Populism, Conspiracy Theories, and Political Preferences for Federal Office in the US

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Abstract

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The onset of the “post-truth” era, characterized by the accretion of conspiracy theories and “fake news”, has generally coincided with a rise in right-wing populist groups and politicians who are often the receptors and propagators of such conspiracy theories. The proposed research project intends to focus on the way in which conspiracy theories are incorporated into populist rhetoric by politicians and its effect on their supporters, arguing that conspiracism is not simply a tendency of populism but also holds instrumental value; the populist radical right can use them to either demonize their opponent, resulting in a “demobilizing” effect among supporters of their opponent or a “mobilizing” effect among the supporters of the populist candidate. Given the lack of detailed data concerning adherence to certain conspiracy theories, the author incorporates a new method for studying conspiracism: data concerning an interest in certain conspiratorial topics from Google Trends. Taking the case of the 2016 Presidential Election in the United States, the results demonstrate a significantly positive relationship between certain conspiracy theories and votes for Donald Trump on the state level suggesting that conspiracy theories play an important role in framing populist arguments. In the fifth chapter, the data acquired from Google Trends is merged with individual-level survey data from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey. The utilization of a multi-level model demonstrates that those individuals who live in states where interest in the anti-Clinton conspiracy theory was high were less likely to turn out to vote for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election, whereas those living in states where interest in Birtherism was highest were more likely to vote for Donald Trump. The results testify to the significant role that conspiracy theories played in the 2016 election and provide evidence as to the consequences of such conspiratorial rhetoric.

Keywords:

Conspiracy theories, populism, Donald Trump, Birtherism, Hillary Clinton, the radical right
# Table Of Contents

## Table Of Contents

Acknowledgments ......................................................... 6

1 Introduction ................................................................. 7
   1.1 Populist Conspiracism .............................................. 7
   1.2 Contributions of the Thesis ...................................... 8
   1.3 Why the 2016 Election? ............................................ 9
   1.4 Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracism ......................... 11

2 Literature Review .......................................................... 13
   2.1 Populism ............................................................... 13
   2.2 Right Wing Populism .............................................. 14
   2.3 Conspiracy Theories ............................................... 15
   2.4 The Internet as a Medium for Conspiracy Theory Diffusion .... 17
   2.5 Conspiracy Theories and Right-Wing Populism ................ 18

3 Conspiracism in Donald Trump’s 2016 Electoral Campaign ......... 22
   3.1 Birtherism ............................................................. 23
   3.2 Anti-Clinton Conspiracy Theories and the “Clinton Body Count” 26

4 A Macro-Level Analysis of Populist Conspiracism in the 2016 Presidential Election ........................................... 29
   4.1 Introduction .......................................................... 29
   4.2 Data and Methods .................................................. 29
   4.3 Results ..................................................................... 31
   4.4 Discussion ............................................................. 36

5 Populist Conspiracism and Political Preferences for Federal Office ........................................................ 40
   5.1 Introduction .......................................................... 40
   5.2 Methods ............................................................... 41
   5.3 Data Sources and Descriptive Statistics ......................... 42
   5.4 Results ..................................................................... 46
   5.5 Discussion ............................................................. 52
      5.5.1 Education ......................................................... 52
      5.5.2 Income .......................................................... 53
      5.5.3 Ideology ......................................................... 54

6 Conclusion ................................................................. 57
7 References 60
Appendix 67
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“Silver, which has been accepted as coin since the dawn of history, has been demonetized to add to the purchasing power of gold by decreasing the value of all forms of property as well as human labor, and the supply of currency is purposely abridged to fatten usurers, bankrupt enterprise, and enslave industry. A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents, and it is rapidly taking possession of the world. If not met and overthrown at once it forebodes terrible social convulsions, the destruction of civilization, or the establishment of an absolute despotism.”

- People’s Party Platform, 1892

1 Introduction

1.1 Populist Conspiracism

The onset of the “post-truth” era, characterized by the accretion of conspiracy theories and “fake news”, has generally coincided with a rise in right-wing populist groups and politicians who are often the receptors and propagators of such conspiracy theories. Donald Trump, for example, is particularly notorious for spreading right-wing conspiracy theories as well as being the main proponent of “birtherism” (Uscinski, 2016). Outside of the United States, the picture looks very similar. Hungary’s Viktor Orban, France’s le Pen family, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, Italy’s League, and the Czech Republic’s Miroslav Sládek have all either made reference to a certain extent to conspiracy theories or adopted them into their official political rhetoric.

Even when we look back in time to the American populists of the late 19th century we find that conspiracism was a prominent mechanism for explaining political phenomenon and framing the conflict between themselves and their opponents (Davis, 1971; Miller, 2011; Ostler, 1995). As Ostler (1995) argues, conspiratorial rhetoric such as the ideas expressed in the conspiratorial pamphlet Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People which alleged that an English conspiracy existed against American liberties involving both English and American bankers, were pivotal to the formation of the People’s Party, the mobilization of its constituency, and spreading the ideas of the party. For example, while it is generally accepted that the party developed in states where a strong Farmers’ Alliance was in existence, the utilization of conspiratorial rhetoric is argued to have been of use to the formation of party organizations in states such as Ohio where none were already in existence. As Davis (1971) demonstrates, the “Crime of 1873” was heavily emphasized in many of the critiques coming from many in the populist movement and served as a mechanism to simplify the complexities of economic and social change into a moral binary in which one side had “betrayed” the common people.

The election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States and the ascension of the radical right across Europe have many referring back to Hofstadter’s (2008) original theory of the “Paranoid Style”. While the concept was originally invented to describe the political style attributed to Joseph McCarthy or the John Birch Society, it could just as easily be applied to the new populists. The feeling of being “dispossessed” in one’s own country leads many to “manufacture the mechanism of history” to explain their misfortune. Decisive events in history are interpreted not in the form of causal mechanisms
or social facts, but in the consequence of one or more powerful individuals’ personal will. The “paranoid spokesman” who sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms views the struggle with his opponents as one between “good” and “evil”, leading to the demand that the enemy be totally defeated.

While many researchers since Hofstadter have also noted the link between the populist right and conspiratorial ideation as well as the populist supporters’ adherence to conspiracy theories (Jylha, Strimling, and Rydgren, 2019; Krasodomski-Jones, 2019; Silva, Vegetti, and Littva, 2017), little to no research has been done on the political dynamic surrounding the populist’s usage of conspiracy theories. What role, if any, do conspiracy theories play? Is it possible that benefits to using conspiratorial rhetoric in the electoral arena exist for populist political candidates? The current article is interested in pursuing this route. Due to the close relationship that many right-wing populist politicians have with various conspiracy theories the current paper intends to answer the following question:

**RQ:** What is the political relationship between right-wing populists and conspiracy theories? Do they simply have a tendency towards conspiratorial ideation or do they serve a larger strategic purpose?

The author argues that conspiracy theories serve as a frame that the populist leader can harness in order to gain votes either by mobilizing their base or demonizing or “Othering” their political opponents. As conspiracy theories, which usually target powerful forces in our societies, and populism, which emphasizes the division between “the elite” and ”the people”, both view the world in Manichean terms, it is thus feasible for populist, either ideologically or strategically, to merge the two in a way that combines the value judgments of both into one consistent picture. Not only are the “evil” elite against the people, but they are also involved in a sinister plot behind closed doors to the detriment of the common people. As a result, the electoral benefits for the populist’s spread of conspiracy theories are essentially (1) the mobilization of their base to support them in elections; and (2) the demobilization of some of their opponent’s supporters.

The current study begins with a general introduction to the literature around populism, the radical right, and conspiracy theories after which a brief explanation of the convergence between them is examined. Chapter 3 describes in detail the two conspiracy theories chosen to demonstrate the relationship between the populist politician and his followers, Birtherism and the “Clinton Body Count” conspiracy theories. In Chapter 4, the first empirical tests using state-wide data are conducted which examine the extent to which conspiracism played a role in the 2016 Presidential Election. There, the description of the methods and data sources, as well as a discussion of the results are outlined. Finally, the fifth chapter conducts further tests using a multi-level regression and survey data from the 2016 Presidential Election in order to test theories of the possible effects of conspiratorial rhetoric. Finally, The current thesis ends with several concluding remarks.

### 1.2 Contributions of the Thesis

This thesis offers several potential contributions to the literature on the populist radical right. First is the rather broad contribution to the emerging literature on conspiracism and the populist radical right which is rather underdeveloped. While a large number of studies have focused on the conspiratorial ideation in individuals and the proliferation of “fake news” over the last decade, surprisingly little research has been
performed on the intersection between populists, the radical right, and conspiracy politics. Even more so, next to no studies have analyzed the ways in which populists utilize conspiracy theories as a rhetorical device. The current study is a first step in this direction and provides empirical evidence of its relevance.

More precisely, the current paper adds to the literature on populism by demonstrating the effects of populists resorting to conspiratorial politics and disinformation campaigns while out of power. Previous studies have simply noted the populist’s rhetorical behavior which focused on the “corrupt” or “evil” elites but has not explained the instrumental role that conspiracism can play. The same goes for radical right studies. This exploratory case study points towards a rather promising direction for research in the future. Given the rise in political conspiracy theories that aid in the rise of far-right politicians and the radicalization of supporters, the author is of the opinion that this research contributes to answering the questions concerning some of today’s pressing issues (Winter, 2019).

Finally, the current thesis adds to the literature on conspiracy theories. While a great many studies have attempted to identify who the conspiracy theorists and the origins of their belief, not many studies have investigated the effects of such beliefs. Thus the current study contributes to the literature by moving in the direction of the political manipulation of conspiracy theories and demonstrating empirically their effects with regards to voting behavior.

1.3 Why the 2016 Election?

The study of conspiracy theories poses difficult problems for researchers because of the near incomparability of conspiracy theories across national boundaries as their content and the context in which they exist vary drastically. Thus, the author has decided against a comparative or cross-national approach and opted for a more holistic study of a single case. Considering that the current research is exploratory in nature, though, the author views the trade-off between internal and external validity as justified (Seawright and Gerring, 2008). The current project intends to take the conspiracy theories referred to by the populist Donald Trump as the unit of analysis due to his relatively heavy usage of conspiratorial rhetoric as well as the fact that he was successful in coming to power, testifying to the possibility that conspiratorial rhetoric played a significant role. The case of Donald Trump represents a deviant case of conspiratorial rhetoric being incorporated into general populist rhetoric. Given this extreme case, if the hypotheses are accepted, then this study would provide for strong internal validity as to a causal mechanism that could be further examined in future research (Seawright and Gerring, 2008).

The case of Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign for the Presidential Election has become a classic case of the upsurge in right-wing populism in the last decade. Much of his rhetoric reflects this. First, there is the core ideology that distinguishes “the people” from the “elite”\(^1\). Considered to be empty-signifiers, any group of people can be included or excluded from the concept. The policies and actions of the elite are said to go against the well-being of the people and that instead, the state should govern based on the volonté générale.

\(^1\) It should be mentioned that the definition of “Populism” used in this study is the ideational conception proposed by Cas Mudde (2004, 2007) and others.
“...it is our corrupt political establishment that is the greatest power behind the efforts at radical globalization and the disenfranchisement of working people” (FactSquared, 2016a).

What differentiates populist ideology from others (such as those based on economic interest) is the moral dimension; “the people” are perceived as being “pure” while “the elite” are necessarily “corrupt” or “evil”. In addition, both groups are largely perceived to be homogeneous in terms of characteristics and interests.

“The corrupt establishment knows that we are a great threat to their criminal enterprise. They know that if we win their power is gone, and it's returned to you, the people, will be. The dark clouds hanging over our government can be lifted and replaced with a bright future. But, it all depends on whether we let the corrupt media decide our future, or whether we let the American people decide our future... The only thing that can stop this corrupt machine is you. The only force strong enough to save our country is us. The only people brave enough to vote out this corrupt establishment is you, the American people” (FactSquared, 2016a).

For the populist, the elite do not compete for power, but merely collude, implying that a change in administration would not bring about significant changes and that a single unified bloc prevents the populist from competing fairly for office.

“This election will determine whether we are a free nation or whether we have only the illusion of democracy, but are in fact controlled by a small handful of global special interests rigging the system, and our system is rigged. This is reality, you know it, they know it, I know it, and pretty much the whole world knows it. The establishment and their media enablers will control over this nation through means that are very well known. Anyone who challenges their control is deemed a sexist, a racist, a xenophobe, and morally deformed” (FactSquared, 2016a).

Populists have a tendency to exhibit epistemological populism, which values the “knowledge of the common people” (Saurette and Gunster, 2011). Consequently, the populist’s faith is placed in “folk-wisdom” or common sense notions instead of that produced by knowledge elites.

*No matter what we have, our military's depleted, our vets aren't taken care of, we have stupid people leading this country. They're stupid people. You know, I'd like to use another word. I went to an Ivy League school. I was a very good student. But there's nothing better than the word stupid" to describe these people.* (FactSquared, 2016b)

If “the people” is an empty-signifier that can allow for any group to be included, then others can be excluded on the basis of being “impure”. As Mudde (2007) explains in his examination of populist radical right parties, the ideological core of radical right party family is the existence of nativism which holds that states should be inhabited solely by the members of the native group and allows for exclusion of others from “the people” based on racist, cultural, or religious grounds. Of the four typologies of radical right
enemies of “the people”, a special role is reserved for those who are “within the state and the nation” whom the radicals view as traitors to the nation.

“They will allow the great Trojan horse -- and I don't want people looking back in a hundred years and 200 years and have that story be told about us because we were led by inept, incompetent and corrupt people like Barack Obama and like Hillary Clinton. We don’t want to be part of that history” (FactSquared, 2016a).

As this brief summary has made clear, Donald Trump fits the archetypal radical right politician. In Chapter 3, a brief demonstration of how Trump’s populist rhetoric merged with his conspiratorial rhetoric will be explained further.

1.4 Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracism

In this section, I intend to define what is meant by “conspiracism” and “conspiracy theories”, terms that will consistently be referred to throughout the study. The more “absolutist” view of conspiracy theories can be seen in the works of Popper and Hofstadter. In Karl Popper’s (1972, p. 341-2) brief discussion of conspiracy theories, belief in them is likened to the thesis of the “conspiracy theory of society”, wherein conspiratory theorists hold that all history can be explained as the result of successive and successful conspiracies. This, Popper rejects, with the argument that it is obvious that history does not work in this manner, and thus must be wrong. Thus, by extension, belief in conspiracy theories also must be irrational. Hofstadter (1964) came to a similar conclusion; for his part, he compares conspiracy theory belief to paranoid ideation, which he termed the “paranoid style” of politics. While not a clinical diagnosis, he argues that the similarity to classical paranoia, in the sense that sinister conspiracies are behind the workings of everything, might be reason enough to be generally suspicious of them. If we assume that paranoia is irrational, then logically, belief in conspiracy theories must be too. Both thinkers do acknowledge the fact that historically, conspiracies do, in fact, occur. Popper’s problem with conspiratorial ideation comes down more to its justification; too much causal power is ascribed to conspirators and their conspiracies and thus are unfalsifiable. For Hofstadter, the paranoid simply has a predisposition to believe that he is being persecuted when he is not and sees conspiracies where in reality none actually exist.

