



Conspiracism in Populist Radical Right Candidates: Rallying the Base or Mainstreaming the Fringe?

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Abstract

As evidenced by the 2016 US presidential election, conspiracy theories such as birtherism, the belief that Barack Obama is not a natural-born citizen, have become more impactful on modern-day liberal democracies. This study investigates the consequences of the conspiratorial narratives espoused by populist candidates, arguing that the creation of a narrative involving a “conspiring” establishment figure can positively benefit populist candidates during elections by allowing them to position themselves as defenders of “the people”. Taking the case of Donald Trump and the birther conspiracy theory, empirical testing indicates that by helping to spread birtherism, Donald Trump was able to create for himself a core group of supporters who turned out to vote for him in both the Republican primaries and general election. Moreover, when tests are performed to investigate whether this was a consequence of rallying a right-wing base or mainstreaming the fringe conspiracy theory, significant positive relationships are demonstrated not with more conservative birthers, but instead with the more moderate ones, testifying to the strength of the mainstreaming effect.

Keywords Populism · The radical right · 2016 election · Donald Trump · Birtherism · Conspiracy theories · Barack Obama · Racial resentment · Authoritarianism · Electoral mobilization

Introduction

Scholars have noted for a long time the connection that many populist politicians and parties have towards conspiratorial ideation. Donald Trump, for example, is particularly known for spreading far-right conspiracy theories such as “birtherism”, the

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belief that Barack Obama was born abroad and as a result was ineligible to run for president in 2008 (Klinkner, 2014). When we look abroad, we find that the picture looks very similar. All across the political spectrum, populist candidates such as Silvio Berlusconi (Shin & Agnew, 2009), Hugo Chavez (Hernández, 2008), Miroslav Sládek (Hanley, 2012), and parties such as the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Leconte, 2019) and the Five-Star Movement (Mancosu et al., 2017) have all either adopted conspiracy theories into their political rhetoric or made positive reference to them. Even those whose intentions are to avoid the fringes and “de-demonize” (*dédiaboliser*) their parties, such as Marine Le Pen, have at times “flirted” with conspiracy theories (Maad, 2019, 18 March). Why is it that we find such a close connection between populists and conspiratorial narratives, and what role, if any, do they play in electoral politics?

When we look back in time to the original American populists of the late nineteenth century, we find that conspiracy theories played a prominent role in explaining political phenomena and framing the conflict between themselves and their political opponents (Davis, 1971; Ostler, 1995). Conspiratorial narratives, such as those expressed in the popular pamphlet *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People*, which alleged that a conspiracy existed between English and American bankers to “re-enslave” the American people, were pivotal to the formation of the People’s Party, the mobilization of their supporters, and the spreading their ideas (Ostler, 1995).¹ While most historians have accepted that the People’s Party developed in states where a strong Farmers’ Alliance was in existence, by spreading the conspiracy theory of the “Crime of 1873”, the populists were able to organize more effectively in states such as Ohio where no such organizations existed (Ostler, 1995).² This conspiracy theory allowed them, in the words of Ernesto Laclau (2005), to “simplify” the political stage, and thus provide a critique regarding the legitimacy of the country’s representatives in an era of unparalleled inequality (Jäger, 2020).

While a number of researchers have investigated the link between populists and conspiracy theories (Bergmann, 2018; Bergmann & Butter, 2020; Jylha et al., 2019; Krasodonski-Jones, 2019; Silva et al., 2017), little to no work has been done to empirically test these relationships. Is it possible, as with the original People’s Party, that conspiracy theories can be electorally beneficial? The current

¹ The connection was so strong that it even appeared in the People’s Party Platform of 1892 and William Jennings Bryan’s famous “Cross of Gold” speech (Kramnick & Lowi, 2009).

² The “Crime of 1873” is a conspiracy theory which alleges that the Coinage Act of 1873, which officially ended the silver standard in America, was a part of a larger conspiracy on behalf of American and British banks to reimpose a “tyranny” in the United States (See Ostler, 1995). By spreading it, the populists were able to diffuse a narrative consisting of a strong critique of economic and political elites which simplified the complexities of economic and social change occurring at the end of the nineteenth century into a simple moral binary in which one side had “betrayed” the common people.

study is interested in pursuing this route and intends to answer the following question:

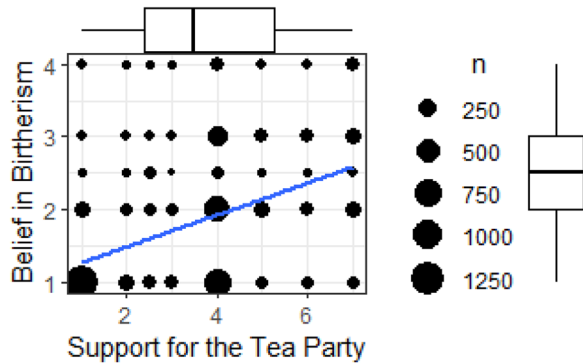
RQ: Can political dividends be obtained by populist candidates by referencing and promoting political conspiracy theories?³

I argue that one way in which conspiracy theories can benefit populist candidates is that they can be used to rally voters to support them during elections. Considering that both conspiracy theorists and populists target the “elite” in society and view this struggle in Manichean terms, it is possible for the populist to merge the two in a way that combines them into one coherent narrative. Not only are the “corrupt” elite fundamentally at odds with “the people”, but they are also involved in a sinister plot behind closed doors to their detriment. The creation of this narrative, thus, permits the populist to position himself as a “defender of the people” in a relationship akin to the “missionary politics” described in Zúquete (2008), which in the eyes of their followers, legitimates the candidate’s “mission of salvation” against the “immoral” elite, leading to more (enthusiastic) support from voters.

This study begins with a description of the case to be used in testing, the 2016 presidential election which was contested by the radical right populist Donald Trump. Here, the “birther” conspiracy theory, which claims that Barack Obama was born abroad and as a result was not eligible to run for president in 2008, is introduced and its connection to the Trump campaign is further elaborated. From there, the conceptual framework which underlies the central hypotheses is laid out with a theoretical argument to justify their investigation. The empirical tests are introduced with an overview of the methodology and materials used as well as the strategy taken to provide evidence for the hypotheses. Using a logistic regression model and data from the 2016 ANES survey, strong positive relationships are demonstrated between those who believe in birtherism and those who voted for Donald Trump during both the Republican primaries and the general election. Moreover, when combined in an interaction term with the respondent’s political ideology, the results from the regression models testify to a strong positive relationship between more moderate voters who believe in birtherism and votes for Trump as well as a slightly negative one with conservative birthers, testifying more to a mainstreaming effect than “rallying the fringes”. Given the tendency of conservative voters to cast their ballot for the Republican candidate regardless of their belief in birtherism as well as the sheer numerical superiority of moderate voters, conspiracy theories would seem to be more beneficial to the populist candidate when they can be brought to the mainstream. This study concludes with a summary of the results, their implications, and a few remarks involving directions for future research.

³ Due to the set-up of this study, I will focus primarily on conspiracism in the populist radical right, though, this relationship can clearly be seen in a whole host of populist leaders and parties across the political spectrum.

Fig. 1 Tea Party Support and Belief in Birtherism. Source: Reproduced from ANES Data Center (2012). Note: The question denoting belief in birtherism was asked in the following way in the 2012 ANES survey: Was Barack Obama definitely born in the USA, probably born in the USA, probably born in another country, or definitely born in another country?"



Donald Trump and the Case of Birtherism

“Birtherism” is a term used to characterize those who believe in a far-right conspiracy theory that alleges that Barack Obama is not a natural-born citizen (the most common reiterations claim that Kenya or Indonesia were his true countries of birth) and, thus, was ineligible to run for the office of the President of the USA (Neiwert, 2017). Additionally, it was also claimed that Obama was secretly a practicing Muslim, which, in the eyes of many conservatives, rendered him not only legally ineligible for office but also an unpatriotic outsider. Birtherism originated from online chain emails during the 2008 presidential election that went viral and continued even until the end of Obama’s second term in office in 2016 despite Obama having released both his short- and long-form birth certificates. Numerous right-wing journalists and politicians helped to mainstream the conspiracy theory and bring it to the Republican Party at large (Neiwert, 2017).

The birther conspiracy theory is a highly racialized one, as it demonizes Obama based on his race and family origins and plays on the fear of the Muslim “Other”. For many on the fringes of the conservative movement, Obama’s election was seen in very apocalyptic terms. The increase in racial resentment following the 2008 election (Tesler, 2013) formed the catalyst for the growth in birtherism as well as a resurgence of right-wing movements such as the militias and the Tea Party (Mudde, 2017; Neiwert, 2017). Consequently, belief in birtherism has been shown to be strongly correlated with groups such as the Tea Party (DeGrazia, 2017) as seen in Fig. 1. Much of this coalesced into the birther conspiracy which posited that Obama was secretly hiding his “foreign” religious beliefs from the public and held nefarious plans for the country. The more extreme variants of birtherism, for example, allege that Obama’s Muslim sympathies signify his intention to impose sharia law on the USA or allow for foreign jihadists to enter the country. Much of this played into the “green scare” in which alleged an Islamic “infiltration” of the White House (Mudde, 2017).⁴ Thus, for the right, America was at a crossroads and the 2012 and

⁴ Mudde (2017) has noted the similarities that this conspiracy theory has had with that of the anti-communist conspiracy theories of the twentieth century. As with the Red Scare, the “Green Scare” alleged an Islamist infiltration of the White House (and more specifically, by the Muslim Brotherhood) with the aid of “fifth column” operatives and the naivety and opportunism of “useful idiots”. Any prominent individual of Arab descent or

2016 elections were viewed as the last chances to “take the country back” (Mudde, 2017). Kim (2020) has demonstrated that those who believed in birtherism were more likely to vote in the 2012 Presidential Election.

