

# The Elite Is Up to Something: Exploring the Relation Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories\*

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## Abstract

We explore the relationship between populist attitudes and conspiratorial beliefs on the individual level with two studies using American samples. First, we test whether and what kinds of conspiratorial beliefs predict populist attitudes. Our results show that belief in conspiracies with greedy, but not necessarily purely evil, elites are associated with populism. Second, we test whether having a conspiratorial mentality is associated with all separate sub-dimensions of populist attitudes – people-centrism, anti-elitism, and a good-versus-evil view of politics. Results show a relation only with the first two,

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\*The final version of this paper has been published in the *Swiss Political Science Review*, doi: [10.1111/spsr.12270](https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12270). This is the resubmitted version, one before the final accepted. Changes in relation to the published version are minor.

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confirming the common tendency of both discourses to see the masses as victims on elites' hands. These findings contribute to research on the correlates of populism at the individual level, which is essential to understanding why this phenomenon is so strong in contemporary democracies.

*Would it be weird if they had developed a technology to inoculate cancer, and nobody knew it until now? That people would only find out in fifty or God knows how many years? I don't know, I just leave you with the reflection.*

*Hugo Chavez, December 28, 2011.*

## 1 Introduction

In December 2011, upon learning that Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner had been diagnosed with cancer, Hugo Chavez invited his followers into reflection. What were the odds, he asked, that so many left-wing Latin American leaders would discover they had cancer in such a short period of time? In 2009 the disease had hit Brazil's then presidential candidate Dilma Rousseff. In 2010 it was Paraguay's President Lugo's turn, followed in 2011 by Brazil's former President Lula da Silva, Kirchner, and Chavez himself. Could it be just a coincidence? Or was it not much more likely that a certain *someone*, who felt challenged by these leaders, had developed a machine capable of inducing cancer from long distance, and was doing so against those who threatened their interests?

Populism and conspiratorial reasoning often walk hand-in-hand. As textbook definitions put it, the elites are seen by populists as "one homogeneous corrupt group

that works against the ‘general will’ of the people [...] some shadowy forces that continued to hold on to illegitimate powers to undermine the voice of the people” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013: 503). This kind of narrative is typical of many conspiracy theories as well. As Sutton and Douglas (2014: 256) maintain, “[t]o believe in any conspiracy theory is to believe that authorities can be malevolent, that they can conceal their evil-doing, and that official explanations for major events may be lies”.

Not surprisingly, authors on populism have described the way that such politicians paint their opponents as an elite conspiracy (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Hawkins, 2009; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), and sometimes openly make use of specific conspiracy theories around certain events. Albertazzi (2007) mentions how radical right-wing parties in Italy often present immigrant groups as ready to “create unholy coalitions to ruin law-abiding citizens” (336). Wysocka (2013) points that Polish national-populists were quick in finding conspiratorial explanations for the airplane crash that killed president Lech Kaczynski in 2010, pointing to a “Masonic conspiracy against the PiS party” (307). Donald Trump was one of the loudest voices in the “birther” movement, which claimed that Barack Obama’s birth certificate was fraudulent and that he was not an American citizen.

In spite of the many examples reported in the literature, the relation between conspiracy beliefs and populism has never been analyzed systematically. Although many researchers seem to imply that populist anti-elitism is borderline conspiratorial, there is a lack of theories or empirical investigations on the topic. What are the psychological underpinnings that the two attitudes have in common, if any? What

kind of conspiracy theories are more likely to be accepted by populist thinkers? This discussion is the subject of this paper. Using two surveys conducted through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, we investigate if and how populism is related to different facets of belief in conspiracy theories. We hypothesize that a conspiratorial way of thinking, which splits the world into evil conspirators and impotent victims, can explain the endorsement of a populist worldview, especially on its anti-elitist and Manichaeian aspects. We also look at common correlates of both constructs and potential exogenous predictors to see how these two are connected. As the results show, even though belief in different conspiracies tend to go together, some kinds are more relevant for those with populist tendencies.

## 2 Those up there

### 2.1 Populism Defined

Populism is recognized as having at least two identifiable core characteristics – it emphasizes the central role of ‘the people’ in politics, and is heavily critical of ‘the elite’ (Canovan, 1981; Hawkins, 2010; Mudde, 2007) – whoever comes to fit these two broad groups in each context (Panizza, 2005). These are two dimensions that can be identified in populist movements across regions and times (Rooduijn, 2014) and, in fact, are jointly necessary for a discourse to be considered populist (Hawkins, 2009). The ‘appeal to the people’ is the most important characteristic, and has been most often discussed. ‘The people’ is an inherently ambiguous concept, as there usually is no specific definition of who is in and out (Mudde, 2004: 545-6). It may well refer to

the whole electorate or only a part of it (Taguieff, 2007: 176), or it may be determined by class or nationality (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Mény and Surel, 2004). The ‘people’ is associated with all things positive – they carry the image of a ‘heartland’, characterized by the virtues of honest, hard-working folk (Taggart, 2000). Drawing on democratic ideals, the people also ought to govern, and populists have frequently promised to give the government back to the people (Canovan, 2005: 29). In other words, populist rhetoric has a strong emphasis on popular sovereignty, and on the idea of a ‘general will’ that is not being heard by those in power (Canovan, 1999; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

Here is where the second part of populism comes into play: the elites who seized power for their own benefit. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013: 502) note, not so many have theorized about the meanings of ‘elites’ in populism, except for knowing that the distinction is primarily moral, between *them* as corrupt forces and ‘*we*’, the pure people. The elite may be found, depending on the context, dominating politics, economics, culture, media, or the judiciary (Rooduijn, 2014: 4). In all narrations, the elite has captured the state and uses it for pursuing its own egoistic interests at the expense of ordinary people. As a consequence, there is a call for liberation and systemic change, through which politics may be purged from the evil minority that took it over by subverting democracy and popular rule (Hawkins, 2009: 1044).