Philosophical discussions as of late, however, have introduced an important dimension to the rationality debate concerning belief in conspiracy theories. The problem with all of the before-mentioned theories, according to philosophers such as Pigden (2016), David Coady (2007), Lee Basham (2011), and Matthew Dentith (2018), is that the general literature on conspiracy theories are all “generalizing” in nature in so far as they all assume that any belief in conspiracy theories is prima facie irrational. Instead, they argue that each conspiracy theory should be considered based on its own merits and the evidence put forth by said theory. The paradox of the generalist school is that despite the fact that actual conspiracies do occur, it is deemed irrational to believe in one that even has the possibility of turning out to be true simply because it belongs to the collection of theories that also encompasses those that are strange and mystical. Because of the generalist position, any mention of a belief in a certain conspiracy, no matter
how realistic, is automatically viewed with suspicion. However, in a world where conspiracies actually exist (and history is cluttered with examples), it would not be so farfetched to see behind the veil of everyday life sinister actors plotting against society (Bale, 2007; Pigden, 1995). To grant theories an equal opportunity to be put before critical analysis based on the evidence provided is to be “virtuous epistemic agents” (Dentith, 2018).

Moreover, there are other generalists (Lewandowsky, Oberauer, and Gignac, 2013; Douglas and Jolley, 2014) who blanketly dismiss all conspiracy theories because it is believed that they all naturally lead to negative social consequences. As the World Economic Forum (World Economic Forum, 2013) and FBI (Winter, 2019) reports have made clear, this is oftentimes true, but again, these authors place all conspiracy theories into the same basket without regard for the individual merit of each case, possibly ignoring those that could lead to positive social consequences, such as the uncovering of an actual conspiracy that could be to society’s detriment. One could only imagine how the world would have been negatively affected if conspiracies such as COINTELPRO or Watergate, had not been uncovered or the *complots* behind the Dreyfus Affair or the Gulf of Tonkin incident had not been brought to the attention of the public.

Thus, Dentith (2018) posits that conspiracy theories themselves are not the problem, but certain conspiracists are. *Conspiracism*, which he distinguishes from *conspiracy theorists* (those who believe that one or several specific conspiracy theories have merit based on the facts backing them up), is characteristic of those who hold a pathological belief in conspiracy theories, and hold the “conspiracy theory of society” or “paranoid style” to be true. Conspiracists are those who are believers *sans* evidence. Dentith defines “conspiracism” as follows:

“The view that there is a kind of belief in conspiracy theory which is due to or caused by factors other than there being good arguments or evidence in favour of such theories” (Dentith, 2018).

As a result, while all conspiracists are conspiracy theorists, not all conspiracy theorists are conspiracists. The actual problem sought after by most scientific studies and philosophical discussions is comprehending the conspiracists. The negative value-judgment associated with the conspiracy theorist should then be imposed on the conspiracist. They arrive at conclusions through dogmatism or ideological bias without consideration for the evidence backing up certain claims. As Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer (2013) argue, their belief in conspiracy theories exhibits a “quasi-religious mentality” which “engenders uncompromising fundamentalism that decreases the prospects of fruitful inter-group dialog”. I argue, as with Dentith (2018), that this distinction should be made between these two concepts and intend to do so in the following study.
2 Literature Review

2.1 Populism

The “populist moment” the world currently finds itself in has led many to turn their attention to the study of this new wave of emerging populist leaders and movements. Populism has been difficult to fully define due to it being neither “an ideology or a political regime” (Mouffe, 2016). For her part, Chantal Mouffe defines it as a “way of doing politics which can take various forms, depending on the periods and the places” (Mouffe, 2016). Mudde’s (2004) definition differs slightly, arguing that it is in fact an ideology but is “thin-centered” and able to merge well with other different ideologies.

“Though populism is a distinct ideology, it does not possess ‘the same level of intellectual refinement and consistency’ as, for example, socialism or liberalism. Populism is only a ‘thin-centred ideology’, exhibiting ‘a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts’. The core concept of populism is obviously ‘the people’; in a sense, even the concept of ‘the elite’ takes its identity from it (being its opposite, its nemesis). As a thin-centred ideology, populism can be easily combined with very different (thin and full) other ideologies, including communism, ecologism, nationalism or socialism. Essential to the discourse of the populist is the normative distinction between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’, not the empirical difference in behaviour or attitudes. Populism presents a Manichean outlook, in which there are only friends and foes. Opponents are not just people with different priorities and values, they are evil! Consequently, compromise is impossible, as it ‘corrupts ‘the purity’” (Mudde, 2004, p. 544).

While definitions of populism may differ depending on the researcher, what mainly everyone agrees on is the fact that populism divides society into two antagonistic forces; “the people”, who are considered to be “pure”, and the “elite” who are “corrupt” or manipulating forces (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 1995; Urbinati, 2019). The people is an obviously vague term as not everyone is included in “the people”. This term is used simply as a rhetorical device that refers to a certain class segment depending on the imagined community the populist leader is attempting to attract to his side (Cas Mudde, 2004). It is for this reason that Taggart (1995) makes use of a different term with more explanatory power, “the heartland”, where “a virtuous and unified population resides”. Populists play an expressly anti-party role under liberal democratic regimes. That being said, it should be mentioned that while they hold anti-party views, they are not anti-systemic. In other words, they are reformist and not revolutionary. They do not oppose political parties or the democratic process per se, but are opposed to the current establishment parties and claim to be a new kind of party. These systemic parties are believed to have a corrupting influence on their leadership which puts their own interests over those of “the people” and creates divisions within a homogenous mass (Mudde, 2004). Populists are not in favor of changing the people themselves, such as their values or “way of life”, as would a revolutionary (i.e. the 20th century Fascists), but instead,
advocate for changing their position within a society (Mudde, 2004). The masses become active when a “persisting political resentment” is combined with a perceived challenge to one’s way of life and the existence of a charismatic populist leader (Mudde, 2004). The populist leader does not seek the full removal of constitutional limits on power as with the fascists of the 20th century but instead relies on audience democracy for legitimacy. Thus, In order to retain his anti-party posturing throughout his mandate, he must remain in a permanent electoral campaign, reaffirming his connection to his constituents whenever needed and reassuring them of the work being done in the battle against the establishment (Morozov, 2011; Urbinati, 2019).

While populism is a specific symptom of democratic regimes, it can lead to either a more democratic or authoritarian functioning of the political system once in power under liberal democracies (Urbinati, 2019). As Urbinati (2019) has noted, a populist movement, when in power, can “stretch constitutional democracy toward its extreme borders and open the door to authoritarian solutions and even dictatorship”. This is due to the fact that “the people” do not represent themselves through direct rule, but are represented by the leader who mobilizes the public to support him by claiming that only he represents their true interests (Skocpol and Williamson, 2012; Urbinati, 2019). As the establishment and their existing institutions are viewed with mistrust, the relationship between the populist leader and the populist movement is one largely based on its opposite: trust through faith (Urbinati, 2019). This relationship, as a result, is not conducive to public accountability because trust and love for the leader, despite any flaws, is all that is necessary to support him. It is for this reason that millionaires such as Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, and Ross Perot are not required to be “pure” individuals for office.

2.2 Right Wing Populism

Radical right-wing populism is an ideology and party family that reemerged in the West in the 1970s with the rise of the European New Right (Nouvelle Droite). The right-wing populists, who exhibit rather diverse views on certain economic and political topics depending on their country of origin, tend to converge on a number of issues that allow them to be considered a “party family”. First and foremost, the radical right places a strong emphasis on ethno-nationalism that is rooted in myths of the distant past and their programs tend to emphasize the importance of making the nation more homogenous, thereby strengthening it, and bringing back traditional values (Rydgren, 2007). Moreover, the radical right’s relationship with the existing political order is populist and parliamentary. Indeed, this quasi-acceptance of democracy is often cited as the key to its success as it can position itself as anti-establishment populists (Mudde, 2004). This they do by accusing elites of prioritizing internationalism, or “globalism”, and placing their own self-interests above that of the nation (Rydgren, 2007). Thus, within the core of radical right-wing parties, sociological authoritarian platforms can be found, manifested in policies intended to bring “law and order” and “family values” (Minkenberg, 2001; Rydgren, 2005).

The radical right is often misinterpreted as being “fascistic”, and while they share many commonalities, it is important to indicate the difference in order to come to a theoretical basis. To take from the definition of Lipset and Raab (1970) who define extremism as exhibiting “anti-pluralism” which represses dissent and closes down “the marketplace of ideas”. To this end, the first difference between the radical and extremist right begins. While the latter disdains and absolutely opposes democracy as an idea, the former, in its own view, does not. While certain elements of an existing democratic system may be opposed, as a whole, the radical right is more reactionary than revolutionary in that they are insistent on
curtailing and rolling back the gains that have been made vis-a-vis representative democracy. That being said, as its ideal state is the “ethnostate”, the extremist element inherent within the radical right is its opposition to pluralism.

Indeed, this quasi-acceptance of democracy is often cited as the key to its success as it can position itself as anti-establishment populists (Mudde, 2004). For its purposes, the radical right positions itself with “the pure people” and against the “corrupt elite”, and argues that the difference between the establishment political parties are irrelevant as they merely “collude” with each other instead of competing. In many cases, considering that they are an anti-establishment and anti-system party, the radical right often claims that they represent true democracy which takes into account the interests of the common man (Rydgren, 2007).

These interests, as understood by the radical right, show priority mainly to sociocultural issues, principally those pertaining to national identity. A central pillar to many contemporary populist parties is the idea of “ethno-pluralism” a term reintroduced by the New Right (Rydgren, 2005, 2007; Betz, 2005). Instead of the belief in a hierarchical ordering of the “races”, as per the Nazis, “ethno-pluralism” understands ethnicities to different, but not necessarily superior or inferior; instead, it is this difference that renders them incompatible to live amongst others or else will bring about “cultural extinction” (Betz and Johnson, 2004; Taguieff, 1988). Like older manifestations of right-wing racism, though, ethno-pluralist ideas still picture culture and ethnicity to be more or less monolithic and deterministic (Berliner, 1976; Holmes, 2000). The resulting policy measures are ones which emphasize responding to “the erosion of the system of ‘ethno-national’ dominance”, which characterized much of the history of modern nation states” (Betz and Johnson, 2004, p. 323). Whereas old racism, rooted in colonialism, implied domination, new racism implies expulsion (Fennema, 2005).

Defined as the Other, the immigrant is perpetuated as the main threat to national identity. To the radical-right, immigrants do not migrate, they “invade”. They are perceived as a major cause of crime, a cause of unemployment, and abusers of the European welfare state (Rydgren, 2003). Muslims and Arabs are often the most targeted because of their belief that they are the least apt to assimilate (Zaslove, 2004), though, the form of the Other can also be designated to people from the South American continent (American right), the African continent (European right), or Central Asia (Russia). Multinational corporations, “cosmopolitan elites”, and trans-national organizations such as the European Union, are also common targets of the Right as instigators of economic globalization which hastens the process of heterogenation and multiculturalism (Betz and Johnson, 2004; Griffin, 2000; Zaslove, 2004).

Right-wing populism often occurs in times of fast-paced social or cultural changes (Mickenberg, 2013). In the West, this movement is widely believed to have reappeared due to a number of historic structural changes in these societies. The fall of the post-war social democratic consensus and the transformation of society into a “post-industrial society” in the 1970s and 1980s is often cited as the beginning of the “new populist parties” (Mickenberg, 2013; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 1995). In a sense, right-wing populists could be regarded as those left behind by the modernization process (Minkenberg, 2013; Mudde, 2004).

2.3 Conspiracy Theories
While conspiracies, or plots against a government, are facts of history, conspiracy theories tend to exist in much higher numbers than actual conspiracies (Bale, 2007). In the “post-truth” era, conspiracy theories have been found to be on the rise as people seek alternative visions for explaining what is “reality”. Conspiracy theories are a relatively common phenomenon in the United States and Western Europe as large portions of the population subscribe to them. It is for this reason that Hofstadter (2008) argued that American politics is defined by a distinct “paranoid” style. Conspiracy theories serve an explanatory function and are believed to exist as one way in which human beings attempt to deal with the unknown and contradictions between known “facts” and the individual’s belief system (Heine, Prouix, and Vohs, 2006; Park, 2010). This allows them to observe a world with perfect order, clarity, and predictability.

There are a number of biographical characteristics that tend to appear when studying who accepts conspiracy theories as truthful. In his study of American conspiracy theories, Goertzel (1994) found that anomia, economic insecurity, and a lack of trust in other people, were common traits that conspiratorially-minded people shared. Volkan (1985), who observed similar findings, provides us with an explanation; during times of insecurity and dissatisfaction, alienated individuals feel the need for a “enemy” that one may blame for his problems which could be too abstract or complicated for him to properly understand. Empirical studies provide evidence to the fact that identifying external “enemies” is more effective in regulating distress than admitting the role that uncontrollable social forces may play because the mind can better understand and cope with the actions of a recognizable agent (Rothschild, Landau, Sullivan, and Keefer, 2012; Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild, 2010).

The relationship with uncertainty in one’s life or one’s environment is rather mixed. On the one hand, a number of studies testify to the fact that uncertainty can in fact lead to conspiratorial thinking (Park, 2010; Prooijen and Jostmann, 2013; Shermer, 2011; Sullivan, et al., 2010; Van den Bos, 2009; Whitson and Galinsky, 2008). For example, Whitson and Galinsky (2008) demonstrate that people who lack control in their lives, commonly associated with feelings of uncertainty, are more inclined to observe patterns in unrelated stimuli, resulting in superstitious and conspiratorial beliefs. That being said, other studies have found the opposite effect, that people sometimes devote more faith to the actors typically targeted by conspiratorial beliefs, such as the President or state institutions, in times of threatening events (Kay, et al., 2008; Kay, Whitson, Gaucher, and Galinsky, 2009).

Conspiratorial thinkers tend to exhibit monological belief systems, or belief systems that “speak only to themselves” instead of “engaging in dialogue with their context”, which implies that they possess “closed” minds (Goertzel, 1994). This means that each belief they hold serves as evidence for others. Thus, the more conspiracy theories an individual believes in, the more likely he will accept another one if proposed to him (Goertzel, 1994; Lewandowski, Oberauer, and Gignac, 2013; Swami, et al., 2011; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Furnham, 2010; Van Prooijen, et al. 2015; Wood, Douglas, and Sutton, 2012). Those with monological thinkers do not look for factual evidence in order to test their beliefs, instead, they resort to ideological arguments (Goertzel, 1994). This suggests a systematic way of processing information that accounts for threatening events as being the result of conspiracies by evil-doers (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, and Gregory, 1999; Swami, et al., 2010).

