

ABSTRACT

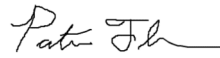
A Pandemic of Skepticism: The relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior in the United States

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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many Americans have turned to COVID-19 conspiracy theories to make sense of the world. At the same time, the United States has faced an increase in unconventional political acts like destructive protests, law and mandate noncompliance, and events like the Capitol insurrection. Considering these trends, this study tests the hypothesis that belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories increases one's willingness to commit unconventional political acts. Additionally, the study tests whether a causal relationship exists between general conspiracy exposure and unconventional political behavior. To test these hypotheses, I conducted a nationally representative online survey in the summer of 2021. In analysis, a series of regression models showed a statistically significant positive relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior ($\beta=0.296$, $t=7.999$, $p<0.001$) even after accounting for possible confounders. These results suggest that the endorsement of some COVID-19 conspiracies increases one's willingness to commit unconventional political acts. Regarding the second hypothesis, T-Test results from a survey experiment showed that conspiracy exposure does not directly cause an increase in willingness to commit unconventional acts for the general population. However, exposure does have a significant causal effect on some demographic subsets. These results suggest that unconventional political behavior is not influenced by simple exposure to conspiracy theories but a certain attitude towards them. The findings of this study ought to be considered when assessing ways to reduce dangerous conspiracy belief and political acts in the United States.

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A PANDEMIC OF SKEPTICISM: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
COVID-19 CONSPIRACY BELIEF AND UNCONVENTIONAL POLITICAL
BEHAVIOR IN THE UNITED STATES

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has cultivated a unique sociopolitical climate in the United States. As misinformation and fear take hold, so too do conspiracy theories related to the virus. Was it intentionally created? Are death rates being overstated or falsified? Does the vaccine cause infertility? The psychological stress of the pandemic has taken a toll on many Americans' mental health pushing some to find consolation in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Lockdowns and stay-at-home orders have further facilitated the spread of conspiracy as people turn to the internet for information, comfort, and social connection. At the same time, a phenomenon of unconventional political behavior has swept across the nation. From historic social protests to the Capitol insurrection, many Americans have turned to radical forms of political expression during the pandemic. Even grocery stores, shopping centers, and airplane cabins have become arenas for political demonstration and dissent. In the wake of the pandemic and its unique effect on the United States, we ought to ask whether and to what extent COVID-19 conspiracy belief has contributed to the shift toward unconventional forms of political behavior.

To address this question, the following study was undertaken to investigate the relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior in the United States. In this pursuit, I conducted an original, nationally representative online survey in the summer of 2021. The survey was conducted in partnership with the company Qualtrics and with funds from the Baylor Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Achievement (URSA) small grant award program. To make full use of survey

time and funds, a supplementary survey experiment was incorporated into the survey to broaden the investigation and test whether exposure to conspiracy causes an increase in unconventional political behavior. In addition to examining the linear relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and political behavior, an investigation into the causal relationship between conspiracy exposure and behavior can reveal demographic groups that are particularly susceptible to the influence of conspiracy and, therefore, better inform the approaches we take to reduce dangerous, unconventional political acts in the future.

In analysis, I determined that a positive linear relationship exists between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and willingness to commit unconventional political acts: as the number of COVID-19 conspiracies one believes increases, so do the number of unconventional acts they are willing to commit. This relationship exists even after accounting for a host of possible confounding variables. Results from the survey experiment elaborate on this relationship by showing that exposure to conspiracy causes an increase in unconventional political intentions for some demographic subsets of the population but not for the whole. In particular, those with less than a high school education and those who attend their place of worship once or twice a year were significantly affected by exposure. While much research exists on the predictors of conspiracy belief, the results of this survey provide a novel contribution to conspiracy studies by considering the behaviors of actual, self-reported conspiracy believers during a unique time of heightened conspiracy spread. Moreover, the study provides nuance to this relationship by considering the differential role of conspiracy exposure on the mode of political expression one considers.

Although a tragic event, the pandemic has provided a unique lens through which we can examine the psychological and behavioral effects of social crisis. Indeed, research during the pandemic is perhaps the only way to begin to understand the reaction of many Americans to these unique stressors. Moreover, engaging with conspiracy believers through research can be a step towards understanding and remediation. Rather than dismissing conspiracy believers as irrational, we can and ought to view their beliefs and actions in context. With this perspective in mind, the following survey study attempts to bridge the gap in research on the behavioral correlates of conspiracy belief as well as provide critical insight into the state of the American people in the age of COVID-19.

As an overview, this project begins with a thorough review of the predictors of conspiracy belief as well as the known relationship between belief and political behavior. Following this review, I will discuss the data collection process and the methods used for operationalizing the test variables. I will then present the results of a series of regressions that test the relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior. I will explain the implication of the results and consider the role of other variables shown to be significant in the regression. Next, I will discuss the results of the survey experiment which measured the effect of conspiracy exposure on behavior. These results are presented through a series of T Tests. Finally, I will conclude the paper by considering the findings, their implications, and future avenues of research.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

A thorough investigation into the relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and political behavior requires a review of the known demographic and psychological predictors of conspiracy belief. Such a review will uncover possible confounding variables that could separately influence conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior. Adding these variables to the analysis will reduce the chances of claiming a spurious relationship between the test variables. Moreover, if a positive relationship *is* found between the test variables, understanding the predictors of conspiracy belief can inform future steps for reducing such beliefs and their behavioral effects. Many studies from a wide range of academic fields have explored the predictors of conspiracy belief. The following section of the review summarizes the most prominent, general predictors of conspiracy belief. Here, it is important to note that conspiracy research is a necessarily imprecise science. Conspiracy theories vary greatly in subject as well as degree of skepticism. Moreover, the study of conspiracy believers is hindered by social desirability bias and distrust in scientific research. Keeping these challenges in mind, the following studies have informed the approaches and predictions made in this study.

Psychological State

Unsurprisingly, social crises have a negative effect on mental health. Pfefferbaum and North (2020) posit that the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic such as

heightened health risks, home confinement, economic crisis, and trauma ultimately lead to an increased risk for emotional distress and psychiatric illness. Moreover, Van Prooijen and Douglas (2017) suggest that conspiracy theories often originate in times of societal crisis and become the framework through which conspiracy believers recall past events. In this way, conspiracy theories help believers make sense of crises, like pandemics, and mitigate the psychological distress associated with them. In accordance with these claims, a survey done during the COVID-19 pandemic found that feelings of lack of control predicted belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories (Šrol et al., 2021). Indeed, the pandemic has created the perfect environment for psychological distress: social isolation, widespread death, and political fearmongering. Under these unique stressors, many Americans have turned to conspiracies because they affirm and redirect their fears toward an identifiable source. Of course, the novelty of the virus has only exacerbated feelings of uncertainty as conflicting and fluctuating information bombards Americans through news and social media. We should not be surprised, then, to see an uptick in conspiracy theories over the past two years.

Social Identity

Beyond psychological state, an individual's social identity, formed through perceived ingroups and outgroups, plays a role in conspiracy subscription. On one hand, feelings of isolation and otherness have been associated with conspiracy belief (Wood and Douglas, 2018). Those who feel alienated from mainstream society are inclined to support theories that validate their suspicions about mainstream actors and opinions. On the other hand, conspiracy spread relies heavily on a well-defined ingroup that is motivated by the perceived threat of a powerful outgroup (van Mulukom et al., 2020)

(Van Prooijen, 2019). This communal sense of isolation facilitates the creation and spread of conspiracy. Accordingly, conspiracy worldviews emerge in a variety of social communities, particularly in times when their members feel as if their way of life is being threatened. The following two subsections outline general group identities that have been shown to facilitate community-oriented conspiracy: political partisanship/ideology and religiosity.

Partisanship and Ideology

In a chapter of the collaborative work *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* edited by Joseph Uscinski, Moore (2018) posits that, by nature, the institutional form of democracy relies on a paradoxical dynamic of trust and distrust. Political distrust is embedded in American democracy through formal systems like the separation of powers, but it also manifests in informal systems like the partisan divide that pervades modern politics. Partisan distrust is self-reinforcing: relying on an ever-growing ingroup identity. As previously discussed, these group identities often promote conspiracy as a response to perceived threats. Thus, in times of heightened political tension, political conspiracies thrive within partisan ingroups, especially in their most radical corners. We witnessed this phenomenon during the 2020 presidential election cycle when conspiracies surrounding COVID-19 and mail-in voting became prominent among the political right.

In another chapter of the same collaborative work, Atkinson and Dewitt (2018) discuss the role of political leaders in conspiracy dissemination:

For individuals who seek disruption, conspiracy theories are the most readily available means of game change. They are particularly effective in political environments such as mass democracies like the United States, which are

characterized by widely dispersed power, incoherent individual-level preferences, and group-oriented mass politics. (p. 122)

When uncertainty is high, conspiracy theories can be used as political tools by politicians to direct fear and distrust toward opponents. In a study on COVID-19 conspiracies and misinformation, Uscinski et al. (2020) found that the conspiracy that the virus threat had been exaggerated was strongly associated with support for Donald Trump. They suggest that these supporters “adopted this belief in response to the Presidents’ early messaging about the virus” (p. 2). I suspect that a similar dynamic led to the spread of the election fraud conspiracy later in 2020. When distrust pervades politics, leaders play a major role in either stifling or spreading conspiracy. The COVID-19 pandemic as well as the 2020 presidential election created the perfect environment for leaders on both sides to use conspiracy to their advantage.

In the same vein as political partisanship, ideological extremism is associated with increased conspiracy belief. Studies support the notion that extremism on both the right and left sides of the ideological spectrum predicts conspiracy belief (Van Proojien et al., 2015) (Krouwel et al., 2017). Recognizing that conspiracies will vary from left to right, Van Proojien et al. (2015) suggest that the rigidity of ideological extremists’ perspectives leads them to accept simpler solutions to societal problems. Conspiracies often appeal to these individuals because they provide clear and targeted explanations for perceived threats. However, like most predictors of conspiracy, the relationship is not clear-cut. In a study on QAnon conspiracy, Enders et al (2021b) concluded that QAnon supporters were not “left/right ideologues or steadfast partisans but people who, irrespective of political commitments, exhibit elevated levels of conspiracy thinking, dark triad traits, and nonnormative attitudes”. Thus, in at least some cases, ideological extremism is only

connected to conspiracy insofar as it is one manifestation of a generally nonnormative perspective. Still, it is worth considering whether ideological extremism influences political behavior. For situations like the Capitol insurrection, I suspect that extremist ideologies greatly informed the methods of political expression taken by the insurrectionists. If so, what role did conspiracy belief play in this relationship? By adding partisanship and ideology into analysis, we can better understand the interaction between extreme opinions and behaviors.