Klinkner’s (2014) early study on the conspiratorial belief pointed to a significant positive relationship between belief in birtherism and those who identify as Republicans while others have confirmed that conservative and Republican Party affiliating individuals were much more likely to hold the belief (Enders et al., 2018; Pasek, 2015). The argument put forth by Smallpage et al. (2017) is that conspiracy theories such as birtherism are for “losers”, or out-of-power groups which use them to organize collective action against those in power. That said, both Richey (2017) and Jardina and Traugott (2019) have observed that the birther conspiracy theory was not unique to the right of the political spectrum. Richey (2017) notes that in 2012 a relatively large number of moderates and even “10 percent of Democrats [believed] that it is probably or definitely true that Obama was born in another country” while many of these same individuals also believed in other conspiracy theories from the other side of the spectrum such as trutherism. This would seem to imply that while on the whole, conspiracy theories may be used for partisan mobilization, other background covariates may play a larger role. The authoritarian personality has been identified as another relevant factor due to the greater anxiety and cognitive difficulties these individuals have with higher order thinking (Richey, 2017). A large number of studies have pointed to anti-black sentiments as being a particularly strong indicator as well (Jardina & Traugott, 2019; Pasek et al., 2015; Richey, 2017). As the argument goes, birtherism is activated by the adherent’s motivated reasoning which endorses conspiratorial beliefs based on their cohesion with other predispositions, such as racial resentment.

During the 2008 campaign, many in the Republican Party distanced themselves from the birther conspiracy, while several Tea Party Republicans, such as Sarah Palin, openly referenced it in public. While on the campaign trail, for example, several supporters of the Republican candidate John McCain articulated their belief that Barack Obama was an “Arab” who “cohorts with terrorists”. McCain responded to the supporters by saying that Obama was a “decent, family man, and a citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with”, which resulted in several boos from the audience (CNN, 2015). During the 2016 election cycle, 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”.

Instead of correcting the supporter like McCain had, he responded by saying that “bad things are happening out there” and promised that he would “be looking at that and plenty of other things” (WCCO—CBS Minnesota, 2015).

Footnote 4 (continued)

Muslim faith was considered to be in on the plot to impose sharia such as Huma Abedin, an advisor to Hillary Clinton, the wife of Democratic congressman Anthony Weiner, and the wives of Grover Norquist and John Brennan. President Obama was alleged to be the “Muslim-in-Chief” at the center of the plot to “destroy the American way of life”.

After the 2008 election, Donald Trump largely became the most prominent propagator of the birther conspiracy (Klinkner, 2014) and only publicly distanced himself from it in September of 2016, only 2 months before the presidential election (Neiwert, 2017). In July of 2010, the conspiracy theory reached its height when more than 41% of Republicans expressed that they believed that Obama was either “probably” or “definitely” born in a different country (CNN Opinion Research Corporation, 2010). Starting in Spring 2011, Trump publicly expressed his doubts about Obama’s citizenship over the span of several weeks in interviews with mainstream media outlets, in which he mentioned that the “private investigators” that he had flown to Hawaii in order to investigate the case “could not believe what they’re finding”. These interviews correlated with a strong increase in the polls for Trump in the event that he decided to enter the Republican primaries, which placed him among the leading candidates (Klinkner, 2014).

Once Obama released his “long-form” birth certificate the following year, only 13% of the total public still believed that he was born abroad (Morales, 2011). Regardless, Trump and other prominent birthers relentlessly claimed that the birth certificate was a forgery which led to the levels of Republicans believing in birtherism to shoot back upward again. The percentage of Republicans who believed in birtherism, averaging only 28% in 2012, increased to 34% in 2014 (Klinkner, 2014).

Only 2 months before the general election and prior to the first debate, Trump publicly disavowed birtherism and instead, (falsely) blamed Clinton and her 2008 campaign for having started the conspiracy theory. In a *Yahoo News* interview, Sam Nunberg, former campaign advisor to Trump, admitted to using birtherism as a campaign strategy which allowed Trump to retain “a consistent group of supporters” (Richardson, 2018). On Factbase, a website which archives Donald Trump’s speeches, tweets, and media appearances, a search for the term “birth certificate” results in 105 entries from between March 2011 and November 2016 (FactSquared, 2019). Although it is speculation, Trump himself is also alleged to have known the strategic effects of diffusing birtherism:

“We [MSNBC host Mika Brzenski] 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 Trump was a true believer or not, the effects were clear; a poll taken just after the 2016 presidential election showed that the percentage of Republicans that believed that Barack Obama was born in Kenya had shot back up to 51% (Economist/YouGov, 2017). In Sawyer’s (2020) study, states where interest in conspiracy theories such as birtherism was higher were significantly correlated with the proportion of the vote for Donald Trump. In the 2016 ANES dataset, one finds that respondents who believed in birtherism during the 2016 election correlate positively with a number of other variables that point to a certain connection with Trump (see Table 1). For example, one finds higher levels of belief in birtherism to be positively correlated with higher ratings of Trump, as well as with those who feel “hopeful” because of Trump, feel that he “provides strong leadership”, and feel that he is “honest”.

Table 1 Correlations with belief in birtherism

	Birtherism (1–10)	How would you rate Trump (0–100)	Hopeful because of Trump (1–5)	Trump is honest (1–5)	Trump provides strong leadership (1–5)
Birtherism (1–10)	1	0.565	0.515	0.482	0.205

Source: Reproduced from ANES Data Center (2016)

Conspiracism as Missionary Politics

A number of scholars have pointed out the connection between conspiracism and populist movements (Bergmann, 2018; Taggart, 2019).⁵ Historian of American conspiracy theories, David (1971) has emphasized the extent to which the “populist” motif reappears in many conspiracy theories throughout American history, whereas Fenster (2008) has argued that conspiracy theories all hold a “populist core”. While several of them have noted that both radical left and right variants are more or less equally likely to become immersed in conspiracism (Thalmann, 2019; Uscinski, 2019), others have disagreed, arguing that the radical right wing variant is much more conspiratorial than others (Priester, 2012; Wodak, 2015b). Priester (2012) and Wodak (2015b) even go as far as to include conspiracy theories as one of the core elements of radical right-wing populism. While conspiracism does not exist in every populist movement, Taggart (2019, p. 84) has emphasized the ‘tendency’ that populists have towards conspiracism.⁶ The most reasonable argument put forth concerning this relationship has been Bergmann and Butter’s (2020) who posit that “conspiracy theories are a non-necessary element of populist discourses”.

While definitions of populism may differ, a consensus remains around the basic binary antagonistic division of society into the corrupt “elites” and the pure and virtuous “people”, both of which are seen as being largely homogeneous in terms of interests, values, and ideology (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 1995; Urbinati, 2019). The ideational approach goes further, emphasizing the *necessarily* moral dimension that is placed on these groups (Mudde, 2004).⁷ As an “empty signifier” (Laclau, 2005), the populist is at liberty to define who the “people” and the “elite” consist of based on the imagined community the leader is attempting to attract to their side and constantly refer to them as a rhetorical device (Mudde, 2004). Like populist rhetoric, conspiracy theories also target powerful forces in our societies and define them according to the Manichean dichotomy of “good” and “evil” (Bergmann, 2018; Hauwaert, 2012; Yla-Antilla, 2018). More quantitative-based studies, such as the

⁵ A conspiracy theory is defined here as a “belief that a number of actors join together in secret agreement, in order to achieve a hidden goal which is perceived to be unlawful or malevolent” (van Prooijen, 2018).

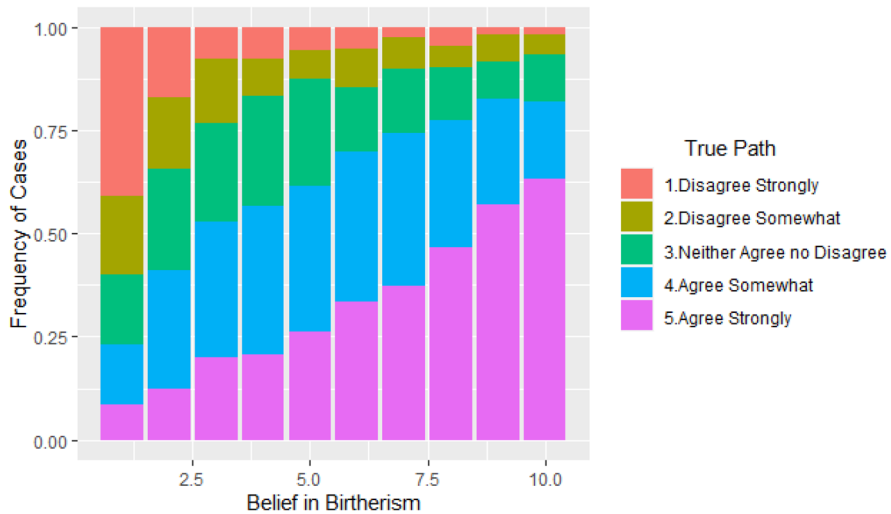
⁶ On the more extreme end, Stoica (2017) and Vassiliou (2017) argue that populism cannot exist without a certain level of conspiracism, though, this is a view that I do not share.

⁷ The ideological approach defines populism as “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people” (Mudde, 2004).

ones performed by Oliver and Rahn (2016) and Castanho Silva et al. (2017), have demonstrated that distrust of elites is also a relevant factor. It is this combination of anti-elitism and Manichaeism that both beliefs share that permits them to join together as a cohesive whole.