Conspiracy theories are not without their consequences. Previous research has found that simply viewing a website with anti-vaccine information for five to ten minutes can lower one’s intention to vaccinate (Chou, Oh, and Klein, 2018). In general, we find that parents that choose not to vaccinate their
children are those that have searched for vaccination information online and from more sources than parents that do vaccinate their children (Harmsen, 2013; Jones, et al. 2012).

2.4 The Internet as a Medium for Conspiracy Theory Diffusion

In a 2013 report from the World Economic Forum, conspiracy theories were claimed to be one of the most dangerous issues facing modern societies today is the way with which “fake news”, and misinformation, is able to quickly spread over the internet (World Economic Forum, 2013). They write that:

“The global risk of massive digital misinformation sits at the centre of a constellation of technological and geopolitical risks ranging from terrorism to cyber attacks and the failure of global governance. This risk case examines how hyperconnectivity could enable “digital wildfires” to wreak havoc in the real world.”

Indeed, a large collection of research has proven the virality of conspiracy theories over the internet. One reason for this is due to the structural role the Internet plays in modern day communications. In the 20th century, media communications was dominated by traditional media, the newspaper, the radio, and the television, which distributed information in a hierarchical fashion and held major influence in determining which issues would be important for public opinion (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). With the introduction of the Internet, we find that information diffusion has become democratized, permitting anyone to be able to effectively compete for audiences with the corporate outlets and allowing for alternative narratives to reach the surface (Bessi and Quattrociocchi, 2015). In a study by Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel (2007), the authors surveyed 1,010 randomly selected adults and found that among those most likely to hold conspiratorial beliefs (in this case, the “9/11 was an inside job” conspiracy theory) a negative correlation was found with those who received their news from daily newspapers and online news sites, while a positive correlation was found among those whose source of information came from blogs and tabloids. With the monopoly on information held by the traditional media broken, the flow of information has moved from a process which was dominated by experts, journalists and other gatekeepers to more of a “collective intelligence” where knowledge is created by a synergy of people. This attribute makes it much more difficult to prevent conspiracy theories from occurring because once disinformation reaches its audience, oftentimes that audience interacts with said theories in ways that add onto what was originally claimed.

Social media has played a large role in propagating conspiracy theories. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and others have seen the most distribution of inaccurate medical advice revolving around vaccines as well as the conspiracy theories associated with them. Studies concerning the spread of medical fake news has found that the vast majority of the sharing of and engagement with anti-vaccine articles originated on Facebook (Waszak, Kasprzycka-Waszak, and Kubanek, 2018; Faasse, Chatman, and Martin, 2016), while a decent amount of “anti-vax” conspiracy theories have been spread by way of Twitter (Chakraborty, et al., 2017), Youtube (Ekram, et al. 2018), Pinterest (Guidry, Carlyle, Messner, and Jin, 2019), and Myspace (Keelan, et al., 2007).
Another problem that the 2013 World Economic Forum report warned about was the existence of online “echo-chambers” (World Economic Forum, 2013). Disinformation, thus, can become dangerous when it feeds into an existing worldview, moving people into an ideological bubble that is divorced from any sort of reality. Bessi and Quattrociocchi have found in their research that selective exposure to an “environment full of unchecked information maximizes the tendency to select content by confirmation bias” (Bessi and Quattrociocchi, 2015; Mocanu, et al., 2015; Bessi, et al., 2015).

The existence of so-called “super spreaders” are responsible for the large amount of the conspiratorial material and “fake news” found online. In their study on the spread of anti-vaccine content on social media, Waszak, Kasprzycka-Waszak, and Kubanek (2018) discovered that 20% of the fake news articles in their dataset came from one source. Kate Starbird’s (2017) study on the production of alternative narratives online during mass shooting events found that several websites, such as Newsbusters.org and Alex Jones’ Inforwars.com, were responsible for a disproportionate amount of disinformation.

While for some of these spreaders, the goal is financial in nature (Waszak, Kasprzycka-Waszak, and Kubanek, 2018), for others, the purpose of spreading fake news online is to “troll” others, who find humor in pranking or eliciting an emotional response from other online users. With regards to conspiracy theories, trolls will often gather online to create satirical pages in order to mock and parody certain beliefs, ideologies, or individuals leading to the spread of information that many people often accept as “truth” (Bessi and Quattrociocchi, 2015). “Memes” that go viral are another way in which this is accomplished. Ideology is another particularly strong motive promoting the distribution of disinformation in online echo-chambers (Marwick and Lewis, 2015; Donovan and Friedberg, 2019). On several occasions, fake news stories that were shared online by trolls and “alt-right” groups were picked up and reported on by local and national news outlets as if the stories were true in the run up to the 2016 election (Marwick and Lewis, 2015).

2.5 Conspiracy Theories and Right-Wing Populism

From Hungary to France, and Brazil to the United States; right-wing populists and their voter base seem to be attracted to conspiratorial ideation. Why is it that we find right-wing populists to be so attached to conspiracy theories? This connection does not seem to be a coincidence. Conspiracy theories, which usually target powerful forces in our societies (Berlet, 2011; Butter, 2014), and populist rhetoric, characterized by a dichotomy of “the good people” and the “corrupt elite”, both tend to emphasize a Manichean division in society between the forces of “good” and “evil” (Bergmann, 2018; Oliver and Wood, 2014; Yla-Antilla, 2018). It should, thus, be possible to combine the two into rhetoric which posits the existence of a secret conspiracy which one’s political opponents are involved in. Historian David Brion Davis (1971) has emphasized in his works the extent to which the “populist” thematic reappears in many of the political conspiracy theories in the history of the United States, while Fenster (2008) argues that conspiracy theories all hold a “populist core”.

During times of economic or social insecurity, or dissatisfaction with one’s life, individuals may feel the need for an “enemy” that can be blamed for their problems involving social phenomena that may be too abstract or complicated to understand (Volkan, 1985), a simplification that sits well with the populists’ distinction between friends and enemies. In fact, the creation of this “enemy” has been found to
be more effective in regulating stress and coping with these problems than admitting the role uncontrollable forces may play (Rothschild, Landau, Sullivan, and Keefer, 2012; Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild, 2010).

At the same time, there is much overlap in terms of the “demand” factors engendering both populism and conspiratorial ideation. Cynicism or dissatisfaction with the way the system works have been found in both those who believe in conspiracy theories (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, 2015; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Furnham, 2010; Volkan, 1985) and those who vote for populist candidates (Bergh, 2004; Pels, 2012; Schumacher and Rooduijn, 2013). Economic insecurity and anomie have been found to be a strong predictor of conspiracism (Goertzel, 1994; Volkan, 1985) and populism (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; van Dyke and Soule, 2002; Rodrik, 2018). Fear of strangers, of losing one’s job (migrants or minorities), of losing national autonomy, of losing old traditions and values, and perceived threats to “their nation”, is another strong predictor (Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, and Blaine, 1999; Pels, 2012; Van Prooijen and Van Dijk, 2014; Van Prooijen and Van Lange, 2014). This seems to coincide with the “paranoid style” of politics, described by Hofstader (2008) and uncovered by others in studies of the social determinants of conspiratorial ideation (DiGrazia, 2017). There also tends to be a convergence when considering levels of education; those with less years of education tend to believe in conspiracy theories and favor populist politics at higher rates than those with more education (Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet, 2015; Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel III, 2007; Rothwell, 2016; Bessi and Quattrociocchi, 2015). Finally, populism and conspiracy theories tend to increase in contexts in which the institutions of mainstream society lack legitimacy on behalf of the people; mistrust in the governing bodies or the mainstream media, for example, are common predictors of populism and conspiracism (Algan, 2017; Fuchs, 2018; Jylha, Strimling, and Rydgren, 2019; Krasnodomski-Jones, 2019).

Moreover, studies have demonstrated that specific ideologies tend to have a higher tendency to resort to conspiratorial thinking (Swami, 2012; Wright and Arbuthnot, 1974). In four studies undertaken by van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet (2015) political extremism and ideological radicalization are understood to be strong predictors of conspiratorial thinking. This was attributed to political extremists’ “highly structured thinking style that is aimed at making sense of societal events” (Fernbach, et al., 2013; Greenberg and Jonas, 2003; Kruglanski, et al., 2006). Historians (David, 1971; Groh, 1987), social scientists (Lipset and Raab, 1970; Hofstadter, 2008; Sindre, 2014), and psychologists (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford, 1950, pp. 92-101) all demonstrate that conspiratorial thinking often plays a central role to ethno-centric and populist authoritarian worldviews in the West. In their original study of the “authoritarian personality”, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) reported on the specific “nuclear ideas” in the anti-semitic belief system that “pulls in” conspiracy theories and “rumors”. Dobratz and Waldner’s (2016) study on conspiratorial ideation among the White Power and Tea Party movement found that overlapping conspiracy theories in both camps served as “bridging frames” that provide fertile grounds for some members of each movement to collaborate and possibly participate in both. This merger of conspiratorial ideation, and its Manichean distinction, in the modern radical right has the effect of making the individual uncompromising and often unrealistic in their political goals; as the enemy is not simply understood in terms of interests or relative differences, but as being totally evil, only complete victory will assure their defeat (Hofstadter, 2008).
In order to retain the constant mobilization of its supporters, populism engages in “permanent electoral campaigning” by constantly reaffirming its identity with “the people” (Urbinati, 2019). Thus, populists have a tendency of speaking directly to the people, often through social media, in lieu of more traditional channels (Kramer, 2017). A prime example is the American President Donald Trump who resorts to sending messages on Twitter which allows him to speak directly to a sympathetic audience and avoid the mainstream media, an institution which he holds contempt for (Calderone and Lippman, 2019). Online populist media operates in a similar way; the usage of social media and online forums as their medium of communication serves both the role of strategy and message for their anti-systemic political beliefs. Websites or online populist media operated by followers help in the construction of “the people” and the Other as they collect anecdotal evidence which “proves” the danger posed by foreign actors or the corruption of elite figures (Kramer, 2017). This form of knowledge, based on common sense, permits more thorough analyses such as those involving statistics, to be disregarded with a slight of hand as deception by elites or “obfuscation by complexity”. As a result, many online populist communities form echo chambers that serve a “self-socializing” function into the right-wing populist worldview (Kramer, 2017) and, in turn, promote the diffusion of right-wing conspiracy theories (Bassi and Quattrociocchi, 2015; Marwick and Lewis, 2015; Donovan and Friedberg, 2019).

Populists have been said to exhibit what Saurette and Gunster (2011) call epistemological populism, or the valorization of the “knowledge of the common people”. Further research has gone on to show that this tendency to eschew the advice of experts in favor of so-called “folk-wisdom” is indeed a common trait common to populism (Cramer, 2016; Hawkins, 2010; Hofstadter, 2008; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Wodak, 2015). As a result, conspiracy theories associated with “common sense”, feelings, identity, and anti-intellectualism, are one possible form of “post-truth” rhetoric associated with populism. The other, which Yla-Anttila (2018) terms counter knowledge, departs from epistemological populism due to its employment of “scientific” language and its radical defense of perceived empirical “truths”. Instead of an opposition to expert knowledge, counter knowledge opposes itself to the current knowledge authorities and is conspiratorial insofar as it deems opponents to be hiding the objective “truth” from the people.

Few studies have attempted to bridge the literature between populism and conspiratorial ideation in political candidates. While many researchers have merely observed the tendency that many populists have towards conspiratorial ideation, the current research, instead, argues that conspiratorial rhetoric serves a larger function and is an important political strategy exclusive to populist candidates. If we are to accept the results of Yla-Anttila’s (2018) study on counter knowledge, then we should expect the use of conspiratorial rhetoric in populist politicians to come with political benefits, such as the countering of a systemic ideology or the manipulation of the public’s distrust of mainstream politics for political gain. Edwards and Rushkin (2019) have demonstrated that Trump’s divisive rhetoric incited many to commit hate crimes, but did the “Trump Effect” help him win elections? Again, if we recall the case of the People’s Party, the usage of conspiratorial rhetoric should theoretically be of political benefit to the believers. Bergmann (2018) has posited that conspiracism in populist candidates allows them to spread fear and distrust, to identify the enemies of the people, and “legitimize the margins”. Thus, we should expect that the demonizing of their opponents and their posturing as “the answer” to such a fundamental evil should have electoral consequences.
Taking the case of Donald Trump during the 2016 Presidential election, the proposed research project intends to pursue the question of the political relationship between the radical right populist politicians and the usage of conspiratorial rhetoric.

**H1:** Conspiracy theories were used by Trump, the radical right populist, as a prominent framing technique, resulting in positive political benefits.

**H1a:** By “Othering” political opponents through disinformation, conspiracy theories had the effect of mobilizing Trump’s electoral base.

**H1b:** By “Othering” political opponents through disinformation, conspiracy theories led to a demobilization of supporters for Trump’s political opponent.

**H2:** The individual level effect is stronger in areas where there is a higher interest in conspiracy theories.

This study intends to provide evidence for these hypotheses by exploring both the rhetorical side of Donald Trump’s campaign as well as employing a quantitative analysis of conspiratorial beliefs in Trump supporters which will be introduced in the following sections.
3 Conspiracism in Donald Trump’s 2016 Electoral Campaign

As previously mentioned in Section 1.4, an important distinction should be made between conspiracy theorists and conspiracists. Considering the fact that conspiracies do, in fact, occur throughout history, it would be incorrect to place all conspiracy theories into the irrational category especially when some may have a large amount of evidence for their existence. In order to avoid this conceptual pitfall, the author intends to examine two clear cases of conspiracism, which are characterized by their wild and exaggerated claims without any evidence being provided, instead placing faith in theories based on their cohesion with their personal ideological beliefs. For the purposes of the current research, the two conspiracy theories analyzed are the “Clinton Body Count” conspiracy theory and “Birtherism”, both of which are to be summarized in this chapter. These two conspiracy theories were chosen because they played a prominent role in the 2016 election as each conspiracy theory was, to a certain extent, propagated by and used in the rhetoric of the Republican candidate for president, Donald Trump. Figure 3.1 (shown below) displays the timeframe in which interest in both conspiracy theories spiked during the 2016 campaign.

In addition, both conspiracy theories specific to the populist radical right section of the broader conservative movement in the United States as will be mentioned in the subsequent sections. What distinguishes the populist radical right from conservatism or right-wing extremism is its core tenants of populism, authoritarianism, and nativism, (Mudde, 2007) all of which can be observed in their own way in both conspiracy theories.

At the same time, these two choices were chosen due to their specific characteristics which could allow for the hypotheses to be empirically tested. As the current section will demonstrate, the first conspiracy theory, “Birtherism”, is of interest due to the fact that Trump and other Republicans were able to create a movement out of the demonization of Barack Obama, thus allowing us to test the second hypothesis. The “Clinton Body Count”, on the other hand, is an obvious attempt to demonize Trump’s political opponent and could theoretically lead to a segment of her supporters to decide against voting for her based on the disinformation residing in the conspiracy theory.