Religiosity

Like political identity, religious affiliation encourages the formation of a clear ingroup rooted in a shared perspective of the world. When this perspective is threatened, religious groups often act like other ingroups by developing conspiracy theories to make sense of the perceived threat. Consider, for instance, the conspiracy that the COVID-19 vaccine is the Mark of the Beast as depicted in the Bible. Claborn (2022) describes this conspiracy:

Indeed, this in some cases is the essence of vaccine hesitancy: People from this tradition often distrust any action that is mandated by government, but especially any that in any way changes or leaves marks on their bodies. In their view, the Mark of the Beast could be a brand or a tattoo, but it could also be an indelible mark only seen under a certain light: a computer chip, a scarification, an ink stamp—any mark can do. (p. 185)

While these apocalyptic conspiracies stretch beyond religious communities, they all rely on a certain worldview. In “Conspiracy theories and religion: superstition, seekership, and salvation”, Robertson and Dyrendal (2018) suggest “that there is a great deal of similarity between conspiracist and religious belief in terms of narrative structure, cognitive and psychological mechanisms, group dynamics, and even social demographics” (p. 419). Many religions contain beliefs in prophecy, revelation,

apocalypse, and evil entities. These same concepts form the foundation of many popular conspiracy theories. Indeed, the cognitive assumptions of conspiracy and religion overlap in a way that leads some researchers to call conspiracy belief a quasi-religious mentality (Franks et al., 2013). In their 2021 survey, the Baylor Religion Survey (BRS) looked at the relationship between religiosity (religious intensity) and conspiracy. They found an association between religiosity and three COVID-19 era conspiracies: the 2020 Presidential election was rigged, Democratic leaders are involved in a child sex-trafficking ring, and the COVID-19 vaccine should not be trusted (Baylor Religion Survey, wave 6, 2021). Because of the strong connections between religious intensity and conspiracy belief, we ought to account for religiosity as a possible confounding variable in analysis. To measure religiosity in this study, the survey asked respondents how often they attend their place of worship. This question can quantify, to a certain extent, the amount of devotion one has to their religion.

Education and Trust in the Scientific Community

Another relevant correlate of conspiracy belief is low educational attainment. A study on education and conspiracy found that people with a high-level education were less likely than those with a low-level education to subscribe to conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen, 2017). Van Prooijen argues that the connection between education and conspiracy is multifaceted and cannot be reduced to a single mechanism. Instead, he identifies three factors that mediate the relationship: “belief in simple solutions for complex problems, feelings of powerlessness, and subjective social class” (p. 50). Indeed, low education is a predictor of conspiracy belief insofar as it is also associated with a particular psychological state and social identity as previously discussed. Nevertheless,

the relationship is fallible. In a previously mentioned study on COVID-19 conspiracies, Uscinski et al. (2020) found that “most strikingly, there is no correlation between educational attainment and either conspiracy belief [COVID-19 threat exaggerated and COVID-19 spread on purpose], suggesting that these beliefs are not merely the product of deficient health education, but one of psychological and political motivations” (p. 4). Indeed, the relationship between conspiracy belief and education is complex and not necessarily consistent.

Especially with COVID-19 conspiracies, belief may be accompanied by skepticism toward science and the scientific community. In “Are Conspiracy Theories “Anti-Science”?”, Uscinski (2018a) explains that conspiracy theorists are inconsistent in their acceptance of scientific research and tend to use or dismiss scientific arguments to validate their worldview.

Those who believe that the theory of evolution is a fraud tend to be strongly religious... Those who object to climate change tend to do so because their views about free markets lend them to reject collective solutions that solving climate change would necessarily entail. (p.199)

Accordingly, the rejection of COVID-19 scientific information is motivated by a variety of perspectives. As discussed above, support for political actors who question or deny COVID-19 information provided by health organizations could lead some individuals to distrust these sources. Additionally, those who value personal freedom or the economy to a high degree could reject COVID-19 facts due to quarantine measures and stay-at-home orders.

Social Media Use

During the pandemic, misinformation and conspiracy theories have largely been spread via the internet and social media. In fact, a study on COVID-19 misinformation on

Twitter found that misinformation from low-quality sources is shared at higher rates than information from high-quality health and news sources (Singh et al., 2020). However, social media use, alone, is not necessarily a predictor of conspiracy belief. A study on the effects of social media use on conspiracy belief concluded that social media exposure increases conspiracy belief only for individuals who are already prone to conspiracy thinking: “the predisposition to interpret salient events as products of conspiracies” (Enders et al., 2021a, p. 1). As with the other predictors, high social media use is only indicative of conspiracy belief when accompanied by certain psychological traits related to a conspiracy worldview: feelings of fear, uncertainty, lack of control, simplistic thinking, an extremist attitude, etc.

Another factor that influences the online spread of conspiracy is the support of political actors. In March of 2020, a COVID-19 conspiracy circulated on Twitter under the hashtag #FilmYourHospital. Supporters of the conspiracy were told to visit and film local hospitals to prove that they were empty, suggesting that the pandemic was a hoax. A case study on this conspiracy found that the driving factor behind the spread was “a handful of prominent conservative and far-right political activists on Twitter” who encouraged their followers to break quarantine to video hospitals (Gruzd & Mai, 2020, p. 1). This case study demonstrates the power that political leaders have in controlling the narrative that their supporters adopt as well as the role of ideological extremism in belief and spread.

To sum up this section of the review, conspiracy belief is facilitated by a not necessarily predictable mix of demographic and psychological traits. Due to this imprecision, all predictor variables discussed in this literature review will be accounted

for in the regression analysis along with more general demographic variables like race, gender, and age. Adding these variables to analysis will bolster the accuracy of the results and ensure that a true relationship is found between the test variables.

The Behaviors of Conspiracy Believers

As demonstrated, there has been extensive research into the demographic and psychological predictors of conspiracy belief. As with other conspiracies, the motivating factors behind COVID-19 conspiracy have been shown to be equally multidimensional: they “cannot be linked to a single and distinct motivational structure” (Rothmund et al., 2020, p. 2). Although extensive and valuable in their contributions, most of these studies engage with conspiracy belief solely as the dependent variable. Little research, however, has been done to uncover the behavioral correlates of conspiracy belief: how do the behaviors of conspiracy believers differ from non-believers? Such questions treat conspiracy belief as the independent variable and provide a novel approach to conspiracy research. Moreover, in times of heightened conspiracy belief, being able to understand and predict behavioral correlates can help inform the approach we take to reduce dangerous unconventional acts like the Capitol Insurrection in the future. Accordingly, the rest of the literature review is committed to discussing what is currently known regarding the relationship between conspiracy belief and political behavior.

Unconventional Behavior

In a two-part experiment study, Imhoff et al. (2021) examined the effects of a conspiracy worldview on political participation. Researchers asked participants to hypothetically adopt one of three perspectives: low, intermediate, or high conspiracy mentality. These participants were then asked what political acts they would consider

committing with reference to their assigned perspective. The acts ranged from normative (legal) acts to nonnormative (illegal) acts. The results of the thought experiment showed that the adoption of a conspiracy worldview lessens reported intentions to carry out normative political acts and increases intentions to participate nonnormatively. The researchers claim that “these results provide first evidence of the notion that political extremism and violence might seem an almost logical conclusion when seeing the world as governed by conspiracy” (p. 71). Although this study provides novel evidence for the relationship between conspiracy belief and unconventional political participation, it is limited by its hypothetical nature. The study presented in this thesis aims to overcome the restrictions of the Imhoff et al. (2021) study by examining the behavioral intentions of actual, self-reported COVID-19 conspiracy believers.

While Imhoff et al. (2021) were one of the first to look directly at the effects of conspiracy belief on unconventional or nonnormative political behaviors, other studies have shown that conspiracy belief reduces prosocial behaviors and intentions (Van der Linden, 2015) (Van Prooijen et al., 2021). These results fall in line with the observed reduction in normative political participation in Imhoff et al. (2021). At the same time, conspiracy belief has been shown to increase violent intentions and justifications (Jolley & Paterson, 2020) (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020). Once again, an increase in violent intentions supports the notion presented by Imhoff et al. (2021) that conspiracy belief increases willingness to commit nonnormative political behaviors. In particular, Jolley & Paterson (2020) support this association in the context of COVID-19. “Findings revealed that belief in 5G COVID-19 conspiracy theories was positively correlated with state anger, which in turn, was associated with a greater justification of real-life and

hypothetical violence...alongside a greater intent to engage in similar behaviors in the future” (p. 628). From these studies, we can begin to speculate how the spread of COVID-19 conspiracy theories has impacted the behaviors of Americans.

The Behavioral Effects of Conspiracy Exposure

As established in this review, belief in conspiracy is mediated by a complex combination of psychological traits, social identities, and news sourcing behaviors. Accordingly, simple exposure to conspiracy does not stipulate belief (Uscinski, 2018b) (Enders et al., 2021a). However, it is worth investigating whether, and for what groups, conspiracy exposure causes an increase in unconventional political behavior. As mentioned in *Chapter One: Introduction*, I conducted a survey experiment as part of the national survey to investigate the causal effects of conspiracy exposure on unconventional political behavior. Thus, in addition to looking at the linear relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior, this project can further clarify the differential role of conspiracy predictors on the influence of conspiracy exposure. This data will be especially useful in mitigating the spread of conspiracy online because we will have a better picture of the individuals who are likely to be swayed by such exposure.