Consequently, it should be theoretically possible to merge the two into a consistent narrative which posits the existence of a secret conspiracy which one's political opponents are involved in. The role that conspiracy theories play in what Zúquete (2008) termed "missionary politics" is to provide conspiring forces of evil that are necessary for the creation of a "quasi-religious" narrative wherein the charismatic populist leader leads the "chosen people" on a mission of salvation. While the core of populism is ultimately viewed here as an ideological worldview, it is undeniable that specific characteristics emphasized by the political-strategic approach to populism, such as the un-mediated, uninstitutionalized relationship between the personalist populist leader and their followers, often take place (Weyland, 2001). Due to uninstitutionalized character, the leader must give this bond extraordinary intensity and constantly reaffirm their identity with the movement by attacking "enemies of the people" and mobilizing them for "heroic missions" (Weyland, 2017). The epic confrontation depicted in the conspiracy theory between forces of good and the demonic "counter-church" of political opponents leads followers to place their faith in a charismatic populist leader (Vassiliou, 2017), who is "at the same time the expression, guide and 'savior' of the people" (Taguieff, 2007, p. 10). As moralized attitudes based on notions of "good" and "evil" lead citizens to oppose compromises, punish compromising politicians, and forsake material gains (Ryan, 2016, the populist leader has a core constituency at their disposal that can be easily mobilized against opponents. As Fig. 2 demonstrates, those who believed in birtherism were much more likely to "somewhat" or "strongly" agree that the country "needs a strong, determined leader who will crush evil and take us back to our true path" (ANES Data Center, 2016)

Populism tends to occur during times of fast-paced social, economic, or cultural change with the transformation of society into a "post-industrial" society being cited as a major catalyst for the West's current populist wave (Mickenberg, 2013). Studies have demonstrated that populism arises as the result of a "cultural backlash" in which closely intertwined social and economic changes encourage the "losers" of such changes to revolt against the mainstream (Mickenberg, 2013; Mudde, 2004). A number of psychological studies have pointed to alienated individuals with low trust in other people, feelings of economic or social insecurity, cynicism, and dissatisfaction in the status quo as having higher tendencies to believe in conspiracy theories and support populist candidates (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goertzel, 1994; Miller et al., 2015; Pels, 2012; Volkan, 1985). For them, 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 allowing them to observe a world with perfect order, clarity, and predictability (Bessi & Quattrociocchi, 2015; Goertzel, 1994). Conspiracism



Note: The variable “True path” asks the respondents the following question: “What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil and take us back to our true path”

Fig. 2 Conspiracism and Missionary Politics. Source: Reproduced by the author from ANES Data Center (2016)

in populist politicians, thus, could have the effect of simplifying these complex shifts of socio-economic forces and redirecting that anger at specific individuals (Moffitt, 2016).⁸ Contexts in which the political establishment and institutions are viewed with high levels of mistrust also give rise to appeal for populist candidates (Algan et al., 2017; Jylha et al., 2019; Krasodomski-Jones, 2019). As a result, the relationship between the populist leader and their supporters becomes based on its opposite: trust through faith (Urbinati, 2019). This implies a relationship which is not conducive to public accountability as trust and love for the leader is all that is required in order to support them and disregard any flaws. 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.

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

⁸ This explanatory role is reminiscent of one of Alinsky (1989 [1971]) “rules” which argues that “in a complex, interrelated urban society, it becomes increasingly difficult to single out who is to blame for any particular evil. There is a constant, and somewhat legitimate, passing of the buck. In these times of urbanization, complex metropolitan governments, the complexities of major interlocked corporations, and the interlocking of political life between cities and counties and metropolitan areas, the problem that threatens to loom more and more is that of identifying the enemy. Obviously there is no point to tactics unless one has a target upon which to center the attacks.

audience and avoid the many mainstream media outlets which he holds contempt for.⁹ 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; McLamore & Ulug, 2020). The forms of truth that these claims take are either based in “common sense”, feelings, identity, and general anti-intellectual sentiments (Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Saurette & Gunster, 2011; Wodak, 2015a) or perceived empirical “truths” articulated through scientific language (Yla-Anttila, 2018). These claims can take a conspiratorial turn insofar as their adherents claim their opponents to be hiding the objective “truth” from the people and are used to cast doubt on experts and other “knowledge authorities”. These forms of knowledge permit more thorough analyses such as those involving statistics, to be disregarded with a sleight 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 populist worldview (Kramer, 2017) and, in turn, promote the diffusion of conspiracy theories (Bessi & Quattrociochi, 2015).

The current study, thus, begins by investigating the connection between populism and conspiratorial belief in individuals. If it is the case that populism, and not other characteristics common to conservatism and the radical right, is the reason for the increased tendency to believe in conspiracy theories, one would expect to observe this empirically in individuals. With the theoretical framework set out for the correspondence between populism and belief in conspiracy theories, the first two hypotheses which is expected to be empirically supported is as follows:

H1: Voters are more likely to believe in birtherism if they hold populist attitudes.

H2: Individuals who believe in birtherism were more likely to vote for Trump.

“Othering” and the Populist Radical Right

Donald Trump’s election to the presidency of the USA and the rise in the populist radical right across Europe have many referring back to Hofstadter’s (2008 [1964]) observation of the “Paranoid Style” in politics.¹⁰ While the term was originally attributed to the figures such as Joseph McCarthy, the John Birch Society, and others, it could just as

⁹ By this, I mean to say that Trump largely views those large media outlets such as CNN, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and MSNBC that are more antagonistic to his politics to be fundamentally disingenuous insofar as they publish “fake news” simply to undermine him. At times, even the right-wing outlet Fox News has come under fire from Trump when he publicly chose to skip two Fox News debates over a conflict with one of the moderators and over the years has criticized certain anchors who have disagreed with him (Shafer, 2019, Aug 30).

¹⁰ The reader should note that by using the term “paranoid”, Hofstadter was not making a clinical diagnosis, but instead was attempting to describe the political style of the contemporary radical right.

easily be applied to many of today's radical right-wing populists. The feeling of being "dispossessed" in one's own country leads many to "manufacture the mechanism of history" that explains their own misfortune. Events in history become interpreted not in the form of social facts or causal mechanisms, but instead, as the consequence of one or more person's personal will. For the conspiracist, his enemy must be totally defeated as the struggle is seen in apocalyptic terms as a fight between "good" and "evil".

A large number of studies have demonstrated that specific ideologies tend to have higher tendencies to resort to conspiratorial thinking (Swami, 2012; Wright & Arbutnot, 1974). Historians (Davis, 1971), social scientists (Hofstadter, 2008 [1964]), and psychologists (Adorno et al., 1950) all demonstrate that conspiratorial thinking often plays a central role to ethnocentric and populist authoritarian worldviews in the West. In four studies undertaken by psychologists van Prooijen et al. (2015), political extremism and ideological radicalization were understood to be strong predictors of conspiratorial thinking. This connection has been attributed to extremists "highly structured thinking style that is aimed at making sense of societal events" (Fernbach et al., 2013). In the original study on the "authoritarian personality", the authors reported on specific "nuclear ideas" inherent within the anti-semitic belief system which had a tendency to "pull in" conspiracy theories and "rumors" (Adorno et al., 1950, p. 92–101). In Dobratz and Waldner's (2016) study of the role that conspiracy theories play among two far-right movements, the White Power and Tea Party movement, the authors discovered that overlapping conspiracy theories in adhered to by both camps served as "bridging frames" that provided fertile ground for some of the members of each movement to collaborate with and possibly participate in both movements. In the USA, conservative voters, and especially "extreme conservatives" are much more likely to adhere to certain conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking in general than their liberal and moderate counterparts (van der Linden et al., 2020). Van der Linden et al. (2020) have argued that American conservatism's distrust of scientists, governmental representatives, and the mainstream media renders them more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking.

As opposed to non-believers, conspiracists, who are conceptualized as those who believe in conspiracy theories *sans evidence*, exhibit monological belief systems which "speak only to themselves" instead of "engaging in dialogue with their context" (Goertzel, 1994).¹¹ This assumes that they have "closed" minds. Those with monological thinkers do not look for factual evidence in order to test their beliefs; instead, they resort to ideological arguments. This suggests a systematic way of processing information that accounts for threatening events as being the result of conspiracies by evil-doers (Swami, 2010). Consequently, this means that each belief a conspiracist holds serves as evidence for others. Thus, the more conspiracy theories one believes in, the more likely he will accept another one if proposed to him (Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2010; Van Prooijen et al., 2015).

¹¹ Here, as per Dentith (2018), I intend to differentiate between *conspiracy theorists*, who back their beliefs up with evidence-based arguments, and *conspiracists*, who think ideologically and base their beliefs on emotions instead of evidence.

While populist radical right parties, leaders, and movements differ on a variety of issues, they all converge on central ideological pillars that allow them to be considered a “party family”: authoritarianism, nativism, and populism (Mudde, 2007). The radical right places a strong emphasis on ethnonationalism, rooted in myths of a distant past and making the nation more homogeneous (Rydgren, 2007). The creation of an *ingroup* and *outgroup*, which is standard behavior for any identity building, is said to be of higher importance for the radical right (Geden, 2004; Mudde, 2007; Pelinka, 2005). Given the largely homogenous and limited definition of the ingroup for the radical right, this means that those belonging to the *outgroup* are rather numerous.

During times of economic and social insecurity, or events that result in feelings of fear or uncertainty (such as a national crisis), individuals may feel the need for an “enemy” to be blamed for their problems involving social phenomenon which may be too abstract or complicated to understand (van Prooijen, 2018; Volkan, 1985). Empirical studies provide evidence to the fact that identifying external “enemies” is more effective in regulating stress 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 et al., 2012).