**Figure 3.1**: Conspiracism During the 2016 Presidential Campaign
3.1 Birtherism

“Birtherism” is an American conspiracy theory popular among the far-right that claims that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States (the most common reiterations claim he was born in Kenya or Indonesia), is actually a Muslim, and as a result is not eligible to run for President of the United States (Neiwart, 2017). Liberal members of the Democratic Party are also alleged to be in on the plot to install the Manchurian candidate into the office of the President. Birtherism is obviously a very highly racialized one as it plays heavily on Barack Obama’s race and family origins and on sympathies that he is un-American because of his alleged Muslim faith, the defining prejudice of the modern-day radical right (Mudde, 2007, 2019). More extreme variants extend this basic claim to one that considers him on the cusp of imposing sharia law, allowing foreign jihadis into the country, or helping terrorist groups abroad. This conspiracy clearly fits into Cas Mudde’s (2007) second typology of radical right “enemies”: those who are “within the state, but outside the nation”. The picture painted is one in which Obama is not loyal to the United States due to his racial background and alleged “Muslim faith” or worse, he is planning, along with other radical islamists to “subvert” American constitutional democracy. At the same time, there is the added allegation of corruption or unconstitutional behavior insofar as Obama ran for the office of the Presidency despite not being eligible to. As Cas Mudde (2019) has observed, populist radical right parties have the tendency to charge the elite with being corrupt even in cases of countries where corruption is widely accepted to be close to nonexistent.

Originating from chain emails that went viral during the 2008 election, the conspiracy continued into the end of Obama’s second term in office despite him having released both the short and long-form birth certificates which testified to him being born in Hawaii. Birtherism’s characterization as “conspiracism” comes not only from the very farfetched idea that Obama was a practicing Muslim from another country, but also that when confronted with two birth certificates testifying to him being born in Hawaii, the conspiracy theorists rejected their authenticity, preferring ideological faith to an analytically-grounded approach to uncovering the “truth”.

Much of the appeal of Birtherism was shown to come from many in the more conservative wing of the Republican Party who felt animosity towards the first African American president (David Neiwart, 2017). Hofstadter (2008) noted a similar sentiment among the conspiracy theories of the radical right.
emerging in the 20th century. Faced with an America that has been “taken away from them and their kind … they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion”.

At the time, while many in the Republican mainstream distanced themselves from Birtherism, Tea Party Republicans such as Sarah Palin and conservative journalists emphasized it in their rhetoric. For example, while on the campaign trail in 2008, John McCain responded to several supporters who articulated their belief that Obama was an “arab” who “cohorts with terrorists” by stating that Obama was a “decent, family man, and citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with” which elicited several boos from the crowd (CNN, 2015). In 2016, Donald Trump was asked a similar question by a supporter:

“We have a problem in this country. It’s called Muslims. We know our current President is one. You know he’s not even an American.

Trump responded not by correcting the supporter but by saying that “bad things are happening out there” and that he would “be looking at that and plenty of other things” (WCCO - CBS Minnesota, 2015).

For his part, Donald Trump was one of the most important propagators of the Birther conspiracy theory from the very beginning of its existence in 2008 and only publicly distanced himself from the theory on September 16, 2016, just two months before the election (Klinker, 2014; Neiwert, 2017). Belief in the conspiracy theory reached its height in July 2010 when 41% of Republicans (CNN Opinion Research Corporation, 2010) indicated that Obama was “probably” or “definitely” born in a different country. In Spring 2011, Donald Trump began publicly expressing doubts about President Obama’s citizenship in live interviews over a span of several weeks, mentioning that the “private investigators” he had sent to Hawaii to investigate the matter “could not believe what they’re finding”. The result was a dramatic increase in the polls for Trump in the event he would enter the 2012 Presidential race, placing him among the top candidates (Klinkner, 2014; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, 2018). Figure 3.2 shows one of the more infamous tweets involving Trump’s birther claims.

Figure 3.2: Donald Trump and the “Birther” Conspiracy

![Twitter post by Donald Trump](image)

After having released his “long-form” birth certificate the following year, these numbers fell to around 13% of the total public (Morales, 2011). Despite this, though, Trump and other birthers continued to claim that this birth certificate was a forgery. As a result, the increase in Republicans who believed that Obama was born in the United States was short-lived, and promptly rose back to the levels prior to the release of the long form birth certificate. Polling of Republicans in 2012 averaged only 28% of respondents who claimed that Obama was born in the US and would only rise to 34% in 2014 (Klinker, 2014).
Without putting the issue to rest, Trump did not bring the conspiracy theory up at many of his 2016 rallies, instead allowing his surrogates, such as Joe Arpaio, to do so.

“We have a couple of things in common, I won’t talk much about them. One is the birth certificate. You don’t have to be interested, but I am” (Neiwert, 2017).

Apparently, this effort to avoid the birther issue without fully distancing himself from it was an effort by aides to make Trump seem more presidential (Markey and Suebsaeng, 2020, 4 February). When prompted though, Trump would defend his record of questioning the birth of Barack Obama and (falsely) place the blame on other candidates in order to muddy the waters.

“I would like to see his college records, I think it's important. Now as far as the birth certificate, Hillary Clinton wanted his birth certificate. Hillary is a birther. She wanted -- but she wasn't unable to get it. John McCain fought really hard and really viciously to get his birth certificate. John McCain failed. Couldn't get it. Trump comes along and I'm not a sitting senator. I'm not a sitting anything else. I'm a good businessman. [Crowd laughing] But Trump comes along and said birth certificate. He gave a birth certificate. Whether or not that was a real certificate because a lot of people question it. I certainly question it but Hillary Clinton wanted it, McCain wanted it, and I wanted it. He didn't do it for them. He did it for me. So in one sense, I'm proud of it. Now all we have to do is find out whether or not it was real” (FactSquared, 2016c)

When prodded about the conspiracy theory by CNN’s Anderson Cooper, Trump offered the same defense but quickly attempted to change the subject:

“Trump was able to get something... I don't know what the hell it was, but it doesn’t matter. Because I’m off that subject. I’m about jobs, I’m about the military, I’m about doing the right thing for the country” (Neiwart, 2017)

On September 16, 2016, only two months before the election and in advance of the first debate with Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump publicly disavowed birtherism, instead blaming Clinton and her 2008 campaign for starting the conspiracy theory. This is the position that Trump would hold with regard to his past “birther” statements up until the election. A search for the term “birth certificate” on Factbase, a site that archives speeches, tweets, and media appearances of Donald Trump, resulted in 105 results between March 2011 and the election in 2016 (FactSquared, 2019). In an interview with Yahoo News, former campaign advisor Sam Nunberg admitted to using “birtherism” as a campaign strategy which allowed Trump to retain “a consistent group of supporters” (Richardson, 2018). Although it is speculation, Trump himself is also alleged to have known the strategic effects of diffusing birtherism:

“We [MSNBC host Mika Brzezinski] confronted him about ‘birtherism’ ... We said it’s bad, it’s wrong. And he said in a low voice, ‘I know it's bad but it works’” (Wise, 2018, 5 November).
Regardless of whether or not Trump is a true believer, the effect of this strategy is evident; a poll taken after the 2016 election showed that the percentage of Republicans who believed that Barack Obama was born in Kenya had shot back up to 51% (The Economist/YouGov Poll, 2017).

3.2 Anti-Clinton Conspiracy Theories and the “Clinton Body Count”

The “Clinton Body Count” is a conspiracy theory that alleges that the Clinton family is responsible for the murder of a large number of people, some of which were political competitors, while others were murdered in order to prevent the release of incriminating evidence of corrupt activities. This list of “Clinton murders”, which was started by online conspiracy theorists in the 1990s, continued to be propagated by conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones, Mike Cernovich, and Matt Couch in the run-up to the 2016 election and reached new heights due in part to the Trump campaign. The conspiracy of Seth Rich was one of the most prominent of the “Clinton murders” up and around the time of the election. It alleges that Hillary Clinton and her “deep state” associates orchestrated the murder of DNC worker Seth Rich after having released DNC emails to Wikileaks which disclosed unethical activity during the primary elections. Donald Trump’s appearance on Alex Jones’ Infowars, a conspiracy theory “superspreader” which boasted more than 50 million viewers on Youtube at the time, seemed to confirm his endorsement of many of the more outrageous Clinton-based conspiracy theories (Griffing, 2018).

If Birtherism was an attempt to demonize a President who was “outside of the nation”, the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory provides us with an example of an elite being demonized form “within the nation and the state”. As Cas Mudde (2007) points out, these “enemies” are meant to be made out as “traitors” of the nation who destroy their own for their own profit.

This is, of course, not to say that Hillary Clinton was not by any means clear of any political corruption as her campaign was constantly marred with scandals of one sort or another. That being said, much of the Donald Trump’s rhetoric consisted of clear falsehoods concerning the Clintons such as his claim that she and Barack Obama had “founded ISIS”, that she intended to abolish the second amendment to the Constitution, and that Clinton was paying protesters “$1500 plus an iPhone” to be violent at Trump rallies (FactSquared, 2016b; Vanity Fair, 2016). One of the better examples of Donald Trump’s invocation of the anti-Clinton conspiracies occurred at a campaign rally on October 13, 2016.

“The Clinton machine is at the center of this power structure. We’ve seen this first hand in the WikiLeaks documents, in which Hillary Clinton meets in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of U.S. sovereignty in order to enrich these global financial powers, her special interest friends and her donors” (FactSquared, 2016a).

What is interesting to note is the way in which Trump would take actual critiques of Hillary Clinton, especially from the populist angle, and move into a clearly conspiratorial direction. The case mentioned above clearly demonstrates this. While Clinton was known for and heavily critiqued on both sides of the political spectrum for her connections to Wall Street firms and positions on free trade and globalization, the notion that she meets in secret with them to “plot the destruction US sovereignty” is obvious conspiratorial rhetoric. This has the effect of simplifying the narrative, a function that many modern conspiracy theories hold in common, from one in which socio-economic forces instigate societal changes
to one in which the evil Clinton thirsts for power and domination at the expense of everyone else. Whereas structural dynamics are difficult for many people to visualize, a personalist touch ensures that even low-information voters understand the framing. All of Trump’s claims merge into a larger conspiracy theory which places the Clintons among a group of ‘globalist elites’ who exist solely to “protect and enrich itself” (Miller, 2016).

“They [The Clintons] are criminals ... This is well documented. And the establishment that protects them is engaged in a massive cover-up of widespread criminal activity at the State Department and the Clinton Foundation in order to keep the Clintons in power” (FactSquared, 2016a).

Due to the structure of the anti-Clinton conspiracy theory, and its resemblance to other Manichean conspiracy theories, the theory was flexible enough to merge with other previously existing ones as demonstrated in the case of her connection to “global financial power”. Aside from Clinton, among those alleged to be responsible for the “violent protesters” at rallies also included George Soros, a common far-right boogeyman who often stands in for the stereotypical Jew in anti-semetic conspiracy theories (Mackey, 2016, April 3). The claim that Clinton intended to “abolish the second amendment” (the right to bear arms) and that the “second amendment people” might be able to do something about it is coded language pointing to the conspiracy theory among many guns-rights activists and patriot and militia organizations that alleges that the Democrats, along with the United Nations, plan to confiscate all of guns in order to install a New World Order (Corasaniti and Haberman, 2016, 9 August). Figure 3.3 (shown below) shows one of the ways in which this occurred when Donald Trump tweeted an edited photo by a white supremacist user with Hillary Clinton next to a ‘Star of David’ and in front of a background with piles of U.S. currency with the caption “Most Corrupt Candidate Ever” in a less than subtle appeal to anti-semetic conspiracy theories (Marwick and Lewis, 2015).

**Figure 3.3: Donald Trump and Anti-Clinton Conspiracy Theories**
On a separate occasion, Donald Trump made specific mention of the Vince Foster case, a friend of the Clintons whose suicide was the catalyst for the invention of the ‘Body Count’ conspiracy theory. During a Washington Post interview on May 23rd, he stated that the case was “very fishy” and the claims about foul play were “very serious” (Bixby and McCarthy, 2016).

“He had intimate knowledge of what was going on,” Trump claimed. “He knew everything that was going on and then all of a sudden he committed suicide.”

Trump’s advisor of “dirty tricks”, Roger Stone, was one of the main Trump affiliates who continuously claimed that the Clintons were responsible for the murder of many more bureaucratic and political figures (Hananoki, 2016). Stone was also one of the first Trump affiliates to link the Clintons to the Seth Rich murder. On the same day that Julian Assage claimed that Seth Rich had been the source of the DNC email dump, Roger Stone posted a tweet which claimed that Seth Rich, as well as three other politically-minded individuals, were murdered by the Clintons (See Figure 3.4 below). The Seth Rich conspiracy theory especially took off following the election of Donald Trump. For our purposes, though, the author only intends to make use of the broader “Clinton Body Count” conspiracy theory instead of search terms related to the Seth Rich murder due to it occurring late in the election and reaching its height after the election on the 6th of November.

**Figure 3.4:** Roger Stone and the Seth Rich Conspiracy Theory
4 A Macro-Level Analysis of Populist Conspiracism in the 2016 Presidential Election

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the author will test, by means of regression analysis, whether the before-mentioned conspiracy theories were influential in the decision to vote for Donald Trump. In order to achieve this, state-level data from Google Trends measuring the level of interest in each conspiracy theory will be taken as the main variables of interest and controlled with other relevant variables believed to lead to the rise in right-wing populist politicians. I explicitly present the detailed account of the methods in the following section, but what is important to note from the outset is that these figures are aimed at capturing the general level of belief in Birtherism or the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory on a state-wide-level.

Having said this, the intention of this chapter is aimed at testing the first hypothesis of this paper’s investigation. As you will recall, many researchers have noticed the tendency that populists have towards conspiratorial ideation (Bergmann, 2018; Hofstadter, 2008). The current research, on the other hand, argues that conspiratorial rhetoric may have strategic value for populists. While “folk-wisdom” may have the effect of undermining knowledge elites, Yla-Antilla (2018) argues that counter knowledge has the effect of countering them. Regardless of the form they take, conspiracy theories should allow for the populist to manipulate the public’s trust in the establishment to counter the systemic ideology in ways that benefit the populist. As the case of the People’s Party demonstrates, conspiratorial rhetoric may be an important way in which populists campaign (Ostler, 1995). Whether this is because it rallies supporters to the candidate or depresses the vote of the ‘Othered’ opponent is to be examined in Chapter 5. In the current chapter, the given tests are intended to investigate the first hypothesis:

**H1**: Conspiracy theories were used by Trump, the radical right populist, as a prominent framing technique, resulting in positive political benefits.

In the following section, the methodology used in this chapter will be discussed in more detail. Following the methodology, the results will be discussed, immediately followed by the conclusions arrived at and the limitations that arise from these tests.