CHAPTER THREE

Data Collection and Methods

Data Collection

Data collection occurred between August 16th and 23rd of 2021. Using funds from the Baylor URSA small grant program, the survey was conducted in partnership with the software company Qualtrics. As a panel aggregator, Qualtrics can reach a nationally representative sample of online survey takers by implementing demographic quotas from US census data into the survey. Limited to three demographic quotas, age, race/ethnicity, and gender were selected to restrict the sample. The breakdown for the demographic quotas was provided by Qualtrics and can be seen in Table 1. These three demographic quotas are the most used and recommended by Qualtrics for academic surveying. All participants were located in the United States and 18 years or older. Depending on the panel, participants were incentivized between \$2 to \$4 for proper survey completion. Data collection began with a soft launch to determine a median response time and inspect for minor survey issues. Upon completion of the soft launch, a ‘speeding check’ was implemented to terminate responses that took less than half of the median response time of 4 minutes. Additionally, an ‘attention check’ was added to terminate inattentive respondents. Gibberish, nonsensical, and straight-lined responses were manually removed to ensure data quality. After vetting all responses, 866 complete responses were accepted for analysis.

Table 1

Breakdown of Demographic Quotas

	18-34 (~33%)
Age	35-54 (~33%)
	55+ (~33%)
	Non-Hispanic White (~66%)
Race/Ethnicity	Non-Hispanic Black (~12%)
	Hispanic (~12%)
	Other (~10%)
Gender	Female (50%)
	Male (50%)

Participants took the 35-question survey in an online format on either a computer or mobile device. Although the survey is nationally representative in terms of demographic breakdown, it is important to note that online surveys have an unavoidable selection bias insofar as they can only reach those with the time, ability, and disposition to give personal opinions over the internet. Keeping this in mind, the survey can still be used to make conjectures about the US population because of its demographic diversity and large sample size. In addition to questions related to this study, the survey contained a set of questions from a separate study on democracy in the United States. A single open-ended question was included in the democracy section and was used to vet for gibberish responses. The democracy questions were added to utilize extra time available

in the survey as well as create a “buffer” between the first research question (the relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy and unconventional behavior) and the second research question (the survey experiment to test causality). Figure 1 shows the basic format of the survey. The content of the sections will be discussed later in this chapter. Additionally, the complete survey is provided in the *Appendix*.

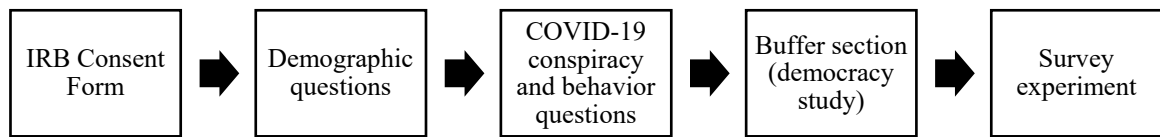


Figure 1: Survey Format

Methods

As discussed, this study has two research goals. The first goal is to determine the impact of COVID-19 conspiracy belief on unconventional political behavior. To reduce social desirability bias and discomfort in respondents, unconventional political behavior was measured in terms of “willingness to act” rather than actual behavioral history. Respondents are more likely to answer honestly if questions are phrased in a theoretical manner because they can avoid admitting to past unconventional or illegal acts. This methodology provides more accurate and unbiased results. Later in this chapter (*Determining Impact* subsection), I will discuss the methods for operationalizing these test variables.

The second goal of the study is to determine whether conspiracy exposure causes an increase in unconventional political behavior. To test this research question, a survey experiment was implemented to randomly expose respondents to either a treatment or control. Unlike measuring impact, causality is concerned with the time-order of the

relationship: whether conspiracy brings about an increase in unconventional political behavior as a direct result of exposure. It is important to mention that the independent variable for the survey experiment is exposure to conspiracy rather than belief in conspiracy. This is because conspiracy belief cannot be imposed onto a randomized group; within the limits of a survey experiment, I can only control exposure to the independent variable. I decided to use a deep state conspiracy for the treatment rather than a COVID-19 conspiracy. This decision was made to broaden the scope of the study and avoid unnecessary priming from the previous COVID-19 conspiracy questions. Finally, unconventional political behavior was measured in the same manner described above: “willingness to act”. A more thorough description of the survey experiment will be presented later in this chapter (*Determining Causality* subsection).

Determining Impact

Within this study, a COVID-19 conspiracy is defined as an opinion that indicates extreme skepticism toward, or disbelief in, COVID-19 information put out by government officials and experts. These conspiracy theories are often presented as alternative explanations to official COVID-19 information. To measure belief in COVID-19 conspiracy, I asked survey participants to select answer choices they believed were accurate from a randomly sorted list of seven conspiracy and seven factual statements about COVID-19. The factual statements were included in the question to reduce the chances of respondents seeing a pattern in answer choices. The following conspiracy statements were selected based on their popularity and lack of scientific backing (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021a) (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021b) (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021).

- Pharmaceutical companies have contributed to the creation and spread of the COVID-19 virus in order to financially profit
- The COVID-19 virus is a hoax / it is not real
- US COVID-19 death rates have been drastically overstated by officials
- The COVID-19 virus is no deadlier than the seasonal flu
- The COVID-19 virus was intentionally engineered by a powerful entity or person
- The COVID-19 vaccine has serious risks such as death and infertility that are intentionally being ignored by US government officials and experts
- The COVID-19 vaccine contains a microchip implant that jeopardizes personal privacy and security

In choosing factual statements, care was taken to select COVID-19 information commonly known and accessible to the public. Thus, the following factual statements were selected based on their general acceptance and scientific support by health organizations (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021a) (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021b) (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021):

- Social distancing helps prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus
- Older individuals and those with underlying medical conditions are at higher risk of COVID-19 complications
- Wearing a mask in crowded areas helps prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus
- There are different strains / variants of the COVID-19 virus
- The COVID-19 vaccine is generally safe and effective

- COVID-19 herd immunity, or the slowing of disease spread, could occur if enough people become immunized against the virus through vaccination
- The COVID-19 virus is spread person-to-person through the respiratory droplets of infected individuals

Unconventional political behavior was measured using the same format as COVID-19 conspiracy belief. In this study, unconventional political behavior is defined as a political action that is considered deviant in American society. The unconventional behaviors listed in the survey range from “frowned upon” to illegal activities. The survey measures participants’ willingness to commit the unconventional political acts by asking participants which activities they would “consider engaging in in order to communicate their political and social opinions to other Americans and elected officials”. Six unconventional and six conventional behaviors were listed as answer choices in a random order. As with the conspiracy belief variable, conventional behaviors were added to reduce response bias. The following were chosen as unconventional political behaviors based on their divergence from acceptable means of political participation as well as their increased occurrence during the pandemic:

- Participate in a protest that results in the destruction of property or a public institution
- Make an intimidating remark online against someone you disagree with politically
- Protest by intentionally not complying with a law
- Join a secret or underground political organization

- Demonstrate by trespassing in a restricted area or on government property
- Encourage others to not comply with laws in order to make a political statement

As discussed, conventional political behaviors were chosen to list along with the unconventional political behaviors. The actions listed below were selected as conventional political behaviors based on their societal approval as normal ways of expressing political opinions in the United States.

- Vote in an election
- Donate to a political campaign
- Participate in a political rally
- Discuss political and social issues online
- Try to convince a friend or family member to support your political opinions
- Sign a petition

To measure the relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior, respondents were given a score in analysis based on the number of COVID-19 conspiracies and unconventional behaviors they selected. For the independent variable, a “conspiracy score” was calculated to reflect the number of conspiracy statements each respondent selected. For instance, if a respondent marked three conspiracy statements as accurate, they were given a conspiracy score of three. Similarly, the dependent variable was coded into an “unconventional score” that reflects the number of unconventional activities each respondent selected. Using these two scored variables, a regression analysis was run to measure the impact that COVID-19 conspiracy

belief has on unconventional political behavior. Regression results will be discussed in *Chapter Four: Determining Impact Through Regression Results*.

As mentioned in *Chapter Two: Literature Review*, possible confounding variables were included in analysis to account for alternative explanations for a relationship between the test variables. Following a set of general demographic questions (age, ethnicity, gender, education level, and income), additional demographic questions were added to the survey to measure these possible confounders. Based on previous studies on the correlates of conspiracy belief and unconventional behavior, the following demographic variables were added to the survey as possible confounders: political partisanship and ideology (Moore, 2018) (Atkinson & Dewitt, 2018) (Uscinski et al., 2020), religious beliefs and habits (Baylor Religion Survey, 2021) (Robertson & Dyrendal, 2018), social media use (Ferrara et al., 2020) (van Mulukom et al., 2020) (Enders et al., 2021a), and psychological state (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017), (van Mulukom et al., 2020) (Van Prooijen, 2019) (Šrol et al., 2021) (Difonzo, 2018). The questions on psychological state measure trust in others (other Americans, political leaders, mass media, the scientific community, and religious leaders), feelings of being threatened, lack of control, and uncertainty about life/future. As discussed, adding these variables to analysis will provide greater assurance that a true linear relationship exists between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior.

Based on the results of the Imhoff et al. (2021) thought experiment as well as my own observations over the past few years, I hypothesize that a positive linear relationship exists between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior: as the number of COVID-19 conspiracies one believes increases, so do the number of

unconventional acts they consider committing. As described in the *Literature Review*, the Imhoff et al. (2021) study found an association between a conspiracy worldview and nonnormative political participation. Considering events like the Capitol insurrection, which was strongly associated with QAnon and election fraud conspiracies, as well as anti-mask and anti-vaccine demonstrations, it is highly likely that such acts were motivated or at least influenced by belief in conspiracy theories. Indeed, it is reasonable to expect radical beliefs to produce radical behaviors. I suspect that this relationship is mediated by some antecedent psychological, personality, and/or environmental predictors that will hopefully appear in the regression analysis. For instance, ideological extremism is a possible antecedent variable to the conspiracies associated with election protests. To illustrate the hypothesized relationship between the test variables, I have included Figure 2 below.