Key to the success of populist radical right candidates is their anti-establishment rhetoric which they use to accuse elites of prioritizing “globalism” and placing their interests above that of the nation. Mudde considers this typology of radical right enemies to be those who are “within the nation and the state” (Mudde, 2007). Common targets of the radical right are multinational corporations, “cosmopolitan elites”, and trans-national organizations such as the European Union which are perceived as instigators of economic globalization which hastens the process of heterogenization and multiculturalism (Betz & Johnson, 2004).

Juxtaposed to those belonging to “the nation” are the foreigners, immigrants, and other minorities which are considered to be the main threat to national identity. To the radical right, immigrants do not migrate, they “invade”. They are perceived as a major causes of crime, unemployment, and immorality and are often scapegoated for abusing the welfare state (Rydgren, 2003). Though the form of the “Other” can change based on national context, Muslims and Arabs are often the most targeted because of the belief that they are least apt to assimilate (Zaslove, 2004). Fears of foreigners, of losing one’s job to migrants or minorities, losing national autonomy, or old traditions and values, and perceived threats to “their nation”, are typically strong predictors for support for radical right parties and politicians (Pels, 2012; van Prooijen & van Dijk, 2014; Van Prooijen & Van Lange, 2014). As Hofstadter (2008 [1965]) noted, this merger of conspiracism and Manichaeism has a radicalizing effect in the modern-day radical right as he begins to see the world in “apocalyptic terms”:

“Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, what is necessary is not compromise but the will to fight things out to the finish. Since the enemy is thought of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated-if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention. This demand

for total triumph leads to the formulation of hopelessly unrealistic goals, and since these goals are not even remotely attainable, failure constantly heightens the paranoid's sense of frustration" (Hofstadter, 2008 [1965]).

An Instrumental View of Conspiracism in Populist Radical Right Candidates¹²

A number of authors have written on the instrumental role that spreading conspiracy theories can play in electoral campaigns (Bergmann, 2018), and though few have successfully demonstrated this with empirical testing (see for example Kim, 2020), little has been done to uncover the precise mechanisms which can provide explanatory power to this relationship. While the purpose and effects of conspiratorial belief differ based on its content and the context in which it exists, the current study will investigate the electoral consequences of a single conspiracy, birtherism, in order to provide evidence of a “rallying” effect which draws voters to the populist candidate. Taking the case of Trump and the “birthers” during the 2016 presidential election, I argue that conspiracy theories can have the effect of rallying voters to cast their ballots for the populist candidate who can position themselves as a defender of the interests of “the people” in the struggle against an “existential evil”.¹³

Assuming certain conspiracy theories mentioned by populist radical right candidates such as Trump can lead to a radicalizing effect in which the individual begins to view the world in Manichean terms, and the “evil” outgroup must be absolutely defeated, this would have the potential for reaping political benefits for said candidate by rallying supporters to their “cause”. Researchers have noted that spreading political discontent (Rooduijn et al., 2016) and disinformation (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020) can bring about positive dividends to populist candidates. Bergmann (2018) has posited that conspiracism in populist candidates allows them to spread fear and distrust, to identify the enemies of the people, and “legitimate the margins”. If a “rallying” effect is to have taken place, whereby conspiratorial narratives persuaded more voters to cast their ballot for the populist, one would expect those voters who were not necessarily inclined to vote for the populist candidate to do so if they believed in

¹² To clarify, when referring to an “instrumental value” for conspiracist narratives, I do not mean to say that Trump or any populist actor is *solely* responsible for its diffusion. Conspiracy theories are largely produced and maintained in common by a whole community of believers, activists, and “spin-doctors”. That being said, political candidates have a certain amount of power to redirect conspiracy theories in certain directions or amplify their message. Mentioning conspiracy theories can signal to their supporters that they are on their side and believe in what they are saying. For others, the fact that a major public official puts into question an official narrative can lead others to consider the merits of the conspiracy theory with less hesitation.

¹³ The 2016 presidential election has become a classic case of the “cultural backlash” over the past decade. (Inglehart & Norris, 2019; Mudde, 2017). By referring to Trump as a “populist radical right” candidate, I am referring to the definition provided by Mudde (2007) which consists of an ideological core based on three central pillars: populism, nativism, and authoritarianism. For reasons of conceptual clarity, however, the Republican Party as a whole should not be considered within this framework as, unlike in many multi-party systems, it serves to provide a “big tent” to a number of factions on the right of the political spectrum.

the conspiracy theory. Voters who believe in birtherism would be more likely to vote for Trump due to a radicalizing effect which causes them to feel that they need to support their candidate at all costs in order to defeat the “Other”. In conservative voters, this feeling of urgency would likely have the effect of rendering them more likely to vote for Donald Trump as opposed to other candidates, whereas for moderate voters, which as the reader will recall consisted of a non-unsubstantial proportion of birthers, would also be attracted to the populist messaging and distrust of mainstream politics implicit in the birther conspiracy theory, thus rendering them more likely to vote for Trump. Thus, I also intend to provide evidence for the following hypotheses:

H2a: Birtherism had the effect of making conservative voters more likely to vote for Trump.

H2b: Birtherism had the effect of making moderate voters more likely to vote for Trump.

Methods and Materials

In order to test the hypotheses concerning the relationship between the birther conspiracy theory and votes for Trump, as well as the “rallying” mechanism responsible for this connection, I apply quantitative methods to 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series Study data (ANES Data Center, 2016). The 2016 ANES survey data includes 1180 face-to-face interviews and 3090 Internet interviews for a total sample size of 4270. The reader should note, though, that not every respondent was asked every question while some respondents refused to answer some questions asked of them, thus resulting in missing observations.

Empirical Approach

The first set of tests intend to parse out the specific effect of the personality traits of voters which render them more prone to believe in birtherism. If it is the case that populism is a relevant factor, as opposed to other characteristics common to the radical right, such as authoritarianism and nativism (Mudde, 2007), then demand factors of populism should also be taken into account. Thus, the first tests investigate the relative strength of populist attitudes on the propensity of a respondent to believe in birtherism, and control for other personality traits demonstrated to be strongly correlated with the conspiracy theory: authoritarianism, racial resentment, and conservatism.

The strategy for identifying a “rallying” mechanism is as follows. The second series of tests will investigate the influence of the “birther” vote during the 2016 Republican Primaries. Given that the Republican Party operates as more of a large-tent coalition of voters (Mieczkowski, 2009), testing of the Primary elections allows one to sift through the base of each candidate and observe which voters were more likely to vote for each candidate. The difference in the social base of Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, for example, is particularly of interest as Ted Cruz originally made a name for himself with the Tea Party wave that swept the country in 2012 and also has a tendency to promote certain right wing-conspiracy theories. That being said, Donald Trump’s political style

heavily focused on promoting the idea that Barack Obama's birth certificate was a fake prior to the 2016 primaries. Thus, if the hypothesis is to be confirmed, a strong positive relationship should be revealed between those who believe in birtherism and votes for Donald Trump. Moreover, while it could logically be contested that the direction of causality could be the inverse, wherein Donald Trump diffuses the birther conspiracy that subsequently leads his base to vote for him, I add an instrumental variable denoting the respondent's subjective "feeling" towards African-Americans in order to demonstrate evidence to the effect that the direction of causality originates with the birther voter who then votes for the candidate that voices their belief in the conspiracy theory. As many studies have demonstrated, those with resentment towards African-Americans were the prime constituency for the birther conspiracy theory to flourish (Jardina & Traugott, 2019). While Donald Trump has a long history of making racially insensitive comments and attacking groups of ethnic, national, and religious minorities, during the election cycle, African-Americans were one of the few groups that seemed to be spared the public racist attacks afforded by the candidate in public. Thus, if it is true that voters who believed in birtherism tended to vote for Donald Trump because of his support for the conspiracy theory and not the other way around, one should expect to see those with negative feelings towards African-Americans correlated negatively with votes for Donald Trump during the primaries.¹⁴

The final set of tests investigate the third and fourth hypotheses by combining the political ideology of the respondent with their level of belief in birtherism into an interaction term. If significant relationships are revealed in the positive direction when belief in birtherism is combined with either moderates, liberals, or conservatives, then birtherism can be said to have been a significant factor in convincing these voter cohorts to vote for Trump. These tests are also performed with party identification in order to provide more robust findings for this connection.

Dependent Variables

The main dependent variable used for the tests involving the primary and general elections, respectively, is "vote for Donald Trump" (Tables 3 and 4). For each of the tests, a dichotomous variable was created wherein a score of 1 represents a vote for the candidate and 0 represents a vote for a different candidate or abstaining from voting.¹⁵ For the tests on primary votes, binary variables were also created for those who voted for Ted Cruz and for John Kasich. By creating separate dichotomous variables for each candidate, one can better observe the effects that the predictor variables have on the choice for said candidate.

¹⁴ It should be noted that while Donald Trump frequently made reference to "Law and Order", a well-known dog-whistle for those with racially resentful sentiments (Drakulich et al., 2019) during the campaign, this became a significant part of his platform in the summer after Republican Primaries as he prepared to face off against Hillary Clinton in the general election. With this in mind, if the call for "Law and Order" and not birtherism per se is to be the explanation for a positive correlation with votes for Trump during the Republican primaries, then one should also expect to observe a similar correlation with votes for Ted Cruz who also campaigned on this issue.

¹⁵ Note that this means that for the primary elections, those who voted for a Democrat are still included in the sample for the Republican primary as a "0" as with those who voted for a Third Party in the General Election.

Also used as a dependent variable in the first series of tests (Table 2) is the ordinal variable denoting belief in birtherism, to be described in the following section.