4.2 Data and Methods

The method employed by this study involves the use of a standard Ordinary Least Squares regression due to the normalized data for the dependent variables. The dependent variable used for this study to measure support for the Right-Wing populist candidate Donald Trump in the 2016 election is the percentage of the vote for Donald Trump in each state. For this, data was taken from the United States Election Project (McDonald, 2019).
As there is little to no long-term polling to date concerning belief in certain conspiracy theories, especially on the state, local, or individual level, the author intends to employ a new method, similar to the one used by DiGrazia (2017), in order to overcome this. Google search data available from the site Google Trends will be taken for the independent variable of interest (Google, 2019). For our purposes, this study will make use of geographical data provided for each of the 50 states in order to compare the level of interest in conspiracy theories with electoral results of the given populist candidate during elections. The two search terms employed for the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election are “Obama birth certificate” to measure levels of support for “Birtherism, and “Clinton Body Count” to measure a number of Hillary Clinton-related conspiracy theories. In order to gather a full and accurate measurement of each search term, the dates to be included for each search term ends on the day of the election, November 8th, 2016 and begins eight years prior. These two terms were chosen because they played a prominent role in the 2016 election as each conspiracy theory was, to a certain extent, endorsed by the Republican candidate for president, Donald Trump.

It should be noted that this study makes no assumption that every search done for a given search term is done by sympathizers of said conspiracy theory, however, it does assume that it does provide a relative measure of support for or receptivity to the conspiracy theory within a geographical area. Previous studies using internet search aggregates have shown the data to be reliable measure of the public’s general interest in a topic (Brownstein, Freifield, and Madoff, 2009; Carneiro and Mylonakis, 2009; DiGrazia, 2015, 2017; Stephens-Davidowits, 2014; Swearingen and Ripberger, 2014; Vosen and Schmidt, 2011).

It is very possible that a spike in interest could be due to an event that became a public issue for discussion on the news or went viral online, which may not necessarily mean that everyone searching for the term is doing so out of interest for the topic but instead out of interest in the news story. Nonetheless, the author still believes that these figures are accurate. Past research has shown that despite the negative press an issue can receive on the news, the fact that it is picked up and covered by mainstream journalists has shown to lead to an increase in searches for and interest in the topic at hand (Vliegenthart, 2005). Journalists play the role of both “gatekeeper” and “players” in the public arena and actively shape the consciousness of that society by picking and choosing which ideas to emphasize, quotes to insert, and spokespeople to include. Events that are not picked up by journalists become non-events so media visibility is confirmation of an idea’s legitimacy (Gamson, 2004). In addition, mass media permits political movements to overcome the limitations of organizational networks which have the tendency to “preach to the choir”, allowing one’s beliefs and values to spread further into society (Koopmans, 2004).

In order to control for social and economic factors, the author intends to introduce several variables to represent aspects of the various theories concerning the origins of right-wing populism.

As many studies concerning right-wing populism emphasize the existence of foreign immigration as a catalyst for supporting right-wing populist candidates, the share of non-citizens in a state is to be used. Moreover, to control for the number of non-white people live in a given state, a variable for the share of non-whites in a state is also taken. The data for these variables all originate from the Kaiser Family Foundation (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2019).

As mentioned in the review of the literature on radical right movements, economic factors have often shown to be an important catalyst for their proliferation (Minkenberg, 2013; Mudde, 2004). In order to test for various theories involving economic factors and notions of social class (the anti-modernization theory), several variables are incorporated. First, the median household income is added in order to
control for the general level of wealth in a state. A variable for the level of poverty among whites is used as a control for a relevant economic indicator specific to the white community to test for economic deprivation among the dominant racial group. Both of these figures were taken from the Kaiser Family Foundation (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2019). Next, as a measure of social capital, the share of the population with a high school degree is used as a means of testing for the role of education (Ryan and Siebens, 2012). These figures are from 2009 as they are the most recent publication that includes data references on a state-by-state basis. Finally, the Gini index was included to control for the levels of inequality found in each state. This data comes from the US Census Bureau (US Census Bureau, 2019).

The last control variable is a demographic one, the share of the population in metropolitan areas, so as to control for differences in rural and urban regions. This data was provided by the Kaiser Family Foundation (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2019).

All of the data used in the subsequent tests is summarized in the table shown below.

Table 4.1: Exploratory Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Body Count</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama's Birth Certificate</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income</td>
<td>55224</td>
<td>35521</td>
<td>76165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro Area Population</td>
<td>0.752</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td>0.869</td>
<td>0.799</td>
<td>0.918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Citizen</td>
<td>0.0545</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Poverty</td>
<td>0.0917</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>0.170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini Index</td>
<td>0.4538</td>
<td>0.419</td>
<td>0.532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>0.3157</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trump Vote Percentage</td>
<td>0.490</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>0.700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Results

In accordance with the previously stated methodological approach, an OLS regression performed on vote percentages for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential election produces a significant positive relationship with interest in the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory (see Table 1, Model 1). Controls
for the share of non-whites, the share of the population with a high school diploma, and the Gini index all turned out significantly negative.

Upon adding a control for the median household income, a significant negative relation is unveiled between votes for Trump (see Table 1, Model 2). Our main variable of interest, interest in the “Clinton Body Count”, remains positive and significant while the control variable for the Gini index also retains its very significant negative relationship.

Finally, in the third model, a variable for the percentage of the population located in metropolitan areas is added which turns out to be statistically significant in the negative direction (see Table 1, Model 3). The control variable for median household income remains negative and statistically significant from the previous model. The Gini index becomes insignificant while the percentage of non-whites in a given state gains a negatively significant relationship. Thus, as hypothesized, the independent variable for the amount of interest in the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory remains positively significant throughout all three models with the addition of all controls. As is clear from our tests, the strength of the Clinton Body Count variable has one of the stronger correlations with votes for Donald Trump (aside median household income) which implies that this ideological variable holds just as much explanatory power as other materialist factors. That being said, these results do not necessarily contradict each other as social, economic, and ideological factors could all be at play at the same time. Moreover, this test also validates the significance of other control variables such as median household income, the share of the metropolitan population, the Gini index, and the share of non-whites. From this, we can observe a trend in voting patterns; votes for Donald Trump tended to come from those states where levels of economic inequality were relatively low, where household income was slightly lower, where the non-white population was relatively small, and where the rural population was larger.
Table 4.2: OLS linear regression of the percentage of the vote that Trump received in the 50 United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1 Coef.</th>
<th>Model 1 t</th>
<th>Model 2 Coef.</th>
<th>Model 2 t</th>
<th>Model 3 Coef.</th>
<th>Model 3 t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest in “Clinton Body Count”</td>
<td>0.136*</td>
<td>1.888</td>
<td>0.124*</td>
<td>1.848</td>
<td>0.150**</td>
<td>2.277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.072)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.067)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.066)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of Non-Whites</td>
<td>-0.150</td>
<td>-1.521</td>
<td>-0.162</td>
<td>-1.777</td>
<td>-0.170*</td>
<td>-1.927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.098)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.091)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.088)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of Non-Citizens</td>
<td>-1.029*</td>
<td>-1.895</td>
<td>-0.518</td>
<td>0.959</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.543)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.540)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.583)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini Index</td>
<td>-1.776**</td>
<td>-2.159</td>
<td>-1.746**</td>
<td>-2.281</td>
<td>-1.160</td>
<td>-1.464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.823)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.766)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.792)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of White Poverty</td>
<td>0.515</td>
<td>0.805</td>
<td>-0.607</td>
<td>-0.835</td>
<td>-0.902</td>
<td>-1.261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.639)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.728)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.715)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of Population with a High School Degree</td>
<td>-1.553***</td>
<td>-2.753</td>
<td>-0.697</td>
<td>-1.134</td>
<td>-0.830</td>
<td>-1.393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.563)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.615)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.595)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income, log Income</td>
<td>-0.349**</td>
<td>-2.679</td>
<td>-0.325**</td>
<td>-2.583</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.130)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.126)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Metro Area Population</td>
<td>-0.175**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-2.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.087)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple R-Squared</td>
<td>0.6235</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.6782</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.7129</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

An OLS regression with the second variable representing belief in the Birther conspiracy theory reports a significant positive relationship with votes for the Republican candidate Donald Trump as expected (see Table 2, Model 1). Moreover, we find a strong negative relationship with the Gini index, the share of non-whites, and the share of the population with a high school degree. It should be mentioned that the strength of these three control variables are particularly strong.
In the second model, a variable for white poverty is added which turns out to be insignificant among the previous variables (see Table 2, Model 2). All of the previously mentioned variables more or less retain their significance and intensity except for the share of non-whites in the population and the share of the population with a high school degree which diminishes in strength.

The third model adds a control for the percentage of the population in metropolitan areas (see Table 2, Model 3). Ultimately, this variable, too, turns out to be insignificant. All other variables retain their strength and significance from the previous model.

Finally, upon adding a control for the median household income of a given state, we find that this variable gains a significant negative relationship with votes for Donald Trump while our variable for the Birther conspiracy theory and share of the population with high school degrees diminish slightly in significance (see Table 2, Model 4). As with the previous test, the current one also demonstrates that conspiracism is statistically significant in the vote totals for Donald Trump. As with the previous test, while the measure for conspiracy theory belief was not as strong as the other variables, again, ideological factors can coincide with social and economic factors at the same time. Again, given the strong significance of certain control variables there is reason to believe that other factors played a large role in the vote tallies for Donald Trump. In the previous test, it was found that votes for Donald Trump tended to come from those states where levels of economic inequality were relatively low, where household income was slightly lower, where there were lower levels of an urban population, and where the non-white population was relatively small. With the exception of the statistical significance between vote percentages for Donald Trump and the level of the urban population, this second test confirms the results provided by the previous models. Moreover, a strong negative relationship between votes for Trump and the percentage of the population with a high school degree which demonstrates that states with lower levels of high school graduation rates, and thus lower levels of social capital, tended to vote for Trump. Finally, the fact that white poverty rates remained insignificant throughout all tests puts into question the theories based on economic anxiety.
Table 4.3: OLS linear regression of the percentage of the vote that Trump received in the 50 United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>Coef.</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in Obama’s Birth Certificate</td>
<td>0.254** (0.109)</td>
<td>2.323</td>
<td>0.251** (0.110)</td>
<td>2.294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of Non-Whites</td>
<td>-0.312*** (0.100)</td>
<td>-3.112</td>
<td>-0.285** (0.106)</td>
<td>-2.699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of Non-Citizens</td>
<td>-0.833 (0.533)</td>
<td>-1.563</td>
<td>-0.716 (0.552)</td>
<td>-1.298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini Index</td>
<td>-2.934*** (0.611)</td>
<td>-4.798</td>
<td>-2.846*** (0.622)</td>
<td>-4.576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of Population with a High School Degree</td>
<td>-2.469*** (0.371)</td>
<td>-6.661</td>
<td>-2.164*** (0.516)</td>
<td>-4.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of White Poverty</td>
<td>0.537 (0.631)</td>
<td>0.851</td>
<td>0.456 (0.658)</td>
<td>0.692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Metro Area Population</td>
<td>-0.026 (0.055)</td>
<td>-0.480</td>
<td>-0.051 (0.090)</td>
<td>-0.564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income, log</td>
<td>-0.308** (0.134)</td>
<td>-2.300</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple R-Squared</td>
<td>0.7287</td>
<td>0.7334</td>
<td>0.7349</td>
<td>0.7678</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
4.4 Discussion

The previously performed tests demonstrate that belief in conspiracy theories are significant predictors for votes for the right-wing populist candidate Donald Trump during the 2016 election. Using Google Trends data representing interest in the “Birther” and “Clinton Body Count” conspiracy theories in each of the 50 states, a significant positive correlation was discovered between both of these variables and votes for Donald Trump. The findings from the previous tests, thus, provide evidence for the relationship between the usage of conspiratorial rhetoric by Donald Trump and votes for him in the 2016 Presidential election. In Figure 4.2, the positive correlation between interest in the both conspiracy theories and votes for Donald Trump is shown.

**Figure 4.2.** Conspiracism and Votes for Donald Trump and Interest in Conspiracy Theories

With this in mind, the author finds the first hypothesis to be supported. Conspiracism, as demonstrated through the tests in the previous section, has been shown to be a relevant mechanism to Trump’s electoral campaign. As was demonstrated, those environments in which the specific conspiracy theories employed by the populist candidate were prevalent lead to higher percentages of the vote for that candidate. How exactly this relationship operates, however, is another story, and will be addressed in the subsequent chapter.

Given that a slight negative relationship between levels of education and votes for Donald Trump was uncovered, this could provide a possible explanation for the relationship between conspiratorial ideation and votes for Trump. Figure 4.3 (shown below) provides a visualization of this dynamic. As you will recall, there tends to be a convergence in terms of demand for populist politics and conspiratorial ideation with regards to the less educated (Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet, 2015; Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel III, 2007; Rothwell, 2016; Bessi and Quattrociocchi, 2015). The results of the current test thus coincide with the results of past studies. Moreover, when the states are divided into categories denoting “high”, “medium”, and “low” levels of educational attainment, we observe that those states where high school
graduation rates were lowest tended to show higher interest in conspiracy theories and vote for Trump at higher rates.

**Figure 4.3: Education Levels and Votes for Donald Trump**

Finally, the median household income in a given state has proven to be a strong negative predictor of votes for Donald Trump. Previous literature has indeed found a significant link between economic insecurity, anomie, and dissatisfaction and both demand for populist politics and conspiratorial ideation (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Goertzel, 1994; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Rodrik, 2018; van Dyke and Soule, 2002; Volkan, 1985). This could be interpreted in several ways, though. One explanation is simply that those states that are located outside of the urban areas on average tend to have lower incomes and thus attracted to Donald Trump because he appeals to those living in the “heartland”, or that he gained significant support from the economically disenfranchised segments of the population. That being said, considering that variables such as the white poverty rate came out to be insignificant in both tests, the latter explanation does not seem to hold. Instead, the fact that both tests demonstrate a strong negative relationship with the Gini coefficient and the first test displayed in Table 1 demonstrates a strong negative relationship between the population in metropolitan areas and votes for Donald Trump, the first explanation is more likely.

**Figure 4.4. Household Income and Votes for Donald Trump**
Past studies have demonstrated that while economic anxiety does in fact tend to play a role in demand for right wing populism, cultural factors tend to be a more important factor (Mudde, 2019). That being said, in much of the socio-cultural transformation literature, economic and cultural change is more or less complementary in so far as the far-right links unemployment, economic stress, or bloated welfare budgets to immigrants, elites, or the left. Moreover, insofar as the far right ever had a natural base consisting of lower-class voters, the demographics of support in the 4th wave of the far-right resurgence are becoming less homogenous (Mudde, 2019). For example, while Trump did win a significant amount of support from the industrially ravaged areas of the country, past studies have demonstrated that income could not explain the Trump phenomenon by itself (Rothwell, 2016). Instead, Rothwell (2016) finds that employment status and occupational categories were the least important explanatory variables explaining support for Trump while no link could be found between support for him and trade competition. Instead, higher incomes tended to predict votes for Trump, and not vice versa. In other studies, the cultural aspects have demonstrated much more explanatory power than economic ones in predicting the rise of Trump (Forscher and Kteily, 2019; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta, 2017). Thus, for our purposes, it would seem that while both the median household income of each state and conspiracism has a negative relationship with votes for Trump, it is more likely that characteristics common to the “heartland”, and not simply economic insecurity are connected to the tendency to resort to conspiratorial ideation.

