evidence that conspiracy beliefs seem to be on the rise during environmental and economic crises (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). Similarly, a key predictor has been social class, and whether one belongs in the ethnically dominant group or a deprived minority (see for example, Groetzel's (1994) thesis about black minority groups in the United States). Lastly, conspiracy beliefs appear to be strongest among voters of opposition parties (i.e. those deprived of political control) and ideological rivals (Imhoff et al., 2022).

Populism and Conspiracy Theories: common attributes

Besides the shared womb of negative connotations originally highlighted by Hofstadter (1955; 1964), populism and conspiracy theories have been seen as sharing several other common attributes. A first common characteristic is that populist supporters are anti-elitist, drawing sharp distinctions between the common ('pure') people and the powerful ('malevolent') elite. A similar duality is evident for conspiracy theorists, who systematically divide between the ignorant people and the conspirators who are in a position of power. In both instances, elites (media, politicians, and so on) are seen to conspire against the popular demands of the ordinary people. Sociologists have argued that the populist message appeals to voters only when expressed by politicians who are considered anti-establishment or non-mainstream (Rooduijn et al., 2017), attesting to the anti-establishment and anti-elitist sentiment.

Another factor is the opposition to liberal, representative democracy. Both conspiracy theorists and populists assign maladies of representation to corrupt elites and politicians. Both view representative democracy as inherently flawed, failing to give voice to constituencies that do not feel represented by the elite, leaving a feeling that people's concerns are not being considered by the political establishment (especially demands of excluded sectors) (Stavrakakis, 2018; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; Kaltwasser & van Hauwaert, 2020; Pantazi et al., 2021).

A shared quality is that both populism and conspiracy theories offer simple and straightforward solutions for ordinary citizens to better navigate in a complex, ever-changing globalized world. Belief in simple solutions to societal problems has already been empirically linked to conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen, 2017), but not to populist message endorsement, though such messages too can bring about a simplistic vision of antagonism between the people and the elites.

This brings forward another shared characteristic that is cognitive and moral in nature. Both populists and conspiracy theorists unite in a Manichean logic and worldview,

discursively creating an external threat to the in-group ("the people" in populism, or ordinary citizens in conspiracy theories). From a Manichean point of view, populist politics are seen as a binary struggle between the people and the malignant elite. Put simply, both strands share a joint archetypical storytelling narrative, in which a heroic underdog is fighting a powerful evil villain (Akkerman et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2017). Conspiracy theories are attractive precisely because their Manichean narrative structures better comport with how some people process political information and provide compelling explanations for otherwise confusing or ambiguous events (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018).

Yet another common factor is their apparent rise under conditions of (financial) crises, where the most disadvantaged are left out of the political game. When crises occur, citizens feel powerless, demanding change and their voices to be heard. Conspiracy beliefs have historically been prominent in times of crises (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017), and the same has been argued for populist movements (Stavrakakis, 2018) as marginalized and disadvantaged groups come together in protest, challenging the political establishment and demanding changes to the current state of affairs.

Lastly, identifying enemies in the political arena is a shared characteristic between the two phenomena. The "others" are discursively turned into enemies of "us", "the people", threatening their identity and culture and, thus, ruining the welfare conditions they have built for their own country. This is particularly endorsed by right-wing conspiracy theorists and right-wing populist parties (see for example the Eurabia conspiracy theory).

The Role of Cynicism, Powerlessness and Zero-sum Thinking in Populism

Populist citizens view politicians as unreliable and deeply corrupt. Through this lens, politicians are regularly accused of putting their own interests ('the elite') over the interests of ordinary citizens ('the people'), breaking promises if this will increase their power and selling out their ideas if that would serve 'the establishment'. Thus, populist attitudes reflect a *cynical* stance towards politicians and established elites as well as political institutions and their functioning (Fieschi & Heywood, 2004).

Moreover, the populist worldview implies a strong 'us-versus-them' thinking and an antagonistic conflict between the common people and the powerful ('malevolent') elites (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist citizens find it increasingly difficult to be able to influence a particular outcome by taking action (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). Thus, as the populists usually side with the *powerless* people, and not the powerful elites, we anticipate higher levels of powerlessness.

A populist worldview implies that politics and economic growth is a *zero-sum game* (Eichengreen, 2018). This means that when one group makes gains, the other loses by the same amount. We conceptualize zero-sum thinking as a belief system about the antagonistic nature of social relations —that one person's gain is possible only at the expense of other persons (Rozycka-Tran et al., 2015). This belief system is shared by people in the society and it is based on the implicit assumption that a finite amount of goods exists in the world, in which one person's winning makes others the losers, and vice versa.

The Role of Cynicism, Powerlessness and Zero-sum Thinking in Conspiracies

Belief in conspiracy theories has been strongly associated with significant distrust in authorities and increased levels of political cynicism (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2012; Pantazi et al., 2021). Citizens who believe in conspiracy theories tend to be politically disengaged and *cynical* towards politicians. Specifically, they tend to believe that most politicians rely on shady practices to remain in power and make (campaign) promises that they do not keep.

Similarly, belief in conspiracy theories has been associated with feelings of political *powerlessness* (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). People who feel powerless find comfort in conspiracy theories because these theories help them accept and explain their predicaments and that forces beyond their control are at play that influence their lives (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999). Interestingly, when they get directly involved in political decision-making, and therefore empowered, they become less inclined to endorse conspiracy theories (Pantazi et al., 2021).

