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PERSPECTIVE ESSAY

Conspiracy thinking in American politics

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Abstract
Conspiratorial thinking is an indelible part of American politics; indeed, conspiracy theories proliferated in North America even before the founding of the United States. A current headwind of trends appears to facilitate a surge in conspiratorial thinking, including the increased spread and accessibility of misinformation, steady declines in public trust in authority figures, and an increasingly polarized electorate marked by mutual partisan animosity. The annual symposium of the UC Irvine Center for Neuropolitics brought together experts in law, political science, neuroscience, philosophy, and psychology to discuss why and how conspiracy thought develops and persists. This paper synthesizes the insights from that symposium, addressing the foundations of conspiracy thinking in both individuals and society as a whole, and its place in the current American political landscape. Through integrating various disciplinary perspectives, the symposium aimed to identify possible pathways to alleviating the prevalence and influence of conspiratorial thinking.

Keywords: conspiratorial thinking; misinformation; polarization; moralization; cognition; belief factions

Defining conspiracy theories and delineating their impacts

Conspiracy theories have been fixtures in American politics, from the Salem witch trials and the Red Scare to more recently the conspiracies proliferated around the COVID-19 vaccinations and the baseless stolen election claims that fueled the January 6th US Capitol attack (Douglas et al., 2017; Enders & Smallpage, 2018). In his seminal 1965 book, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," Richard Hofstadter argued that critical examination of conspiratorial thinking is important in no small part due to its potential prevalence among the polity:

> "the idea of the paranoid style would have little contemporary relevance or historical value if it were applied only to people with profoundly disturbed minds. It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that make the phenomenon significant."

Conspiratorial thinking appears to be especially prominent in the current moment, which has been labeled an "era of misinformation" and the "golden age of conspiracy theories" (Fisher, 2021; Klepper, 2024). While popular discourses on this subject range from puzzlement to alarm, the number of psychological studies on conspiracy beliefs has grown exponentially in recent years (Stanton, 2020; Uscinski et al., 2022).

Conspiracy thinking is a belief that two or more actors have coordinated in secret to achieve an outcome, and that their conspiracy is of public interest but not public knowledge (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Conspiracy theories are distinguished by a number of factors. They are oppositional, which means

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they oppose publicly accepted understandings of events. They describe malevolent or forbidden acts. And they ascribe agency to individuals and groups, as opposed to impersonal or systemic forces (Enders & Smallpage, 2018).

Further, conspiracy theories are epistemically risky, meaning that although they may not be entirely false or implausible, taken collectively, they are more prone to falsity than other types of belief. Conspiracy theories are social constructs, meaning they are not merely adopted by individuals, but rather are shared by multiple people with social objectives in mind. The social nature of conspiracy theories augments their potential to not only represent and interpret reality, but also to fashion new social realities (Pilch et al., 2023).

Both scholarship and recent anecdotal real-world evidence suggest the observable consequences of adherence to conspiratorial thinking (Orth, 2023). For instance, American believers of the conspiracy theory that the COVID-19 pandemic was a "hoax" perceive the pandemic as less threatening, exhibit a higher refusal of vaccines, and engage substantially less in preventative behaviors such as mask usage (Douglas, 2021; Romer & Jamieson, 2020).

Further, adherence to the conspiratorial belief that COVID-19 is a bioweapon or a result of 5G signals was associated with selfish behavior and an increased general willingness to engage in violence (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020; Romer & Jamieson, 2020). The 2020 Nashville bombing, the largest vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attack since the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, was conducted by a paranoid believer of 5G cellular networks (Jibilian, 2020; Jolley & Paterson, 2020).

Conspiracy beliefs have also been linked to violent extremist intentions (Chan et al. 2021), acting as a "radicalizing multiplier" that "serves to reinforce ideologies and psychological processes within extremist groups (Orth, 2023). For example, many of the most prominent and violent participants in the aforementioned January 6 Capitol siege were affiliated with QAnon, a decentralized far-right extremist movement coalescing around conspiracy theories (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020).

With Americans' trust in government, media, and institutions continuing to fall to historic lows (Bell, 2024; Jones, 2022; Nuckols, 2016), conspiracism has never seemed more widespread or ripe for weaponization (Jones, 2022). Misinformation—the inadvertent spread of false or inaccurate information—and disinformation—the intentional spread of such falsehoods, and bad faith dismissals of accurate reports as "fake news"—sow further distrust, accelerating a decades-long trend of declining societal trust (Rose, 2021). These trends have spawned a recent resurgence of theoretical and empirical studies systematically examining conspiratorial thinking at individual and collective levels. What are the individual, group, and structural bases for conspiracy theorizing? How are conspiracy beliefs maintained and shared? What can neuroscience say about conspiracism? Is there cause for alarm, and what can be done moving forward?

These questions were addressed at a symposium hosted by the University of California, Irvine's Center for Neuropolitics in October 2023. This paper integrates the insights offered by the symposium participants, whose expertise spans the fields of political science, neuroscience, law, psychology, and philosophy. The order of the paper is as follows. We first provide an overview of recent research illuminating the individual- and country-level predictors of conspiracy thinking and the social element of conspiracism, exploring how group norms and trust dynamics allow conspiracy theories to spread and endure. We then draw on neuroscientific insights that challenge conventional understandings of conspiratorial thinking and offer a novel framework for thinking about and analyzing conspiracism that considers the interplay between the conscious mind, motivated reasoning, and the preconscious brain. We close with brief thoughts on the challenges of government regulation of disinformation.