**Figure 4.5: Cultural factors and votes for Donald Trump**

![Figure 4.5: Cultural factors and votes for Donald Trump](image)

Indeed, when the interactions between votes for Trump, interest in political conspiracy theories, and cultural factors, such as the percentage of minorities or the percentage of the urban population in a given state are compared, a clear delineation can be observed between these two poles. Thus, it would seem that this phenomenon cannot not be explained by income or education alone. Instead, a clear connection can also be viewed between states with small minority populations and small urban populations. Again, this would suggest that the rural areas of the country were principally susceptible to the conspiracy theories employed by Donald Trump and as a result turned out to vote for him.

While the results of this section have been enlightening with regards to the dynamics surrounding political conspiracy theories, it suffers, like all analyses, from a number of limitations. The tests performed in the current section incorporate state-level data so as to provide a cross-sectional analysis of the effects of conspiratorial rhetoric in political campaigns while keeping the form of conspiracy theory
constant. For more precise results, tests involving individual survey data may be necessary in subsequent studies to see if the same basic relationship holds. Also, without survey data, the current study is limited in explaining the exact mechanism, on the individual level, that accounts for this relationship, which is something that will be attempted to be rectified in the following chapter.
5 Populist Conspiracism and Political Preferences for Federal Office

5.1 Introduction

The current chapter of this thesis will be dedicated to answering the final three hypotheses, which, as the reader will recall, are as follows:

- **H1a**: By “Othering” political opponents through disinformation, conspiracy theories had the effect of mobilizing Trump’s electoral base.

- **H1b**: By “Othering” political opponents through disinformation, conspiracy theories led to a demobilization of supporters for Trump’s political opponent.

- **H2**: The individual level effect is stronger in areas where there is a higher interest in conspiracy theories.

In so doing, the current section will test the hypotheses with the use of survey data taken prior to and following the 2016 Presidential election and analyzing the effects of the two political conspiracy theories mentioned in Chapter 3 with regards to individual voting behaviors using a multi-level regression. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, an ecological fallacy exists insofar as the tests only analyze the voting behavior of various populations based on state-wide data, thus missing out on the essential biographical characteristics of the individuals who vote for Trump. With the addition of survey data, an analysis based upon micro-level characteristics will provide for more conclusive results as for the “demand” side of populist radical right candidates such as Donald Trump.

That having been said, given that state-level data for interest in the aforementioned conspiracy theories are to be used in place of individual survey data for belief in conspiracy theories, the results will testify to more to the level of support for Donald Trump within a given environment in which the populace is more prone to conspiratorial ideation. As the tests performed in the previous chapter demonstrated a strong correlation between geographical regions and votes for Trump and belief in conspiracy theories, it is assumed that the environment, or community in which one lives in can be influential in this regard. Moreover, another important conclusion can be drawn from the findings regarding the ever-present question of reverse causality. If it is the case that belief in certain political conspiracies predicts votes for Trump, then this could either be because (1) Trump used conspiracy theories which resonated with his base which resulted in them voting for him, or (2) Supporters voted for Trump due to them living in a conspiracy-theory-prone environment which Trump could then exploit for electoral gain.
If the environment is shown to demonstrate a significant effect on voting patterns, this could have one of two effects; (1) Voters for Clinton may become demobilized, preferring to stay home on election day in the midst of such a disinformation campaign. Thus, if those groups who heavily supported her during the election showed less of a tendency to vote for her in conspiracy-theory-prone environments, then a “demobilizing” effect could be established. A similar effect could possibly occur not only with regards to the less educated and lower-income groups which have shown to exhibit a higher tendency to resort to conspiratorial thinking (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Goertzel, 1994; Volkan, 1985), but also with more moderate voters who may be undecided as to who to vote for among the two candidates; (2) Voters may be attracted to a certain candidate because they speak to the beliefs that they already hold, thus, creating a “mobilizing” effect wherein one’s base is more likely to vote for the candidate in conspiracy-theory-prone environments. Again, this may also apply to fence-sitters such as the moderates but also more conservative voters. In order to test these two hypotheses, the multilevel regression models in this chapter will test for divergence in voting behavior among voters in states where interest in the aforementioned conspiracy theories were highest. With this in mind, the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory, as mentioned in Chapter 3, was principally used in order to demonize Trump’s political rival and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. Therefore, the interaction between this conspiracy theory and other individual characteristics is best suited to test for the ‘demobilization’ effect. On the other hand, Birtherism, as was previously explained in detail, had the effect of convincing a large number of Republicans to rally around him prior to the 2012 elections and onward. Therefore, the interaction between this conspiracy theory and the individual-level variables are of interest in order to test for the “mobilization” effect.

5.2 Methods

As little survey data exists as to the extent that individuals believe in certain conspiracy theories around the time of the 2016 election (as far as I am aware, no survey data exists in which respondents are asked their about their belief in anti-Clinton conspiracy theories) and the only figures available exist in a state-aggregate form, the multilevel model was chosen as the most effective way in which to overcome this hinderance.

The basic configuration of the multilevel (hierarchical) model allows for statistical testing of data within a larger context, or environment (Goldstein, 1998). All social data, such as political behavior, occurs within a structure of hierarchies or clusters. A hierarchy For example, despite the fact that students in two different schools learn from the exact same curriculum, educational outcomes can differ drastically depending on environmental factors such as the level of development of the community or the social status of the parents. Thus, the individual data is said to be “embedded” into a larger social context.

The usefulness of multilevel model becomes apparent when we take into consideration this lannce of data on the level of the individual. Considering the fact that the Google Trends data from the previous chapter are state aggregate figures, this data can be utilized as a ‘second-level’ variable in which the individual-level variables are embedded. The following test, as a result will examine how conspiracy-theory prone environments affect voting behaviors at the individual-level. If in the results a statistically significant divergence is demonstrated when individual variables are embedded in
high-conspiracy-theory-prone environments, then the environment can be said to be significant in affecting the individual’s behavior.

For the individual level data, the dataset of survey results from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) for the year 2016 will be used (Ansolabehere, Schaffner, 2017). This sample of 64,600 adult respondents was conducted over the internet prior to and following the election on November 8, 2016.

5.3 Data Sources and Descriptive Statistics

In order to create the second-level variables representing the conspiracy theory prone environment, the *Google Trends* aggregate figures used in the previous chapter for interest in the “Clinton Body Count” conspiracy theory and interest in Obama’s birth certificate were given to each respondent according to the state in which they live (Google, 2019). As was previously mentioned (See Chapter 4), a number of past studies have demonstrated the figures provided by Google Trends to be a reliable measure of the public’s general interest in a topic (Brownstein, Freifield, and Madoff, 2009; Carneiro and Mylonakis, 2009; DiGrazia, 2015, 2017; Stephens-Davidovits, 2014; Swearingen and Ripberger, 2014; Vosen and Schmidt, 2011). While the author makes no assumption that every search for the given search terms were done by sympathizers or believers in the conspiracy theories, it is assumed that the figures do represent a relative measure of support for or receptivity to the conspiracy theory in each state.

The dependent variables for the current tests are votes for Donald Trump and votes for Hillary Clinton (CC16_410a). For each variable, a dummy was created for each candidate and tested using a binomial method which is best to handle such binary distributions.

While far-right parties and movements become more heterogeneous as they gain in success making it more difficult to identify the “typical” voter (Mudde, 2019), a number of studies have pointed to the role that education plays with regards to demand for populist radical right parties (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2002; Givens, 2004; Evans, 2005; Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Arzheimer, 2009; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Mudde, 2006; Rothwell, 2016). They report a significant negative relationship between the level of education one has and levels of support for radical right politicians. Thus, the level of education one has will be used as the first control variable. The variable taken from the CCES dataset is the one for ‘Education’ (educ) which was formatted into an ordinal variable with figures from six (representing no high school diploma) to one (post-graduate). As the divergence in voting patterns is theoretically predicted to occur among those with less education, the ordinal variable was inverted in order for the model to observe the difference in this range and not those who are highly educated. Given the significant negative correlation between education levels and votes for Trump in the tests performed in the previous chapter, a similar relationship is expected to be found in the subsequent tests wherein the lower educated

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2 As you will recall, the two search terms employed for the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election are “Obama birth certificate” to measure levels of support for “Birtherism, and “Clinton Body Count” to measure a number of Hillary Clinton-related conspiracy theories. In order to gather a full and accurate measurement of each search term, the dates to be included for each search term ends on the day of the election, November 8th, 2016 and begins eight years prior.

3 2016 President vote: “For whom did you vote for President of the United States?”

4 Education: “What is the highest level of education you have completed?”
cohorts tend to vote for Trump and against Clinton more in areas where political conspiracy theories are prominent. To make the findings more robust, a dummy variable was created denoting those with either a high school diploma or less.

As with education, a significant negative relationship is often shown to exist between the lower income cohorts and votes for the populist radical right (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2002; Givens, 2004; Evans, 2005; Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Arzheimer, 2009; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012). This is in line with other studies which found economic factors to play a role in voting for the radical right. Various studies have pointed to those who find themselves in economic competition with immigrants to be susceptible to far right candidates as they are more likely to hold anti-immigrant attitudes (Scheve & Slaughter, 2001). As for unemployment, Golder (2003) has argued that those people who believe that their status is due to labor market rigidities, then they may feel no need to vote for the far right, whereas those that consider to be the root cause of their woes will find it necessary to vote for them. The variable for family income (famine)\(^5\) was used in order to test for the economic dimension of populist support emphasized as a factor in both the “economic grievances” and the “modernization losers” literature (Betz, 1994; Mickenberg, 2000, p. 187; Golder, 2016; Rodrik, 2018; van Dyke and Soule, 2002). In order to avoid a response bias associated with more sensitive questions, the authors of the CCES dataset ask specifically about family income and provide answers on a 16-point ordinal scale. Thus, the variable for the current study is ordinal, not numeric and spans from 16 (less than $10,000) to one ($500,000 or more). Again, these figures are inverted as the divergence in voting patterns is expected to occur among low-income and not high income voters. Another variable will be added for those with family incomes in the range of poverty which span from three (less than $10,000) to one ($20,000 to $29,000), while those earning above the poverty line were denoted with a zero.

A control for the ideological leaning of the voter will be included as another relevant, and rather intuitive control. Previous studies have demonstrated the tendency that specific ideologies, especially radicals, have towards conspiracism (Hofstadder, 2008 [1964]; Lipset and Raab, 1970; Sindre, 2014; Swami, 2012; van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet, 2015; Wright and Arbuthnot, 1974). This has been shown to have a ‘radicalizing effect’ in which the merger with this Manichean distinction in the modern radical right leads the individual to become uncompromising in his goals as the opponent is by definition “evil” and should be defeated (Hofstadder, 2008 [1964]). The variable taken from the CCES dataset is the five-point ideology scale (ideo\(^5\))\(^6\) which places respondents on a scale from one (being ‘very liberal’) to five (‘very conservative’) with three being ‘moderate’.

A dummy variable for both respondents claiming to be ‘white’ (race)\(^7\) or ‘black’ in the CCES study will be included as indicators of those included in Trump’s conception of the ‘nation’. In Chapter 3, it was demonstrated that those states with lower levels of the ‘non-white’ population were statistically significant predictors of votes for Donald Trump. As previously noted, which confirms previous studies which found the same relationship (Forscher and Kteily, 2019; Rothwell, 2016; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Neta, 2017). It is expected that the variable for ‘white’ will demonstrate a positive relationship with votes for Trump whereas ‘black’ will show a negative one.

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\(^ {5} \) Family Income: “Thinking back over the last year, what was your family’s annual income?”

\(^ {6} \) Ideology: “In general, how would you describe your own political viewpoint?”

\(^ {7} \) Race: “What racial or ethnic group best describes you?”
Likewise, a variable for the respondent’s gender (gender)\(^8\) will be included. These results are expected to skew heavily in Clinton’s favor as women tend to vote for populist radical right at much lower rates than others (see Mudde, 2019, p. 159-62) and the case that there was much excitement over Clinton being the first female presidential candidate to be nominated by a major US political party.

The level of religiosity is another control variable that is commonly used as predictors in US elections. This is due to the relatively higher level of religious voters, especially the bloc of evangelical voters which tend to vote Republican. A methodological problem exists, though, in measuring how religious one is. Questions in which the respondents are asked how important religion is to their life or if they ‘consider’ themselves to be religious are highly subjective and fail to differentiate the less religious from the more religious. Thus, a more objective measure, the number of times one prays (pew_prayer)\(^9\), was chosen for the models. These figures range from one (never) to seven (several times a day).

Another control variable will be CCES’ variables for those who voted for Barack Obama in the 2012 Presidential election (CC16_326)\(^10\). This was included mainly due to control for those Democratic voters who have a tendency to vote Democrat in each election. Moreover, an ordinal variable representing a question in which respondents were asked their approval of Barack Obama (CC16_320a)\(^11\) will also be added. This is operationalized in such a way that the highest value denotes those who “strongly disapprove” of Obama while the lowest denotes those who “strongly approve” of him. Given Donald Trump’s Birtherism, it is expected that those who supported Barack Obama will support Clinton while those who did not will support Trump. That being said, according to the theory advanced in this thesis, those living in a state where interest in Birtherism is highest, a divergence could occur wherein moderates or conservatives with an interest in Birtherism tend to support Trump more so. Likewise, a control for those who voted for the Republican candidate Mitt Romney was also included for similar reasons and is expected to show a strong positive relationship with votes for Donald Trump. A control was added for those who consider themselves to be ‘independents’ (pid3)\(^12\).

Finally, given that a large number of studies have pointed to the role that the internet, and more specifically social media, have played in diffusing conspiracy theories (Bessi and Quattrociocchi, 2015; Kalmar, Stevens, and Worby, 2018; Waszak, Kasprzycka-Waszak, and Kubanek, 2018; Vicario, et al., 2016), the final variable to be tested for will be one involving the respondent’s usage of social media. For this, the variable denoting those who have “read a story or watched a video about politics” (CC16_300d_3)\(^13\) will be used due to its specific focus on politics but its inclusion of both online written and visual platforms.

In Table 5.1, the descriptive statistics of the dataset used in the following tests is shown.