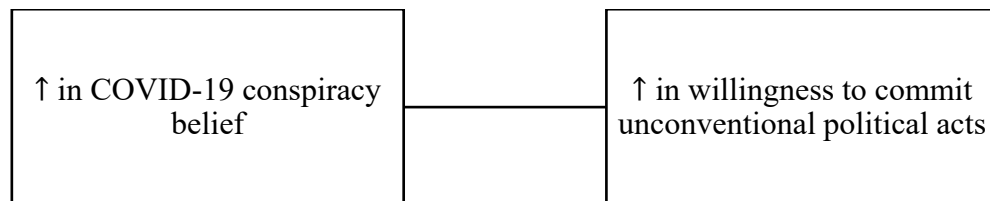


Figure 2: Hypothesized relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior

Determining Causality

As depicted in Figure 1, the survey experiment was placed at the end of the survey following the “buffer” section. Using Qualtrics software, respondents were randomly divided into either a treatment group or control group. A description of the deep state theory was chosen as the treatment paragraph because it is a general, non-partisan conspiracy that has some relevance in the United States. For ethical purposes, the

conspiracy exposure was presented as descriptive rather than persuasive. This was done so that respondents were not overly affected by exposure. Presented below is the paragraph that the treatment group was asked to read:

Some Americans have argued that United States national policy is not under the control of elected officials and representatives. These Americans suggest that much of the government's activity is controlled by a secret system of unelected individuals that come from a variety of institutions such as the military, academia, government bureaucracy, and the criminal underworld. Americans who support this theory often argue that violent events in the United States such as bombings, mass shootings, and assassinations are arranged by this secret national system of unelected individuals.

For the control group, respondents were asked to read a paragraph describing how a bill becomes a law in the US. This topic was chosen because it is factual, stable, and non-partisan. Moreover, I wanted the control paragraph to describe an aspect of the US government to ensure that differences in responses between the groups were not based on the mentioning of the government. Thus, the following paragraph was presented to control participants to carefully read:

In the United States, laws begin as bills introduced to either the House of Representatives or Senate by a sponsor congressperson. Once introduced, bills go to committees where they are discussed and occasionally amended. If the bill passes through the necessary committees and subcommittees, the full chamber votes on the bill. Passed bills are referred to the other chamber of congress where a similar committee and voting process occurs. Bills that are passed by both the House and Senate move on to the president. The president can sign the bill into law or oppose the bill by vetoing it. If the president takes no action for ten days while congress is in session, the bill automatically becomes law. Congress can override a presidential veto with a two-thirds majority vote.

Following either the treatment or control paragraph, all participants were asked: “if the US government is not listening to Americans like you on important political issues, how likely would you be to consider joining a group effort to forcibly trespass on government property to get the attention of elected officials?”. Participants were presented with a 5-point Likert scale from “extremely likely” to “extremely unlikely”.

This question was chosen because it is a clear unconventional political act. To reduce social desirability bias, the question was framed as a group effort with conditional reasoning making the act appear more justifiable to some individuals. In analysis, mean scores for the question were compared between the treatment and control groups through a T Test to determine if exposure to conspiracy causes an increase in willingness to commit the unconventional political act. Supplementary T Tests were also run to compare means within demographic subsets. These tests and their results will be discussed further in *Chapter Five: Determining Causality Through Experiment Results*.

As mentioned in *Chapter Two: Literature Review*, exposure to conspiracy does not necessitate belief (Uscinski, 2018b) (Enders et al., 2021a). This is perhaps an obvious observation; people are exposed to conspiracy daily, yet such exposure does not cause belief in the average person. However, we ought to consider whether exposure holds any causal force on modes of political expression either for the whole or for certain groups of the population. Testing this relationship is important because the results can further clarify which predictor variables of conspiracy belief give causal power to exposure. For this aspect of the study, I hypothesize that the conspiracy exposure presented to the treatment group *will not* cause an increase in unconventional political intentions for the whole group but *will* cause an increase for certain demographic groups that are predisposed to be influenced by conspiracy: perhaps those with extreme ideological identity, low education, high religiosity, and high psychological stress. Figure 3 below shows the dynamics of this hypothesized relationship.

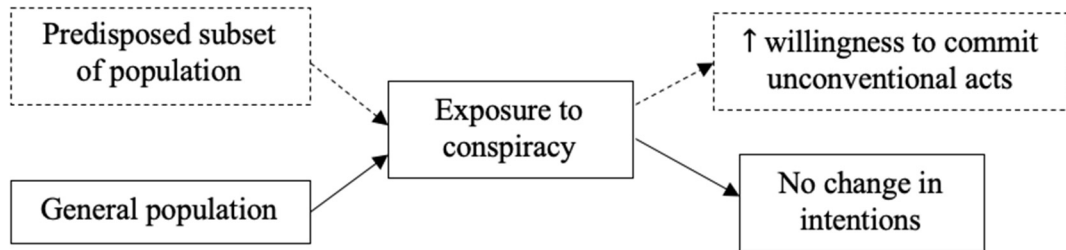


Figure 3. Hypothesized results of survey experiment

Avoiding Measurement Error

Because conspiracy is a controversial topic, special care was taken to prevent priming respondents for certain responses. Beyond those measures already mentioned, loaded and problematic terminology such as conspiracy, deep state, and insurrection were avoided completely. In the political behavior section, unconventional political acts were phrased in a way that avoids socially undesirable words. For instance, illegal acts were described as “not complying with the law”. However, it is important to note that, when surveying for unconventional beliefs and actions, social desirability bias can never be completely prevented. Even with careful wording, it is likely that some respondents answered inaccurately to appear less deviant. Conversely, it is also likely that some individuals marked conspiracy and unconventional statements and were not being genuine about their beliefs.

To ensure that variables were precisely measured and to avoid pigeonholing respondents, answer options for the survey were written to be comprehensive and exhaustive. For example, the answers for the ideology question were listed from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative” on a gradual scale. Moreover, “don’t know/haven’t thought about it much” was provided as an alternative answer. This answer

format will provide more accurate responses that can be collapsed into simpler groups if needed. Similarly, questions that could cause discomfort, such as income and gender questions, were supplemented with “prefer not to answer” choices.

CHAPTER FOUR

Determining Impact Through Regression Results

Sample Descriptives

As discussed in *Chapter Three: Data Collection and Methods*, demographic quotas were embedded into the survey to capture a nationally representative sample of survey takers. The estimated sample size for the survey, based on available funds, was originally 830 respondents. However, to fill the demographic quotas and replace gibberish and straight-liner responses, 866 good responses were eventually accepted for analysis. Displayed below is the actual demographic breakdown for all 866 responses (Table 2). With the additional 36 responses, the actual breakdown varies slightly from the original quota which can be seen in Table 1. Still, the survey sample is generally reflective of the demographic make-up of the United States and can be used to make reliable conjectures about the state of American public opinion and behavior.

Table 2

Actual Breakdown of Demographic Quotas

	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Age</i>		
18-34	285	32.90%
35-54	282	32.60%
55+	298	34.40%
Total	866	100%
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White	585	67.60%
Black	121	14%
Hispanic	107	12.40%
Other	53	6%
Total	866	100%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	433	50%
Male	418	48.30%
Other	15	1.70%
Total	866	100%

In addition to discussing demographic quotas, *Chapter Three* outlined the methods for operationalizing COVID-19 conspiracy belief (IV) and unconventional political behavior (DV). As discussed, both variables were coded into score systems that reflect the number of conspiracy and unconventional statements each respondent selected. Table 3 shows the frequency distribution for the conspiracy score (IV). Unsurprisingly, most respondents (56%) did not agree with any of the COVID-19 conspiracy statements. Although COVID-19 conspiracies are currently more popular than other conspiracies, they are still fringe beliefs and cannot be expected to sway the majority. Still, 44% of respondents agreed with at least one COVID-19 conspiracy listed

in the survey. As the conspiracy score increases, however, fewer and fewer respondents fall into each score group. Only 9 respondents marked 6 or 7 conspiracy statements as accurate.

Table 3

Frequency for Conspiracy Score (IV)

# of conspiracies marked	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	485	56	56
1	197	22.7	78.8
2	94	10.9	89.6
3	52	6	95.6
4	19	2.2	97.8
5	10	1.2	99
6	6	0.7	99.7
7	3	0.3	100
Total	866	100	

Regarding the specific COVID-19 conspiracies, Table 4 shows the frequency distribution for the 7 COVID-19 conspiracies listed in the survey. The “Frequency of agreement” column shows the number of respondents who marked each conspiracy as accurate from largest to smallest. The conspiracies have been paraphrased slightly in the table, but the full statements can be seen in *Chapter Three*. As displayed, the most popular conspiracy is the “intentionally engineered” conspiracy which is supported by 19.5% of respondents. The second most popular conspiracy is the “death rates” conspiracy (18.4%) followed by the “vaccine has serious risks” conspiracy (15.8%). As discussed in *Chapter Two: Literature Review*, conspiracies form in response to the perceived threat of a powerful outgroup. In line with these expectations, the three most common conspiracies supported by respondents reflect a distrust in certain outgroups:

officials, experts, powerful entities/persons. Perhaps these conspiracies are most popular because they name and place blame on an outgroup.

In contrast, the two least popular conspiracies are the “hoax” and “microchip” conspiracies (2.1% and 5.5% agreement respectively). There are a few possible reasons that these conspiracies are the least supported. First, they are extreme forms of conspiracy insofar as they assume a large-scale coverup. Such extremism could make them less convincing to most people. Another possibility is that these conspiracies do not name an outgroup and are, therefore, a less satisfying explanation for those who feel threatened during the pandemic.

Table 4

Frequency for COVID-19 Conspiracy Statements

COVID-19 Conspiracy Statements	Frequency of agreement	Agreement percentage
1. COVID-19 was intentionally engineered by powerful entity/person	169	19.50%
2. US COVID-19 death rates have been drastically overstated by officials	159	18.40%
3. COVID-19 vaccine has serious risks that are intentionally being ignored by officials/experts	137	15.80%
4. COVID-19 is no deadlier than seasonal flu	107	12.40%
5. Pharmaceutical companies have contributed to creation/spread for profit	86	9.90%
6. COVID-19 vaccine contains microchip implant	48	5.50%
7. COVID-19 is a hoax / is not real	18	2.10%

Like the conspiracy score (IV), Table 5 shows the frequency distribution for the unconventional score (DV). The vast majority of respondents (76.9%) did not select any of the unconventional political behaviors listed in the survey. As mentioned in *Chapter Three*, social desirability bias likely had an impact on respondents' willingness to answer genuinely. Also, I suspect that respondents are more likely to support extreme opinions than extreme acts since action requires an extra step of commitment and extremism. 23.1% of respondents selected 1 or more unconventional acts, and zero respondents selected all 6 unconventional acts. Like the conspiracy score, the unconventional score shows a continual decline in the number of respondents in each group as the score increases.