People who hold a belief system that approves the *antagonistic nature of social relations* – i.e. one group's gain is possible only at the expense of the other group's loss– may be more likely to endorse conspiracy theories. Conspiracy beliefs can act as a catalyst to in-group/outgroup distinction in everyday life (for instance pro vs anti-vaxxers), introducing conflict between groups. It is therefore possible that when resources are perceived as scarce, people might be more inclined to endorse conspiracies that glorify their in-group legitimate privileges (while downplaying that of the out-group).

Populism, Conspiracy Theories and (liberal) Democracy

Whatever its use, and despite being an essentially contested concept, it is safe to assume that the rising populist phenomenon has triggered widespread global concern in contemporary politics and academia about the future of (liberal) democracy (Stavrakakis, 2018). The same can be said about conspiracy theories. Both populism and conspiracy theories have been argued to threaten democracy, each for different reasons.

We would argue that populism has to be understood in the context of a democratic framework (Stavrakakis, 2018). A contextualization that is mainly driven by empirical evidence (Kaltwasser & van Hauwert, 2020) and theoretical accounts (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). From an empirical standpoint, recent evidence shows that most populist actors (are) mobilize(d) within a (liberal) democratic system, and while they seem to be disgruntled with how democracy functions in their countries, they systematically favor and support democracy over other forms of government (Kaltwasser & van Hauwaert, 2020). From a theoretical standpoint, populism is primarily placed alongside liberal democracy than to any other type of democracy (e.g. electoral democracy, illiberal democracy) (Stavrakakis, 2018).

Regardless of how the term populism has been used over the decades, its relationship with democracy has always been a topic of intense debate. While the literature is far from reaching a consensus on the matter, the conventional position maintains that populism constitutes an intrinsic threat and danger to democracy (Rosanvallon, 2008; Muller, 2017).

However, over the years, such a position has been forcefully criticized by many political scientists. The most notable proponent and defender of this view has been Ernesto Laclau (2005), who has been arguing that populism can foster the 'democratization of democracy' by giving voice to excluded sectors and re-introducing conflict into politics. Through this lens, populism is conceived as an emancipatory and democratic force (Laclau & Mouffe 2014) against the background of a liberal democracy that fails to honor its founding principles (popular sovereignty) and moves in a post-democratic direction.

A similar threatening alarm has been put forward for believing in conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2011; Jolley & Douglas, 2014). The conventional literature is that belief in conspiracy theories can pose a threat to democratic governance and that people who endorse such theories are more likely to support an authoritarian regime (Grzesiak-Feldman & Irzycka, 2009; Wood & Gray, 2019; Papaioannou et al., 2022). To date, however, it remains unclear whether belief in conspiracy theories is directly linked to liberal democratic attitudes. Recently, it has been shown that people who believe in conspiracy theories would strongly support direct democracy over other forms of democracy like representative and stealth (Pantazi et al., 2021). Such findings call for a more nuanced reconceptualization of the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and democratic preferences.

Research Overview

In this article, we empirically assess the relationship between populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs. Specifically, using two surveys (Study 1 and Study 2), we investigate whether populism is related to conspiracy beliefs in Greece and the United Kingdom. In addition, we look at factors that may mediate this relationship, namely cynicism, powerlessness and zero-sum thinking. In Study 3, we set out to test a causal model of this relationship according to which a political system that responds to people's populist attitudes may actually lower their conspiracy beliefs. We employ an experimental design using a fictitious country vignette paradigm and test what would happen to conspiracy beliefs if a populist (anti-establishment) party were elected in office – all while testing again the mediating role of cynicism, powerlessness and zero-sum thinking.

Study 1

In an online survey, we investigated the extent to which conspiracy beliefs are linked to populist attitudes. We measured participants' conspiracy mentality and their belief in specific conspiracy theories. We also measured their support for populism as well as their levels of cynicism, powerlessness and zero-sum thinking as potential mediators.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We recruited 275 Greek participants through Prolific Academic, who completed an online survey (70.5% Male, 28.7% Female, .7% "Other"; M_{Age} = 26.59, *SD* = 7.07). With this sample, we could detect Pearson bivariate correlations (two-tailed) between our variables

of interest as small as .20 with .95 power at the .05 alpha level (G*Power; Faul et al., 2007). Ethics approval was obtained from the Oxford Internet Institute's research ethics committee (Reference number: SSH OII CIA 19 047).

Participants read a page with general information about the study procedure, data use and payment and then completed an online consent form. Then, participants answered to the scales in the order appearing below, followed by demographic information. Participants were fully debriefed about the purposes and hypotheses of the study.

Measures

We measured the following variables on a scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree", unless noted otherwise. The full scale of the two main constructs appear in Appendix A. All other items/scales are saved online in an open access repository and can be accessed following this link (https://osf.io/rk8mg/).

Conspiracy Mentality (α = .77) was measured with the 5-items of the conspiracy mentality questionnaire by Bruder et al. (2013). This scale includes items like "*I think that there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions*".

Belief in specific conspiracy theories *(*α = .81*)* was measured with a scale including compiled popular specific conspiracy theories, adapted to the Greek context. This scale includes items, such as "*The financial crisis in Greece was the result of a conspiracy designed and executed by the Germans*".