Individual- and country-level bases for conspiracy thinking

Studies examining individual-level predictors of conspiracy theories have placed emphasis on unmet psychological motives (Douglas et al., 2017), and factors relating to individual's cognitive capacities, clinical condition, motivations, and personality traits (Biddlestone et al., 2022). Relatively less is known

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about contextual or country-level predictors of conspiracy theorizing. Yet, two possible societal factors have been identified. Conspiracy theories could be more prominent within sociopolitical systems characterized by high levels of socioeconomic vulnerability, discrimination, and victimization (Hornsey et al., 2022).

On the other hand, conspiratorial thinking could be more prevalent within states with particularly strong or powerful governments, as these governments are more easily perceived as capable of conspiring (Douglas et al., 2023; Enders & Smallpage, 2018). Efforts to uncover state-level factors that shape conspiracy beliefs are hindered by the difficulty of establishing credible correlations between mass-level forces and collective propensities to adhere to conspiracy theories. Scholars, however, see immense promise in utilizing machine learning models to explore such correlations (Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

A global web-based study conducted mere weeks after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic examined both individual- and country-level predictors of conspiracy thinking (Douglas et al., 2023). The study identified five factors as the most important individual-level predictors of conspiratorial sentiment: social discontent, or a sense of crisis driven by the perceived breakdown of society (Gootjes et al., 2021); support for extraordinary governmental intervention in the economy; paranoia, defined as strong suspiciousness of other people (Schlier et al., 2016); an indicator of disempowerment labeled as struggling (Gootjes et al., 2021; Leander et al., 2020); and finally, a palpable sense of disturbance about the potential for economic suffering due to the coronavirus.

The top five country-level predictors included three respective factors from the World Governance Indicators: country political stability and absence of violence or terrorism; government effectiveness; and government control over corruption. The final two predictors were the number of confirmed deaths from COVID-19 and the ratio of doctors per ten thousand residents. Notably, however, there was a non-monotonic relationship between government effectiveness and conspiratorial thinking. The countries with the most effective ratings, which include Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom, had lower rates of people adhering to conspiracy beliefs.

The individual-level predictors are resonant with findings from previous research, which has identified cognitive ability, paranoia, schizotypy, control, self-esteem, and narcissism as predictors of conspiracism (Douglas et al., 2017). However, the country-level findings suggest that conspiracy theorizing may flourish in more effectively governed societies, with the exception of the *most* effectively governed societies. The positive, yet nonmonotonic relationship between governmental effectiveness and conspiratorial thinking may reflect the simple observation that conspiracy beliefs can flourish in states with more protections of liberties such as free speech and dissent.

Thus, while attention should continue to be paid to the deleterious consequences of individuals' adherence to conspiracy theories, the relative prevalence of adherence to those theories need not uniformly be perceived as a collective failure. The identification of both individual- and country-level predictors of conspiratorial thinking across a globally diverse sample offers generative insights and fruitful directions for future research into the basis of conspiracy thinking (Bruder et al., 2013).

How ideological and political context shape conspiracy thinking

Viewing conspiracism through the lens of politics, conspiracy theories are associated with ideological extremism, distrust of rival ideological camps, populist distrust of mainstream politics, and ideological grievances (Douglas et al., 2023). These factors are both inputs and outputs of two politically relevant forces: polarization and moralization. Examining the basis for conspiracism in contemporary American politics thus requires examining the moralization of politics as a structural condition conducive to conspiracy thinking.

Moralization is a social–psychological process through which issues typically thought of as morally neutral take on moral significance (Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Moralized politics refers to the process by which political issues are framed not in terms of differences in policy preference or ideological perspective, but rather as battles between good and evil. Metaphors commonly used in public discourses

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highlight this moralization process in American politics. American liberals and conservatives are often framed as warring tribes, with studies showing tribalism is a "natural and nearly ineradicable feature of human cognition…" (Kraaijeveld & Jamrozik, 2022). Group loyalty is rewarded and evolutionarily selected for, leading to in-group favoritism (Clark et al., 2019).

This concept is also reflected in the notion of "political sectarianism," wherein partisan adherents aim to "dominate the abhorrent supporters of the opposing party" in a manner akin to religious sectarian strife (Stanovich, 2021). The increasing prevalence and influence of partisan outgroup antipathy is reflected in trends revealing that negative partisanship has increased at a greater rate than partisan in-group preference. In other words, out-group hatred has emerged as a stronger force than in-party-love.

Lastly, American politics is sometimes framed as a toxic marriage, with conservatives and liberals holding two different models of morality akin to a "stern father" and "nurturant mother" (Finkel et al., 2020). These metaphorical models of political moralization help frame an understanding of the conditions conducive to conspiracy thinking, as studies have shown moralization heightens political polarization, partisan bias, hostility, and by extension, susceptibility to conspiracist thinking (Douglas et al., 2023; Garrett & Bankert, 2018; Lakoff, 2016; Miller et al., 2015; Rhee et al., 2019).

Three types of moralization cascade within American politics: issue moralization, personal moralization, and grievance moralization (Uscinski et al., 2016). By its very nature, politics deals with moral issues, and disagreements are bound to occur across issue lines due to differing moral sensitivities. This intractable element of politics is examined by moral foundations theory (Ditto et al., 2024; Graham et al., 2013; Haidt & Joseph, 2004).

