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Erisa Castillo

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Behind the Belief: Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories

Erisa Castillo

Department of Political Science, Chapman University; Orange, California

OVERVIEW:

This study covers several predictors that may influence an individual's beliefs in conspiracy theories, specifically in the United States.

- Research Focuses on:
  - Using the 2018 Chapman University Survey of American Fears
  - Applying previous research and studies to either back up or refute the hypotheses
  - Focusing on the Government's concealment of information on the JFK Assassination, 9/11 Attacks and the South Dakota Crash
  - Examining if the various independent variables are applicable to all conspiracy theories or an individual one

ABSTRACT:

Conspiracy theories have been used by many Americans throughout history as explanations to justify situations and events that the United States Government has carried out, however, many have no reliable evidence. The claims of these theories range from violent to completely harmless and some are categorized as strange phenomenas. So why do Americans believe in conspiracy theories? One reason may be our lack of confidence, trust, and transparency between our government and us as American citizens. Using the Chapman University Survey of American Fears, I will look more closely into the various variables that play leading roles as to why people are so convinced by conspiracy theories, also, whether one conspiracy theory is more believed than another. That said, I will also look at these variables: fear of corrupt government officials, social media, and education. This paper will be exploring three different conspiracy theories, first, the belief that the government planned the 9/11 attacks, second the theory that the United States concealed the truth about JFK's assassination, and lastly the made-up South Dakota Crash. To my knowledge, there are many people that believe in conspiracy theories ranging from the elderly to the young, however, more recently, there has been a shift in those who believe in conspiracy theories. If the research shows a relationship between the predictors of conspiracy beliefs, it will allow me to better understand why people believe in such theories. Lastly, this paper will discuss three hypotheses; those who are less educated are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories, those who rely on social media to get their information are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories and, those who believe in the fake South Dakota crash are more likely to believe in this theory because of the default lack of trust in our government.

What is a Conspiracy Theory?

Conspiracy theories are much like conventional forms of public opinion, however, they are motivated more/ less by misinformation, paranoia, or political mistrust. Many beliefs are considered outlandish in nature and even bizarre, therefore people in disciplines like political science, psychology, sociology, and history have suggested various causes for conspiratorial beliefs.

HYPOTHESES:

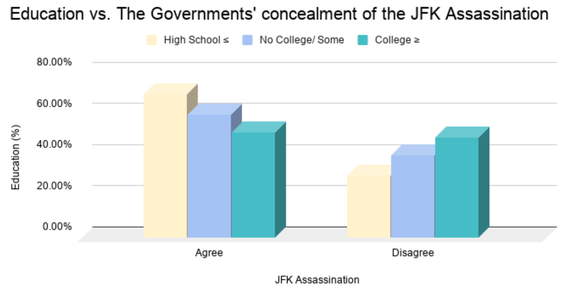
H1: Those who are less educated are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories

H2: Those who rely on social media to get their information are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories

H3: Those who believe in the fake South Dakota crash are more likely to believe in this theory because of the default lack of trust in our government

Data Compilation

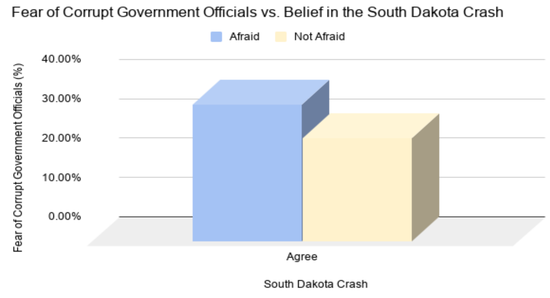
Hypothesis 1: JFK assassination x Education



The results of this crosstabulation between the JFK assassination and the various levels of education show that those who are more likely to agree with the question "The government is concealing what it knows about…JFK assassination" are those who obtained a High School diploma and/or currently in lower levels of education. Whereas, those individuals who disagree with that claim, are those who have or are attending college/ above levels of education.