Considering how power is concentrated in the political and economic spheres in modern democracies, it is not surprising that those are the favorite targets of contemporary populists. In politics, all parties are charged with having turned into an oligarchy with no difference from one another, alienating people and hollowing

the meaning of real democracy (Mouffe, 2005: 64). This makes it necessary for a new, truly popular kind of party to appear (Mudde, 2004: 546). Moreover, when populists are in opposition, economic and political elites are painted as a coalition – often, politicians are puppets in the hands of big business, national or international (Hawkins, 2009). When populists are in power, on the other hand, economic elites are then associated with opposition parties as a subversive group who wants to illegitimately depose a popular government. This group is then blamed for all failures that might befall the populist administration (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013: 504). In the case of populists in government, independent media is also often included in the unholy elite coalition, what leads to repeated cases of attacks on media freedom by populist governments (Levitsky and Loxton, 2013).

It is important to highlight that the division between people and elites in populist discourse is primarily moral (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). That is why Hawkins (2010) refers to as it being a *Manichaeian* discourse, or a good-versus-evil understanding of politics. The people not only should rule because of democratic principles, but because it embodies noble values. Elites not only should be removed from power because it is unfair that a small group rule politics on its own, but because they are the embodiment of evil. These three aspects: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichaeian outlook are what Castanho Silva et al. (2013) identify as the core psychological dimensions of populist attitudes among the masses.

## 2.2 Populism and conspiracy theories

For decades, conspiracy theories have captured the interest of social scientists from diverse areas, and more recently this interest has reached political scientists. Depending on the outlook of their disciplines, scholars have focused on different aspects of conspiracy theories. One is their logical structure, or rhetorical style (Byford, 2014). In this view, conspiracies are accounts of events that tend to favor some specific narratives, or patterns, over others. First, they tend to explain observable facts, often complex and disconnected to one another, as the consequence of the deliberate will of a group of people (Bale, 2007; Clarke, 2002). In this way, conspiracy theories reduce the complexity of social and political phenomena to monistic and intrinsically deterministic explanations. The necessary assumption for such explanations to be valid is that the people responsible for observed events, the *elites*, are granted infinite power. This leads to the second rhetorical element: because of the secrecy and almightiness of the elites perpetrating conspiracies, such theories are unfalsifiable. Every attempt to deny a conspiracy theory can be turned into evidence for its pervasiveness, which factors into the perception of the conspirators' genius and power (Keeley, 1999). As a consequence, the mind of the conspiracy theorist can hardly be changed, and surely not on mere logical grounds. These two elements, namely the ideation of hidden plots behind social events and the suspiciousness with which alternative accounts are regarded, have prompted historians to define conspiracy thinking as a form of collective *paranoia* (Hofstadter, 1996).

Given these premises, some scholars have been trying to explain why certain people believe in conspiracy theories in the first place. An important group of accounts

looks at the dispositional traits that might make individuals more likely to believe in conspiracies. Some relevant factors that have been found to predict conspiracy theory belief are authoritarianism (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999), feelings of powerlessness, low interpersonal trust, anomie (Goertzel, 1994), uncertainty (Van Prooijen and Jostmann, 2013), a tendency to believe in paranormal or supernatural forces (Brotherton et al., 2013; Bruder et al., 2013), and, more importantly for our discussion, a preference for Manichaeic narratives, which reduce events to a struggle between the good and the evil (Oliver and Wood, 2014). These are also typical of the populist worldview (Hawkins, 2009, 2010), establishing a first common factor between the two phenomena.

Another perspective views conspiracy belief as a form of motivated reasoning driven by some latent core attitudes. The starting point is the robust finding that believing in one conspiracy theory is strongly related to believing in *other* conspiracy theories, even when they contradict each other (Wood et al., 2012) or are simply made up (Swami et al., 2011). In other words, conspiracy believers do not seem to evaluate specific stories in their own merit, but they rather tend to accept the whole package (Brotherton et al., 2013). This suggests that belief in conspiracies might work as a monological worldview, or *belief system*, in which individual beliefs reinforce one another in a coherent narrative, not different from a political ideology (Converse, 1964; Goertzel, 1994).

But what is the common factor underlying such a system? In the case of political ideologies, it has been shown that some core values with respect to inequality and social change guide people's evaluations of policy issues (Jost, 2006). In the case



of conspiracy thinking, it has been suggested that the common factor behind the acceptance of individual theories be called “deceptive officialdom”, namely “the idea that authorities are engaged in motivated deception of the public” (Wood et al., 2012: 768). This idea might act as a compass for people to evaluate the credibility of a story: when it implies that elites are the hidden perpetrators of some malfeasance, it is likely to be true. In this perspective, people are motivated to accept new conspiracy theories when they meet them, as the opposite would imply questioning a more deeply-rooted belief.<sup>1</sup>

This view draws an even stronger connection between belief in conspiracy theories and populism. As Mark Fenster points out, conspiracies proliferate in an environment where there is “the extreme – indeed, ultimate – skepticism of the political sphere by a sector of the population that feels excluded” (Fenster, 1999: 71). Believing in conspiracies requires the conviction that the only thing politicians can do is being deceptive and plotting secret plans for a global takeover (Fenster, 1999: 71). Such a cynical and dissatisfied view of political institutions and their functioning is also associated with preference for populist parties (Doyle, 2011). In fact, such parties often use a conspiratorial tone to describe their opponents (Hawkins, 2009), and in broader terms, their discourse is often described as ‘conspiracist’ (Vossen, 2010). Some populist groups have even contributed to the diffusion of conspiracy

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<sup>1</sup>Note that also other factors have been argued to underlie the belief in different conspiracies. For instance, Oliver and Wood (2014) find that people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories when the alleged conspirators belong to the adversary political groups. In general, as Sutton and Douglas (2014) point out, there are different mechanisms that hold beliefs in conspiracy together, many of which are plausible and not even mutually exclusive. We focus here on the mistrust for the authority as it seems to be one of the most salient common threads across different studies and disciplines.

theories in the U.S. (Ostler, 1995; Postel, 2007), as some radical-right parties did in Europe (Betz, 2013; Rydgren, 2004; Wysocka, 2013).