Populist attitudes *(*α = .79*)* was measured with 8 items, using the validated populism scale by Stavrakakis et al. (2017), including items such as "*Popular demands are today ignored in favor of what benefits the establishment*" and "*The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people*".

Political Cynicism (α = .82) was measured with 7 items, using the cynicism scale by Pantazi et al. (Study 3, 2021), including items such as "*Most politicians in Greece are corrupt*" and "*Political parties in Greece are only interested in my vote and not in my opinion*".

Political Powerlessness (α = *.85*) was measured with 7 items compiled and adapted from various sources (Papaioannou et al., 2021; Douglas et al., 2014b), including items like "*When I watch the political reality in Greece I feel powerless*" and "*The average citizen can affect governmental decisions*" (reversed).

Zero-sum thinking *(*α = *.67*) was measured with 5 items taken from the literature (Rozycka-Tran et al., 2015), including items such as "*If someone gets richer, it means that somebody else gets poorer*" and "*Life is like tennis game—A person wins only when others lose*".

Results

Descriptive results. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables. Consistent with our line of reasoning, both conspiracy mentality and belief in specific conspiracy theories were positively correlated with populist attitudes. As expected, all three mediators under consideration (cynicism, powerlessness and zero-sum thinking) were correlated with both measures of conspiratorial thinking, and populist

attitudes. In line with our pre-registration (https://osf.io/e7axu), in each model multivariate outliers were excluded based on the median absolute deviation with a constant of 3 (Leys et al., 2013).

Table 1. *Study 1. Greek survey sample*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Conspiracy Mentality	3.48 (0.68)					
2.Specific Conspiracy Theories	.748***	2.85 (0.73)				
3. Populist attitude	.494***	.499***	3.76 (0.60)			
4. Political Cynicism	.415***	.396***	.575***	4.30 (0.61)		
5. Powerlessness	.297***	.237***	.313***	.363***	3.38 (0.74)	
6. Zero-sum thinking	.234***	.239***	.318***	.150*	.317***	3.39 (0.59)

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations in Study 1

Notes. Means and standard deviations (parenthesized) reported in the diagonal. Total number of participants were N = 275. Other values present Pearson correlation coefficients. *: $p < .05$ **: $p < .01$ ***: $p < .001$.

Mediation model. We then examined whether cynicism, powerlessness and zero-sum thinking mediated the relationship between the two conspiracy endorsement scales (i.e. mentality and specific conspiracy beliefs) and populist support. Mediation analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013; Model 4) with bootstrapping for 5,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals.

These analyses revealed positive indirect links between conspiracy mentality and populist attitudes through political cynicism (B = *.12, SE = .02,* 95% CI = [.07, .17]) and zero-sum thinking (B = *.04, SE = .01,* 95% CI = [.01, .07], see Figure 1). Similarly, belief in specific conspiracy theories was positively linked to populist attitudes through political cynicism (B = *.11, SE = .02,* 95% CI = [.06, .15]) and zero-sum thinking (B = *.03, SE = .01,* 95% CI = [.01 .06], see Figure 1). Political powerlessness on the other hand did not mediate the links between conspiracy mentality (*B* = .005, *SE* = .01, 95%CI [-.023, .035]) or specific conspiracy beliefs (*B* = .007, *SE* = .011, 95%CI [-.014, .027]) and populist attitudes.