A note on both the independent and dependent variables: JFK assassination was the result of recoding the question, "The government is concealing what it knows about…" Originally tested on a 4-point scale, it was then recoded too: 1—Agree and 2—Disagree. Likewise, the variable education, originally on an 8-point scale, was then recoded too: 1—High school ≤, 2— No college/ some, 3—College ≥

Hypothesis 3: South Dakota Crash x Fear of Corrupt Govt. Officials



The results of the crosstabulation between the South Dakota Crash and the fear of corrupt government officials shows that people who are more likely to fear those in higher authority have also led the respondent to believe that the South Dakota Crash conspiracy theory is true, when it was made up entirely for the purpose of the Chapman University Survey of American Fears. From this cross tab, we're able to infer that this may play a larger role regarding trust within our government.

A note on both the dependent and independent variables: South Dakota Crash was the result of recoding the question, "The government is concealing what it knows about…" Originally on a 4-point scale, it was then recoded to: 1—Agree and 2—Disagree. Fear of corrupt government officials was originally on a 4-point scale where 1—Very Afraid, 2—Afraid, 3—Slightly Afraid, and 4—Very Afraid, which was then recoded into two categories: 1—Afraid and 2—Not Afraid.

Hypothesis 2: 9/11 Attacks x Media Types

Regression Table 9/11 Conspiracy Theory

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Sig.
	B	Beta	
(Constant)	2.818		.000
8d. How often do you...? Watch Fox News?	-.039	-.065	.036
8e. How often do you...? Watch CNN?	-.059	-.089	.022
8f. How often do you...? Watch MSNBC?	.055	.083	.031
8g. How often do you...? Watch the local TV news to learn about your area?	-.001	-.001	.974
8i. How often do you...? Read online news websites (such as Yahoo News or Google)?	.034	.055	.074
8j. How often do you...? Get news from social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook)	-.102	-.183	.000

The results of this regression table indicates the relationship between four out of the six sources of media and the government's concealment of the 9/11 attacks are statistically significant (.000). The four significant sources are watching CNN, MSNBC, reading online news and using social media. The magnitude of the relationship between the independent variable of receiving news from social media is represented by -.183. That said, of the four media sources that people obtain their news information from, social media has the greatest impact as a predictor of the 9/11 attacks. Furthermore, the R square is 0.44, in which only 4.4% of the media is explained by this data.

FINDINGS

H1: Education

Education is a strong predictor for why people believe in conspiracy theories, the less educated are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. However, people who have/had obtained a lesser education disagreed that the government is concealing information about the South Dakota Crash, rather than agree. In contrast, those who are more educated have a decreased belief in all three conspiracy theories.

H2: Social Media

The different media outlets listed all have various amounts of impact on individuals for beliefs in conspiracy theories. Receiving news information from social media outlets like Instagram and Twitter held the greatest impact for influence. However, that said, higher usage of social media did not make one more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.

H3: Lack of Trust in our Government

The results from the crosstabulation of Fear of Corrupt Government officials and the South Dakota Crash proved to be statistically significant. From this finding we can't prove that our lack of trust in our government stems from the fear of corrupt officials, which then leads us to believe in certain conspiracy theories however, a study should be done to see respondents answer to specific questions relating to lack of transparency between the government and its citizens.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, there are numerous predictors that social scientists use to explain why people believe in conspiracy theories. Yet for the purpose of this project the predictors of education, media use, and fear or corrupt government officials were used. According to my findings, there is not one independent variable that predicts the beliefs in all three conspiracy theories. However, some predictors proved to be more significant than others. For both the JFK assassination and 9/11 attacks, the less educated, usage of social media, and fear of corrupt government officials were very influential predictors for why people believe that the government is concealing the events' information. Whereas, predictors like education and social media usage were not as influential enough/ significant for the belief that the government is concealing information about the South Dakota crash. However fear of corrupt government officials was statistically significant.

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