The worldviews of conspiracy theories and populism are very similar. They both present (or demand) simple narratives with two well defined sides, separated on moral grounds. They see conspirators controlling society, with more resources and willpower, and ordinary people as their victims. Moreover, they both seem to be rooted in general animosity toward anything official. This leads us to expect a correlation between the two which does not necessarily indicate a causal connection, at least at the attitudinal level.<sup>2</sup> These are similar worldviews which seem distinct manifestations – one political, one broader about society –, of some of the same underlying dispositions.

Furthermore, while there are clear similarities, the two are not the same phenomenon. Populist attitudes are widespread across democracies, with high levels of agreement in public opinion surveys (Van Hauwaert et al., 2016). Belief in, and endorsement of conspiracy theories is popular but not so common: in one American sample, for example, from a list of well-known conspiracy theories, the most endorsed still draws only 25% of respondents to agree with it (Oliver and Wood, 2014: 956). It is important to investigate, therefore, at which specific points these two attitudes converge.

For that, we follow Brotherton et al. (2013) in first separating conspiracy belief

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<sup>2</sup>The direction of causality could potentially go both ways, with one reinforcing the other, or not exist at all, with both being caused by a same antecedent factor. Since this is an initial exploratory study, in which given our data we cannot test causal directions, we refrain from theorizing at length about these possibilities. In the conclusion we revisit this topic to discuss potential venues of further research.

into various facets. While belief in one conspiracy does predict belief in others, it is still possible and valuable to recognize that they come in meaningfully different groupings. For example, some talk about extraterrestrial cover-up, while others focus on criminal actions by national governments. Not all are expected to have the same appeal for populists. The five conspiracy facets identified by [Brotherton et al. \(2013: 6\)](#) are: a) Government Malfeasance (GM), in which governments commit secret criminal and terrorist acts against its own citizens; b) Malevolent Global conspiracies (MG), which depict small global elites controlling important events; c) Extraterrestrial cover-up (ET), or the idea that governments hide evidence of extraterrestrial contact; d) Personal Well-being (PW), conspiracies concerned with spread of diseases and tests of mind-controlling technologies on an unaware public; and e) Control of Information, in which organizations (including governments) suppress information from the public.

From those, we hypothesize that populist attitudes are related to the three kinds that directly involve governmental (or supra-governmental) activities in exploiting an ignoring people: government malfeasance, malevolent global conspiracies, and control of information. While Extraterrestrial cover-up conspiracies also involve governments, their target is not oppressing the public. Personal well-being conspiracies, on their turn, are not openly proposed as governments' actions against their citizens. This hypothesis is tested in our first study.

Second, we take a look at what dimensions of populism are related to conspiracy beliefs. Drawing from the division by [Hawkins \(2010\)](#) and [Castanho Silva et al. \(2019\)](#), we test if conspiracy belief is equally connected to the belief of a good, vic-

timized people (people-centrism), to a negative view of elites (anti-elitism), and to a perception of politics as a good-versus-evil struggle (Manichaeism outlook). We expect that it correlates with all three dimensions, as all are manifestations of theorized aspects of conspiratorial beliefs. Our second study tests this hypothesis.

## 3 Study 1

### 3.1 Measurement and Data

As a recent development in the study of populism, scholars proposed scales to measure populism as attitudes that individuals hold (or not), and which may influence their political behavior (see, for example, [Akkerman et al., 2014](#); [Hawkins et al., 2012](#); [Spruyt et al., 2016](#); [Stanley, 2011](#)). One of the first such suggestions was made by [Hawkins et al. \(2012\)](#), who proposed four items for the measurement of populism: 1) “Politics is a struggle between good and evil”, 2) “The politicians in Congress need to follow the will of the people”, 3) “The power of a few special interests prevents our country from making progress”, and 4) “The people, not the politicians, should make the most important policy decisions” ([Hawkins et al., 2012: 8](#)). These were designed to “capture key elements of populism, especially a Manichaeism view of politics, a notion of a reified popular will, and a belief in a conspiring elite” ([Hawkins et al., 2012: 7](#)).

In our first study, we use items number 2, 3, and 4. The first (“Politics is a struggle between good and evil”) is excluded because it has a low factor loading in

both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis in these data.<sup>3</sup> We also include an extra battery to measure specifically one of the sub-components of populism, “anti-elitism”, with six statements. It focuses on this specific facet which we theorize to be essentially connected to conspiracy theories. We use both scales to test whether populism is associated with belief in conspiracy theories, and of which kind.

We use a 15-items scale to measure belief in conspiracies at a general level. It was introduced by [Brotherton et al. \(2013\)](#) and measures the five facets of an overall conspiracy belief mentioned in the previous section: government malfeasance, malevolent global conspiracies, extraterrestrial cover-up, personal well-being, and control of information.<sup>4</sup> While these are assessed to be unique, though correlated constructs, factor analysis conducted on our own data suggests that only the extraterrestrial cover-up is substantively different from the rest. However, since we want to achieve a nuanced understanding of how conspiratorial thinking is related to components of populism, we kept the original facets intact for the purposes of our analysis in the first study.<sup>5</sup>

Last, we also include a control for political trust. Low trust in institutions has been associated both with populist preferences ([Doyle, 2011](#)) and conspiracy endorse-

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<sup>3</sup>This is the case also in [Akkerman et al. \(2014\)](#), who excluded the item from the analyses as well.

<sup>4</sup>Tables 1 and 2 in the Supplementary Materials include sample means of agreement with all conspiracy and populism questions, from both studies. The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs items, asked on a 1 (definitely not true) to 5 (definitely true) scale, have averages between 2 and 3. Populism items, asked on a 1-7 disagree-agree scale, have average agreement between 4.6 and 5.7.

<sup>5</sup>An alternative that has been frequent is using a list of well-known conspiracies and ask individuals how much they believe them (see, for example, [Goertzel, 1994](#); [Swami et al., 2013](#)). This approach, however, has the downside of making results depend on respondents’ knowledge of the listed conspiracies. Many who would accept them after a moment’s thought might answer they do not believe simply for lack of familiarity with the conspiracy’s name ([Brotherton et al., 2013](#)).

ment (Miller et al., 2016). It is necessary to test, therefore, whether any effects on the relation between populism and conspiracy remain once political trust is taken into the picture. It is measured as a latent variable with three indicators: confidence in politicians, Congress, and political parties, on a scale from 0 (none at all) to 10 (complete trust).