Independent Variables

As the main explanatory variable used to test for the respondent's belief in birtherism, a composite variable for populist attitudes is added. The concept of "populism" has been notoriously difficult to conceptualize and the underlying theory behind the term necessarily affects which parties, politicians, and movements are included into the category. Given that the conceptual framework for populism, and its connection to conspiracism, rests upon the worldview that populists have, the ideological approach as theorized by Mudde (2004) and others (also see Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018) will serve as the basis for this variable. While the ANES dataset does not include a variable for "populism" per se, a number of variables exist which permit the construction of a general index of populist attitudes. The intention of this variable is to capture the full ideology of populism, as well as its conception of what democracy is, with a particular focus on central aspects such as the binary struggle between the people and elite, as well as their majoritarian, and moralistic beliefs. The first question which was included in the index refers to the belief that the will of the majority should always prevail, as a variable encapsulating populism's exaggerated belief in popular sovereignty. The second variable included asks the respondent how many politicians in government they believe to be corrupt (with the highest value denoting "all of them"), in order to take into account aspects of anti-elitism, as well as the amorality and homogeneity of the elite. The third variable is a question where respondents were asked whether they agreed that "people not politicians should make most important policy decisions" to account for the people-centric view of populists. The fourth variable is a question asking respondents whether they believe that "compromise in politics is selling out on one's principles", which captures the uncompromising zero-sum game between forces of good and evil that populists believe themselves to be engaged in, as well as their anti-pluralist beliefs. The fifth variable included asks respondents whether they believe that "government is run by a few large interests" for aspects of anti-elitism and anti-pluralism. The sixth variable, which asks whether respondents agree that "most politicians do not care about the people", accounts for most, if not all aspects of populist attitudes (homogeneity, anti-elitism, and the antagonism between the two forces, etc.). Finally, for a clear inclusion of a variable denoting belief in politics being a struggle between forces of 'good' and 'evil', I include a variable which asks respondents whether they agree with the following statement: "What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil and take us back to our true path". Each variable was placed on the same scale and then combined to create the variable for populist attitudes.¹⁶ The descriptive statistics for this variable, and others, can be found in Table 5 in the Appendix.

¹⁶ One should note the similarity that most of the components have to questions used in the index created by Akkerman et al. (2014). That said, the final variable added (POP7) also allows for the inclusion of aspects of the political-strategic approach as well.

In terms of votes for Donald Trump, the main independent variable of interest chosen as a predictor for votes for Donald Trump is the one denoting belief in whether or not “Barack Obama is a Muslim”. This variable is an ordinal one and ranges from “1”, meaning that the respondent is “extremely sure Obama is *not* a Muslim”, to “10”, which denotes the respondent being “extremely sure Obama *is* a Muslim”.

As mentioned in the previous section, I add a variable for the respondent’s subjective “feelings” towards African Americans as an instrumental variable to provide evidence for the direction in which the relationship between conspiracist voters and the leader moves in. The respondents are asked “how would you rate blacks?” and then respond with a number from 0 (worst) to 100 (best). As an additional robustness check, the variable for “racial resentment” which aims to measure the underlying negative racial sentiments the respondent has towards African-Americans without triggering a response bias, was included in the [Appendix](#) (see Table 5).

Control Variables

Previous studies have testified to the efficacy of a number of variables in predicting the tendency for a voter to embrace the birther conspiracy. The classical notion of the ‘Authoritarian Personality’ has been shown to correlate strongly with belief in conspiracy theories in the past (Altemeyer, 1996; Bruder et al., 2013; Butler, 2013; Grzesiak-Feldman & Irzycka, 2009; Heaven et al., 2011; Swami, 2012) as well as with birtherism itself in Richey’s (2017) study. This is derived, as Richey explains, from the tendency to suffer from higher levels of anxiety and cognitive difficulties with higher order thinking. The variable used for authoritarianism comes from the ANES dataset and is based on Stenner (2005) and Feldman’s (2003) Social Conformity Autonomy (SCA) scale. The questions included in this scale focus on patterns in parenting in the individual and parse out the respondent’s preferences for either conformity to group norms or individual autonomy. The specificity of the questions can be found in Table 7 in the [Appendix](#).

Another personality trait that has shown to be highly correlated with certain racially based conspiracy theories, especially the birther myth, is that of underlying feelings of racial resentment (Jardina & Traugott, 2019; Pasek et al., 2015; Tesler & Sears, 2010). As the argument goes, conspiracy theory belief is a function of motivated reasoning and their ability to integrate them into the belief system that one is already predisposed to. As Jardina and Traugott (2019) demonstrated in their study, racial resent was a strong and significant predictor for belief in birtherism during the 2012 Presidential Election. As with the SCA scale, this battery of questions used is intended to parse out the respondent’s underlying animus African-Americans by centering in on beliefs of general anti-black affect as well as beliefs that consider African-Americans to not subscribe to the traditional American values associated with the Protestant work ethic (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Sears & Henry, 2005).

Finally, for the Republican primary elections (Table 3), a number of control variables were added which tend to predict votes for conservative candidates in the USA. First, a control for those who believe in *traditional family values*, with 5 denoting the highest level of agreeance, was added. The next variable, to control for antipathy

for undocumented migrants, is a variable denoting belief in *sending back the children of undocumented immigrants* which ranges from “1” to “6” (favor sending them back a great deal). The following control is one for those respondents who believe that *welfare spending should be decreased* which ranges from “1” (increased) to “3” (decreased). A control for a belief that *businesses should be deregulated* has been added which ranges from “0” to “5”. The final control consists of those who believe in the importance of reducing the federal government’s budget deficit. These figures range from “1” for “not at all important” to “5” for “extremely important”.

In addition to the aforementioned controls, a number of general controls were added to all models. These are ideology, age, voter race, gender, income level, education level, and distrust in the federal government. More information about these variables can be found in Table 5 in the [Appendix](#). Finally, approval of Obama was added as the last control for birtherism.

Results

Belief in Birtherism

In Table 2, an OLS multiple regression is performed on the tendency of a respondent to believe in birtherism. In the first column, the individual effect of each individual personality trait and other personal covariates are tested to test the strength of each variable in predicting belief in birtherism. As the results demonstrate, populism, authoritarianism, and racial resentment demonstrate very strong and significant correlations with belief in the conspiracy theory. The beta score on the right hand side of column 1 provides a standardized coefficient for each variable in the model, allowing them to be directly compared with each other. In the first column, the beta figures indicate that both populist attitudes and racial resentment were on par with each other in terms of their particular strength in predicting a respondent who believes in birtherism. These results provide direct evidence for the first hypothesis.

As populism is best described as a “thin-ideology” which cannot exist on its own without a “host ideology”, it is unreasonable to simply test the strength of the variable on its own without also considering it with other characteristics of the radical right worldview. It is these “thick” ideological features which provide the populist “shell” of the conspiracy with its core content (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017). Now that the particular strength of populist attitudes as an explanatory factor for belief in the birther conspiracy theory have been demonstrated to be a strong predictor of belief in birtherism, one should also expect to see populism correlate strongly with the birther conspiracy theory when considered alongside other personality traits and views common to the radical right given that birtherism in itself is not a purely “populist” conspiracy but also a discursive construction of other nativist and authoritarian beliefs as well. These results can be seen in the second, third, and fourth columns. While the variables for authoritarianism and racial resentment do present rather strong beta coefficients when combined with populism, ultimately, the variable for ideology demonstrates the largest beta coefficients when combined with populism. Thus, in brief, these results indicate that not only are populist attitudes a

Table 2 OLS regression on belief in birtherism, analysis of covariates

	Belief in birtherism		(2)		(3)		(4)	
	Coef	Beta	Coef	Beta	Coef	Beta	Coef	Beta
Populist Attitudes	0.920*** (0.125)	0.169	0.273 (0.196)	0.050	-0.030 (0.250)	-0.005	-0.549* (0.277)	-0.101
Populism × Authoritarianism			0.632*** (0.148)	0.134				
Populism × Racial resentment					0.319*** (0.073)	0.190		
Populism × Ideology							0.369*** (0.062)	0.280
Authoritarianism	0.593*** (0.103)	0.127	0.597*** (0.103)	0.128	0.614*** (0.103)	0.132	0.639*** (0.103)	0.137
Ideology (7 = Very Conservative)	0.170*** (0.050)	0.085	0.184*** (0.049)	0.091	0.187*** (0.049)	0.093	0.164*** (0.049)	0.082
Racial Resentment	0.377*** (0.059)	0.170	0.395*** (0.059)	0.178	0.367*** (0.059)	0.165	0.398*** (0.058)	0.179
Distrust the Government	-0.202*** (0.069)	-0.058	-0.200*** (0.068)	-0.057	-0.207*** (0.068)	-0.059	-0.199*** (0.068)	-0.057
Approve of Obama	-0.760*** (0.065)	-0.321	-0.766*** (0.064)	-0.324	-0.757*** (0.064)	-0.320	-0.766*** (0.064)	-0.324
Age	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.009	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.016	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.013	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.020
White	0.520*** (0.157)	0.065	0.408* (0.158)	0.051	0.424*** (0.157)	0.053	0.438*** (0.156)	0.055
Male	-0.285* (0.111)	-0.045	-0.305** (0.111)	-0.048	-0.285* (0.111)	-0.045	-0.284* (0.110)	-0.045
Income (1–28)	-0.019** (0.006)	-0.051	-0.018** (0.006)	-0.048	-0.020** (0.006)	-0.053	-0.020** (0.006)	-0.053
Education (1–16)	-0.018 (0.015)	-0.022	-0.021 (0.015)	-0.025	-0.019 (0.015)	-0.022	-0.024 (0.015)	-0.028
Religiosity (1–4)	0.036 (0.038)	0.017	0.036 (0.038)	0.017	0.035 (0.038)	0.0175	0.029 (0.038)	0.014
Observations	1720			1720				1720
AIC	7703.9			7687.7				7670.7

+ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

particularly prominent explanatory factor for belief in birtherism, but also that when combined with other aspects of the “host-ideology”, together with populism, these factors demonstrate an even stronger correlation with birtherism.