Conservatives are theorized to value all five moral intuitions: care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity (Haidt, 2013). In contrast, liberals are believed to value the intuitions of care and fairness above the rest. Subsequent research suggests that these patterns are not absolute and may vary depending on the specific policy domain or moral context (see Hatemi et al., 2019; Nilsson et al., 2020); however, the general distinction remains useful for understanding how conservatives and liberals approach moralized issues. Whereas political conflict emerges from issue moralization, personal moralization transforms policy disagreements into personal conflicts. A consequence of this personalization of the conflict is that it is not simply opposing viewpoints themselves that are met with moral distaste and demonization; the people holding those views are subjected to the ire.

This process is captured within the concept of basic morality bias, or "the belief that outgroup members lack basic moral values" (Graham et al., 2013). National surveys indicate just how pervasive this morality bias is within the electorate, revealing that the majority of Americans in both political parties view members of the out-party as more immoral, dishonest, and close-minded than other Americans (Pew Research Center, 2022). Such moral antipathy for the partisan outgroup leads to grievance moralization, wherein perceived wrongs justify anger, mobilization, and conflict escalation (Puryear et al., 2024). Grievance moralization, activated by both trait and state anger, has been found to be positively associated with higher endorsement of specific and generic conspiracy beliefs (Szymaniak et al., 2023).

Thus, moralized politics has a self-escalatory property that is conducive to conspiracism and consequent harmful actions. It distorts perceptions of morality, rendering behaviors that were previously characterized as wrong as now acceptable, because "evil" opponents warrant extreme action. The January 6th US Capitol siege, for example, was "justified" by Democratic conspirators "stealing the election" (Lee et al., 2022).

Moralized politics also biases the processing of political information, as partisans tend to seek out, and apparently believe and accept facts that support their moral views (Ditto & Liu, 2016). This, in turn, leads to a "fact gap," and the rise of "alternative" news sources and the devaluing of countervailing information as "fake news." These trends are all indicative of the diverging political realities spurred by moralized politics (Ditto & Liu, 2016). Ultimately, trust in traditional institutions and information sources is degraded, creating conditions ripe for conspiracy thinking (Brauner et al., 2023; Marie et al., 2023).

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Accordingly, moralized politics constitute a strong, structural component of conspiracist thinking. Common aspects of a moralized political climate, which include anxiety, powerlessness, distressing events, and extreme political views, are linked to conspiracy theorizing, as are mistrust in traditional institutions and biased informational processing. Further, moralization's tendency to support beliefs insinuating that political opponents are evil aligns with conspiracism's reliance on "malevolent" forces in a biased manner. These provocative conditions, shaped by moralized politics, influence the basis for conspiracy thinking. And utilizing a framework of moralized politics can illuminate the reasons why the individual- and country-level predictors of conspiratorial thinking identified in the previous section exert their influence.

Why conspiracy beliefs endure: the social nature of conspiracism

Beyond the individual-level cognitive factors and aggregate-level country dynamics, it is also necessary to examine social group-level mechanisms through which conspiracy thinking spreads and persists. Although less research exists at this level (Scheufele & Krause, 2019), studies examining intra-group conformity and inter-group hostility reveal a clear social dimension to conspiracism (Hornsey et al., 2022).

While the idea of "unpopular norms"—in which seemingly-popular ideas and practices are not privately endorsed by "believers"—has been examined extensively (Centola et al., 2005; Willer et al., 2009), this idea has not been examined with respect to conspiracy theories. The idea that conspiracy thinking itself exists as an unpopular norm may better explain how conspiracy theories endure. Indeed, a focus on the social costs to group membership can shed light on how non-believers can feel incentivized to spread, endorse, and reinforce conspiracy theories.

A series of empirical studies by Lawson et al. (2023) substantiate this idea. Across observations of social media usage across multi-month time periods and experiments, they find that people who do not share fake news engender less social interaction compared to people who do share fake news. This pattern was found among conservatives and liberals alike, although the decline in social interaction was sharper among conservatives. Further, study respondents expressed less desire to interact with online peers who did not share fake news, compared to peers who did share fake news.

Overall, these studies found that group members who do not share fake news suffer social penalties. Accordingly, the desire to avoid social sanctioning may facilitate the spread of fake news, including conspiracy theories. These trends reveal the influential role played by social norms and group dynamics in the spread of conspiracism.

The social norms incentivizing the sharing of fake news within one's friend networks are resonant with the notion of belief factions: groups in which actors hold in common a set of shared polarized beliefs (O'Connor & Weatherall, 2020). Extant scholarship underscores how belief factions are forged from a shared set of philosophical commitments among adherents, which exert a uniform pull on how those adherents view various matters. For example, Lakoff's (2016) aforementioned "strict father" and "nurturant mother" model of US politics highlights how the bundle of positions that liberals and conservatives hold on a variety of issues are bound together by a common underlying beliefs system about how government should operate: "…the role of government, social programs, taxation, education, the environment, energy, gun control, abortion, the death penalty, and so on…are ultimately not different issues, but manifestations of a single issue: strictness versus nurturance." The fundamental shared commitments that constrain the views of belief factions make it easier to predict how belief factions will perceive emergent issues. They also increase the likelihood that opposing belief factions that disagree over one issue will similarly diverge on other issues as well.

There is ample reason to believe, however, that the constraints that bind belief factions together (and in opposition to other belief factions) may be rooted not entirely in shared ideology, but rather in interpersonal trust between adherents. Drawing upon previous work on polarization, which finds that

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social influence within a partisan group is contingent upon similarity of opinion within the group, Weatherall and O'Connor (2020) adopted and modeled a *similarity of belief* concept.