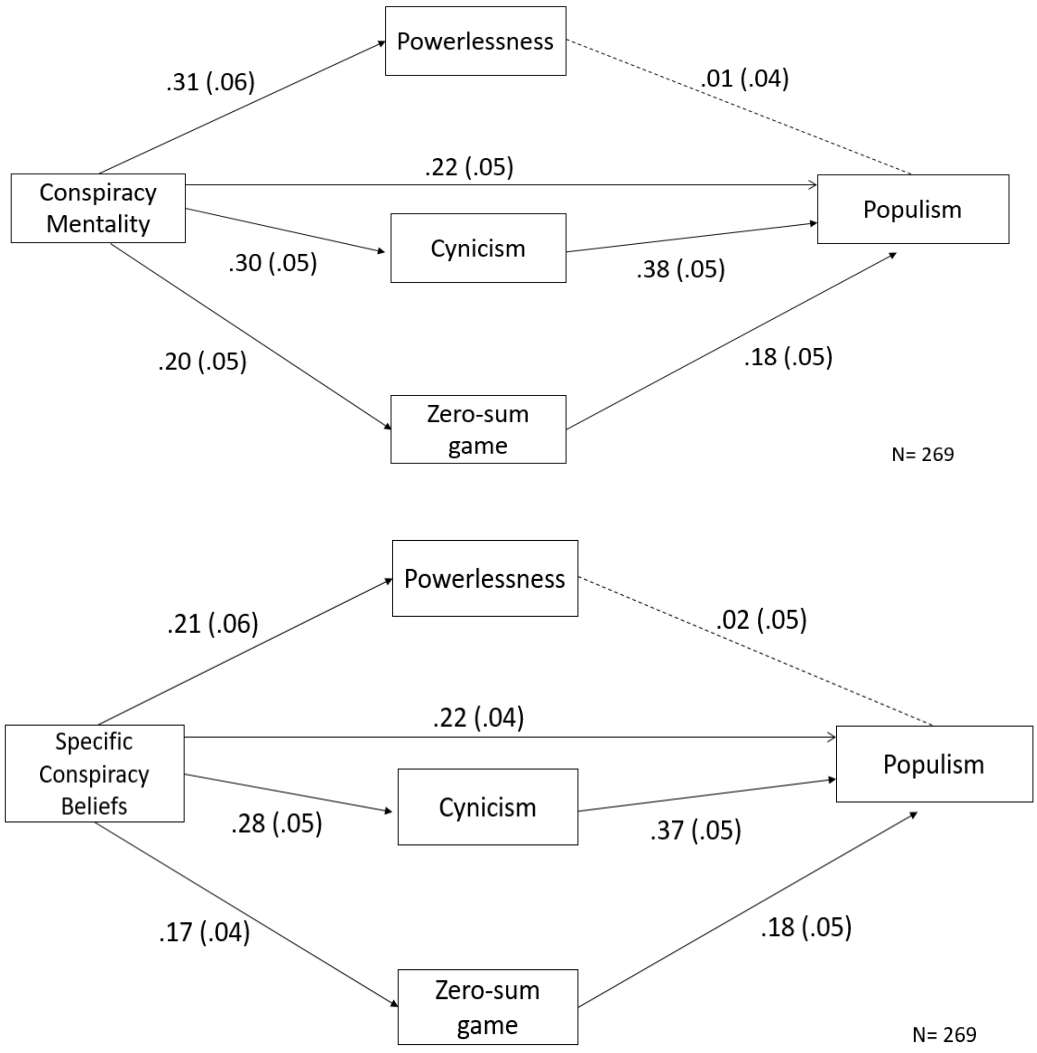

Figure 1. **Study 1.** Multiple parallel mediation models of the relationship between conspiracy mentality (upper panel) and specific conspiracy theories (lower panel) and populist attitudes. Note. Dashed lines highlight non-significant relationships and solid lines highlight significant relationships ($p < .05$).

Discussion

Study 1 supported the line of reasoning laid out in the introduction: people who believe in conspiracy theories are more likely to exhibit populist attitudes, and this relationship is mediated by political cynicism and zero-sum thinking.

Study 2

In Study 2, we sought to replicate the Study 1 findings by running a similar study in a different country, the United Kingdom. We also sought to investigate whether political cynicism and zero-sum thinking would again appear to be significant mediators of the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes, and whether powerlessness would exhibit a significant indirect effect in this sample.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We recruited 300 participants from the United Kingdom through Prolific Academic (36.3% Male, 62.0% Female, 1.7% "Other"; M_{Age} = 35.6, *SD* = 13.25). Similar to Study 1, participants were asked about their populist attitudes, their perceptions of conspiracy theories, cynicism, powerlessness and zero-sum thinking.

Measures

The following variables were measured on a scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree", unless noted otherwise.

Conspiracy Mentality (α = .79) was measured with the same conspiracy mentality questionnaire by Bruder et al. (2013) as in Study 1.

Belief in specific conspiracy theories (α = .81) was measured with 5 items, including compiled popular specific conspiracy theories in the UK, such as "*The British government permits or perpetrates acts of terrorism on its own soil, disguising its involvement*".

Populist attitudes (α = .80) were measured with the same validated populism scale from Study 1 (Stavrakakis et al., 2017).

Political Cynicism (α = .84) was measured with the same 7 items as in Study 1.

Political Powerlessness (α = .87) was measured with the same 7 items as in Study 1.

Zero-sum thinking (α = .83) was measured with the same 5 items as in Study 1.

Results

Descriptive results. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables. Both conspiracy mentality and belief in specific conspiracy theories were positively correlated with the populist attitudes scale, as well as with the three tested

mediators (namely: political cynicism, feelings of powerlessness and zero-sum thinking). As expected in line with Study 1 the populist attitudes scale was also positively correlated with all three mediators.

Table 2. *Study 2, UK survey sample*

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Conspiracy Mentality	3.52 (0.69)					
2. Specific Conspiracy Theories	.642***	2.07 (0.77)				
3. Populist attitude	.518***	.412***	3.59 (0.62)			
4. Political Cynicism	.522***	.375***	.625***	3.53 (0.69)		
5. Powerlessness	.231***	.309***	.391***	.446***	2.89 (0.83)	
6. Zero-sum thinking	.346***	.334***	.401***	.415***	.302***	3.07 (0.81)

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations in Study 2

Notes. Means and standard deviations (parenthesized) reported in the diagonal. Total number of participants were N = 300. Other values present Pearson correlation coefficients. *: $p < .05$ **: $p < .01$ ***: $p < .001$.

Mediation models. We ran two parallel mediation models (Hayes, 2013; SPSS macro; model 4) one for conspiracy mentality and one for belief in specific conspiracy theories, using populist attitudes as the outcome measure, and political cynicism, belief in zero-sum and powerlessness as the three (parallel) mediators. In each model, multivariate outliers were excluded based on the median absolute deviation with a constant of 3 (Leys et al., 2013).

