Behind the Belief: Predictors of Why People Believe in Conspiracy Theories

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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 2021 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, the South Dakota Crash, and Qanon.

ABSTRACT:

Many people have used conspiracy theories as explanations to justify situations or events that the United States Government has carried out; however, many have no reliable evidence. These theories are often made by power groups that are usually politically motivated. So why do people 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 into the various variables that play leading factors in why people are influenced into believing conspiracy theories. Also, whether one conspiracy theory is more believed than another. This paper will be exploring four different conspiracy theories, the 9/11 attacks, John F. Kennedy's assassination, the South Dakota Crash, and lastly, the recent conspiracy theory known as Qanon. In addition, whether the variables, age, fear of corrupt government officials, social media usage, region, education, race, and the fear of being unemployed impact one's belief in these theories. To my knowledge, many people believe in conspiracy theories ranging from the elderly to the young; however, more recently, through outlets like social media, 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 understand better why people continue to believe in such theories. Ultimately, this paper will discuss four hypotheses; those who are Black and Hispanic and from southern regions of the U.S are more susceptible to believing these theories, those who are younger and less educated are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories, those who obtain their news information through social media are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories, and lastly, people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories because of their fear of corrupt government officials and one's fear of unemployment.

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HYPOTHESES:

H1: Those who are identifying themselves as Black and those who are from southern regions of the U.S are more susceptible to believing these theories.
H2: Those who are younger and less educated are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.
H3: Those who obtain their news information through social media are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.
H4: People are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories because of their fear of corrupt government officials and their fear of unemployment.

Data Compilation

H1: JFK and Qanon Regression (Race and Region)

Race JFK Assasination	Agree	Disagree
White Non-Hispanic	50.2%	49.8%
Black Non-Hispanic	75.2%	24.8%
White Hispanic	60.9%	39.1%
Black Hispanic	20.0%	80.0%
Unspecified Hispanic	61.8%	38.2%
Asian/Chinese/Japanese	57.7%	42.3%
Native Am/Am Indian/Alaska Native	100.0%	0.0%
Other Race	100.0%	0.0%
Mixed	50.0%	50.0%

Race Qanon	Agree	Disagree
White Non-Hispanic	40.8%	59.2%
Black Non-Hispanic	60.0%	40.0%
White Hispanic	47.8%	52.2%
Black Hispanic	40.0%	60.0%
Unspecified Hispanic	43.4%	56.6%
Asian/Chinese/Japanese	44.9%	55.1%
Native Am/Am Indian/Alaska Native	100.0%	0.0%
Other Race	0.0%	100.0%
Mixed	33.0%	66.7%

Region JFK Assasination	Agree	Disagree
North East	51.4%	48.6%
North Central	56.2%	43.8%
South	60.2%	39.8%
West	51.0%	49.0%

Region Qanon	Agree	Disagree
North East	33.1%	66.9%
North Central	45.2%	54.8%
South	50.4%	49.6%
West	41.5%	58.5%

Note: None of these variables are recoded.

H2: 9/11 and South Dakota Crash (Education and Age)
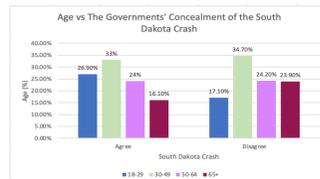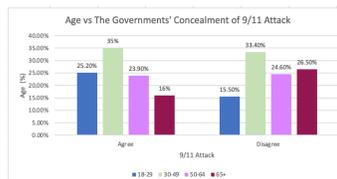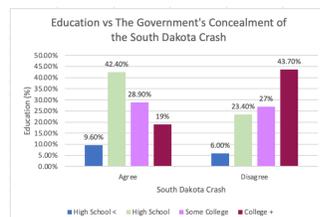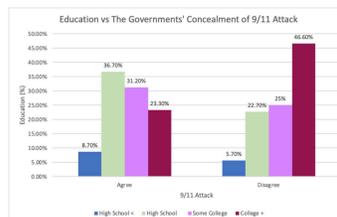
Note: Both 9/11 and the South Dakota Crash was the result of recoding the question, "The government is concealing what it knows about…" Originally tested on a 4-point scale, it was then recoded too: 1—Agree and 2—Disagree. Likewise, the variable education, originally on an 8-point scale, was then recoded too: 1—High school <, 2––High School, 3—Some College, and 4—College +. Age is divided into four categories: 1—18-29, 2—30-49,3—50-64, and 4—65+.