In their model, agents trusted information from those with similar beliefs but mistrusted those with different beliefs. Using a network model with polarization between groups of agents, they found that the introduction of a new idea could result in a polarized distribution of the idea along pre-existing belief factions. Importantly, this distribution occurred independent of political ideology. Trust dynamics alone could lead to the emergence of belief factions, illustrating how theories can be unequally distributed and persistent across social groups.

These findings carry implications for cases of conspiracism, as many conspiracy theories constitute belief factions. QAnon is one such belief faction, trafficking in conspiracy theories, including the existence of a cabal of Satanic child molesters that operate a global sex trafficking network opposing Donald Trump (Donegan, 2020); the theory that Princess Diana was murdered because she was attempting to stop 9/11 (ABC News, 2002); the belief that Germany is a corporation created by the Allies after World War II (Beauchamp, 2022); the idea that Angela Merkel is Adolph Hitler's granddaughter (Reuters, 2020), etc.

These disparate conspiracy beliefs are bound together not by some unifying ideological thread or philosophical commitment, but rather by the communal ties between QAnon adherents in online spaces (Rehagen, 2020). The binding together of conspiracy theorists in this loosely connected group exemplifies epistemic factionalization. As a further reflection of this notion, QAnon supporters often trust others in the QAnon community while exhibiting hostile mistrust of those outside the community.

While it can play a pivotal role in the formation of belief factions, a shared underlying ideology is not necessary. The extent of social trust within a group can play a driving force in belief factionalization. Even in the absence of shared philosophical commitments, this trust can facilitate the spread of conspiracy beliefs within a group.

Now that we have established a baseline of prior research into the individual and collective foundations of conspiracy thinking, the next section offers a new paradigm through which to view conspiracism. By acknowledging the influence of the preconscious brain on human judgment and decision making, and interrogating the associations between the preconscious brain, the conscious mind, and affect, this section illuminates how a neuroscientific view on conspiracy thinking challenges conventional understanding and raises new questions about how best to address the phenomenon.

Challenging extant paradigms: a neuroscientific understanding of conspiracy thinking

> A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it …"
>
> -Max Planck, *Scientific Autobiography, and other papers*, 1950 (Planck, 1950, p. 33)

Current theoretical foundations of research on conspiracy thinking

The epigram is meant as a pointed hint that scholars are no less committed to their convictions than are those who subscribe to "conspiracy" centered accounts. Conspiracy theory (Cassam, 2023; Nero & Schòpfer, 2023) is a specialized case of the general approach to human judgment and agency. After all, crafting an accurate understanding of the mind is the core task of the social sciences, because the mind is the central executor of what we decide and what we do (Willingham & Riener, 2025). As Musolino and colleagues put it (Musolino et al., 2022, p. i):

> "Beliefs play a central role in our lives. They lie at the heart of what makes us human, they shape the organization and functioning of our minds, they define the boundaries of our culture, and they guide our motivation and behavior."

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Within that approach are three presumptions so fundamental that they are most often unstated, and therefore untested. First, that human agency flows through the mind. That is, volitional behavior is a task for the mind. Second, the mind is capable of executing volitional agency. And third, that the human mind has instantaneous access to the sensory and somasensory flows that are the necessary foundation for deft thought and timely deft action. In sum, the human species is a thinking animal. Accordingly, mapping what people think is of vital importance in explaining what they decide and do. Hence, the focus of conspiracy theory is properly directed at what people believe.

The apparent willingness of humans to accept and hold to bad information, cast as "misperception" (Flynn et al., 2017) is seen as a fundamental flaw (McKay & Dennett, 2009). The many studies that amplify human fallibility point to precisely people's apparent inability to perceive accurately and correctly adjust when shown that their beliefs are fallible (Asch, 1955; Goethals & Reckman, 1973; Rokeach, 1960; Rokeach, 1964). Similarly, human gullibility is often taken as evidence of the unsuitability of the human condition for democratic regimes (Bernstein, 2021; Mackay, 1841; Milgram, 1974).

This condemnation should not be taken as a modern position. It goes back at least to Plato (Plato, 1974). And, it reaches well beyond the domain of academic scholarship. As Marcel, translated by Lois B. Cooper, asserts:

> "Facts do not penetrate the world where our beliefs abide; facts did not give birth to our beliefs, and they do not destroy them. Facts can contradict beliefs constantly without weakening them in the least, and an avalanche of misfortunes or illnesses occurring one after another without interruption in a family will not shake its faith in the goodness of its God or in the talent of its physician" (Proust, 1998).

Neuroscience research does not affirm the conventional theoretical foundations of the human mind

The third of these presumptions came under scientific assault in the late 1970s, beginning with the findings of Benjamin Libet (Libet et al., 1979, 1983; Matsuhashi & Hallett, 2008). He and his colleagues estimated that conscious awareness takes about 500 milliseconds to construct. That estimate has largely remained even as it generated an intense and ongoing debate as to whether humans have free will (Mitchell, 2023; Neafsey, 2021; Sapolsky, 2023). The evident ferocity of this debate is a powerful indicator of the importance that most people assign to humans being portrayed as mindful, autonomous, and self-guided by their minds. The character of the debate shows that "affective polarization" arises in the scientific domain no less than it does in the political.

A simple demonstration should suffice to settle the issue. Take any finger and touch your nose. Then answer two questions. First, how many touches do you experience? Most will confidently respond one. Second, when do you experience that touch? Most will confidently reply "as it happened." If so, then your answers are judged as accurate by your mind. But your brain knows that these answers are not true.