\(^8\) Gender: “Are you male or female?”
\(^9\) Frequency of Prayer: “People practice their religion in different ways. Outside of attending religious services, how often do you pray?”
\(^10\) President 2012: “In 2012, who did you vote for in the election for President?”
\(^11\) Obama: “Do you approve of the way each [Obama] is doing their job…”
\(^12\) 3 point party ID: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a ...?”
\(^13\) Read a story or watched a video about politics: “Did you do any of the following on social media (such as Facebook, Youtube, or Twitter)?
**Table 5.1: Exploratory Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Body Count*</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama’s Birth Certificate*</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Clinton</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Trump</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Income [16=less than $10,000; 1=$500,000 or more]*</td>
<td>10.69</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Scale [5=Very Conservative]*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level [6=No High School; 1=Post-Grad]*</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity [7=Pray Several Times a Day]</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Obama in 2012</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Romney in 2012</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approve of Obama [4=Strongly Disapprove]*</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Diploma*</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty [3=lowest income]*</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read a Story or Watched a Video on Social Media*</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Independent Variables considered in interaction terms*

In Figure 5.1 (see below), the figures from the previous chapter denoting interest in the ‘Clinton Body Counts’ and ‘Birther’ conspiracy theories provided by Google Trends, are merged with the CCES dataset. Here, we can observe the general trend with regards to the level of conspiracism in each state and votes for each candidate. The reader should note the continued existence of the positive relationship between interest in birtherism and votes for Trump as demonstrated in the previous chapter as well as the theoretically expected negative relationship between interest in anti-Clinton conspiracy theories and votes for Clinton.

**Figure 5.1:** Conspiracism and Votes for Clinton and Trump
In the subsequent section, we turn to the results of the tests mentioned in this section which will be performed on votes for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in order to unveil the dynamic behind this correlation.

5.4 Results

**Votes for Hillary Clinton (Figure 5.2)**

In the current section, models are created which test for the effects of “demobilization” of Clinton’s supporters due to the demonizing or “Othering” effects of conspiracist rhetoric. If this occurs, we should expect to observe negative relationships or see a divergence away from a positive correlation with votes for Clinton with regards to those groups who would otherwise support her. In Model 1 (see Table 5.2 below), a multi-level regression is performed on votes for Hillary Clinton according to the previously mentioned methodology. Strong positive relationships can be found with those control variables denoting those who voted for Obama in the 2012 Presidential election, women voters, African American voters, and the more educated voters whereas a slight positive relationship can be seen between votes for Clinton and income levels. Meanwhile, strong negative relationships can be seen between conservative voters, people who voted for Romney in the 2012 Presidential election, independent voters, religious voters and white voters. The variable for higher income voters came out consistently insignificant.

For the purposes of this study, however, the interaction terms between the high conspiracist environments are of more interest. The first set of models (Models 1.1-2) test for an interaction with voters with lower levels of education and conspiracist environments. In Models 1.1, an interaction term with the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory and education demonstrates a negative relationship in both models which provides evidence for the fact that the less educated cohorts were influenced by this conspiracy theory leading them to decide against voting for Clinton. In Model 1.2, a variable denoting those voters with only a high school diploma or less is tested as an interaction variable. Ultimately, while a strong divergence exists between the interaction term and the control variable the results turn out to be just outside of the realm of being statistically significant.

The next set of tests (Models 2.1-2) take economic variables as the independent variables of interest in our interaction term. As with the level of education, a similar dynamic seems to be occurring in which
the lower income groups are statistically less likely to vote for Clinton in high conspiracist states. In Model 2.2, a variable denoting all those voters in poverty (who have a family income of $30,000 or less) is considered within high conspiracist environments. While the control variable for those in poverty exposes a strong positive relationship for Clinton, when placed within an interaction term, the results demonstrate a statistically significant negative relationship, signifying a sharp divergence in voting for Clinton depending on the context.

In the next model, ideological variables are tested for interactions within high conspiracist environments. In Models 3.1, an interaction term is created using the variable for one’s ideology (“very conservative” being the highest). Considering the Clinton Body Count is essentially political in nature, divergence could occur among conservative or moderate voters who decide to vote against Clinton. The results, however, do not show there to be any significant link as the correlation turns out to be statistically significant.

Finally, Model 4.1 tests for interactions with those with exposure to social media, claiming to either have read a story or watched a video about politics. When considered in environments where interest in anti-Clinton conspiracy theories is high, no significant relationship appears.
### Table 5.2: Binomial Hierarchical (Multi-Level) Model on Votes for Hillary Clinton

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Model 1 (Controls)</th>
<th>Model 1.1</th>
<th>Model 1.2</th>
<th>Model 2.1</th>
<th>Model 2.2</th>
<th>Model 3.1</th>
<th>Model 4.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Odds Ratio P</td>
<td>Odds Ratio P</td>
<td>Odds Ratio P</td>
<td>Odds Ratio P</td>
<td>Odds Ratio P</td>
<td>Odds Ratio P</td>
<td>Odds Ratio P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>73.09 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>39.79 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>69.46 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>40.31 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>76.13 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>37.30 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>96.79 *** &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Body Count CT</td>
<td>1.09 0.674 3.15 0.009 1.29 0.285 3.31 * 0.034 1.23 0.363 3.28 0.101 0.90 0.770</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>0.89 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.59 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.89 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.89 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.89 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.89 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.88 *** &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>0.70 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.70 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.70 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.70 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.70 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.69 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.75 *** &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Obama in 2012</td>
<td>9.05 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>9.17 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>9.69 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>9.03 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>9.06 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>8.95 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>8.44 *** &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Romney in 2012</td>
<td>0.24 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.24 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.24 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.24 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.24 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.24 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.25 *** &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4.50 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>4.54 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>4.52 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>4.50 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>4.48 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>4.47 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>4.20 *** &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Family Income</td>
<td>1.00 0.851 1.00 0.896 1.00 0.888 1.06 0.057 0.99 0.180 1.00 0.850 1.00 0.627</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology (1-5 [1 = Very Conservative])</td>
<td>0.31 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.31 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.31 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.31 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.31 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.31 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.30 *** &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Education</td>
<td>0.82 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.99 0.875 0.80 0.001 0.82 0.001 0.82 0.001 0.82 0.001 0.82 0.001 0.80 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.53 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.53 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.53 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.53 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.53 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.53 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.49 *** &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.66 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.66 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.66 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.66 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.66 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.66 *** &lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.62 *** &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Body Count: Less Educated</td>
<td>0.71 0.007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Degree</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.64 0.065</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Body Count: High School</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.48 0.091</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Body Count: Lower Income</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.90 * 0.037</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Body Count: &lt;$30,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.40 0.021</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Body Count: &lt;$30,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.62 * 0.044</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Body Count: Ideology</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.71 0.125</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.88 0.628</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinton Body Count: Social Media</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.33 0.331</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Random Effects**

- $\sigma^2$: 3.29 3.29 3.29 3.29 3.29 3.29 3.29 3.29
- $\phi$: 0.04 imp_main 0.03 imp_gov 0.02 imp_hc 0.03 imp_law 0.02 imp_idea 0.03 imp_law 0.03 imp_law 0.03 imp_law 0.03 imp_law 0.03 imp_law
- ICC: 0.00
- $N$: 50 imp_main 50 imp_gov 50 imp_hc 50 imp_law 50 imp_idea
- $\beta$: 2.95 16.9 4.9 8.9 2.9
- Observations: 31628 31628 31628 31628 31628 31628 21452
- Marginal $R^2$: 0.752 / 0.753 0.752 / 0.754 0.752 / 0.753 0.751 / 0.753 0.752 / 0.753 0.749 / 0.751 0.749 / 0.750
- Conditional $R^2$: 0.752 / 0.753 0.752 / 0.754 0.752 / 0.753 0.751 / 0.753 0.752 / 0.753 0.749 / 0.751 0.749 / 0.750

* $p<0.05$  ** $p<0.01$  *** $p<0.001$
Votes for Donald Trump (Table 5.3)

As you will recall, the second hypothesis argues that conspiratorial rhetoric can result in a “mobilizing” effect wherein the populist candidate can position himself as the defender of the people against the “Othered” political opponent. This was believed to have happened to Donald Trump’s supporters in the run-up to the 2012 elections (see Chapter 3) and theoretically could have occurred again in the 2016 election. In the following tests (see Table 5.3), votes for Donald Trump are considered in conjunction with the Birther conspiracy theory which as was mentioned in Chapter 3, had the effect of rallying a large support base to him and his campaign in prior to the 2016 campaign. If a “mobilizing” effect is believed to take place, we should observe a divergence towards voting for Donald Trump. In Model 1 a multi-level regression finds consistently strong positive relationships between votes for Trump and the control variables denoting independent voters, white voters, conservative voters, and voters who voted for Mitt Romney in 2012. Though not nearly as strong, votes from the more religious voters demonstrate a significantly positive relationship with votes for Trump. Also, as was to be expected, strong negative relationships are demonstrated between those who voted for Obama in 2012, African American voters, female voters and the educated with votes for Donald Trump. Votes from higher income voters remain consistently insignificant throughout every model.

In the first two models, educational variables are utilized within the interaction term, the first with the full educational ordinal variable and the second with the variable denoting those with only a high school education or less, in order to test for any potential divergence in terms of support for Trump among the less educated population. While Model 1.1 turns out to be just outside of statistical significance, Model 1.2 reveals a strong divergence in support. Whereas those with a high school diploma or less were revealed to be negatively correlated with votes for Trump on a national level, when considering these voters within a high conspiracist context, a very strong positive relationship is revealed between them and votes for Trump.

Models 2.1-2 test for interaction with respect to the respondent’s level of income. Model 2.1 combines the level of family income in the interaction term with high conspiracist environments but ultimately turns out to be statistically insignificant. As with the tests with Clinton voters, a variable denoting voters living in poverty is combined in an interaction term resulting in no statistically significant relationship.

In Models 3.1-2, ideology is considered in conjunction with states with higher interest in birtherism. Due to the political nature of the conspiracy theory, conservatism is expected to be correlated with belief in said conspiracy theory, which most likely will not lead to a significant divergence in voting behavior. That being said, in areas where interest in anti-Clinton conspiracy theories is highest, more moderate voters may also be affected which could in fact lead to such a divergence. When combined with the ideology variable (with 5 denoting “very” conservative) we find statistically significant positive relationships between the interaction term and votes for Trump. In Model 3.2, a variable denoting whether the respondents approve of Barack Obama is considered for possible interactions in voting behavior.\textsuperscript{14} As with the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory, Birtherism is both political in nature and personalist, focusing specifically on the character of the United States’ first African American president. Thus, some

\textsuperscript{14} As a reminder, the variable is operationalized in a way in which the highest value denotes “strongly disapprove” and the lowest denotes “strongly approve”.

49
divergence is considered likely with regards to voters’ support for Obama. Model 3.2 presents these results. Whereas a strong positive relationship exists with the control variable and votes for Trump, an even stronger positive relationship appears when considered within the context of states where interest in birtherism is highest.

Finally, Model 4.1 tests for interactions with those exposed to political content online. When considered in high conspiracist states, again, as with votes for Hillary Clinton, no significant relationship appears.
Table 5.3: Binomial Hierarchical (Multi-Level) Model on Votes for Donald Trump

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Model 1 (Controls)</th>
<th>Model 1.1</th>
<th>Model 2.1</th>
<th>Model 2.2</th>
<th>Model 3.1</th>
<th>Model 3.2</th>
<th>Model 3.3</th>
<th>Model 4.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Odds Ratios</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>Odds Ratios</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>Odds Ratios</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>Odds Ratios</td>
<td>p</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.18</td>
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<td>0.001</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>0.001</td>
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<td>Religiosity</td>
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<td>0.001</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.265</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.061</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Obama in 2012</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted for Romney in 2012</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>0.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
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<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lower Family Income</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.838</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.878</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.867</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology (1-5 [5 = Very Conservative])</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Education</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>0.842</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.001</td>
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<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>0.001</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy Less Education</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
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<td>0.089</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy High School Diploma</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy Lower Family Income</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Income &lt;$30,000</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.215</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy &lt;$30,000</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.299</td>
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<td>Bureaucracy Ideology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disapprove of Obama</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy Disapprove of Obama</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
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<td>0.951</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bureaucracy Social Media</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.999</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Random Effects</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>σ²</td>
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<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.29</td>
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</tr>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
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<td>Observations</td>
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<td>31628</td>
<td>31628</td>
<td>31628</td>
<td>31628</td>
<td>31628</td>
<td>31628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal R²</td>
<td>0.752 / 0.753</td>
<td>0.751 / 0.754</td>
<td>0.752 / 0.753</td>
<td>0.751 / 0.753</td>
<td>0.752 / 0.753</td>
<td>0.751 / 0.753</td>
<td>0.752 / 0.753</td>
<td>0.750 / 0.752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditional R²</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05  **p<0.01  ***p<0.001
5.5 Discussion

The results of the tests performed in the previous section suggest that conspiracism did in fact have a significantly positive relationship with votes for Donald Trump which coincides with the tests performed on the state-level aggregate figures in Chapter 4. From the previously performed multilevel model, evidence is revealed for the existence of the two mechanisms believed to be accounting for this relationship. In Table 5.2, we see that a number of groups, such as the lower educated and those with lower incomes were less likely to vote for Clinton in areas where interest in anti-Clinton conspiracy theories were prominent which testifies a possible “demobilizing effect” among her supporters. Meanwhile, in Table 5.3, a possible “mobilizing effect” can be seen to have occurred wherein the less educated and more conservative voters had a larger tendency to vote for Donald Trump when considered in states where interest in Birtherism was highest. A number of social indicators, theoretically believed to be strong predictors of both conspiratorial ideation and demand for populist politics, have shown to diverge with regards voting behavior when considered within high-conspiracist environments.

5.5.1 Education

**Figure 5.2: Interaction Between Education, Conspiracism, and Voting Behavior**

The educational variables tended to stand out as relevant “demand” factors which demonstrate a divergence in support away from Hillary Clinton. Returning again to the case of the interaction term consisting of the respondent’s level of education and the anti-Clinton conspiracist variable (see Table 5.2, Model 1.1), tests revealed that the less educated were less likely to vote for Clinton when considered in high conspiracist states. Figure 5.2 allows us to visualize this dynamic. While most education levels only saw a moderate decline in levels of support for Clinton, those without a high school education tended to
vote for Clinton at a much lower rate when in the high conspiracist states. This would signify an actual connection between the (very) low educated and conspiracism as theoretically expected and demonstrated in Chapter 4.

Donald Trump, on the other hand, saw an almost opposite dynamic. While support for him tended to rise as one moves from the less conspiracist to more conspiracist states, this was more pronounced among those with only high school diploma and those without. In states where interest in birtherism was highest, those with a high school education or less tended to vote for Trump at much higher rates than those with at least some college education. Figure 5.3 (shown below) allows us to visualize the interaction between those with a high school diploma or less in conspiracist heavy locations and votes for Donald Trump which was tested for in Table 5.3, Model 1.2.

**Figure 5.3**: Conspiracism, High School Education, and Votes for Trump

5.5.2 Income

As the reader will recall, the previous tests (see Table 5.2, Model 2.1) revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between votes for Hillary Clinton and those with low family income when considered in high conspiracist environments as theoretically expected. Upon closer inspection (see Figure 5.4 below), we can observe only slight decreases in most income groups below $100,000 in support for Clinton, with the most pronounced decrease occurring among those earning $10,000 and below. Between $150,000 and $250,000, however, there is a strong negative correlation between high conspiracist states and votes for Clinton. Due to the relatively smaller number of observations in the upper-income groups, though, this divergence does not seem to be of more importance than that among the lower income groups.