Birtherism and Votes for Donald Trump in the Primary Elections

In Table 3, the results for the tests associated with the Republican primary are displayed. In accordance with the previously stated methodological approach, a logistic regression performed on votes for the populist candidate Donald Trump produces a strong and significant positive relationship with belief in birtherism (see Table 3, model 1). Significant positive relationships can likewise be observed with votes for Trump and the controls for conservatives, the respondents’ age, the respondent’s education level, and the number of guns they own. Moreover, additional positive correlations are witnessed with those respondents who wish to reduce welfare spending and those who favor sending undocumented children back to their country of national origin. Moreover, when the beta coefficients are consulted, the variable for birtherism demonstrates itself to be one of the strongest predictors of a vote for Donald Trump during the primary elections, second only to political ideology.

In models 2 and 3, the results for the other two main contenders for the Republican Primaries are shown. In the case of voters for the candidate closely aligned with the Tea Party, Ted Cruz, the variable for birtherism reveals itself to be statistically insignificant. As for John Kasich, birtherism does reveal a significant result, but in the negative direction. With this, it would seem that those who believed in birtherism were strongly inclined to cast their vote for Donald Trump in the primaries, demonstrating evidence for hypothesis two.

To parse out evidence as to the possible direction in which this mechanism operates, an instrumental variable is added to each model on the far right-hand-side denoting the respondent’s subjective feelings towards blacks. Again, given that Donald Trump did not publicly attack African Americans as a minority group in his campaign speeches during and prior to the primaries in the way that he did Muslims, Mexicans, and women, there is no theoretical reason why the actions of Donald Trump would be responsible for a positive relationship with those who dislike African Americans (at least not any more than Ted Cruz and other “law and order” candidates). However, given the strong correlation between racial resentment and belief in birtherism, the instrumental variable would be able to provide evidence for birthers turning out to vote for Trump due to his sympathy for their “issue”. The results which reveal themselves once the instrumental variable included do in fact present evidence to this point. While those who were more resentful of African Americans tended to vote for Donald Trump, this variable correlates in the opposite direction, thus, indicating that it is not simply the case that Donald Trump spreads the conspiracy to his supporters, but instead, that the supporters of Trump themselves cast their votes for Trump based upon his support for their conspiratorial narratives. Robustness checks have been produced using the variable for racial resentment and can be found in Table 6 in the Appendix.

Table 3 Logistic regression of votes during the 2016 Republican Primary

	(1) Donald Trump				(2) Ted Cruz				(3) John Kasich			
	Coef	z	Beta	Coef	Coef	z	Beta	Coef	Coef	z	Beta	Coef
Belief in Birtherism	0.164*** (0.025)	6.443	1.619		-0.040 (0.041)	-0.987	-0.648		-0.183*** (0.049)	-3.736	-3.168	
Feeling Thermometer: Blacks				-0.006* (0.003)				0.011* (0.005)				0.001 (0.005)
Ideology (7 = Very Conservative)	0.379*** (0.066)	5.701	1.824	0.450*** (0.064)	0.795*** (0.119)	6.656	6.239	0.770*** (0.112)	0.272** (0.105)	2.581	2.286	0.188+ (0.100)
Age	0.023*** (0.004)	5.521	1.375	0.022*** (0.004)	0.007 (0.006)	1.160	0.723	0.004 (0.006)	0.015* (0.007)	2.202	1.527	0.016* (0.006)
White	0.699+ (0.342)	1.896	0.856	0.635* (0.322)	0.762+ (0.636)	1.199	1.637	0.584 (0.563)	1.194+ (0.656)	1.820	2.749	1.281+ (0.654)
Black	-0.731 (0.581)	-1.258	-0.785	-0.927 (0.571)	-0.337 (0.886)	-0.381	-0.590	-0.673 (0.865)	-1.289 (1.117)	-1.155	-2.416	-1.121 (1.114)
Gender (Male = 1)	0.010 (0.139)	0.070	0.017	0.006 (0.135)	-0.303 (0.223)	-1.359	-0.833 (0.215)	-0.361+ (0.215)	0.040 (0.228)	0.177	0.118	0.111 (0.218)
Income (1-28)	-0.004 (0.009)	-0.427	-0.104	-0.006 (0.008)	0.007 (0.015)	0.446	0.293	0.012 (0.014)	0.011 (0.014)	0.775	0.522	0.010 (0.013)
Education (1-16)	0.052** (0.020)	2.632	0.646	0.031+ (0.018)	0.044 (0.031)	1.431	0.896	0.042 (0.029)	0.187*** (0.048)	3.865	4.032	0.196*** (0.046)
Number of Guns	0.025* (0.012)	2.097	0.338	0.023* (0.011)	0.010 (0.022)	0.474	0.223	0.013 (0.019)	0.018 (0.023)	0.794	0.418	0.014 (0.022)
Religiosity (1-4)	-0.007 (0.045)	-0.154	-0.037	0.015 (0.044)	0.269*** (0.075)	3.581	2.293	0.280*** (0.073)	0.105+ (0.075)	1.407	0.960	0.091 (0.073)
Distrust Government	0.084 (0.088)	0.963	0.254	0.124 (0.085)	0.295+ (0.152)	1.944	1.443	0.307* (0.146)	-0.180 (0.142)	-1.263	-0.943 (0.135)	-0.229+ (0.135)
Favor Traditional Family Values	0.155+ (0.081)	1.905	0.671	0.213** (0.078)	0.135 (0.143)	0.943	0.956	0.113 (0.133)	0.081 (0.116)	0.692	0.610	-0.013 (0.110)

Table 3 (continued)

	(1) Donald Trump			(2) Ted Cruz			(3) John Kasich					
	Coef	z	Beta	Coef	z	Beta	Coef	z	Beta	Coef		
Send Undocu- mented Children Back	0.118** (0.040)	2.937	0.619	0.151*** (0.039)	1.070 (0.065)	1.070	0.070 (0.062)	-0.151+ (0.088)	-1.725	-1.380 -0.176* (0.083)		
Reduce Welfare Spending	0.545*** (0.133)	4.091	1.394	0.547*** (0.131)	0.236 (0.224)	1.053	0.984	0.150 (0.207)	0.451* (0.207)	2.180	2.011	0.344+ (0.196)
Deregulate Businesses	0.041 (0.094)	0.439	0.114	0.082 (0.092)	0.269+ (0.157)	1.706	1.212	0.299* (0.151)	0.302+ (0.165)	1.825	1.460	0.236 (0.156)
Reduce the Deficit	0.107 (0.094)	1.133	0.329	0.151 (0.092)	0.373* (0.178)	2.098	1.873	0.368* (0.173)	0.114 (0.148)	0.772	0.615	0.137 (0.144)
Observations	3104			3207	3104		3207	3104				3207
AIC	1,535.053			1,633.5	710.919		751.85	746.550				799.76

Birtherism, Political Ideology, and Party Identification

As discussed in the theoretical section, belief in birtherism, as with many other conspiracy theories is not solely exclusive to the political right. Both Richev (2017) and Jardina and Traugott (2019) noted that during the 2012 elections, even a significant amount of Democratic voters were believers in the conspiracy theory. The same observation could be made about the constituency for birtherism in the 2016 election. As with Richev (2017) and Jardina and Traugott's (2019) studies, indeed, a significant number of independents and Democratic voters who do not feel so attached to the party can be found on the far right-hand side of the spectrum of birther beliefs (see Fig. 3). As the upper-graphic demonstrates, many of these voters have more ideologically moderate views than liberal ones.

As Fig. 4 demonstrates, as respondents of all party loyalties increase in their belief in birtherism, we can also observe a related increase in populist attitudes, feelings of racial resentment, and authoritarianism. Independents tended to have much higher scores of populism, racial resentment, and authoritarianism, on par with conservative voters.

Thus, it is clear that birtherism is present among those in the center of the political spectrum with similar covariates to the conservative birthers. In Table 4, tests are performed to determine whether their belief in birtherism was a significant predictor of votes for Donald Trump during the 2016 General Election when he faced off against the Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton.