Data come from an online survey through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. It took place in February 2014, with 694 voluntary participants resident in the United States who were rewarded with a modest financial compensation. The survey measured a number of psychological, sociological and political characteristics. A planned missing data design (PMDD) was used in the collection, to reduce the time it took for completion. It worked by assigning individuals only a random subset of statements used for each construct. This procedure allows us to assume the missing data to be completely at random (MCAR, Rubin, 1976), hence not biasing our estimates and, at most, affecting the efficiency of our estimates as if a smaller sample size was used (Allison, 2001). MTurk samples are known to have some distortions in relation to population averages, but are still more representative than oft-used convenience samples (Berinsky et al., 2012). They were also shown to be as representative as random-digit-dialing telephonic surveys (Simons and Chabris, 2012). The first column in Table 1 shows that our sample, as is common to MTurk, are more white, well-educated, and liberal than national averages.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the two Amazon’s MTurk Samples.

	2014 Sample	2015 Sample
Education (median)	Bachelor’s degree	Bachelor’s degree
White	80.7%	77.53%
Female	52.4%	51.34%
Age (median)	32	34
Income (median)	\$35’000 to \$49’999	\$45’000 to \$49’999
Liberal	52.5%	52.47%
Republican	29.97%	–
Ideology	3.44	–
Intention to vote	5.60	–
<i>N</i>	694	721

Notes: *Ideology*: 1 (Extremely liberal) to 7 (Extremely Conservative) likert scale; *Liberal*: binary, where 1’s are all who checked one of the three *liberal* categories in the *Ideology* question; *Intention to vote*: 1 (not at all certain) to 7 (absolutely certain) scale, answering the question on how certain one is to vote during the next national elections. Data collection: for the first sample, February 2014; for the second, April and May 2015.

### 3.2 Model and results

We use a structural equation model with populism and anti-elitism as the dependent (latent) variables, and all five facets of the Generic Conspiracist Belief scale (Brotherton et al., 2013), along with demographic and ideology controls, as independent variables. Populism, anti-elitism, the conspiracy facets, and political trust are modeled as latent variables, following the path model drawn in Figure 1. To address the planned missing design, we use full information maximum likelihood estimation (Finkbeiner, 1979).<sup>6</sup>

Table 2: Correlation Matrix for Populist Attitudes and Conspiracy Belief Facets

	Populism	Anti-elitism	CB 1	CB 2	CB 3	CB 4	CB 5
Populism	1.00						
Anti-elitism	.95	1.00					
CB 1	.41	.47	1.00				
CB 2	.35	.38	.81	1.00			
CB 3	.09	.11	.56	.65	1.00		
CB 4	.22	.26	.86	.84	.81	1.00	
CB 5	.53	.54	.88	.73	.53	.78	1.00

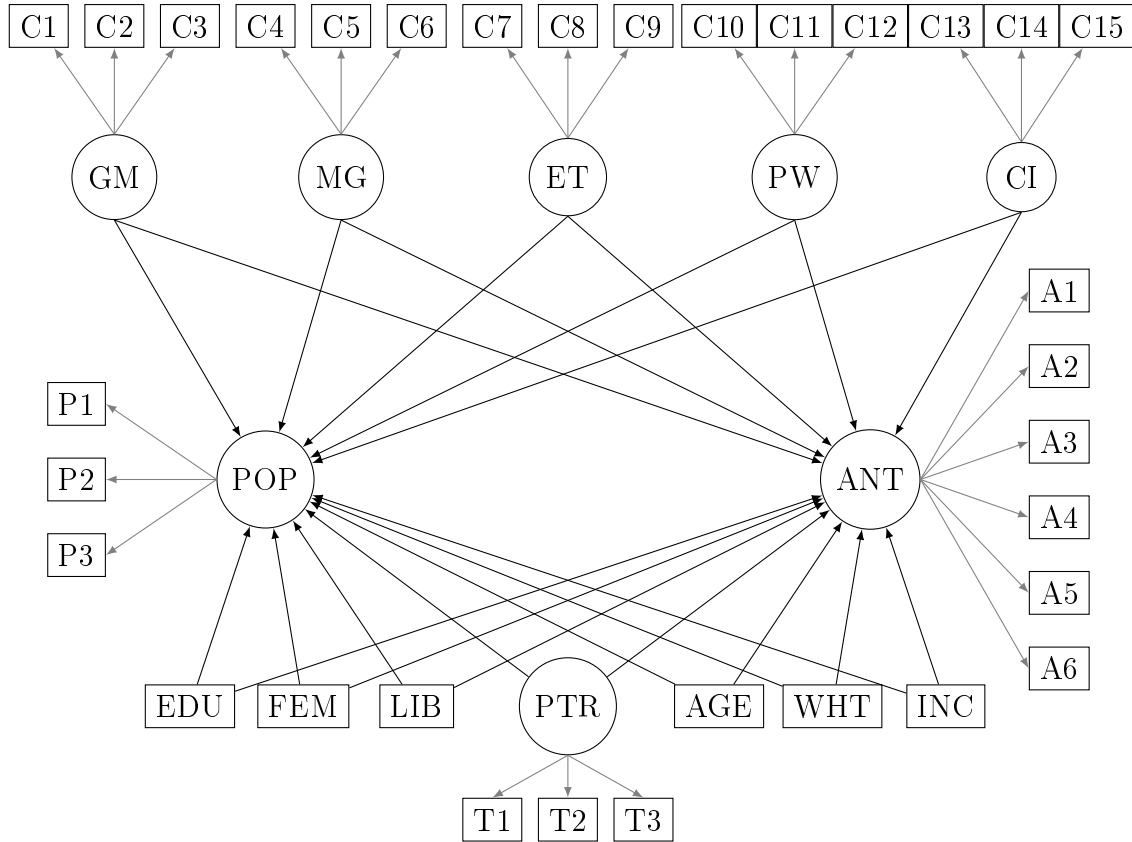
Notes: Correlation matrix from an estimated confirmatory factor analysis model with full information maximum likelihood robust estimation. *Populism* is the three-indicator latent variable from Hawkins et al. (2012), *Anti-elitism* a six-indicator scale developed by the authors, CB 1 – CB 5 are the five facets of the Generic Conspiracist Belief scale from Brotherton et al. (2013). Model fit:  $\chi^2 = 424.234$ ,  $df = 120$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .949, TLI = .930, RMSEA = .065 (90% CI: .058 – .072), SRMR = .052. N = 694.