Begin with this question: How does your brain know something touched your nose? The surface of the human body has nerves that are sensitive to touch. When something presses on a touch nerve, that nerve converts that pressure into an electrical signal. That electrical signal then travels on to the brain. No matter where the touch signal originates, it travels at the same speed as any other touch nerve signal. The brain registers a signal sent from touch nerves in the nose. But it also receives a touch signal from your finger. The length the signal travels from the fingertip is far longer, hence the time taken is far greater. Before awareness, your brain registers two touch signals.

Two electrical signals begin their journeys at the same moment. The journey from the nose arrives first. It is closer to the real time of the event, but not at the time of the event that took place before its journey to the brain. It is merely the first signal your brain received. The signal from the fingertip arrives later, much later, given the greater length of its journey. The preconscious brain consolidates those two time-displaced signals and passes the result along to the mind. The conscious mind lives in an immediate moment, hiding that fact, and presents itself as having instantaneous awareness (Hoffman, 2019). The experience of touching your nose is a real-time demonstration of an ever-active illusion created by the human brain. The mind does not have instantaneous access to perceptions of the world. That limits the mind's capacity to control deft real-time actions.

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Often ignored in the debate between those defending their pro- or anti-free will positions is the capacity of the mind to direct deliberate action. And largely absent in the debates over "free will" is a discussion of *how* the brain knows. The list of human senses is often numbered as five: s*ight, sound, touch, taste*, and *smell.* That list ignores a number of other senses. For example, interoception—the continuous flows of signals from inside the human body. Another is the immune system—which has the independent ability to identify foreign objects in the blood stream and then direct white blood cells to these foreign objects to attack them. Each of these, and others, are vital forms of intelligence that take place apart from the human mind.

We focus here on a vital *sixth* sense, the vestibular system (Angelaki & Cullen, 2008; Cheng & Gu, 2018). We often depict time and space as having four dimensions: height, length, width, and time. We all move through this four-dimensional space. Here, this moment, then, a bit later, over there. But movement, at least on Earth, requires mapping the body's position with respect to gravity. Young infants begin by giving their vestibular system a workout, learning how they can move their arms and legs to turn their bodies over, then to crawl, then to toddle, then to walk and run. Absent this sixth sense, humans could not move. Without a well-functioning vestibular system, you cannot get into or out of a chair; reach forward to grasp and raise a cup of coffee, peddle a bike, and so on.

Yet the human mind is largely unaware of this sense, its complexity, its deftness, and its direct access to sensory and somasensory flows to the motor cortex, all of which are prerequisite for deft motor actions of any and all sorts (Jeannerod, 1994; Libet et al., 1983). Thus, the human mind most often cannot manage deft individual agency. To fully understand human psychology generally, and the role of human judgment and action in politics, we must better understand the preconscious brain.

Research on how the human brain functions makes clear that the information processing capacity of the human mind is severely limited (Zheng & Meister, 2025; Zimmermann, 1989). Apart from the mind's inability to access, let alone control, deft movement, its access to sensory and somasensory streams is necessarily highly reduced and truncated in ways that make it generally inaccurate (Gottlieb, 2016; Nørretranders, 1998; Öztürk et al., 2021).

The preconscious brain has far more timely access than the conscious mind to both reality and to the self. The mind is available too late for deft management of action, is not the sole route to choice (Moreland & Zajonc, 1979; Zajonc, 1980), and presents too late for initiating strategic choice (Bechara et al., 1997). Thus, the mind has a diminished and biased construction of reality, arriving late despite the illusion of seemingly instant access.

Additionally, the preconscious brain has a richer and more accurate understanding of reality and the self. In most circumstances, the mind is incapable of executive function. And, as demonstrated by the mind's susceptibility to visual illusions, the mind is easily deceived. These observations raise the question of whether the conscious mind is intended for the purposes it has traditionally been assigned. Consequently, they also suggest that the preconscious brain has far more important functions than is often recognized by social science scholars.

Fortunately for the human species, preconscious affective processes lead to far earlier understandings, have vastly greater information processing capacity, have access to our "sixth" sense, and gain speed and deftness by relying on multiple parallel processes (Aglioti et al., 1995; Marcus, 2013; McClelland & Rumelhart, 1988; Rumelhart & McClelland, 1986). As these function before awareness, they remain largely hidden from human introspection (Hoffman, 2019; Nørretranders, 1998).

A brief overview of how the human brain functions

Much of the discussion that follows is derived from the theory of affective intelligence (MacKuen et al., 2010; Marcus et al., 1995, 2000, 2019; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993). It also draws on the earlier work of Robert Zajonc (1980, p. 151) who wrote the following over 45 years ago:

> "Affect is considered by most contemporary theories to be postcognitive, that is, to occur only after considerable cognitive operations have been accomplished. Yet a number of experimental results

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on preferences, attitudes, impression formation, and decision making, as well as some clinical phenomena, suggest that affective judgments may be fairly independent of, and precede in time, the sorts of perceptual and cognitive operations commonly assumed to be the basis of these affective judgments."

The theory of affective intelligence (AIT) elaborates Zajonc's prescient assessment by specifying what the principal preconscious affective processes are, and what functions they serve. Further, it specifies how these preconscious processes shape the human mind to better serve the then active circumstances.

We begin with how understanding preconscious processes leads to a better understanding of what the human mind is for. Over recent decades, psychologists have come to understand that the human mind is expressed as one of two states of mind (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Evans, 2008). Among the labels commonly used for the first state are "system 1," or intuitive, automatic, and reflexive, and for the second state, "system 2," or conscious, controlled, and reflective. No matter the naming, there is general agreement that the first state is the default, and functions before conscious awareness. Consequently, the title of Kahneman's (2011) influential book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, is misleading, as it is indeed not "thinking early" but rather *preconsciously* (Dehaene, 2009; Potter et al., 2014; VanRullen & Thorpe, 2001).