In model 1, all control variables are added so as to observe the statistical correlation with votes for Donald Trump generally. Nothing here is surprising as each political ideology correlated with votes for Donald Trump as expected. The variable for moderate voters demonstrated an insignificant result. In models 2–3, the variables for moderates and conservatives are considered in an interaction term with birtherism which produce the expected results. Moderates who believe in birtherism were statistically more likely to vote for Donald Trump. Furthermore, the now statistically significant negative correlation between moderates in general and votes for Donald Trump seems to indicate that the previously insignificant result in model 1 was a result of this split in the vote between birthers and non-birthers. In model 3, conservative birthers demonstrate a significantly negative correlation. In models 4–6, the interaction term with belief in birtherism is now combined with the respondent's party affiliation. As the results demonstrate, strong positive relationships were revealed with the interaction terms for Democratic and independent voters and votes for Donald Trump. One would do well to notice that upon adding the interaction term, the coefficient for Democratic and independent voters in general both become more statistically negative than the other models. In model 6, as with conservative voters, Republican birthers also demonstrate a statistically negative relationship with votes for Donald Trump. Finally, in model 7, the ideological variable is flipped, with 1 denoting a 'very conservative' respondent and 7 denoting a 'very liberal' respondent, and demonstrates a strong and statistically significant positive relationship. The results demonstrated here provide clear support to the second hypothesis (and H2a). Not only was belief in birtherism more likely to influence voters to cast their ballot for Donald Trump, but belief

Table 4 Logistic regression of votes for Trump during the General Election

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Birtherism	0.215***	0.170***	0.276***	0.215***	0.285***	0.140***	-0.05 (-0.056)
Liberal	-1.232***	-1.245***	-1.115***				
Moderate	-0.241 (-0.211)	-0.644**	-0.263 (-0.212)				
Conservative	0.663***	0.697***	1.177***				
Democrat				-1.496***	-1.393***	-2.635***	-0.31 (-0.31)
Independent				0.065 (-0.212)	-0.232*	-0.240*	-0.126 (-0.126)
Republican				1.400***	2.176***	1.398***	-0.168 (-0.168)
Ideology [7 = Very Liberal]							-1.225*** (-0.094)
Age	0.015***	0.015***	0.016***	0.021***	0.022***	0.022***	0.016*** (-0.003)
White	0.964***	0.939***	0.948***	0.694***	0.680***	0.695***	0.961*** (-0.202)
Black	-1.448***	-1.447***	-1.450***	-0.843***	-0.854**	-0.868**	-1.451*** (-0.347)
Male	-0.048 (-0.102)	-0.06 (-0.102)	-0.066 (-0.102)	0.001 (-0.106)	-0.028 (-0.106)	-0.031 (-0.106)	-0.063 (-0.102)
Income	0.023***	0.024***	0.025***	0.016**	0.017***	0.017***	0.024*** (-0.006)
Education	0.006 (-0.014)	0.007 (-0.014)	0.007 (-0.014)	-0.004 (-0.015)	-0.004 (-0.015)	-0.005 (-0.015)	0.005 (-0.014)
Number of Guns in Household	0.052***	0.052***	0.052***	0.046***	0.047***	0.047***	0.052*** (-0.014)
Religiosity	0.140***	0.137***	0.140***	0.170***	0.172***	0.166***	0.137*** (-0.033)
Birtherism × Moderate		0.091**					
Birtherism × Conservative			-0.088***				
Birtherism × Independent				-0.058 (-0.037)			

Table 4 (continued)

Vote for Donald Trump in the 2016 General Election						
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Birtherism × Republican						
Birtherism × Democrat						
Birtherism × Ideology						
Constant					−0.145*** (−0.038)	0.242*** (−0.045)
Observations	3149	3149	3149	3157	3157	3157
Log Likelihood	−1260.951	1257.663	−1250.618	1169.625	−1163.495	−1155.902
Akaike Inf. Crit	2547.902	2543.326	2529.235	2367.250	2354.990	2339.804
						0.077*** (−0.015)
						0.398 (−0.456)
						1251.484
						2526.968

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$

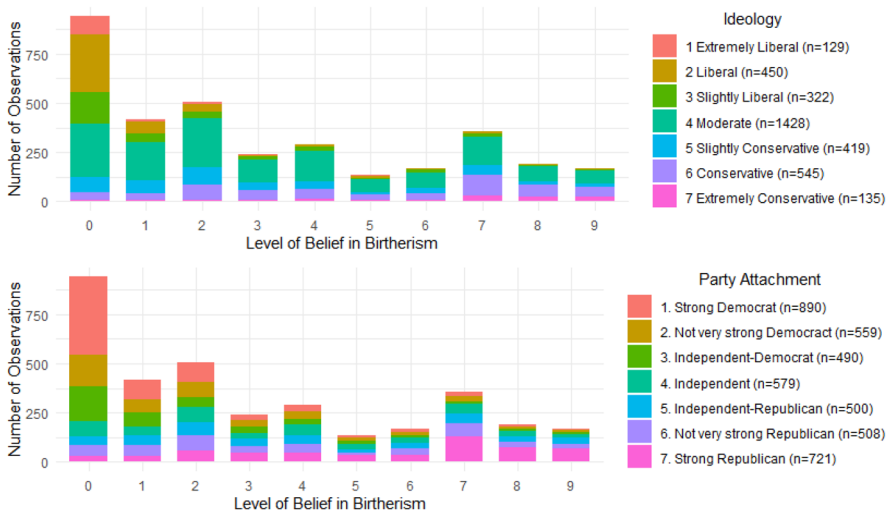


Fig. 3 Party attachment and ideological make-up of the “birthers”, absolute figures. Source: Reproduced from ANES Data Center (2016)

in the conspiracy theory also ‘rallied’ other voters who would otherwise have been disinclined to vote for him; Democratic and independent voters. (See Fig. 5).

Despite the fact that Republican and conservative voters are more represented on the far right-hand side of the birther scale, both variables demonstrated

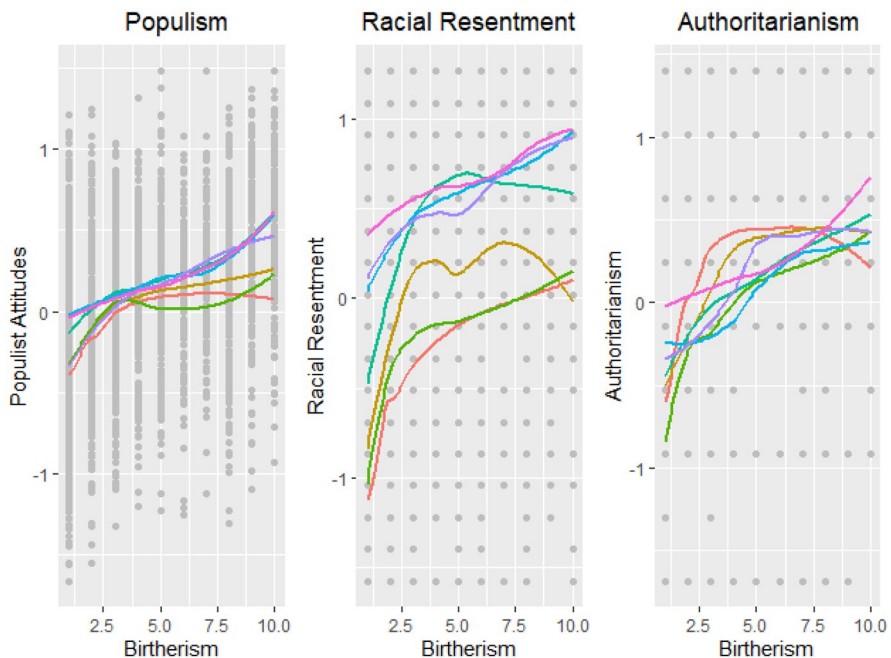


Fig. 4 Birtherism, covariates of birtherism, and party attachment. Source: Reproduced from ANES Data Center (2016)

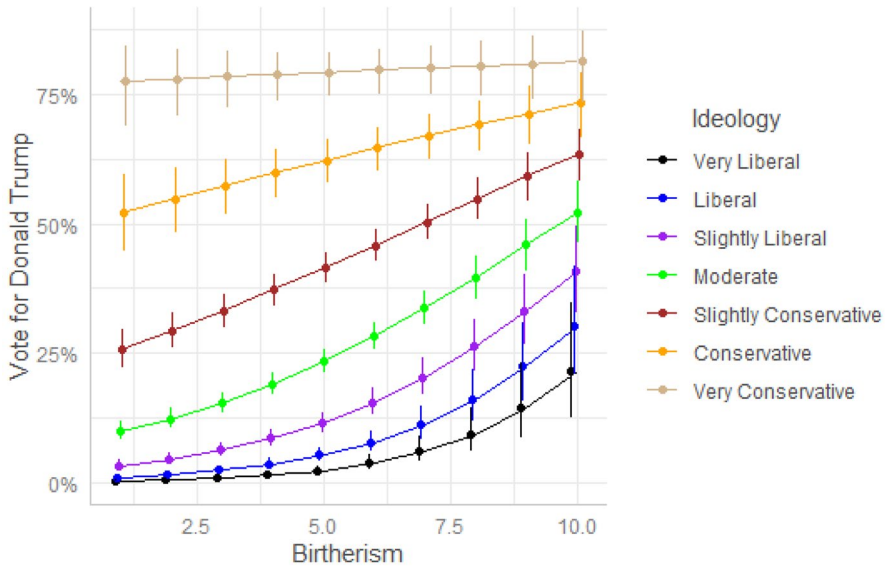


Fig. 5 Predicted probabilities of the effect of birtherism on votes for Donald Trump. *Note:* The results displayed are from Table 4, model 7

statistically negative relationships with votes for Donald Trump in the general election. This would seem to indicate that while Republican voters and birthers on their own were strong predictors of a vote for Donald Trump, birtherism in Republican voters does not tend to increase the likelihood of an individual voting for Trump. This would seem to be due to a “plateau effect” where both indicators, conservatism and Republicans party adherents, are already strongly correlated with votes for Trump no matter where they lie on the birther scale and thus would not be strongly affected by a conspiracy theory such as birtherism. Thus, support for H2b cannot be demonstrated by these tests. Belief in birtherism, in these tests, does not make a conservative or Republican voter statistically more likely to vote for Trump when other factors are controlled for.

Discussion

The results of the previously performed tests suggest a strong positive relationship between respondents who believe in birtherism, the conspiracy that alleges that Barack Obama is not a natural-born citizen and is secretly a Muslim, and votes for Donald Trump. As mentioned earlier, Trump is alleged to have propagated the conspiracy in order to retain “a consistent group of supporters” (Richardson, 2018). By way of demonizing a president that many conservative voters resented, and positioning himself as a “defender” of “the people” against an alleged “outsider” bent on “destroying their way of life”, Trump was able to rally a significant number of supporters during both the Republican Primaries when facing off

against other Republican candidates and the General Election when facing off against his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton.