We start by checking the correlation between the latent variables capturing conspiracy facets and populist and anti-elitist attitudes, in the matrix in Table 2. This is obtained with a confirmatory factor analysis model including only the indicators for

<sup>6</sup>All analyses are done with the package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) for the R programming language.



Figure 1: Study 1 Model: Conspiracy facets, populism, and anti-elitism



Notes: Circles indicate latent variables, squares indicate observed variables. C1–C15 are the 15 Generic Conspiracist Belief indicators (Brotherton et al., 2013), and GM, MG, ET, PW, and CI are its five facets. P1–P3 are the populism scale (Hawkins et al., 2012), and A1–A6 are an original anti-elitism scale. *PTR* is Political trust, measured with confidence in politicians, Congress, and political parties. Gray arrows are factor loadings, black arrows are regressions. Every observed variable has an error term that is estimated but not drawn in the picture. *EDU* is highest degree obtained; *Fem* stands for female; *Lib* is a binary variable liberal/not-liberal; *WHT* is binary on whether the respondent is white, and *INC* is income.

each construct. Populist and anti-elitist attitudes are highly correlated, which is not surprising given that the latter is theorized as an essential component of the former. Apart from that, both have relatively strong correlations with all facets of conspiracy beliefs except for extraterrestrial cover-up. In both cases, the highest  $r$ 's are for the first and last facets, namely government malfeasance and control of information, following our theoretical expectations. Moreover all five conspiracy facets are strongly correlated, with the lowest coefficient being 0.53, between extraterrestrial cover-up and control of information.

Results of the first model are in Table 3. The model fits the data well. Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) is 0.049, while the root mean square of the residual (SRMR) is 0.072, both below the recommended cutoff points of 0.06 and 0.08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999).<sup>7</sup> TLI is also good, above its recommended cut of 0.90, while CFI is slightly below its recommended minimum of 0.95.

The first part of table 3 indicates the ways conspiracy belief is connected to populist orientation. It shows how individuals who are more susceptible to populism tend to believe in the existence of malevolent global conspiracies and control of information. The first facet says, more specifically, that a small group of powerful individuals runs the world from behind the scenes and makes all important decisions on global matters. The second states that new technologies and important information are kept from the public by scientists and industry out of self-interest. Interestingly, beliefs in government malfeasance, which has a strong correlation with populism (.41) when the other facets are not controlled for, has a low (and even

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<sup>7</sup>SRMR is the model-fit indicator least affected by a planned missing data designs (Littvay, 2009).

Table 3: Standardized Direct Paths from a Structural Equation Model

	Populism	Anti-elitism
<i>Conspiracy factors</i>		
Government malfeasance	-.15	.18
Global conspiracy	.32*	.30*
Extraterrestrial cover-up	.06	.10
Personal wellbeing	-.61	-.70*
Control of information	.80**	.50**
<i>Exogenous predictors</i>		
Education	.07	.06
Female	.10*	.04
Liberal	.23***	.09*
Age	.06	.05
White	.02	-.03
Income	-.04	-.03
Political trust	-.27***	-.45***
<i>Model fit:</i>		
<i>N</i>	694	
RMSEA	.049	
TLI	.914	
CFI	.925	
SRMR	.072	
$\chi^2$	1117.837, <i>df</i> = 446, <i>p</i> < .001.	

Note: Estimation method: Maximum Likelihood with robust standard errors. Standardized results. Significance levels: .05\*, .01\*\*, .001\*\*\*.

negative) coefficient once we take the other dimensions into consideration.

For the other two conspiracy facets – personal wellbeing and extraterrestrial cover-up –, also no significant results are found with populism. The high correlation we observed among conspiracy facets is the reason why those three, in a regression with all five facets listed individually and thus controlled for, are not significant. Still,

this variation in their relation with populism is an important finding, for it shows what facets have a stronger and more immediate connection to populist attitudes.

Regarding specifically the anti-elitist aspect of populism, the picture is similar. However, in this case the “personal wellbeing” facet is significantly and negatively associated with that attitude. This facet specifically states that the spread of diseases, and experiments with drugs or new technologies (including mind-controlling ones) are done on the public without their knowledge. Once all other factors are controlled for, believing these kinds of conspiracies is actually associated with lower levels of anti-elitism. This finding might seem puzzling, however it is likely to be due to the very specific nature of the “personal wellbeing” dimension of conspiracy belief. A recent study of schools in California shows that higher shares of vaccination exemptions based on personal beliefs are observed in private schools in predominantly white and healthy areas (Yang et al., 2015). In other words, anti-vaccination attitudes seem to be more prevalent among groups of higher social status. Given their condition of “society’s winners,” these people might have, in turn, more elitist worldviews. To be sure, this is only a speculation based on the assumptions that (1) anti-vaccination attitudes are correlated with higher scores to the “personal wellbeing” conspiracy belief, and that (2) people living in wealthier districts are likely to score lower on the anti-elitism scale. However, it could be a starting point for future research investigating this connection more thoroughly.

When it comes to exogenous predictors, we see both that anti-elitism and populism have a strong association with low levels of political trust (in that measurement, higher numbers mean higher trust). Nevertheless, the relation between certain

aspects of conspiracy and populism remains, indicating that it is not simply a mediation or a spurious relationship due to the fact that low trusting individuals prefer populists and tend to endorse conspiracies. The relation between the two factors goes beyond a simple lack of trust in the political system and its institutions, and runs deeper psychologically.