The language of consciousness is semantic, but the language of preconscious processing is of multiple concurrent affective appraisals, and absent those appraisals, humans cannot intentionally act (Freeman, 2000). There is some recognition that the earlier *system 1* draws on procedural, associative, memory, while the latter *system 2* draws on semantic memory. However, this is not yet widely understood in the social sciences.

AIT presents these two states of mind as described in Table 1. These two states of mind seem to have evolved to deal with the lack of omniscience. Humans, as with all other species, lack the ability to see the future. That leads to two states of mind, one suited to familiar circumstances, and the other set to identify novel or unexpected circumstances. In neither case is accuracy a high-level concern. Most social orders craft founding and enduring social myths that benefit by being fantastic constructions, serving to test the fidelity and devotional loyalty of those in the community. Thus, the default state is to demand credulity as a condition of good standing. Similarly, in unfamiliar or unexpected circumstances, the accuracy of the chosen trajectory is not going to be available except in retrospect; hence, accuracy is of modest value in the immediate moment when decisions must be made.

As the conscious mind does not have timely access to reality or to the self, and because it is a diminished and biased construction of reality, the mind is *generally* incapable of executive management of behavior and judgment. These tasks are largely managed by preconscious processes (Velmans, 1991). Additionally, as the mind does not have direct, timely access to the work of preconscious processes that do manage agency and judgment, the mind is easily deceived, both by the mind's speculations as to the reasons for how ongoing action is managed and how judgments are formed.

Table 1. The two states of conscious awareness in the human mind

	Condition when activated	**Primary functions**
Motivated reasoning	Normal; default state	Facilitates collaborative and conflicted situations to achieve environmental fitness; uses verbal and nonverbal language to support familiar interactions, defends conventional understandings, and affirms salient norms (Festinger, 1957; Festinger et al., 1956; Goffman, 1959; Goffman, 1971; Goffman, 1981; Goffman, 1986a; Kunda, 1990; Rokeach, 1964)
Reflective deliberation	Unusual; unexpected	Conscious mind shifts to an *error-correcting space;* preconscious brain turns away from the normal reliance on habits of thought and action; enables the conscious mind as better suited for investigation, deliberation, and coalition building (Gray, 2004; MacKuen et al., 2010; Marcus, 2023)

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This suggests the mind is not intended for the purposes it has traditionally been assigned (Baumeister et al., 2011). Moreover, most accounts do not integrate the protean capacity of the human mind to shift from articulating accounts that serve to announce reliance on established habits of thought, speak, and action, in all their contingencies, and the shift to thoughtful open reflection and consideration of what's best given the then apparent novel and/or unexpected circumstances. Consequently, this also suggests the preconscious brain has far more important functions than is often recognized by social science scholars. Hence, as discussed below, the extant body of research, narrowly focused on the beliefs of people described as holding "conspiracy beliefs," is largely misdirected.

By default, the mind is in a state of motivated reasoning wherein individuals, akin to theater characters, enact habituated scripts. Here, language, verbal and nonverbal, is used to support familiar interactions, defend conventional understandings, and assert affirmation of dominant norms, known and unknown (Goffman, 1986b). Conspiracy thinking is therefore a clear example of motivated reasoning, because the primary role of this state of mind is to enable collaborative behavior (Kunda, 1990; Miller et al., 2015).

In novel and unfamiliar conditions, however, the mind becomes an active space for motivated deliberation (MacKuen et al., 2010, p. 453):

> "In familiar terrain, people automatically rely on routines and habits both to act as well as to make decisions. …When people are in risky and novel circumstances, they are likely to be better off engaging deliberative mechanisms, thoughtful consideration, in order to handle the uncertainty."

Motivated deliberation, invoked by the preconscious brain, provides a counter to conspiracy thinking. The preconscious brain relies on fear appraisal to identify whether ongoing circumstances are familiar or not. The expression of affect in familiar circumstances manifests in calmness. This enables humans to safely navigate via learned habits, routines, and norms with the expectation of familiar positive results. Amid unfamiliar circumstances, the mind experiences heightened fear, and the mind's state shifts from motivated reasoning to reflective deliberation (MacKuen et al., 2007, 2010; Marcus, 2023; Marcus et al., 2019). Here, the mind is empowered to inquire as to what is going on, what is unusual, and accordingly to consider what is best to be done given the novel conditions. These considerations entail less regard for the otherwise normal reliance of extant convictions and habitual practices.

The preconscious brain, relying on anger appraisal, seeks to identify signs of breaches of the norms salient to the occasion. If it finds them, it then swiftly mobilizes defensive and recuperative action, especially collective action (Suhay & Erisen, 2018). This appraisal ranges from calm to suspicious to angry to rage. Research has also linked anger to belief in conspiracy theories (Harmon-Jones, 2023). When others are found to be norm-compliant, then the language of anger expresses a sense of trust. As such, the anger appraisal is essential, as it serves as the "watchdog of justice" (Marcus, Forthcoming).

But this appraisal, like all human appraisals, is fallible. Con artists such as Bernie Madoff excel in inducing trust in their victims, many of whom were rich and experienced in matters of high finance. Similarly, political leaders are necessarily focused on securing and then defending the bonds that link them to their supporters. As the earlier sections attest, those bonds can be manipulated when leaders prey on in-group ties rooted in polarized divisions and factionalism.