As shown in Figure 2, there was a significant positive indirect (i.e. mediated) link between conspiracy mentality and populist attitudes through all three mediators. Political cynicism (B = *.18, SE = .03,* 95% CI = [.11, .25]), political powerlessness (B = *.03, SE = .01,* 95% CI = [.00, .57]) and zero-sum thinking (B = *.04, SE = .01,* 95% CI = [.01, .07]). Similarly, belief in specific conspiracy theories was positively linked to populist attitudes through political cynicism (B = *.18, SE = .03,* 95% CI = [.12, .25]) and zero-sum thinking (B = *.03, SE = .01,* 95% CI = [.01 .06]). Political powerlessness on the other hand did not mediate the links between specific conspiracy beliefs (*B* = .02, *SE* = .01, 95%CI [-.002, .050]). This finding is consistent with Study 1 findings where powerlessness was not a significant mediator of the focal relationship.

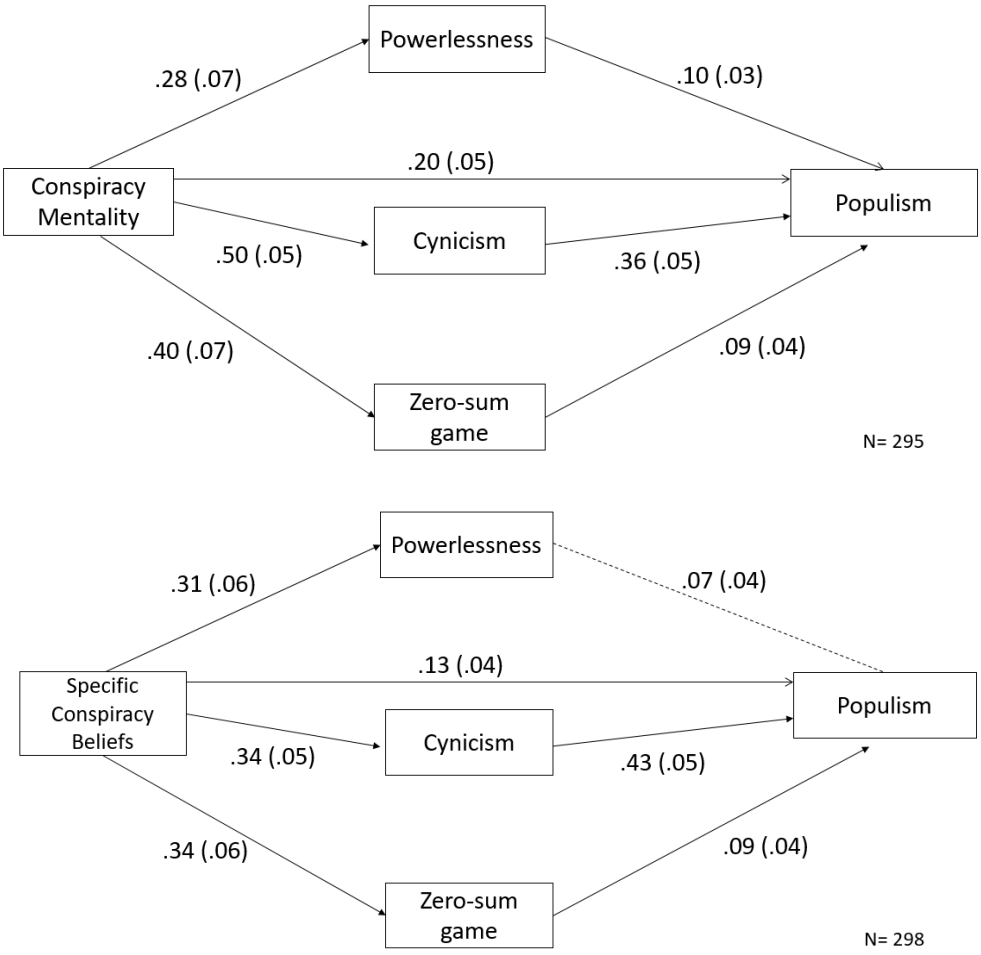

Figure 2. **Study 2.** Multiple parallel mediation models (three mediators) of the relationship between conspiracy mentality (upper panel) and specific conspiracy theories (lower panel) and populist attitudes. Note. Dashed lines highlight non-significant relationships and solid lines highlight significant relationships ($p < .05$).

Discussion

Study 2 largely replicated the main findings established in Study 1 suggesting that the significant positive relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and populism is mediated by political cynicism and zero-sum thinking. Here, it has been demonstrated that belief in conspiracy theories predicts populist support through a general lack of trust against the political system and a world-view that one person's gain would be another's loss, suggesting an antagonistic nature around social relations.

Interestingly, in Study 2 powerlessness mediated the relationship between conspiracy mentality and populism (see Table 2), but not the one between specific conspiracy beliefs and populism, somewhat contradicting the findings in Study 1. This discrepancy may be due to cultural or contextual differences in the two samples. Nevertheless, since the evidence in support of the mediating role of powerlessness in Study 2 was only apparent in one of the two main analyses, we take the evidence for the role of powerlessness in the link between populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs to be rather weak.

Study 3

Given that one of the main arguments of populism is the idea of antagonism between 'ordinary citizens' and the 'powerful elites' to the center of politics and political decision-making and that this antagonism between citizens and elites is one of the main mechanisms behind conspiratorial thinking, Study 3 was designed to explore what happens when a populist party seizes power. We reasoned that if a populist party comes to power, therefore satisfying the interests of ordinary citizens, belief in conspiracy theories among citizens *might actually go* down. A populist worldview would suggest that the election of a populist party creates the expectation that power is placed back into the hands of ordinary citizens, therefore decreasing political cynicism. Moreover, arguably it will be more difficult for powerful elites to conspire under a populist leadership.