### **3.3 Conclusion of Study 1**

In this study we find that all but one facet of conspiracy beliefs are associated with populist attitudes. When controlling for all, however, the strongest associations are with malevolent global conspiracies and control of information. These are kinds of conspiracies in which elites are depicted as greedy actors who do evil, secret deeds for the sake of more resources or power. While elites are certainly morally reproachable, these conspiracies do not paint them as evil for evil's sake, like a caricature of a villain. To a certain extent, populism and conspiracism therefore are associated on a level in which there is still a certain attribution of reason for elites' misdeeds. Moreover, we observe that this effect exists even when controlling for political trust, a predictor of both kinds of attitudes separately.

## **4 Study 2**

### **4.1 Measurement and Data**

In this part we test how conspiracy beliefs are associated with the distinct components of populism. With this purpose, we use two different scales to measure these

concepts in relation to study 1. Populism is measured with the three-dimensional populist attitudes scale proposed by [Castanho Silva et al. \(ming\)](#), which gives a battery of survey items for measuring separately each of the three core conceptual components of populism: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and a Manichaeian view of politics.<sup>8</sup> It consists of nine items in total, three for each dimension, measured as disagree-agree statements with 1–7 likert scales.

For conspiracy belief, we turn to the battery developed and validated by [Bruder et al. \(2013\)](#). It consists of five items, also on a higher level of abstraction than a list of existing conspiracy theories, which factor together into a single latent variable. It asks how likely respondents think each of the items to be true, with eleven response categories ranging from 0% (certainly not) to 100% (certain). These draw higher agreement than the Generic Conspiracist Belief scale from [Brotherton et al. \(2013\)](#), with average responses between the 50% and 70% categories. Once again political trust is controlled for, modeled as a latent variable with three indicators: confidence in the federal government, political parties, and congress, measured on a 1 (a great deal) to 4 (none at all) scale.

Data for this study comes from a second Amazon Mechanical Turk sample, collected in April and May 2015. It includes 721 respondents, and descriptive statistics may be found in the second column of Table 1. The sample has similar distortions to national representativeness as the previous, following the patterns known in MTurk samples. We have also used a planned missing data design for this round of data collection, but affecting only the conspiracy mentality items (all populism questions

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<sup>8</sup>The full text of all scales used is in the Supplementary Material, as well as the measurement part of the models for the latent constructs.

were asked to all respondents).

## 4.2 Model and Results

The model is depicted in Figure 2, this time with the three populism facets as dependent variables, and the Conspiracy Mentality (Bruder et al., 2013) and political trust as latent independent variables, along with the same controls as the first. Results are in Table 5. The model shows again acceptable fit: RMSEA is .045, with a 90% confidence interval of .040–.051, and SRMR is .047, both below the recommended cuts above which a model is not fitting well enough. TLI also indicates good fit, with a value above 0.900. CFI, however, have is slightly short of the recommended cutoff recommended for good fit, of 0.95 (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

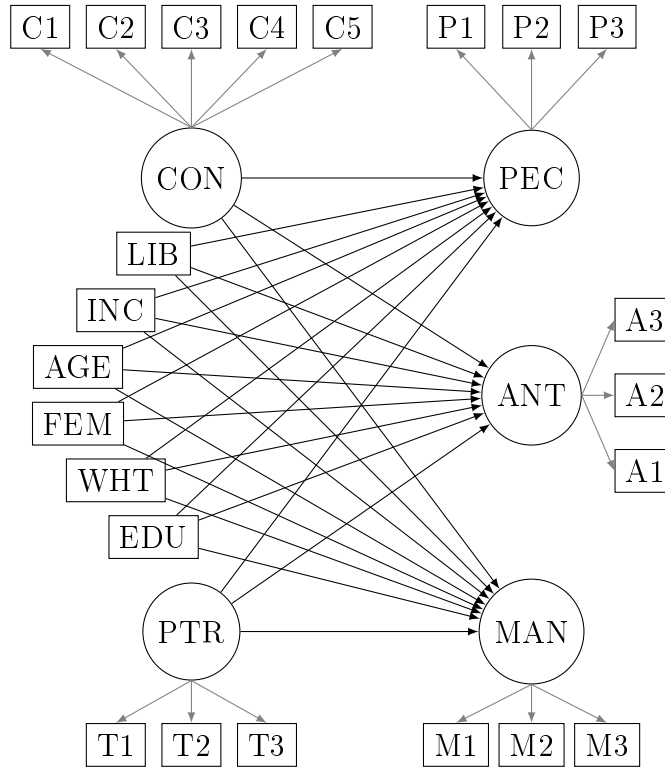
Table 4: Correlation Matrix for Populist Attitudes Dimensions and Conspiracist Mentality

	People-centrism	Anti-elitism	Manichaeian	Conspiracism
People-centrism	1.00			
Anti-elitism	.51	1.00		
Manichaeian	-.22	.29	1.00	
Conspiracism	.33	.71	.17	1.00

Notes: Correlation matrix from an estimated confirmatory factor analysis model with full information maximum likelihood robust estimation. *People-centrism*, *Anti-elitism*, and *Manichaeian* are the three dimensions of the populist attitudes scale by Castanho Silva et al. (ming), with three indicators each. Conspiracism is the five-indicator scale from the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire by Bruder et al. (2013). Model fit:  $\chi^2 = 163.148$ ,  $df = 70$ ,  $p < .001$ , CFI = .952, TLI = .938, RMSEA = .047 (90% CI: .037 – .056), SRMR = .045. N = 721.

The correlation matrix between the three dimensions of populism and conspiracy mentality is in Table 4. We observe varying levels of correlation between conspiracism

Figure 2: Study 2 Model: Conspiracist Mentality and Populism Dimensions



Notes: Circles indicate latent variables, squares indicate observed variables. C1–C5 are 5 items from the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013). *PEC*, *ANT*, and *MAN* are the three populism dimensions from Castanho Silva et al. (2016), respectively people-centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichaeian outlook, formed by observed indicators P1–P3, A1–A3, and M1–M3. *PTR* is political trust, indicated by the amount of confidence in political parties, Congress, and the federal government. Gray arrows are factor loadings, black arrows are regressions. Every observed variable has an error term that is estimated but not drawn in the picture. *EDU* is highest degree obtained; *Fem* stands for female; *Lib* is a binary variable liberal/not-liberal; *WHT* is binary on whether the respondent is white, and *INC* is income.