Conspiracy thinking reimagined—scientific and political implications

The above brief description of the theory of affective intelligence suggests that the focus on beliefs *per se* is not a sufficient research trajectory, as it does not consider the general lack of agency of human beliefs. And, by inattention to preconscious processes, it leaves most research results reliant on underspecified models. Thus, most current research on the influence of beliefs does not actually demonstrate what, if any, causal influences beliefs have on judgments or actions. What does AIT propose as an alternative paradigmatic approach?

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First, it offers a radically different, yet long-running "fear story" (Hobbes, 1968; Shklar, 1989). Social scientists appeared to affirm the notion that fear triggers a search for conservative, strong leadership (Croucher, 2017; Jost et al., 2003, 2017; Onraet et al., 2013). However, the multiple factors that are strongly correlated with anger appraisal were not controlled for. In contrast, studies that do consider their independent concurrent influences find that fear is not a direct influence on growing support for conservative policies, parties, or candidates. Rather, increased anger drives that support (Lambert et al., 2014, 2019; Marcus et al., 2019; Neuman et al., 2024; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019; Vasilopoulou & Wagner, 2017; Wagner, 2014).

Moreover, when collective anger increases sufficiently enough to become a public matter, efforts by others to correct the claims advanced by the angry are taken by the angry as hostile efforts. The angered, when so challenged, are inclined to see these efforts as intended to undermine their collective project (Suhay & Erisen, 2018), a dynamic not exactly novel (Thucydides, 1996). But, rather than "blaming" the anger or treating those who are angry as children in need of course correction, AIT suggests that the focus should be on identifying the actual grievances that are identified by the anger appraisal.

To effectively counter those grievances requires identifying the *true* grievances, not merely those that are publicly shared. The true grievances are likely rooted in actual or anticipated status loss, or expectation of a diminished future. For example, the efforts to achieve female empowerment, spanning many decades and achieving varying levels of success and setback, have included as goals the right to own property, the right to divorce, equal division of property, changes to laws defining rape, greater female authority over reproductive rights, merit-based opportunities to work and earn professional advancement, and much more. Many of these outcomes would mean lesser status in family and work circumstances for men—at least men tethered to traditional understandings of male and female roles.

The anger felt by both proponents and opponents of these efforts have fueled various forms of campaigns, resistance, and political protest, ushering in cycles of progress and retrenchment in the domain of women's empowerment. All this is well known. But rather than dealing directly with everyone's grievances, a common approach has been to chide the angry. Attempts to resolve divisive conflicts, especially when status shifts are in play, often lead to violence (Gould, 2003). Anger is simply an indicator of one's levels of grievance, and to lower the level of anger requires exploring how best to establish new stable status hierarchies, including more equalitarian orders as they replace more hierarchically reliant orders.

Within this realm, Adam Smith (1986) introduces a new understanding of work. Rather than securing stable social orders based on stable, enduring commercial practices, the shift to Enlightenment economic practices inevitably leads to recurring rapid changes whereby work, as to its nature and location, freely moves. This transference of work leaves behind those who, for years—and possibly generations—built stable communities on the basis of the constancy of work, only to find them torn asunder (Bailey, 1998; Gildea, 2023). While many may benefit from the progressive exploration of new technologies and their capacity to improve the quality of life for many, those left "behind" by this exploration feel aggrieved. And becoming aggrieved means becoming angry.

Aggrieved people, due to a combination of not having direct insight into their grievances and the relatively high level of human gullibility, are readily seduced by narratives that give voice to their sense of grievance. But many of these narratives may be inaccurate and generated by those who seek to gain the support of the aggrieved by giving voice to their anger, while leveraging the political power derived from their support to achieve a surreptitious set of goals.

In the case of conspiracy beliefs, what is or is not believed to be a conspiracy likely depends on perceived norm violations by the preconscious brain. But our minds, not having access to the preconscious anger appraisal's ongoing analysis, have to speculate as to the substance of the actual grievance. The mind then searches for plausible explanations. And if others of like mind have a persuasive speculation, then that will be taken up as trustworthy by others. But that speculation may be false, and, hence, misidentifying the true grievance.

The preconscious brain, thus, is a significant actor in both evaluating and engaging in conspiracy thinking, particularly with respect to the often emotionally charged language that characterizes political

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discourse. For example, the preconscious brain's ability to appraise habituated thoughts and actions produces reactions on an emotional spectrum ranging from depressed, to steady, to hopeful and elated. The enthusiasm appraisal is the third preconscious appraisal of the AIT trilogy. The language of these appraisals can be heard in the enthusiastic sentiment of Barack Obama's "Hope and Change" and Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogans. Political movements can be built on foundations of elevated enthusiasm no less than they can be built on elevated anger. These can establish bonds of resilience and persistence.

The perceived narrative is an especially salient factor, as narratives create and reinforce the normative structures that form the expectations of others embedded in the brain. These narratives and norms need not be matters of truth; indeed, most commonly, they are matters of faith and devotion. Hence why, when the narrative at hand is a "conspiracy theory," informing believers of "the truth" is not conducive to changing their actions. For the conscious mind is not an appraiser of truth. In order to make established convictions subject to new information, it would be better not seek *corrections* but rather to present *novel circumstances* to thereby engage the mind in motivated deliberation. Consequently, addressing conspiracy beliefs may have more to do with engaging the preconscious brain and its emotional appraisals as a means of changing minds.