We tested this hypothesis in a pre-registered experiment on a US sample (Study 3; *N=300*). Specifically, we tested whether having a newly elected populist party in power in a fictional country (as compared to a mainstream party) would lower the belief that conspiracies exist in that country. We also tested whether this effect would be owing to the fact that participants in the populist condition would feel more empowered and less cynical, and whether they would exhibit lower zero-sum thinking.

Method

The study hypotheses and analyses plans were pre-registered (https://osf.io/e7axu). We employed an experimental design in which participants read a short description of a fictitious country called "Constantia". Participants were presented with a short excerpt containing information about the country's history, economic and political situation. Depending on the experimental condition participants either read that Constantia recently elected an anti-establishment populist party, or that an established non-populist party recently came to power.

Participants and Procedure

We recruited 300 U.S. participants through Prolific Academic (46.3% Male; 51.0% Female, 2.7 "Other"; M_{Age}= 35.94, *SD* = 12.33). After reading the study description and completing an electronic consent form, participants read the short excerpt about Constantia. Each participant was randomly allocated to either read that a recent election took place in Constantia and

> *citizens opted for a systemic change and voted for a new political party that had not ruled the country before. A new party that had promised to serve the needs of its people, by taking the power from the well-established political elites.* After a year in office this newly elected government "*was less likely to compromise with the big businesses and that has adopted a more confrontational attitude against previously established elites*.

In the control condition participants also read that a recent election took place in Constantia but were told that Constantia

> "voted for a party that had ruled the country before". A party that "*promised to bring back to the country financial, macroeconomic and political stability, and to support its big corporations*". After a year in office, the newly elected government "*was not making strong efforts to make their citizens' popular demands heard as had already compromised with the established national and international elites*".

After random assignment, 153 participants were allocated to the populist condition and 144 participants to the control condition. To increase participants' involvement, participants were asked to imagine being a citizen of the country while reading the information (cf. van Prooijen & van Dijk, 2014). After reading this information participants completed a manipulation check and subsequently responded to the various scales in the order presented in the next subsection. Finally, participants were asked to respond to some demographic questions.

Measures

A copy of all the material can be found here: https://osf.io/rk8mg/. To ensure that participants read the material of the experimental manipulation carefully, they were first asked to "briefly summarize *in their own words* and in just a few sentences the political situation in Constantia". As a manipulation check, they then indicated dichotomously whether "*the newly elected government has lost touch with the general will of the people"* or "*the newly elected government seems to follow the general will of the people*".

The following variables were measured (on a scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree", unless noted otherwise):

Conspiracy Mentality (α = .85) was measured with the same 7 items as in Study 1 and 2, which were then modified to fit the vignette context of Constantia. For example, "*I would support a non-democratic regime if I believed that it would improve the economy and society of Constantia", "Constantia needs a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections*" and "*having the army rule is the best way of governing Constantia*".

Political Cynicism (α = .91) was measured with the same 7 items used in Study 1 and 2, but modified to fit the context of Constantia (e.g. "*Most Politicians in Constantia are likely to be corrupt*").

Political Powerlessness (α = .78) was measured with the same 7 items used in Study 1 and 2, but modified to fit the context of Constantia. For example, "*I would feel powerless as a citizen of this country*" or "*Constantia is run by a few people in power and there is not so much the average citizen can do about it*").

Zero-sum thinking *(α = .84)* was measured with the same 5 items used in Study 1 and 2, but modified to fit the context of Constantia, For example, "*If someone gets richer, it means that somebody else gets poorer*" and "*Life is like tennis game—A person wins only when others lose*".

Results

As per our preregistration, in our reported analyses we excluded participants who were outliers according to Leys et al. (2013) median absolute deviation method with a constant of 3. Three participants were thus excluded.

Table 3. *Study 3, US sample - experiment*

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Populism (1 = populist condition)	.51 (.50)				
2. Conspiracy Mentality	-.479***	3.24 (0.82)			
3. Political Cynicism	-.612***	.734***	3.24 (1.03)		
4. Powerlessness	-.463***	.627***	.631***	2.69 (.74)	
5. Zero-sum thinking	-.243***	.315***	.311***	3.29***	3.12 (.89)

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations in Study 3

*Notes. Means and standard deviations (parenthesized) reported in the diagonal. Total number of participants were N = 297. Other values present Pearson correlation coefficients. *: p< .05 **: p< .01 ***: p< .001.*

Manipulation Check. Another three participants failed the manipulation check question, suggesting that most participants (99.0%) had correctly read the relevant information. The below analyses are based on all participants including the three who failed the manipulation check (n= 297); excluding participants (n= 294) who failed the manipulation check yielded inferentially similar results.

Main Analyses. Consistent with our preregistered hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA confirmed that participants reported lower belief in conspiracy theories in the populist (M = 2.84, SD = .06) than in the control condition (M = 3.63, SD = .76; F(1, 296) = 90.77, p < .001, partial η^2 = .24). The same effect was observed for political cynicism ($M_{populist}$ = 3.88, SD = .0.90; $M_{control}$ = 2.61, SD = .71; F(1, 296) = 179.135, p < .001, partial η^2 = .38), for political powerlessness ($M_{populist}$ = 2.34, SD = .60; $M_{control}$ = 3.02, SD = .65; F(1, 296) = 87.062, p < .001, partial η^2 = .23) and for zero-sum thinking ($M_{populist}$ = 2.91, SD = .85; $M_{control}$ = 3.34, SD = .87; F(1, 296) = 18.728, p < .001, partial η^2 = .06).