Table 5: Conspiratorial Belief and The Dimensions of Populism

	<b>People-centrism</b>	<b>Anti-elitism</b>	<b>Manichaeian</b>
Conspiracist mentality	.32 <sup>***</sup>	.51 <sup>***</sup>	.09
Education	-.07	.03	-.06
White	.02	.06	-.13 <sup>*</sup>
Female	-.04	-.01	.01
Age	.30 <sup>***</sup>	-.02	.03
Income	.01	-.06	.03
Liberal	.10	.08 <sup>*</sup>	-.01
Political trust	.00	.51 <sup>***</sup>	.15 <sup>*</sup>
<i>Model fit:</i>			
<i>N</i>		721	
RMSEA		.045	
TLI		.905	
CFI		.923	
SRMR		.047	
$\chi^2$		465.431, $df = 192, p < .001$	

Note: Estimation method: Maximum Likelihood Robust. Standardized results. Significance levels: .05<sup>\*</sup>, .01<sup>\*\*</sup>, .001<sup>\*\*\*</sup>

and the three dimensions of populism: as expected, the strongest is with anti-elitism, .71, indicating the two attitudes are indeed very close to one another. It has a moderately strong relationship with people-centrism, conforming to the idea of seeing ordinary people as victims. The correlation with Manichaeian outlook, however, is not that strong, with  $r = .17$ . Among the populist dimensions, while their correlations are also at least moderately strong, it seems clear that those are separate facets.

Regarding regression results, we start with correlates. Demographic factors do not explain much of the populist aspects in this sample. Individuals higher on people-centrism tend to be older. Considering how close people-centrism is to nationalism,

in the praise of traditional or national values and customs, this is in line with current associations between older age and higher levels of nationalism. A Manichaeian outlook, on the other hand, is negatively related to being white, and predicted by lower levels of trust (in this scale, higher values indicate lower trust). It would be expected that less trusting individuals would have less propensity to accept others' viewpoints as legitimate and tolerable. Low political trust is also strongly associated with anti-elitism, as one would expect, which is also the case of being liberal.

Turning to the effects of conspiracy beliefs, they are strong predictors of holding the first two dimensions of populist attitudes, but not Manichaeian outlook. The largest coefficient is on anti-elitism  $-0.51$  (standardized). But on people-centrism the effect is also substantively strong, with a standardized coefficient of  $.32$ . These results confirm that conspiracy beliefs are not only associated with despise for political elites, but with romanticization of common people as victims – the central aspect of populist preferences. These two sides, clearly present in most conspiracies, drive the connection between such beliefs and populist attitudes.

Surprisingly, we find no effect of conspiracist mentality on holding a Manichaeian view of politics. That would seem to contradict the findings by [Oliver and Wood \(2014\)](#), who observe that having a Manichaeian outlook strongly predicts belief in specific conspiracy theories. A few reasons might exist for this mismatch. First is the different measurements used: we have different items for measuring Manichaeian outlook, and use a generic conspiracist mentality for belief in conspiracies, while [Oliver and Wood \(2014\)](#) test the relationship with well-known examples of conspiracy theories.

Second, [Oliver and Wood \(2014\)](#) find that (low) interpersonal trust is a strong predictor of Manichaeian attitudes, but not so much of endorsement of specific conspiracies. In our model, political trust, a correlate of interpersonal trust, is a significant predictor of Manichaeianism. It suggests that the relation between a general conspiracist mentality and good-versus-evil politics is actually about trust, disappearing when the latter is controlled for.

### **4.3 Conclusion of Study 2**

Both populist and conspiratorial narratives depict the general public as victims of oppressive elites. What we find confirms that conspiratorial beliefs are indeed associated with both of these aspects of populist attitudes individually: individuals with conspiratorial worldviews tend to both glorify common people's values, and to dislike political elites. However, the third dimension of populism, Manichaeian outlook, is not related to conspiratorial beliefs once political trust is controlled for.

## **5 'I just leave you with the reflection'**

This paper set out to investigate the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and sympathy for populism. This relation has been hinted at in the populism literature, but had rarely been fully theorized or empirically tested. We start by discussing how a populist worldview might be connected with conspiracy thinking, and what elements of populism would be more likely associated with belief in these theories. We argue that the tendency to adopt a Manichean outlook to social events, and

more importantly, the underlying narrative that sees anything official as *deceptive*, draw the connection between the two.

Using two online surveys through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, we were able to test our hypotheses on this relation. As it turns out, holding a more populist view is correlated only with some sub-facets of belief in conspiracy theories, given that all are controlled for. Populists tend to believe in malevolent global conspiracies, whereby a small powerful group controls world events, and in control of information by a few individuals with access to it, who do so for private material gains at the expense of the public. In this scenario, populism has no remaining relation with beliefs in crimes and terrorism committed by the government against its own citizens, and is negatively related with ideas that some organizations harm, in secret, the health and personal well-being of individuals on a massive scale. Populist attitude relates to the belief in conspiracies that draw on the use of power, by a small group, for their personal benefit at the expense of ordinary people. It is a belief that common people are victims because they lack the power, money, and information of a few groups, what makes them vulnerable to being exploited. On these groups' behavior, these two conspiracy facets frame them as mostly greedy and selfish – individuals who will do what is needed to get richer or more powerful, without caring for the consequences. This is different from the other two conspiracy facets of government malfeasance and personal well-being, where there is not much reference to why organizations or governments harm people and commit secret crimes, framing these as pure evil, who act in such a way for their own sake.

This sheds some light on how individuals with populist attitudes frame elites.

Even though populist anti-elitism has been described as a paranoid style preaching against a small group that represents pure evil, that is not reflected on the public at large. As mentioned, populists believe in conspiracies portraying elites as greedy and selfish, but not comic-book super-villains. On the one hand, the confirmation that populism has a conspiratorial element in it is important. Not only suppliers frame their discourses in these tones, but the public also seems to react positively to a rhetoric with conspiratorial framing. At this point, it is also important to notice that the relation is somewhat different from our initial theorizing. We expected to observe that populism is connected to conspiratorial beliefs mostly because of its anti-elitist and good-versus-evil aspects. However, as the second study has shown, the idea of a purely good common people with a “general will” (people-centrism) is strongly predicted by having a conspiratorial mentality, along with anti-elitism, but that is not the case for holding a Manichaeian outlook of politics.