The tests performed in the previous sections indeed provide strong evidence to the fact that a “mobilizing effect” had taken place. In Table 3, tests were performed for votes during the 2016 Republican Primary for Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and John Kasich. When all controls are added, one finds that those who believed in birtherism were much more likely to vote for Donald Trump than any other candidate, confirming the findings in other studies (Sawyer, 2020). It is interesting to note that the strength of this correlation is only second to the strength of the variable denoting ideology (with “very conservative” being the highest value). While all three candidates had a high tendency of attracting conservative voters to vote for them, it seems that the birther issue was a particular way for Donald Trump to stand out from the crowd and emphasize his conservative bona fides to voters. Moreover, the instrumental variable for the respondent’s feelings towards African Americans indicate that this mechanism may originate from the birthers, who came upon their beliefs from traditional and social media actors as well as Trump himself and supported Donald Trump due to his support for this narrative.

The results produced in the tests in Table 4 confirm these findings. During the General Election, Democratic voters, independents, and ideological moderates were much more likely to vote for Donald Trump if they were adherents to the birther conspiracy theory. As Fig. 3 demonstrates, this was not a small and insignificant group of voters who were ‘rallied’ to vote for Trump as political moderates were nearly as numerous as conservatives on the higher-end of the birther scale. On the other hand, while conservatives and Republican party voters also tended to believe in birtherism at much higher rates, those who did believe in birtherism at the time of the 2016 general election were not more likely to vote for Trump than Republicans or birthers by themselves. Thus, the principal result that can be extrapolated from this study is that while birtherism was a strong predictor of a vote for Donald Trump, belief in the conspiracy theory was influential in turning more moderate voters to vote for Donald Trump than conservative voters. This tends to lend credence to Bergmann’s (2018) position who argues that conspiracism in populist candidates allows them to rally a support base by “legitimizing the margins”.

Finally, in an effort to demonstrate that populist attitudes, as theorized in the previous sections, were relevant factors in predicting the respondent’s tendency to adhere to birtherism, an index of populist attitudes was constructed and compared with several other factors that have been demonstrated to be statistically significant explanatory variables for belief in birtherism: feelings of racial resentment and authoritarianism (Richey, 2017; Jardina & Traugott, 2019). In Table 2, the results demonstrated that among all of the variables added to the model, populist attitudes were strongly correlated with belief in birtherism. That said, given that birtherism is a conspiracy theory prominent to the right of the political spectrum, populism, as a thin-ideology, is not the sole factor explaining these beliefs. This was demonstrated with interaction terms which demonstrated stronger effects when combined with racial resentment, authoritarianism, and ideological conservatism. Thus, it should be made clear that while populist attitudes *alone* are not responsible for a voter’s belief in birtherism they still form a prominent underlying component of these beliefs.

Conclusion

The 2016 presidential election was a pivotal point in time in which the “fringe” triumphed over the political mainstream. Donald Trump, who amplified the discourse of the far right, also brought with him his collection of conspiracy theories, such as birtherism, the belief that Barack Obama is secretly a Muslim born in another country. As several scholars have reported, many American voters saw the ascension of Barack Obama, a liberal African-American, in very apocalyptic terms. As a result, for them, America was “at a crossroads” during the 2012 and 2016 elections, which were seen as the last chances to “take the country back” (Mudde, 2017). Donald Trump gave oxygen to this conspiracy theory by publicly advocating for it at a time when it still remained outside of the mainstream political discourse. The current study investigates the relevancy of Trump advocacy for birtherism during the 2016 presidential campaign and whether it was important to having voters turn out to vote for him.

The central argument I claim in this study is that by constantly referring to the birther conspiracy, Donald Trump was able to generate a narrative which harnessed these apocalyptic feelings among many American voters in order to position himself as a “defender of the people”. In a way similar to Zuquete’s (2008) “missionary politics”, this conspiracy theory helped furnish a narrative which justified Donald Trump’s mission of salvation on behalf of the “American people”. The results of these tests, indeed testify to a strong connection between those who believe in birtherism and votes for Donald Trump. This can be observed in the primary elections when Trump gathered the most support of any Republican candidate (including Tea Party candidates such as Ted Cruz) from the birthers, and the general election, when those who were not necessarily predisposed to vote for Trump tended to vote for Trump at higher rates due to their belief in birtherism. These results are the principal contribution to the literature on populist candidates’ usage of conspiratorial narratives demonstrated by this study. Moreover, tests were also created to investigate which ideological cohorts were “mobilized” through this form of communication. The results testify to a much higher tendency for more ideologically moderate voters to vote for Trump given their belief in birtherism and a lower tendency for conservative birthers to do so which demonstrates evidence of the effect of the mainstreaming of far-right beliefs among voters.

Moreover, this study tests the relevance of populist attitudes in voters to belief in conspiracy theories such as birtherism which showed to be strongly correlated with them. On its own, though, populism as a “thin-centered” ideology cannot provide a full worldview for the respondent (see Mudde, 2004), and as such, only portrays half of the picture related to the background characteristics predicting belief in birtherism. Instead, when combined in an interaction term with other ideological components common to the populist radical right such as authoritarianism and racial resentment, the subsequent correlation was much stronger. That said, given the strong tendency for populist attitudes to correlate with birtherism, it is likely that they may go further in explaining other conspiratorial views beyond those held by the populist radical right.

A limitation of this study involves the direction of causality concerning the strong correlation between votes for Donald Trump and birthers. In Table 3, the use of an instrumental variable indicated that voters who believed in birtherism

tended to vote for Donald Trump due to his support for the narrative. That said, past studies, such as the one performed by Rooduijn et al. (2016), have demonstrated that there is a certain amount of simultaneity in the relationship between voters who are discontent with mainstream politics and support for populist politicians; in their words, populists both fuel and express voters' discontent. It seems rather likely that the same effect could occur with conspiracy theories as well, especially considering that, in the case at hand, Donald Trump played a significant role in propagating the conspiracy theory on Twitter and mainstream media outlets as far back as 2012 (Klinkner, 2014). Due to the fact that the ANES dataset is not set-up as a longitudinal study with the same respondents included in the survey for each election cycle, the necessary tests to account for this plausible scenario could not be accounted for. By all measures, this would be a promising direction for future research.

Appendix

Table 5 Descriptive Statistics

	Min/Max	Mean	Median	Standard deviation
Populist Attitudes	−1.6632/1.4803	0.0349	0.0349	0.5374392
Authoritarianism	0/2	1.093	1	0.648736
Ideology (7 = Very Conservative)	1/7	4.137	4	0.648736
Racial Resentment	1/5	3.218	3.500	1.402787
Approve of Obama	1/4	2.478	3	1.309105
Age	18/90	49.58	50	17.57779
White	0/1	0.7991	1	0.4007478
Black	0/1	0.1094	0	0.3121365
Male	0/1	0.4653	0	0.4988556
Income (1–28)	0/27	14.38	15	8.211544
Education (1–16)	0/16	10.32	10	3.781138
Religiosity (1–4)	0/4	1.501	1	1.561577
Belief in Birtherism	1/10	4.096	3	2.942622
Feeling Thermometer: Blacks	0/100	68.44	70	21.17313
Number of Guns	0/90	1.402	0	3.915599
Party Affiliation [7 = Strong Republican)	0/7	3.848	4	1.384534
Distrust Government	0/5	3.552	4	0.8985364
Favor Traditional Family Values	0/5	1.384534	4	1.384534
Send Undocumented Children Back	1/6	2.339	2	1.55983
Reduce Welfare Spending	0/2	1.275	1	0.7605999
Deregulate Businesses	0/4	2.011	2	0.8204059

Table 6 Binomial regression on votes for Donald Trump in the Republican Primary Elections

	(1) Donald Trump Coef	(2) Ted Cruz Coef	(3) John Kasich Coef
Racial Resentment	0.262* (0.104)	-0.033 (0.175)	-0.053 (0.173)
Ideology (7=Very Conservative)	0.347*** (0.080)	0.677*** (0.147)	0.336* (0.147)
Number of Guns	0.001* (0.017)	0.019 (0.026)	0.024 (0.031)
Religiosity (1–4)	-0.066 (0.057)	0.407*** (0.099)	0.048 (0.107)
Distrust Government	0.190+ (0.109)	0.328+ (0.195)	-0.428* (0.188)
Favor Traditional Family Values	0.239* (0.100)	0.217 (0.192)	-0.086 (0.154)
Send Undocumented Children Back	0.063 (0.049)	0.077 (0.079)	-0.263* (0.130)
Reduce Welfare Spending	0.418* (0.168)	0.452 (0.322)	0.508+ (0.301)
Deregulate Businesses	0.019 (0.112)	0.379* (0.193)	-0.035 (0.214)
Reduce the Deficit	0.177 (0.121)	0.385 (0.239)	0.050 (0.211)
Observations	1751	1751	1751
AIC	993.23	437.79	408.25

Not displayed, yet included in this model, are the controls for Age, White, Black, Male, Income, and Education

+ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Table 7 The three scales compared

Populism scale	Racial resentment	Authoritarianism
POP1 The will of the majority should always prevail	RR1 'Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.'	Auth1 Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: Independence or respect for elders?
POP2 How many in government are corrupt?	RR2 'Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.'	Auth2 Which one is more important for a child to have: Curiosity or good manners?
POP3 People not politicians should make most important policy decisions	RR3 'Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.'	Auth3 Which one is more important for a child to have: Being considerate or well behaved?
POP4 Compromise in politics is selling out on one's principles	RR4 'It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough, if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.'	Auth4 Which one is more important for a child to have: Obedience or self-reliance?

Table 7 (continued)

Populism scale	Racial resentment	Authoritarianism
POP5 Is government run by a few big interests or for the benefit of all?		
POP6 Most politicians do not care about the people		
Pop7 What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil and take us back to our true path		

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