### H3: Social Media Regression

Regression 9/11 Attacks

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Sig.
(Constant)	1.372		0.000
How often do you… read online news?	.24	.5	.138
How often do you… watch FOX News?	.008	.018	.587
How often do you… watch CNN?	-.042	-.094	.026
How often do you… watch MSNBC?	.015	.033	.417
How often do you… watch local news?	.028	.059	.092
How often do you… listen to talk radio?	-.010	-.025	.442
How often do you… get news from social media?	.065	.161	0.000
Adjusted R Square	0.30		

Regression Qanon

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Sig.
(Constant)	1.51		0.000
How often do you… read online news?	.009	.019	.580
How often do you… watch FOX News?	-.003	-.007	.835
How often do you… watch CNN?	-.033	-.074	.083
How often do you… watch MSNBC?	.034	.77	.064
How often do you… watch local news?	.035	.074	.037
How often do you… listen to talk radio?	.010	.024	.459
How often do you… get news from social media?	.017	.043	.181
Adjusted R Square	0.06		

Note: Regressions on the JFK Assassination and the South Dakota Crash are not listed here.

H4: Fear of Corrupt Govt. Officials and Fear of Unemployment
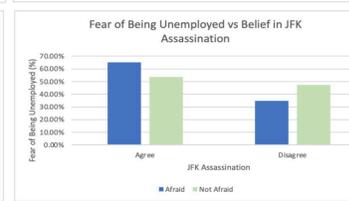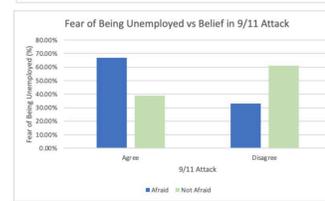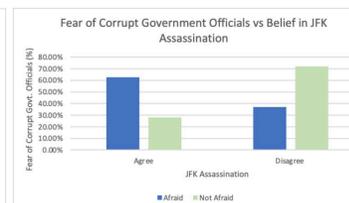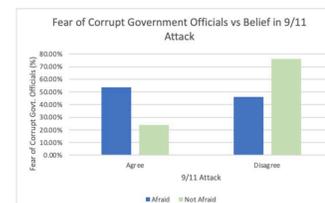
Note: 9/11 and JFK Assassination was the result of recoding the question, "The government is concealing what it knows about…" Originally on a 4-point scale, it was then recoded to: 1—Agree and 2—Disagree. Fear of corrupt government officials and the Fear of being unemployed was originally on a 4-point 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.

FINDINGS

H1: Race and Region

Race and region did not prove to be a significant predictor for why people believe in conspiracy theories. However, my hypothesis was supported by the results of the crosstab. Those who identify as Black Non-Hispanic was the highest percentage in agreeance compared to White Non-Hispanic and other races. In addition, people that answered that they are from the South had the highest percentage in agreeance to believing such theories.

H2: Education and Age

Education is a strong predictor for why people believe in conspiracy theories, the less educated are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. In contrast, those who are more educated have a decreased belief in all three conspiracy theories. In addition, those who are age 49 and younger are more susceptible in believing in these theories. Whereas people aged 50 and above disagree with the statement.

H3: 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.

H4: Fear of Corrupt Govt. Officials and Unemployment

The results from the crosstabulation of Fear of Corrupt Government officials and Fear of Being Unemployed with the 9/11 Attack and JFK Assassination. However, 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. Lastly, the threat to our existential motives have also proved to be a factor for why people believe in theories