Table 5

Frequency for Unconventional Score (DV)

# of behaviors marked	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	666	76.9	76.9
1	118	13.6	90.5
2	55	6.4	96.9
3	14	1.6	98.5
4	9	1	99.5
5	4	0.5	100
Total	866	100	

Table 6 shows the frequency for each unconventional behavior statement. Once again, some statements have been paraphrased, and the full statements can be seen in *Chapter Three*. The unconventional behaviors had less overall support and variability in support compared to the COVID-19 conspiracies. The most popular unconventional behavior is “encourage others to not comply with law” with 8.10% of respondent support.

Perhaps this behavior is most popular because it is a passive unconventional act and appears to be more socially acceptable to respondents. However, the second most popular act is “protest by intentionally not complying with a law” (7.7%). These two acts could be the most popular because they do not name a specific law and can, therefore, be rationalized by more respondents. The least popular act among respondents was to “join a secret/underground political organization” (4.6%). This act could be the least popular because it requires knowledge of and access to such an organization. Still, there is only a 3.5% difference in support between the most popular and least popular acts.

Table 6

Frequency for Unconventional Behavior Statements

Unconventional Behavior Statements	Frequency of agreement	Agreement percentage
1. Encourage others to not comply with law	70	8.10%
2. Protest by intentionally not complying with a law	67	7.70%
3. Participate in protest that results in destruction of property/public institution	53	6.10%
4. Make intimidating remark online	53	6.10%
5. Demonstrate by trespassing in restricted area/government property	43	5%
6. Join a secret/underground political organization	40	4.60%

Regressions

After scoring the test variables, a series of regression models were run using SPSS software to determine whether COVID-19 conspiracy belief (measured as the conspiracy score) positively impacts unconventional political behavior (measured as the unconventional score). To ensure that the relationship is accurately measured, an extensive list of possible confounders was incorporated into the regressions as additional independent variables. The regressions were run at two different scales to account for possible changes across regression model specifications. These two regressions can be seen in Tables 7 and 8. In both regressions, dichotomous variables were coded into dummy variables that represent the absence or presence of some category. Dummy variables include male, ethnicity variables, social media app variables, and religion variables. All other variables were coded to reflect an increase in the variable's label. For example, the variable "social media use" is coded to reflect an increase in use. Some responses were removed from analysis to prevent skewing of the data. For instance, respondents who selected "prefer not to answer" or text responses for demographic questions were not included in the regressions. For this reason, the N for both regressions is 757.

Before discussing the regression results, it is important to discuss the methodology behind some variable measurements. First, ethnicity variables (Asian, Black/African American, and Hispanic) were calculated as dummy variables with white as the reference category. This was done because white was the largest ethnicity category in the survey. In addition to a conservative scale measuring ideology, the variable "ideological intensity" was added to the regression to measure respondents' degree of

ideological extremism. This variable was added to account for the research that shows that ideological extremism on both the left and right are connected to conspiracy belief and violent intentions (Van Prooijen et al. 2015) (Krouwel et al., 2017). To create the “ideological intensity” variable, the 7-point scale used in the conservative scale variable was recoded so that an increased score reflects an increase in both left and right ideological extremism. For instance, both extreme liberal and extreme conservative were coded as the highest number on the scale. Adding this variable to analysis allows us to examine exactly what aspect of ideological identity, if any, has an impact on unconventional political behavior.

Table 7 displays the results of the smaller regression model. This model excludes individual social media app variables as well as individual religion variables. The results of this regression show that 22.3% of the variance in the unconventional score can be accounted for by the independent variables incorporated into analysis (assumed from the adjusted R-Squared). Moreover, seven independent variables are shown to have a statistically significant impact on the unconventional score at the 95% level or higher. As hypothesized, the conspiracy score ($\beta=0.324, t=8.824, p<0.001$) positively predicts the unconventional score. Income ($\beta=0.076, t=2.032, p=0.043$), trust in religious leaders ($\beta=0.089, t=2.091, p=0.037$), lack of control ($\beta=0.136, t=2.957, p=0.003$), and ideological intensity ($\beta=0.109, t=3.239, p=0.001$) are also shown to positively predict the unconventional score. Additionally, those who identified as Black/African American ($\beta=0.084, t=2.306, p=0.021$) are more likely to report higher unconventional scores. Age ($\beta=-0.142, t=-3.345, p<0.001$) is the only variable to negatively predict the unconventional score.

Table 8 shows the results of the larger regression model. After adding individual social media apps and religion variables into the analysis, 24.2% of the variation in the unconventional score can be accounted for by the independent variables (assumed from adjusted R-Squared). In this model, eight variables are statistically significant at the 95% level or higher. Once again, the conspiracy score ($\beta=0.296, t=7.999, p<0.001$) is a positive predictor of the unconventional score. Additionally, trust in religious leaders ($\beta=0.09, t=2.036, p=0.042$), lack of control ($\beta=0.144, t=3.105, p=0.002$), and ideological intensity ($\beta=0.113, t=3.305, p<0.001$) remain as positive predictors, and those who identify as Black/African American ($\beta=0.092, t=2.503, p=0.013$) remain statistically more likely to report higher unconventional scores. Regarding the newly added variables, those who use Parler ($\beta=0.067, t=2.048, p=0.041$) and Snapchat ($\beta=0.111, t=2.454, p=0.014$), as well as those who identify as Muslim ($\beta=0.085, t=2.281, p=0.023$), are more likely to report higher unconventional scores. Within the larger model, income and age are no longer shown to significantly predict the unconventional score. Before moving on, it is important to note that I was limited in the number of significant variables I could discuss within this paper, and therefore, only mention those with a significance level of 95% or higher. However, there are several variables in the regressions that fall within the 90% level of significance: male, trust in scientific community, Tik Tok. These variables can still add to our understanding of unconventional behavior but unfortunately will not be expanded upon in this paper.

Table 7

Regression for Unconventional Score (DV)

	B	SE	Standardized beta (β)	t	p-value
constant	-0.227	0.23		-0.985	0.325
conspiracy score	0.206	0.023	0.324	8.824	<.001***
age	-0.006	0.002	-0.142	-3.345	<.001***
male	0.083	0.056	0.051	1.48	0.139
Asian	0.017	0.107	0.005	0.161	0.872
Black/African American	0.204	0.089	0.084	2.306	0.021**
Hispanic	0.117	0.096	0.045	1.217	0.224
education	0.013	0.02	0.025	0.643	0.521
income	0.024	0.012	0.076	2.032	0.043**
social media use	0.002	0.019	0.004	0.115	0.908
trust, other Americans	-0.009	0.033	-0.01	-0.265	0.791
trust, political leaders	0.058	0.034	0.08	1.694	0.091
trust, mass media	0.061	0.033	0.094	1.891	0.059
trust, scientific community	-0.046	0.029	-0.066	-1.599	0.11
trust, religious leaders	0.063	0.03	0.089	2.091	0.037**
way of life threatened	-0.028	0.026	-0.042	-1.062	0.289
uncertain about life/future	-0.016	0.031	-0.024	-0.523	0.601
lack of control	0.093	0.032	0.136	2.957	0.003***
republican scale	-0.013	0.016	-0.038	-0.818	0.414
conservative scale	-0.032	0.021	-0.07	-1.493	0.136
ideological intensity	0.081	0.025	0.109	3.239	0.001***
religiosity	-0.005	0.011	-0.016	-0.416	0.677
R-Squared	0.245 (.223)				
N	757				

** and *** indicates significance at the 95% and 99% level, respectively. Adjusted R-Squared is presented in parentheses.

Table 8

Expansive Regression for Unconventional Score (DV)

	B	SE	Standardized beta (β)	t	p-value
constant	-0.56	0.254		-2.204	0.028**
conspiracy score	0.189	0.024	0.296	7.999	<.001***
age	-0.001	0.002	-0.03	-0.578	0.564
male	0.106	0.057	0.064	1.845	0.065
Asian	-0.004	0.108	-0.001	-0.033	0.973
Black/African American	0.224	0.089	0.092	2.503	0.013**
Hispanic	0.089	0.099	0.034	0.897	0.37
education	0.01	0.021	0.019	0.472	0.637
income	0.016	0.012	0.052	1.352	0.177
social media use	-0.002	0.023	-0.003	-0.071	0.943
trust, other Americans	-0.002	0.033	-0.003	-0.067	0.947
trust, Political leaders	0.055	0.034	0.075	1.604	0.109
trust, mass media	0.055	0.033	0.084	1.69	0.091
trust, scientific community	-0.052	0.029	-0.074	-1.756	0.08
trust, religious leaders	0.063	0.031	0.09	2.036	0.042**
way of life threatened	-0.023	0.026	-0.035	-0.88	0.379
uncertain about life/future	-0.025	0.032	-0.038	-0.808	0.419
lack of control	0.098	0.032	0.144	3.105	0.002***
republican scale	-0.008	0.016	-0.022	-0.463	0.643
conservative scale	-0.031	0.022	-0.069	-1.457	0.145
ideological intensity	0.083	0.025	0.113	3.305	<.001***
religiosity	-0.009	0.012	-0.03	-0.712	0.477
Facebook	-0.034	0.074	-0.017	-0.462	0.644
Instagram	0.005	0.074	0.003	0.065	0.948
LinkedIn	0.02	0.068	0.011	0.298	0.765
Parler	0.351	0.172	0.067	2.048	0.041**
Twitter	-0.065	0.07	-0.039	-0.922	0.357
YouTube	0.033	0.064	0.019	0.52	0.603
Snapchat	0.201	0.082	0.111	2.454	0.014**
Tik Tok	0.147	0.08	0.083	1.84	0.066
Reddit	-0.007	0.072	-0.004	-0.104	0.917
Atheist	0.146	0.185	0.031	0.789	0.43
Agnostic	0.211	0.155	0.058	1.365	0.173
Jewish	-0.143	0.179	-0.031	-0.799	0.425
Muslim	0.434	0.19	0.085	2.281	0.023**
no religion in particular	0.131	0.117	0.061	1.123	0.262
Christian	6.20E-05	0.186	0	0	1
Protestant	-0.029	0.172	-0.015	-0.167	0.867
Non-denominational	0.143	0.186	0.047	0.766	0.444
Evangelical	0.213	0.224	0.045	0.951	0.342
Catholic	0.133	0.172	0.069	0.773	0.44
R-Squared	0.282 (.242)				
N	757				

** and *** indicates significance at the 95% and 99% level, respectively. Adjusted R-Squared is presented in parentheses.