Mediation model. Following our preregistered analysis plan, we then ran a mediation model with political cynicism and powerlessness as parallel mediators of the effect of belief in conspiracy theories on populism (Hayes, 2013; SPPS macro; model 4). This analysis revealed that the populist to conspiracy belief relationship was mediated by political cynicism (b = -.57, SE = .07, 95%CI [-.73, -.42]) and powerlessness (b = -.22, SE = .05, 95%CI [-.34, -.12]).

As an exploratory analysis, we also ran a mediation model with zero-sum thinking, following the steps mentioned above. Again, the results showed that zero-sum thinking (b = -.08, SE = .03, 95%CI [-.15, -.03]) also mediates the relationship between populist and conspiracy beliefs.

Discussion

Study 3 provided further evidence for the link between belief in conspiracy theories and populist support, showing not only that the two are related but also that a new populist party elected in office, may decrease citizens' belief in conspiracy theories in that country. Importantly, cynicism, powerlessness and zero-sum thinking all decreased in the populist condition and they all seem to partly account for the reduced levels of political beliefs in the populist condition.

General Discussion

The present findings provide ample evidence for a relationship between conspiracy theories and populism, suggesting that people who tend to believe in conspiracy theories and are characterized by a conspiratorial mentality, also tend to hold more populist attitudes. While the assumption that conspiracy theories and populism in societies are closely linked is widespread, there has been little empirical evidence supporting it. Our research corroborates some seminal empirical evidence that conspiratorial and populist attitudes are linked (Silva et al., 2017) providing further evidence for this relationship in two countries other than the U.S., namely the UK and Greece. As such our findings fit

with past research uncovering some negative socio-political correlates of conspiracy beliefs such as reduced political participation (Jolley & Douglas (2014) increased intention to engage in everyday crime (Jolley, et al., 2019) and increased intentions to engage in non-normative political actions such as violently attacking a person in power (Imhoff, Dieterle, Lamberty, 2021).

Building on existing literature (Goertzel, 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Jolley & Douglas, 2014; van Prooijen, 2016), the present studies also suggested that three prominent correlates of conspiracy beliefs, namely political cynicism, zero-sum thinking and to a lesser extent powerlessness appear to partly mediate this relationship.

More importantly, Study 3 not only supported the link between conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes, but provided some evidence for a causal link between the two, showing that if populist demands are satisfied through the election of a populist party, this may lead to a decrease in conspiracy theories belief.

We would like to highlight that although the experiment in Study 3 supports the existence of a causal link between populism and support for conspiracy beliefs, Study 3 does not necessarily entail that it is populist attitudes that generate or lead to conspiracy beliefs. What Study 3 shows is that when populist demands are satisfied some of the underlying factors of belief in conspiracy theories –cynicism, powerlessness and antagonistic zero-sum thinking– are reduced, and so are conspiracy beliefs themselves.

This is rather distinct from arguing that populist attitudes lead to conspiracy beliefs, although future studies could test whether an experimental manipulation that specifically increases populist attitudes might also increase conspiracy belief. In any event, we see the conspiracy beliefs-populism nexus to be of multi-directional nature and presume that the changes in one variable may trigger changes in the other at both the individual and the societal level. Future studies could also test the hypothesis that changes in conspiracy beliefs may lead to changes in populist attitudes.

While our studies can be viewed as forming part of research revealing the negative socio-political correlates of conspiracy beliefs, this is only part of the entire picture. Recently, there has been some research suggesting that conspiracy beliefs do not exclusively correlate with negative socio-political attitudes. For example, it has been shown that the more people endorse conspiracy theories the stronger they support direct democracy (Pantazi et al., 2021). Contrary to the common notion that conspiracy theories are a direct threat to democracy, these recent findings suggest that those who believe conspiracy theories may not necessarily be citizens who are politically disengaged but people who are simply disillusioned with the current system and seek a different, even more democratic regime.

This argument is in line with two non-mutually exclusive, political science theories; the "cognitive mobilization" (Inglehart, 1999) and "political dissatisfaction" theories (Norris, 2011). Both theories maintain that dissatisfied citizens hold a critical, and sometimes even a cynical, attitude towards politics, while at the same time remaining committed to democratic principles. Recently, a new, cross-country study has provided supporting evidence to those theories, suggesting that populist attitudes are compatible with the principles of democracy (Kaltwasser & van Hauwaert, 2020). Specifically, using

data from nine countries around the world (Europe, Latin America and Turkey), they identify the characteristics that define individuals with populist proclivities, or as used in common parlance, the 'populist citizen'. Their findings add supporting evidence to the idea that 'populist citizens', while undeniably disgruntled with how the democratic regime functions in their country, systematically favor and support democracy over other forms of government (Kaltwasser & van Hauwaert, 2020).

The present findings are interesting in view of the aforementioned evidence because populism and populist attitudes, just like conspiracy beliefs, are often viewed as a threat to democracy. Nevertheless, while the term "populism", like the one of "conspiracy theories" (see Douglas, van Prooijen, & Sutton, in press) is used to derogate one's ideological or political opponents as fringe and extremist, populism, according to some definitions, including the definition that we adopted is not necessarily negative for society and democracy. Specifically, populism has been argued to be a form of radical democracy. The most notable proponent of this view has been Ernesto Laclau (2005), who has been arguing that populism can foster the 'democratization of democracy' by giving voice to excluded sectors and re-introducing conflict into politics.