**Figure 5.4**: Interaction Between Votes for Hillary Clinton, Income, and Conspiracism
A closer look into those individuals in poverty demonstrates the same relationship between conspiracism and voting behavior, though these findings are not consistent among all income cohorts. Figure 5.5 focuses on the relationship the candidates had with those voters living in poverty. From these tests, it would seem to be that income was not as much of a factor in explaining why certain people tended to vote more against Clinton as were the others and would explain the relatively weaker significance between the two. This would seem to corroborate the results from Chapter 5 which found that the variable for white poverty to be insignificant in explaining the percentage of the vote for Trump. This is consistent with Cas Mudde’s (2019) thesis of the increasingly heterogeneous “fourth wave” of the far right and others’ studies that claim income to be a less important factor in explaining the Trump phenomenon (Forscher and Kteily, 2019; Rothwell, 2016).

**Figure 5.5:** Poverty, Conspiracism, and Voting Behavior
5.5.3 Ideology

Finally, with regards to the ideological conviction of the respondents, a significant relationship was revealed between those who voted for Trump in areas where interest in Birtherism was highest. In Table 5.3, Models 3.1, a strong positive relationship was uncovered in heavy conspiracist states between votes for Trump and conservatives. In Figure 5.7 (below), we can see that while both conservatives and liberals all tended to vote for and against Trump respectively, the main divergence in voting patterns occurred among the “conservative” and “very conservative” voters who nearly voted for Trump in unanimity in states where interest in Birtherism was highest. Also of interest is the slight divergence towards voting for Trump among moderates and a larger divergence among “liberal” voters. Given the very large number of moderates (34%) in the CCES dataset this small divergence is not necessarily without significance as even a small divergence could lead to many new voters voting for or against any given candidate.

Figure 5.7: Ideology and Conspiracism
A similar dynamic exists when considering the respondent’s approval of Barack Obama when considered in high conspiracist states. Birtherism is a clear case of a political conspiracy theory that was *personalized*, or centered entirely around a single political actor. Thus, it is not very surprising to see some interaction with his approval rating, though, again, this only occurs among those towards the center who only somewhat disapprove of Obama. At the poles, all of the voters have already decided who they would be voting for.

*Figure 5.8: Conspiracism and Approval of Obama*
The tests performed in the current chapter provide evidence for the correlation found in Chapter 4 with regards to the effects that conspiratorial rhetoric have on vote. From the before-mentioned results, the evidence points to both effects of conspiracist “demonization”, where potential voters for Trump’s opponent were “demobilized” due to the heavy misinformation used throughout the campaign, as well as ‘mobilization, in which conspiracism helped Trump encourage more voters to support him by posing his populism as the answer. In most models involving interaction terms between states in which levels of interest in specific influential conspiracy theories and micro-level characteristics of “demand” for populist politics and conspiracy theories, most models revealed themselves to be statistically significant.

The current test, however, is not without its limitations. By utilizing a variable denoting the relative amount of interest in specific conspiracy theories in a certain state, this project assumes that conspiracist environments are relevant factors in predicting changes in voting behavior on a state-by-state basis and that Trump alone is not the sole actor responsible for the propagation of the conspiracy theories. This is somewhat logical as the interaction between supporters who believe in the conspiracy theories and the leader who uses conspiratorial rhetoric, most likely operate in a more dialectical fashion wherein, in the case of Birtherism for example, Trump simultaneously feeds off of preexisting conspiracy theories within the broader conservative movement and amplifies these beliefs through his rhetoric. That being said, as the current study did not use individual-level variables denoting belief in these two conspiracy theories, and instead vouched for state-level variables, the results cannot fully testify to the tendency that individual voters with such beliefs have towards each political candidate. Further studies should be conducted with such variables in order to observe whether the results confirm the findings of the tests run in this chapter. This would seem to be a promising direction for future research.
6 Conclusion

The rise of populist parties in Europe and North America, especially in the form of the populist radical right, is often accompanied in parallel by so-called “post-truth” politics. Indeed, a large number of studies have pointed to the robust connection that disinformation, conspiracy theories, and “fake news” have with the populist radical right (Jylha, Strimling, and Rydgren, 2019; Krasodomski-Jones, 2019; Silva, Veggetti, and Littvay, 2017). To the casual observer (and many researchers) it would seem as if conspiratorial ideation in the populist radical right was simply a tendency. The current research, instead, argues that conspiracism as manifested in political actors such as populist radical right politicians, holds strategic or instrumental value as well. It is not so relevant that Joseph McCarthy, for his part, saw “enemies from within” in every part of the American government, but that the consequences of this rhetoric permitted him to cleanse the political arena of left-leaning opponents. As Hofstadter (2008 [1964]) noted, a certain radicalizing effect takes place as the “enemy” is viewed not in terms of interests or differing opinions, but as essentially “evil”, which justifies an attitude in which only the total defeat of the enemy will suffice. A similar dynamic is believed to exist with America’s first populists; the usage, manipulation, and propagation of the conspiracy surrounding the “Crime of ‘73” aided in providing a strong populist critique of the Democratic and Republican parties permitting the People’s Party to characterize them both as being “owned” by the same financial powers (Ostler, 1995). This permitted the party rank-and-file to help explain the GOP’s reluctance to respond to the farmers’ grievances, simplified global economic and social processes, and legitimized the formation of a new party in a time of crisis. This thesis has as its main point of investigation the political relationship between the populist radical right and conspiracy theories. Is it the case that they simply have a tendency towards conspiratorial ideation coinciding with their political ideology or can this framing serve a strategic or instrumental purpose beyond this?

The current research investigates a more modern case, the 2016 Presidential election, which draws parallels in many ways to the two aforementioned cases. Donald Trump, whom analysts have nicknamed the “Conspiracist-in-chief”, has been known to invoke conspiracy theories on a regular basis, and made heavy use of them during the campaign. Two conspiracy theories of importance during the election cycle were the “Clinton Body Count” conspiracy theory, which alleges that the Clinton family is secretly responsible for the murder of many political opponents and whistle-blowers, and the Birtherism, which alleges that Barack Obama was actually born in another country and thus, was constitutionally ineligible to be President of the United States. This case was chosen in order to test four hypotheses related to the relationship between the populist radical right and their usage of conspiratorial rhetoric; (1) Conspiracy theories were used by Trump, the radical right populist, as a prominent framing technique, resulting in positive political benefits; (2) By “Othering” political opponents through disinformation, conspiracy theories had the effect of mobilizing Trump’s electoral base; (3) By “Othering” political opponents through disinformation, conspiracy theories led to a demobilization of supporters for Trump’s political opponent; (4) The individual level effect is stronger in areas where there is a higher interest in conspiracy theories.

In Chapter Three, the historical context, and political function of both conspiracy theories was outlined. In the case of the “Clinton Body Count” conspiracy and other related anti-Clinton conspiracy theories, the principle aim of the conspiracy theory was to demonize the Democratic candidate, Hillary
Clinton, whereas in the case of Birtherism, the main intention of the continued invocation of this conspiracy theory during the 2016 campaign was to attract and mobilize “a consistent group of supporters”.

In Chapter Four, the first hypothesis is tested with the use of quantitative methods and state-level aggregate data. Given the absence of data concerning belief in these two conspiracy theories in different localities of the United States, a method similar to the one implemented by DiGrazia (2017) of measuring the relative level of interest in certain conspiracy theories using Google Trends data was used as the main independent variables of interest. When controlled for other state-level factors predicting demand for populist politics and conspiratorial ideation, both conspiracy theories consistently demonstrate significant positive relationships with votes for Donald Trump, thus providing evidence supporting the first hypothesis (see Figure 6.1 below).

**Figure 6.1: Interest in Populist Conspiracy Theories and Votes for Trump (2016)**

![Figure 6.1: Interest in Populist Conspiracy Theories and Votes for Trump (2016)](image)

In Chapter Five, the other hypotheses are also tested using quantitative methods. Instead of empirical testing based on state-level data, data is taken from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) for the year 2016 which includes answers from respondents from both before and after the election and has been shown to be nationally representative (Ansolabehere, Schaffner, 2017). Incorporating the Google Trends data from the previous chapter, a multilevel (hierarchical) regression is performed on votes for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in which individual predictor variables for both demand for populist politics and conspiratorial ideation are considered for deviations in voting patterns when considered in states with high and low interest in the aforementioned conspiracy theories. Thus, while no individual-level variables exist in the CCES dataset denoting belief in either Birtherism or anti-Clinton conspiracy theories, these tests are able to test the significance that high-conspiracist-environments have on voting behavior. The results provide evidence for the first hypothesis which argues that the correlation between votes for Trump and interest in these conspiracy theories, as demonstrated in Chapter Five, is shown to be stronger in those areas where interest in said conspiracy theories is higher. Furthermore, robust evidence for the two mechanisms is unveiled insofar as the voting behavior of Trump and Clinton supporters. When considered in states shown to be heavily interested in the “Clinton Body Count”
conspiracy theory, the lower-educated and lower-income cohorts had a lower tendency to vote for Clinton. Meanwhile, when considered in states where interest in Birtherism was highest, there was a much higher tendency for lower-educated voters to vote for Donald Trump, as well as more conservative voters. The principle contribution to the literature on the relationship between conspiracist rhetoric and populism can be found in this result.

Both series of tests allow us to come to several conclusions as to the usage of conspiracist rhetoric by the populist candidate Donald Trump and its likelihood to affect voting patterns. First, education levels have proven to be a significant predictor of the individual’s susceptibility to the conspiracy theories used by Donald Trump. State-level indicators have shown that those states where the percentage of the population with a high school degree was lower had a higher tendency to vote for Trump. When considering micro-level variables, not only is there a clear split between the level of education one has and who they voted for (the least educated had a tendency to vote for Trump whereas the most educated tended to vote for Clinton), but there is also a clear divergence when considered in states with high interest in the political conspiracies employed by Trump. In these states, those with a high school degree or less in particular had a much lower chance of voting for Clinton and a much higher tendency to vote for Trump. This finding matches that found in other previous studies concerning the tendency of individuals to resort to conspiratorial ideation (Bessi and Quattrociocchi, 2015; Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet, 2015; Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel III, 2007) and support populist politics (Mudde, 2007; Rothwell, 2016) and is another clear contribution to the literature of both.

This is not to say, of course, that it is simply a factor of their lower levels of education that they had a larger tendency to vote for Trump. Those who voted for Trump, and were influenced by his conspiratorial rhetoric, were not necessarily only in the lower income groups and lower educational cohorts. As both tests reveal, there may be reason to doubt the strength of income in predicting an individual’s receptivity to populist politicians and conspiracy theories as the variable for white poverty came up conclusively insignificant in the state-level models and income was shown to be rather inclusive in the individual models. This tends to correspond with the notion of post-class “fourth wave” of the far right as theorized by Mudde (2019). Ideology (more specifically conservatism), on the other hand, has shown to be a rather significant predictor of susceptibility to both, pointing to the possibility of a “radicalizing” effect mentioned by Hofstadter (2009 [1964]) and others.

While the results of this paper have been enlightening with regards to the dynamics surrounding political conspiracy theories, it suffers, like all analyses, from a number of limitations. First, and most importantly, the methodology of this study assumes that there is some interaction between the individual and the environment one lives in; as both conspiracy theories largely existed among conservative voters prior to the campaign, the principal assumption is that Donald Trump largely incorporates conspiracy theories that already exist among voters. It is theoretically possible, however, that Donald Trump also plays a significant role in influencing the conspiracist beliefs of the voters and that the relationship between voters and Trump actually mutually reinforce each other. Due to the set-up of this project, the author was unable to account for this possibility, or determine the strength of any particular actor in doing so.

The results of the current thesis point to the continued relevance of conspiracy theories to the rise of radical right wing populism. From here, a number of promising directions could be taken which build upon these findings. The results involving the ideological characteristics of the respondents could not reveal
the full dynamics that populist conspiracy theories had on their decision to vote for either Trump or Clinton. One promising direction would be to further investigate the effects on the poles of the political spectrum using survey data which includes individual variables denoting belief in certain conspiracy theories. Is there a radicalising effect that encourages conservative voters to vote more in favor of Trump and against Clinton, or is the tendency more or less the same regardless of one’s belief in political conspiracy theories? Moreover, what effects does this have on liberals? While conspiracy theories emanating from the populist radical right may not have much appeal to these voters, do these conspiracy theories tend to harden their stance against Trump and the radical right or do they “muddy the waters”, and raise doubts with regards to their preferred choice? Moreover, the current tests have demonstrated the effect that political conspiracy theories have on the decision to vote for or against a given candidate, but other decisions are also available to the voter. For example, does disinformation lead to an increased turnout for a candidate or for voters to stay at home on election day? Similarly, as voters become disgusted with one or both candidates, does disinformation lead to a higher tendency for people to vote for independents?

Another promising direction for research involves the identification of the actors responsible for the propagation of said conspiracy theories and the pathway to becoming incorporated into the rhetoric of candidates for office. Through what channels do conspiracy theories emanating from the far right reach political candidates? At the same time, countless numbers of studies have been dedicated to the propagation of conspiracy theories on social networks, as well as the efficacy of the attempts to prevent their diffusion (Faddoul, Chaslot, and Farid, 2020), though no studies to the knowledge of the author, have been conducted on the effect that limiting the diffusion of disinformation on social media and other channels has on demand for populist politics or their candidates’ ability to use conspiratorial rhetoric.

Finally, a focus specifically on the rhetoric of the populist radical right in order to observe the way in which conspiracy theories are incorporated into their discourse would be especially promising in terms of research projects. In Chapter Three of this thesis, a brief analysis of Trump’s usage of conspiratorial rhetoric made clear that Trump either makes open reference to them, uses subtle cues, or dog-whistle-style utterances. An comparative approach with, say, Marine le Pen, whose tenure at the head of the Rassemblement National has been marked by attempts at dédiabolisation (“de-demonization”) of the party while still “flirting” with far right conspiracy theories such as the grand remplacement, could prove fruitful (Maad, 2019, 19 March). Similarly, another direction might involve an analysis of conspiratorial rhetoric in radical right leaders once in power. The rationale for emphasizing the division between the “elites” and the “people” is clear when the candidate is in the opposition, but why do politicians such as Trump continue to use conspiratorial rhetoric when in power, where by any measure, they have become a clear part of “the elite”?

7 References


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**Appendix**

**Table A1:** The search terms “Clinton Body Count” and “Obama Birth Certificate” were used to measure interest in these two conspiracy theories as it has a high overall search volume and associated with a large amount of similar search terms. Below, the reader can observe the related terms for both searches:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birtherism</th>
<th>Clinton Murders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obama birth certificate</td>
<td>clinton body count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barack obama</td>
<td>Hillary clinton body count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth certificate barack</td>
<td>Hillary clinton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obama</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama certificate of birth</td>
<td>The clinton body count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama birth certificate</td>
<td>Clinton body count list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fake</td>
<td>Bill clinton body count</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>