Discussion

Previous studies have connected nonnormative and violent intentions to conspiracy belief (Imhoff et al., 2021) (Jolley & Paterson, 2020) (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020). In light of the pandemic and subsequent political turmoil in the US, the intent of this study is to examine the relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior by surveying actual, self-reported conspiracy believers. As the results of the regression models show, the conspiracy score (IV) has a significant positive impact on the unconventional score (DV). This means that as the number of COVID-19 conspiracies one believes increases, so does the number of unconventional political acts they are willing to commit. Looking at the third column of Tables 7 and 8, the conspiracy score variable has standardized beta coefficients (β) of 0.324 and 0.296 respectively. These numbers represent the highest standardized betas in the models. Standardized beta coefficients measure the predicted change in the dependent variable (unconventional score) for every 1-unit or standard deviation change in the independent variables allowing for a fair and standardized comparison of independent variables. Because the conspiracy score has the highest standardized beta coefficients, we can assume that it has the greatest impact on the unconventional score. These results support the test hypothesis of a positive linear relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior. However, before we begin to consider strategies for reducing conspiracy belief and its dangerous behavioral effects, we need to determine the role of conspiracy exposure in causing changes in political behavior. The next chapter will address this question through the analysis of the survey experiment.

But first, we ought to consider the other significant independent variables in the regression analysis. Referencing the larger regression (Table 8), Black/African American has a positive standardized beta coefficient of 0.092. I suspect that the positive relationship between Black/African American identity and the unconventional score is related to the recent increase in protests associated with racial injustice and police brutality. In many ways, the perceived experiences of conspiracy believers (outgroup “othering”, fear for the future, and a sense of a lack of control) resemble the lived experiences of oppressed and marginalized communities. These psychological conditions, whether real or perceived, can surely affect a person’s method of political expression.

Two related variables that were also shown to have significant standardized betas are “trust in religious leaders” ($\beta=0.09$) and Muslim ($\beta=0.85$). Perhaps, trusting in religious leaders reflects a strong, religious ingroup identity as well as a personal emphasis on morality and spiritual obligation. People who have high trust in religious leaders likely recognize moral authority beyond government and, therefore, can more easily rationalize unconventional acts if they see those acts as their spiritual or moral duty. Similarly, Muslims maintain a strong ingroup identity as a minority religion in the United States. Like Black/African American individuals, Muslims often face discrimination and other social barriers that can lead to the rationalization of unconventional political acts. Surprisingly, the religiosity variable, which measured worship attendance, did not have a positive nor significant standardized beta. Rather than religious attendance, perhaps it is religious zeal that contributes to a willingness to behave unconventionally.

While the conservative scale variable was not significant, ideological intensity was shown to have a significant standardized beta of 0.113 which is one of the highest in analysis. As discussed in the *Literature Review*, ideological intensity or extremism is also a predictor of conspiracy belief (Van Prooijen et al. 2015) (Krouwel et al., 2017). Thus, it seems that identifying with extreme left or right ideology is an antecedent variable to COVID-19 conspiracy belief and, therefore, unconventional political behavior. Similarly, a sense of lack of control has previously been connected to COVID-19 conspiracy belief (Šrol et al., 2021) and has a significant, positive standardized beta of 0.144 in analysis (the highest other than the conspiracy score). Like ideological intensity, a sense of lack of control seems to be an antecedent or predictor variable to the test variables in this study.

Regarding the social media variables, only two social media sites have a significant, positive standardized beta: Parler ($\beta=0.067$) and Snapchat ($\beta=0.111$). Parler is known to be a far-right, conservative social media app. As we have just discussed, ideological extremism has a positive influence on the unconventional score. Because the app is often used by ideological extremists on the right, it is not surprising to see a connection between use of the app and willingness to act politically unconventionally. Regarding Snapchat, I am not entirely sure how to interpret the positive and relatively high standardized beta. Perhaps the relationship is related to the young age of most Snapchat users, or the type of information spread on the app. Regardless of the reason, it is worth considering whether actions need to be taken to prevent rhetoric on these apps that encourages violent political acts.

CHAPTER FIVE

Determining Causality Through Experiment Results

T Test Results

As shown through the regression analysis, a positive linear relationship exists between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and willingness to commit unconventional political behaviors. To completely understand the relationship between these variables, however, causation ought to be investigated: does exposure to conspiracy lead the whole or some of the population to be more willing to commit unconventional behaviors? Mentioned in *Chapter Three: Data Collection and Methods*, a survey experiment was conducted at the end of the survey to determine causality. Rather than measuring belief in COVID-19 conspiracy, however, this section measures exposure to a deep state conspiracy as the independent variable. Exposure was measured because belief cannot be forced onto a survey sample, and non-COVID conspiracy was chosen to reduce priming from the previous section and broaden the application of the study.

As previously discussed, respondents were prompted to read either the deep state description or a control description. On the following page, respondents were asked to indicate how likely they would be to perform a hypothetical unconventional act. Answers ranged from extremely unlikely (coded as a 1) to extremely likely (5). To measure causality, an independent sample T Test was run to compare means between the treatment group and the control group. The group with the higher mean is more willing, on average, to commit the hypothetical act. If the treatment group has a significantly

higher mean, we can assume that it is the result of exposure because the groups have been randomly selected.

Table 9 shows the T Test for the survey experiment. Looking at the column labeled “N”, 435 respondents were prompted to read the deep state treatment paragraph and 431 respondents read the control paragraph. The number in each group varies slightly due to randomization, however, they are still considered balanced and can be compared in analysis. Regarding the results of the test, the treatment group has a mean score of 2.25 while the control group has a mean of 2.33. Thus, the treatment group was not differentially, positively affected by the conspiracy exposure. Moreover, the difference between the groups was not statistically significant ($p=0.367$). Although underwhelming, this is a reassuring result. It would be quite worrisome if the behaviors of the average American were influenced by simple exposure to conspiracy. These results corroborate and expand on the regression results: the relationship between conspiracy exposure, belief, and unconventional political behavior is mediated by antecedent variables particular to the psychosocial state of the individual. An individual will only be causally affected by exposure if they are already susceptible to conspiracy belief. Because the general population does not possess the psychological and environmental predictors of conspiracy belief, exposure does not increase unconventional political intentions for the whole.

Table 9

T Test for Survey Experiment

	N	Mean	SD	t (equal variance not assumed)	Two- sided p	Mean difference
Treatment	435	2.25	1.335	-0.902	0.367	-0.084
Control	431	2.33	1.389			

Additional Tests and Results

Wanting to make full use of the experiment data (and admittedly underwhelmed by the initial results), I decided to run the T Test on smaller subsets of the sample. Within SPSS, I organized the output based on different demographic groups. In running these additional tests, I can investigate the effect that conspiracy exposure has on a variety of demographic subgroups. While exposure has no significant, causal effect on the larger sample, it is still possible for it to have a significant effect on smaller subsets of the sample. However, because I am breaking down the sample into smaller groups, the sample size for each T Test is much smaller than the original 866 respondents and is, therefore, less likely to produce significant results. Still, these additional tests can provide nuance to the relationship between exposure and behavior.

Table 10 shows the T Test results for the demographic subsets. The “Total N” column shows the number of respondents in each category for both the treatment and control groups. As with Table 9, the “Mean Difference” column indicates the difference in means between the treatment group and control group. A positive mean difference indicates that the treatment group has a higher mean than the control group. A negative mean difference indicates that the control group has a higher mean. A row that has a

positive mean difference and a significant two-sided p-value ($p < 0.05$) signify a category that is causally impacted by the conspiracy exposure so that the exposure increased willingness to commit the unconventional behavior.

Of the over 60 categories (and 12 demographic variables) tested, only two categories are significant at the 95% level ($p < 0.05$): *less than a high school education* and *worship attendance of once or twice a year*. Both demographic subsets have a positive mean difference denoting a causal relationship between exposure to conspiracy and increased willingness to commit the unconventional act. Looking first at the *less than a high school education* category, only 11 respondents fell within this category. Of those 11, 4 respondents were exposed to the conspiracy and had a mean of 4 for the question (somewhat likely to commit the act). The other 7 respondents were given the control and had a mean of 2.43 (between somewhat unlikely and neither likely nor unlikely). Although the sample size is quite small, the mean difference between the treatment and control groups is relatively large and statistically significant ($p = 0.043$). I suspect that these results reflect lower critical thinking and less skepticism towards conspiracy claims in those with less than a high school education. Thus, being swayed by the conspiracy, these respondents consider the unconventional act more willingly. These results fall in line with a study mentioned in *Chapter Two: Literature Review* that concluded that people with a high-level education were less likely than those with low-level education to subscribe to conspiracy theories (Van Prooijen, 2017). Van Prooijen determined that this relationship was mediated by cognitive complexity and feelings of control. Once again, lack of control appears to be a vital antecedent variable to conspiracy belief.