Given the substantial and substantive connection between populist attitudes and conspiracy belief, the next step would be to find out its psychological nature. Is being exposed to conspiracy theories what makes people endorse populist views, or is it being charmed by populist leaders’ discourses that makes people more likely to accept conspiratorial explanations? Is there one common, more abstract, factor that predicts both? Do they reinforce each other in a monological sense? These questions will need further investigation. For the time being, this study contributes to bridging two aspects of the literature that only recently started looking at each other through an empirical lens. By doing so, our study contributes to research on populism by highlighting which aspects of conspiracy thinking are accepted by populist-minded

citizens, and which ones are not. Moreover, it contributes to research on conspiracy theory belief, which so far has been conducted more prominently by social psychologists, by bringing in one important element in support of the thesis that the common root of conspiracy thinking is the belief in the deceptive nature of authorities.

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# Appendix

## Measurement Part of the Full SEM – Study 1

Item	CB1	CB2	CB3	CB4	CB5	Pop	Ant	Trust	Mean
C1. The government is involved in the murder of innocent citizens and/or well-known public figures, and keeps this a secret.	.740								3.02
C2. The government permits or perpetrates acts of terrorism on its own soil, disguising its involvement.	.828								2.69
C3. The government uses people as patsies to hide its involvement in criminal activity.	.846								3.00
C4. The power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control world politics.		.767							2.82
C5. A small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major world decisions, such as going to war.		.864							2.47
C6. Certain significant events have been the result of the activity of a small group who secretly manipulate world events.		.883							2.56
C7. Secret organisations communicate with extraterrestrials, but keep this fact from the public.			.839						2.02

Item	CB1	CB2	CB3	CB4	CB5	Pop	Ant	Trust	Mean
C8. Evidence of alien contact is being concealed from the public.			.890						2.29
C9. Some UFO sightings and rumors are planned or staged in order to distract the public from real alien contact			.875						2.09
C10. The spread of certain viruses and/or diseases is the result of the deliberate, concealed efforts of some organisation.				.783					2.35
C11. Technology with mind-control capacities is used on people without their knowledge.				.783					2.30
C12. Experiments involving new drugs or technologies are routinely carried out on the public without their knowledge or consent.				.750					2.79
C13. Groups of scientists manipulate, fabricate, or suppress evidence in order to deceive the public.						.688			2.90
C14. New and advanced technology which would harm current industry is being suppressed.						.667			3.21
C15. A lot of important information is deliberately concealed from the public out of self-interest.						.656			3.92
P1. The politicians in Congress need to follow the will of the people							.505		5.71

Item	CB1	CB2	CB3	CB4	CB5	Pop	Ant	Trust	Mean
P2. The power of a few special interests prevents our country from making progress						.692			5.17
P3. The people, not the politicians, should make the most important policy decisions						.481			5.03
A1. Elected politicians sell out to various interests groups							.801		5.64
A2. Elected politicians sell out to big business							.779		5.54
A3. High level public officials seek power for its own sake							.715		5.22
A4. Those at the top use their power to become better off at the expense of ordinary people							.501		5.12
A5. Politicians do not want to improve the lives of ordinary people							.735		4.60
A6. A few powerful individuals deliberately prevent our country from making progress							.615		4.70
T1. Trust in Congress								.794	3.15
T2. Trust in politicians								.923	2.82
T3. Trust in political parties								.851	3.09

Standardized factor loadings, estimated with a Maximum Likelihood Robust Estimator. Model fit:  $\chi^2 = 1117.837$ ,  $df = 446$ ,  $p < .001$ , RMSEA = .049, SRMR = .072, CFI = .925, TLI = .914. CB1–CB5 are the facets of the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs scale (Brotherton et al., 2013), as follows: **CB1**: Government malfeasance, **CB2**: Malevolent global conspiracies, **CB3**: Extraterrestrial cover-up, **CB4**: Personal wellbeing, **CB5**: Control of Information; **Pop**: Populism scale (Hawkins et al., 2012), **Ant**: Anti-elitism original scale. **Mean**: sample mean. **Trust**: Political trust. Conspiracy items measured on a 1 (definitely not true) to 5 (definitely true) scale. Populism and anti-elitism items measured on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. Political trust measured on a 0 (no trust) to 10 (complete trust) scale.



## Measurement Part of the Full SEM – Study 2

Item	People	Antiel	Manich	Consp	Trust	Mean
P1. Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people.	.680					6.23
P2. Politicians don't have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job.	-.42					2.76
P3. The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics.	.511					5.26
A1. The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.		.732				5.28
A2. Government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives.		-.591				3.57
A3. Quite a few of the people running the government are crooked.		.712				5.45
M1. You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics.			.664			2.77
M2. The people I disagree with politically are not evil.			-.616			5.38
M3. The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed.			.319			3.79
C1. I think that there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions.				.715		5.46
C2. I think that politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions.				.702		6.99
C3. I think that government agencies closely monitor all citizens.				.612		6.08

Item	People	Antiel	Manich	Consp	Trust	Mean
C4. I think that events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities.				.672		4.94
C5. I think that many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about.				.677		6.53
T1. Confidence in the Federal government					.853	3.03
T2. Confidence in political parties					.762	3.18
T3. Confidence in Congress					.813	3.12

Standardized factor loadings, estimated with a Maximum Likelihood Robust Estimator. Model fit:  $\chi^2 = 465.431$ ,  $df = 192$ ,  $p < .001$ , RMSEA = .045, SRMR = .047, CFI = .920, TLI = .905. **People**, **Antiel**, and **Manich** are scales for the three core dimensions of populism from [Castanho Silva et al. \(ming\)](#), measured on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. **Consp** is the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire from [Bruder et al. \(2013\)](#), measured on a 0% (certainly not true) to 100% (certainly true) scale. **Trust** is confidence in political institutions, on a 1 (a great deal) to 4 (none at all) scale. **Mean** is the sample mean.