This attending to what our minds tell us offers an incomplete account. Beliefs, values, and attitudes are important. But they are but a part of the human psyche. A better understanding of how the preconscious brain functions, and how it influences the mind, is vital if we want to understand when and why the narratives that we share to bind us together take hold. That journey to better understand the preconscious has well begun, but there is significantly more journey ahead.

Can (and should) government regulate us out of disinformation?

It bears noting that effectively addressing conspiracism requires accurately diagnosing the scope of the problem. Evidence suggests the number of true believers of conspiracy theories may be overstated due to three reasons. First, expressive responding, wherein survey respondents profess to believe something that they do not sincerely believe in order to either show support for their in-group or hostility to an out-group (Ross & Levy, 2023; Schaffner & Luks, 2018). Second, trolling, or the act of "antagonizing online by deliberately posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). And third, people expressing mistaken or insincere beliefs, a notion that finds anecdotal corroboration in the pervasive lack of willingness on the part of supposed adherents to conspiracy theories to act on their beliefs. Conspiracy thinking undoubtedly presents political and societal harms that must be addressed, but the prominence and significance of this problem may not necessarily be tied to the number of believers. Regardless, solutions are needed to address conspiracy thinking, its origins, and its harms.

Where harmful conspiracy thinking begins and the rights to freedom of speech and expression end is a matter of debate that shapes how governments respond to disinformation such as conspiracy theories. Article 19 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which has been ratified by the US and 171 other states, provides a potentially comprehensive and standardized approach to freedom of expression (OHCHR, 1966). Paragraph three of Article 19 establishes three standards for the regulation of speech: the legality principle, necessity and proportionality, and legitimacy. The legality principle refers to the clarity and precision of extant laws to restrict harmful speech while constraining the discretion of the state. Necessity and proportionality refer to the justification and severity of restricting speech, with a focus on preventing government overreach with respect to restrictions on speech. Lastly, legitimacy refers to the objective or purpose of the restriction. In short, does the restriction achieve a legitimate purpose, such as protecting an individual's rights or reputation, protecting national security, or advancing public health outcomes?

The legal regulation of speech requires a delicate balance between protecting freedom of expression and limiting harmful expression, such as the dissemination of conspiracy theories. Yet, the novel

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approach to understanding conspiracy thinking presented here suggests that restricting the flow of (mis) information may be less impactful than previously thought. If the preconscious brain is drawn to conspiracist narratives not because of their substance per se, but because of the emotional rescue they provide from a state of perpetual threat, then reducing exposure to such narratives does not address the root cause of the susceptibility to those narratives. Emotionally charged political rhetoric that does not meet the definition of conspiracism could still potentially activate the harmful outcomes of tribalism, increased intergroup antipathy, and hostile rejection of factual information that runs counter to one's predispositions.

Accordingly, a shift in focus may be necessary from regulating harmful speech toward diagnosing the affective undertones of such speech when directed at particular audiences, and identifying counter-claims that engender a competing set of emotions within those audiences. A shift in the distribution of state resources from censorship toward increased civic education and outreach efforts, enacted through local institutions that community members trust, may prove effective at strengthening individuals' resilience to conspiracy beliefs. By promoting collective norms, offering emotional outlets for people to productively process their feelings of anxiety over sociopolitical and economic changes, and providing interventions that increase their sense of political efficacy, such civic initiatives may alleviate the sense of disillusionment and affective precarity that move people into a state of perpetual grievance. Consequently, the conspiracy beliefs that prey upon that grievance may become less alluring.

Conclusion

The claims presented here suggest that conspiracy beliefs, from their development to their distribution, are as likely to persist due to polarized groupings and social pressures and norms as they are due to fundamental belief systems. In some cases, it is not shared ideology or principled commitments, but strong intragroup trust dynamics within collectives that can drive adherence to and the spreading of conspiracy beliefs. Further, the moralization of politics that emanates in part from increased negative partisanship and affective polarization exacerbates individuals' reliance on the idea of "malevolent" forces, shaping the othering of the outgroup as immoral and making conspiracies about that outgroup more appealing. Because the costs of not conforming to the norm of sharing false information include social isolation, conspiracy theories can circulate more widely despite the relatively low numbers of "true believers."

Although conspiracy thinking arising as a salve for people facing existential concerns about society is not inherently dangerous in and of itself, it can be easily weaponized to escalate tensions among partisan, ideological, or social groups. And those enflamed tensions can explode into violence. It must also be noted that simply employing the term "conspiracy theorist" may often be a gambit by one group to discredit or delegitimate a group to which they are opposed. Thus, interrogations of the role of conspiratorial thinking within the United States must be careful not to reify the delegitimization of certain groups.

Perhaps the most effective individual interventions to combat conspiracy beliefs and mitigate their harmful impacts will consist not of cognitive but affective appeals targeting the preconscious brain wherein one's belief system influences behavior. How can coordinated emotional appeals targeted at aggrieved groups create conditions that facilitate their preconscious brain's reassessment of whether their sociopolitical environment is indeed threatening?

At the state level, government regulation of the spreading of conspiracy theories and "fake news" cannot be effectively accomplished via a linear response without infringing on certain rights and freedoms of U.S. citizens, requiring a multifaceted approach at the federal level. In the absence of restricting the flow of information to the public, priority should be given to promoting and strengthening collective norms of critical thinking and authenticity, robust investment in educational efforts, and commitment to fostering communication modes and interventions that alleviate people's sense of unease with rapidly changing economic, cultural, and sociopolitical landscapes.

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