Regarding the category of *worship attendance of once or twice a year*, there are 74 respondents in this category of the religiosity/worship attendance variable. 38 of these respondents received the conspiracy paragraph and had a mean of 2.71 (between somewhat unlikely and neither likely nor unlikely). The other 36 were given the control paragraph and had a mean of 1.97 (~somewhat unlikely). The difference between the means is 0.738 and is statistically significant ($p=0.02$). Thus, it seems that the exposure had some causal effect on this demographic subset. However, the treatment group, on average, still does not express true willingness to commit the act. It is possible that this variation is simply statistical noise. If not, the variation between the treatment and control group could reflect the psychological traits of those who attend worship only a few times a year. Perhaps, these people are more likely to be convinced by extreme ideas (whether religious or conspiratorial) without as much critical thinking or consideration as those who attend worship regularly or not at all.

Table 10
T Test by Demographic Subset

	Total N	Mean Difference	Two-sided p (equal variance not assumed)
<i>Education</i>			
Less than high school	11	1.571	0.043**
High school graduate	211	0.091	0.624
Some college	181	-0.308	0.12
2-year degree	107	0.065	0.795
4-year degree	212	-0.217	0.228
Professional degree	115	-0.161	0.573
Doctorate	26	0.769	0.191
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	418	-0.045	0.743
Female	433	-0.112	0.378
Non-binary/third gender	12	-0.667	0.373
<i>Age</i>			
18-34	285	-0.154	0.329
35-55	288	-0.096	0.547
56+	292	0.05	0.679
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
Asian	69	0.46	0.899
Black	121	-0.218	0.372
Hispanic	107	-0.318	0.21
White	585	0.008	0.937
<i>Partisanship</i>			
Strong Democrat	236	-0.33	0.096
Not very strong Democrat	132	-0.47	0.838
Democrat-leaning Independent	65	-0.005	0.988
Independent	118	0.051	0.808
Republican-leaning Independent	42	-0.532	0.241
Not very strong Republican	83	-0.262	0.309
Strong Republican	160	0.257	0.255
<i>Religion</i>			
Atheist	31	-0.377	0.438
Agnostic	46	0.385	0.222
Buddhist	11	-0.857	0.316
Christian	501	-0.061	0.626
Hindu	8	-0.2	0.621
Jewish	26	-0.055	0.896
Mormon	8	1.467	0.125
Muslim	22	0.457	0.487
No religion in particular	151	-0.284	0.144
Prefer not to answer	21	0.473	0.372
Other	41	-0.683	0.093

<i>Christian denomination</i>			
non-denominational	69	-0.292	0.366
Protestant	185	-0.163	0.415
Evangelical	29	0.856	0.164
Catholic	190	-0.031	0.876
<i>Religiosity/Worship Attendance</i>			
No place of worship	167	-0.305	0.123
Never	109	0.017	0.937
Less than once a year	105	0.091	0.729
Once or twice a year	74	0.738	0.02**
Several times a year	89	-0.102	0.728
Once a month	37	-0.5	0.323
2-3 times a month	58	-0.307	0.381
About once a week	156	-0.161	0.474
Several times a week	71	-0.018	0.963
<i>Ideological Intensity</i>			
Moderate	245	-0.187	0.261
Slightly Lib/Con	147	-0.108	0.587
Liberal/Conservative	258	-0.077	0.643
Extremely Lib/Con	159	0.219	0.389
<i>Ideology</i>			
Extremely Liberal	86	0.15	0.672
Liberal	150	-0.087	0.7
Slightly Liberal	83	0.068	0.807
Moderate	245	-0.187	0.261
Slightly Conservative	64	-0.359	0.213
Conservative	108	-0.11	0.656
Extremely Conservative	73	0.203	0.568
<i>Income</i>			
\$0-\$39,000	274	0.191	0.242
\$40,000-\$79,000	285	-0.160	0.324
\$80,000-\$119,000	128	-0.318	0.154
\$120,000-\$159,000	72	0.154	0.657
\$160,000-\$199,000	50	-0.406	0.259
\$200,000 or more	25	-0.622	0.398
<i>Lack of Control</i>			
Strongly Disagree	107	-0.103	0.719
Disagree	171	-0.127	0.519
Neither agree/disagree	234	-0.042	0.799
Agree	263	-0.073	0.674
Strongly Agree	91	-0.120	0.713

** indicates significance at the 95% level.

Discussion

As mentioned in *Chapter Two: Literature Review*, exposure to a conspiracy does not stipulate belief (Uscinski, 2018) (Enders et al., 2021a). The initial results of the survey experiment seem to suggest that in addition to not stipulating belief, exposure does not cause an increase in unconventional behavior for the average American. These results are not surprising. Americans are relentlessly exposed to conspiracy theories, and for most, such exposure does not make their beliefs and political behaviors any more unconventional. In fact, for some Americans, exposure to conspiracy seems to lessen their willingness to act unconventionally. This trend can be seen in the initial results which, although statistically insignificant, showed a decreasing effect of exposure on unconventional behavior. Similarly, the negative mean differences in Table 10 also indicate a reduced willingness in those exposed to the conspiracy. This decreasing effect likely reflects a rejection of the conspiracy theory and a desire to distance oneself from fringe ideas and corresponding behaviors. As established in *Chapter Four: Determining Impact Through Regression Results*, belief in conspiracy increases one's willingness to behave unconventionally (at least regarding COVID-19 conspiracy). Corroborating these results, the survey experiment supports the claim that exposure only increases unconventional behavior in those who are already susceptible to conspiracy. Considering the two significant demographic subsets, I suspect that a simplistic, noncritical thinking style is a predictor of such susceptibility.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to investigate the relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior. This investigation was motivated by the observable increase in both COVID-19 conspiracy theories and unconventional political behaviors during the pandemic. Some of these behaviors include COVID-19 mandate non-compliance, anti-mask/anti-vaccine demonstrations, destructive social protests, and the Capitol insurrection. To explore this relationship, a nationally representative, online survey was conducted in the summer of 2021. In analysis, a series of regressions showed a positive linear relationship between COVID-19 conspiracy belief (measured through a conspiracy score) and unconventional political behavior (measured through an unconventional score). This relationship has the highest standardized beta coefficient ($\beta=0.296$) in analysis after accounting for possible confounders and is statistically significant at the 99% level ($p<0.001$). These results support the claim that belief in COVID-19 conspiracies increases one's willingness to commit unconventional political acts. This aspect of the study provides a novel contribution to conspiracy research insofar as it polls the behaviors of self-reported conspiracy believers and demonstrates that belief *does* impact the political behaviors one considers. Thus, in times of social crisis and heightened conspiracy belief, we are likely to see an increase in unconventional political behaviors.

Reflecting on the other significant independent variables in analysis, the variables “Black/African American” and “Muslim” indicate that conspiracy believers are not the

only people who are more willing to consider unconventional acts. It is worth considering whether these demographic groups share any psychosocial traits with conspiracy believers. Perhaps, the perceived experiences of conspiracy believers mirror the lived experiences of marginalized communities insofar as both groups experience a greater sense of threat, social “othering”, and lack of agency. Research ought to be conducted to compare the psychological state and perceptions of conspiracy believers with those of marginalized communities. Moreover, the regression models highlighted two significant antecedent variables to the tested relationship: ideological intensity and a feeling of lack of control. Considering that these two traits were applicable to many Americans during the pandemic, the rapid spread of COVID-19 conspiracies is, perhaps, not as surprising.

The secondary goal of the study was to move beyond association and investigate causality: does conspiracy exposure cause an increase in unconventional political behavior? Results from this section of the study show that conspiracy exposure alone has no significant casual impact on unconventional political intentions for the general population. Applied to real-life, these results suggest that brief conspiracy exposure online and through social media does not increase unconventional political behaviors among most Americans: those who are not already predisposed to belief. However, results from further analysis show that exposure does cause increased unconventional intentions for two demographic subsets of the population: those with less than a high school education and those who attend their place of worship once or twice a year. These results suggest that some demographic groups are more susceptible to the influence of conspiracy theories than others. I suspect that the psychological disposition of these groups makes them more willing to accept simpler explanations for major events and life

situations. This disposition mixed with lower critical thinking could lead these groups to consider unconventional acts more readily following exposure to conspiracy.

Looking toward the future of conspiracy research, I want to touch on the limitations of this study and corresponding avenues for future studies. Although the pandemic has created the perfect storm for unconventional beliefs and behaviors, it has also restricted this investigation to a certain context. Americans are not experiencing the world in an ordinary way during social crises, and therefore, cannot be expected to act in ordinary ways. Accordingly, this study is limited to reflecting American opinion and behavior during a particular crisis event. Future research ought to consider how the relationship between conspiracy and political behavior could change during times of stability: does the connection between conspiracy belief and unconventional political behavior still hold during times of political and economic stability?

This study is also restricted by its quantitative approach. Surveys can only address broad topics with limited question styles and answer choices. To overcome these methodological shortcomings, qualitative case studies ought to be conducted on conspiracy believers and unconventional actors. Case studies would allow researchers to ask what sources people get their conspiracy theories from, why they believe them to be true, and what action they would take to defend or prove the conspiracies. A qualitative method would also allow for a more descriptive approach to studying predictor variables. For instance, beyond measuring ideological intensity, respondents could be asked to describe their specific political or social beliefs. Finally, the conspiracy exposure in the survey experiment is relatively weak. Future research ought to test conspiracy exposure at higher intensities and for longer periods of time. Such exposure would better replicate

real-world conspiracy exposure. High intensity, long-term exposure could be tested by asking participants to watch persuasive conspiracy videos daily for weeks or months. It is possible that, after intense conspiracy exposure, larger portions of the population could be behaviorally influenced by conspiracy.

In closing, the greater aim of this study was to better understand the beliefs and behaviors of the American people during social crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented the ideal opportunity for conspiracy formation and spread: economic instability, reduced social interaction, lack of information and control. At the same time, political events like the 2020 presidential election have facilitated unprecedented political tension and unconventional participation. Indeed, if there was a time to study the relationship between conspiracy belief and political behavior, it was these past few years. Looking forward, I suspect that future social crises will present a similar increase in conspiracy belief in the United States. Considering the results of this study, we should be prepared in those instances for an increase in unconventional demonstrations, law noncompliance, and even events akin to January 6th. We must learn from this pandemic and develop plans to combat these trends before the next crisis event comes.