Through this lens, populism can be conceived as an emancipatory and democratic force (Laclau & Mouffe 2014) that has the capacity to 'correct' democratic processes (Rovira-Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2017) by giving voice to popular demands that are usually ignored (Stavrakakis, 2018). Thus, the evidence linking conspiracy theories with populism should not necessarily be viewed as another demonstration that conspiracy beliefs are linked to anti-democratic fringe groups, but that they can also reflect those parts of societies that are seeking less corrupt and better functioning democracies.

Our studies had some important limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, it should be noted that although the effects observed in the current studies were statistically robust, we only investigated a few of the potential mediating factors. It is plausible that other variables mediate the relationship of interest. For example, there is research putting forward a Manichean and moral view (i.e. good vs evil) of populism (Eliser et al., 2021). Although we have been unable to assess other mediators in the present research, future studies should aim to shed light on this by investigating other theory-based related variables of interest.

Second, the experimental setting in Study 3 involved a fictional country and not an actual one, raising concerns about the degree to which people's conspiratorial beliefs and attitudes for their own existing country could be influenced through actual changes in the political system. It is hence premature to conclude that populism and populist parties, if properly implemented may have the power to attenuate conspiracy beliefs in society. Yet, Study's 3 effects should be seen as a very first step towards more focused studies, which would replicate these effects in real-world settings, where citizens' stakes are higher. For example, many populist parties have been in power over the past couple of years offering fertile ground for longitudinal studies following citizens before and after elections.

Third, whilst Study 3 provides evidence that having a newly elected populist party in power lowers the degree of citizens' belief in conspiracy theories, we were not able to assess whether other political regimes would yield a similar outcome. It is likely that, in line with past research showing that implementing direct democracy in a fictional country

may lower perceptions of conspiracy (Pantazi et al., 2021), participants in the populist condition viewed the government as more democratic, and that this "enhanced" democracy was the main reason why participants in that condition believed less in conspiracy theories. Alongside assessing other mediating factors, future studies should seek to disentangle which specific types of changes in regimes would be most likely to lower citizens' conspiratorial thinking.

Lastly, our study design does not allow for a decisive argument in favor of voting for a populist party. It is one thing to have positive attitudes towards a populist narrative, and another to actually vote for a populist party in upcoming elections. Thus far, a considerable amount of literature has been published on the rather distinct difference between political attitudes and behavior (Ajzen ,2005). Future research should take into account this distinction as well.

Conclusion

This article presents a comprehensive examination of the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and populist attitudes. Research exploring the socio-political consequences of conspiracy theories could not have been more timely, following the recent wave of populist parties and movements around the world. While *theoretical* claims that conspiracy theories can be harmful to our societies have strong scientific merit, so does an *empirical* investigation of such claims.

Our results call for a more nuanced reconceptualization of the relationship between populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs, and have significant implications for psychological theories of conspiracy beliefs as well as for political theories. The current research, therefore, opens up a new line of research investigating the political consequences of a burgeoning spread of conspiracy theories and its subsequent implications for Western democracies.

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Appendix A

All measures were included as five-point Likert items using the following coding 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree nor disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree

Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ):

CMQ1. I think that many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about.

CMQ2. I think that politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions.

CMQ3. I think that government agencies closely monitor all citizens.

CMQ4. I think that events that superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities.

CMQ5. I think that there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions.

Populist Attitude Index (POP):

POP1. The politicians in parliament need to follow the will of the people.

POP2. The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.

POP3. The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people.

POP4. People can be better represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.

POP5. Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.

POP6. What people call 'compromise' in politics is really just selling out on one's principles.

POP7. Popular demands are today ignored in favour of what benefits the establishment.

POP8. Political forces representing the people should adopt a more confrontational attitude in order to make their voice heard and influence decision-making.

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POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY
POPULISMUS

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POPULISMUS: POPULIST DISCOURSE AND DEMOCRACY

Populism is dynamically and unexpectedly back on the agenda. Latin American governments dismissing the so-called "Washington consensus" and extreme right-wing parties and movements in Europe advancing xenophobic and racist stereotypes have exemplified this trend. Emerging social movements and parties in Southern Europe that resisted the administration of the global financial crisis as well as the Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders presidential candidacies in the US have also been branded "populist". The POPULISMUS research project (2014-5) involved a comparative mapping of the populist discourse articulated by such sources in order to facilitate a reassessment of the category of "populism" and to develop a theoretical approach capable of reorienting the empirical analysis of populist ideologies in the global environment of the 21st century. Building on the theoretical basis offered by the discourse theory developed by the so-called "Essex School", POPULISMUS endorsed a discursive methodological framework in order to explore the multiple expressions of populist politics, to highlight the need to study the emerging cleavage between populism and anti-populism and to assess the effects this has on the quality of democracy. Through the dissemination of its research findings and the continuation of its activities we anticipate that the synthetic analysis of populist discourse it put forward and the emerging evaluation of populism's complex and often ambivalent relationship with democracy will advance the relevant scientific knowledge, also enabling the deepening of democratic culture in times of consecutive crises.

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