APPENDIX

SURVEY

PROTOCOL TITLE: Consent Form for Research
Public Opinion on COVID-19 and Political Behavior

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Morgan Russell

SUPPORTED BY: Undergraduate Research and Scholarly Achievement (URSA)
Small Grant program funded by the Baylor University Office of Engaged Learning (OEL)

Purpose of the research: You are invited to participate in a brief online survey. The purpose of this survey is to better understand the relationship between American's perception of COVID19 and political behavior. We are asking you to take part in this survey because your participation provides us with valuable insight into the beliefs and behaviors of the American people.

Study activities: If you choose to be a part of this survey, you will complete a 15-minute survey on a computer or mobile device that includes the following activities:

- Answering basic demographic questions (age, gender, race/ethnicity, partisanship, religious affiliation etc.)
- Answering survey questions about your opinions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic
- Answering survey questions about your willingness to perform certain political acts
- Answering survey questions about your opinion regarding democracy in the U.S.
- Reading a short paragraph of information

Risks and Benefits:

If you feel uncomfortable at any point while taking the survey, you may exit the survey.

There are no benefits to you from taking part in this research.

Confidentiality:

Confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Your participation in this online survey involves risks similar to a person's everyday use of the Internet, which could include illegal interception of the data by another party. If you are concerned about your data security, you should not participate in this survey. This survey does NOT ask personal questions such as your name, date of birth, or address. IP addresses are recorded to confirm location within the United States.

We will keep the records of this study confidential by complying with applicable privacy laws. We will make every effort to keep all records confidential. However, there are

times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of data records.

Authorized staff of Baylor University may review the study records for purposes such as quality control or safety.

Compensation

You will be compensated by the panel provider the amount you agreed upon before you entered into the survey.

If you fail to correctly answer the attention check question, you will be terminated from the survey and will not receive compensation.

Questions or concerns about this research study

You can contact us with any concerns or questions regarding the survey. We can be contacted between 9 AM and 5 PM Monday through Friday. We are best reached through email. Our contact information is listed below:

Morgan Russell
Principal Investigator
Morgan_Russell1@baylor.edu

Dr. Patrick Flavin
Faculty Advisor
Patrick_J_Flavin@baylor.edu
254-710-7418

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), you may contact the Baylor University IRB through the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at 254-710-3708 or irb@baylor.edu.

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to stop at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. Information already collected about you cannot be deleted.

By continuing with the research and completing the study activities, you are providing consent.

1 What is your age?

2 I identify my ethnicity as... (select all that apply)

- Asian
- Black or African American
- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian
- Prefer not to answer
- Other _____

3 What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to answer

4 Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or something else?

- Democrat
- Republican
- Independent
- Other _____

4.1 As an Independent, do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party, Democratic Party, or neither?

- Republican party
- Democratic party
- Neither

4.2 Would you consider yourself to be a strong Democrat or a not very strong Democrat?

- Strong Democrat
- Not very strong Democrat

4.3 Would you consider yourself to be a strong Republican or a not very strong Republican?

- Strong Republican
- Not very strong Republican

5 We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Using these terms, which of the following options best describes your political ideology?

- Extremely Liberal
- Liberal
- Slightly Liberal
- Moderate / Middle of the road
- Slightly Conservative
- Conservative
- Extremely Conservative
- Don't know / Haven't thought about it much

6 What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Less than high school
- High school graduate
- Some college
- 2-year degree
- 4-year degree
- Professional degree
- Doctorate
- Prefer not to answer

7 What is the combined income of all members of your household in an average year?

- \$0-\$19,000
- \$20,000-\$39,000
- \$40,000-\$59,000
- \$60,000-\$79,000
- \$80,000-\$99,000
- \$100,000-\$119,000
- \$120,000-\$139,000
- \$140,000-\$159,000
- \$160,000-\$179,000
- \$180,000-\$199,000
- \$200,000 or more
- Prefer not to answer

8 What is your religion, if any?

- Atheist
- Agnostic
- Buddhist
- Christian
- Hindu
- Jewish
- Mormon
- Muslim
- No religion in particular
- Prefer not to answer
- Other _____

8.1 What denomination of Christianity do you identify with?

- Non-denominational
- Orthodox (Eastern, Russian, Greek)

- Protestant (Adventist, Anglican, Baptist, Calvinist, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal)
- Evangelical
- Catholic
- Prefer not to answer
- Other _____

9 How many times do you attend religious services or ceremonies at your place of worship?

- I do not have a place of worship
- Never
- Less than once a year
- Once or twice a year
- Several times a year
- Once a month
- 2-3 times a month
- About once a week
- Several times a week

10 Which of the following social media websites or apps do you currently use, if any? (select all that apply)

- Facebook
- Instagram
- LinkedIn
- Parler
- Reddit
- Snapchat
- Tik Tok
- Twitter
- YouTube
- Other _____

11 How often do you check your social media accounts in a given week?

- Multiple times daily
- Once a day
- Every few days
- Once a week
- Less than once a week
- Never / I do not have social media accounts

12 In your opinion, how trustworthy or untrustworthy are the following sources for providing accurate information about current events?

	Very untrustworthy	Somewhat untrustworthy	Neither trustworthy of untrustworthy	Somewhat trustworthy	Very trustworthy
Other Americans	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Political leaders	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mass media	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The scientific community	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Spiritual / Religious leaders	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about yourself?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
My way of life is being threatened by others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I often feel anxious and uncertain about my life and the future	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel a lack of control over the situations around me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14 In your opinion, which of the following are accurate statements made about the COVID-19 virus and its effects? (select all that apply)

- Social distancing helps prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus
- Older individuals and those with underlying medical conditions are at higher risk of COVID-19 complications
- Wearing a mask in crowded areas helps prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus
- Pharmaceutical companies have contributed to the creation and spread of the COVID-19 virus in order to financially profit
- The COVID-19 virus is a hoax / it is not real
- There are different strains / variants of the COVID-19 virus
- US COVID-19 death rates have been drastically overstated by officials
- The COVID-19 virus is no deadlier than the seasonal flu
- The COVID-19 virus was intentionally engineered by a powerful entity or person
- The COVID-19 vaccine has serious risks such as death and infertility that are intentionally being ignored by US government officials and experts
- The COVID-19 vaccine contains a microchip implant that jeopardizes personal privacy and security
- The COVID-19 vaccine is generally safe and effective

- COVID-19 herd immunity, or the slowing of disease spread, could occur if enough people become immunized against the virus through vaccination
- The COVID-19 virus is spread person-to-person through the respiratory droplets of infected individuals

15 Which of the following activities would you consider engaging in in order to communicate your political and social opinions to other Americans and elected officials? (select all that apply)

- Vote in an election
- Participate in a protest that results in the destruction of property or a public institution
- Make an intimidating remark online against someone you disagree with politically
- Donate to a political campaign
- Protest by intentionally not complying with a law
- Join a secret or underground political organization
- Participate in a political rally
- Discuss political and social issues online
- Demonstrate by trespassing in a restricted area or on government property
- Try to convince a friend or family member to support your political opinions
- Encourage others to not comply with laws in order to make a political statement
- Sign a petition

16 Americans receive news about the COVID-19 virus from many different sources. Please rank the following sources by clicking and dragging them up and down based on how frequently you receive your COVID-19 news from them with 1 being most frequent and 6 being the least frequent.

- _____ Traditional media sources (CNN, FOX, MSNBC, etc.)
- _____ Social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.)
- _____ Family and friends
- _____ Health organizations (CDC, WHO)
- _____ Politicians
- _____ Religious / spiritual leaders

17 How confident are you that all votes were counted accurately and the correct candidate was deemed the winner of the 2020 US presidential election?

- Not confident at all
- Somewhat unconfident
- Neither confident nor unconfident
- Somewhat confident
- Very confident

18 If you are paying attention, please select "red" for the answer below.

- yellow
- red
- blue

19 In your opinion, how well or poorly does the United States fare regarding each of the following?

19.1 Citizens can formulate their own political opinions

- Very poorly
- Poorly
- Neither well nor poorly
- Well
- Very Well

19.2 Citizens can communicate their political opinions to the government

- Very poorly
- Poorly
- Neither well nor poorly
- Well
- Very Well

19.3 Elected officials equally weigh all citizens' political opinions when making policy decisions

- Very poorly
- Poorly
- Neither well nor poorly
- Well
- Very Well

20 In your opinion, has the United States government become more responsive or less responsive to the American people over the past 10 years?

- Much more responsive
- more responsive
- Neither more nor less responsive
- Less responsive
- Much less responsive

21 In a few words, what do you consider to be the most pressing threat to democracy in the United States?

22 To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

22.1 Americans have enough access to information about politics and politicians to hold their elected officials accountable if they aren't representing voters well

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

22.2 Through voting, contacting officials, joining interest groups, participating in protests, and other activities, Americans can effectively communicate their political opinions to elected officials

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

22.3 Members of Congress are more likely to listen to voters than professional lobbyists when deciding how to vote on an important bill

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

23.1

Please read the following short paragraph and then answer the question that follows.

In the United States, laws begin as bills introduced to either the House of Representatives or Senate by a sponsor congressperson. Once introduced, bills go to committees where they are discussed and occasionally amended. If the bill passes through the necessary committees and subcommittees, the full chamber votes on the bill. Passed bills are referred to the other chamber of congress where a similar committee and voting process occurs. Bills that are passed by both the House and Senate move on to the president. The president can sign the bill into law or oppose the bill by vetoing it. If the president takes no action for ten days while Congress is in session, the bill automatically becomes law. Congress can override a presidential veto with a two-thirds majority vote.

23.2

Please read the following short paragraph and then answer the question that follows.

Some Americans have argued that United States national policy is not under the control of elected officials and representatives. These Americans suggest that much of the government's activity is controlled by a secret system of unelected individuals that come from a variety of institutions such as the military, academia, government bureaucracy, and the criminal underworld. Americans who support this theory often argue that violent events in the United States such as bombings, mass shootings, and assassinations are arranged by this secret national system of unelected individuals.

24 If the US government is not listening to Americans like you on important political issues, how likely would you be to consider joining a group effort to forcibly trespass on government property to get the attention of elected officials?

- Extremely likely
- Somewhat likely
- Neither likely nor unlikely
- Somewhat unlikely
- Extremely unlikely

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