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The Age(s) of Conspiracy Theory

America is a vast conspiracy to make you happy.

—John Updike¹

Conspiracy theories are a fixture on the American landscape—discerning eyes find them in the unlikeliest places. Yet for such popular perennials, no one seems to agree on when their peak season is. Journalists have not been shy about pronouncing a new age of conspiracy. In 2011, the *New York Daily News* declared:

It's official: America is becoming a conspiratocracy. The tendency for a small slice of the population to believe in devious plots has always been with us. But conspiracies have never spread this swiftly across the country. They have never lodged this deeply in the American psyche. And they have never found as receptive an audience.²

Seven years earlier in 2004, the *Boston Globe* suggested that we were then living in the “golden age of conspiracy theory.”³ In 1991, the *Washington Post* asserted that we lived “in an age of conspiracy theories” before correcting itself in 1994, claiming that Bill Clinton’s first term “marked the dawn of a new age of conspiracy theory.”⁴ Charles Krauthammer, columnist for the *Post*, agreed with his

¹ *Problems and Other Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1979), p. 44.

² Jacobsen (2011).

³ McMahan (2004).

⁴ (Cannon 1991); Thomas (1994).

employer in the first instance, but as far as we can tell, not in the second. He referred to conspiracy theories in 1991 as a “rash.”⁵ Fourteen years prior, the *Los Angeles Times* concluded that 1977 America was a world historical high watermark: “we have become as conspiracy prone in our judgments as the Pan-Slav nationalists in the 1880s Balkans.”⁶ And, thirteen years prior to that, the *New York Times* was sure we were living in the age of conspiracy theories in 1964 because they had “grown weedlike in this country and abroad.”⁷

Author David Aaronovitch (2010:15) is confident the West is “currently going through a period of fashionable conspiracism.” But given the subjectivity of the evidence, Ross Douthat doubts that: “If anything, Aaronovitch’s book suggests that the paranoid style’s direct power over Western politics has declined precipitously over the last 50 years.”⁸ Author Jonathan Kay splits the difference, and suggests twin peaks in the 1960s and 2000s (Kay 2011:xiii).

Scholars have sung in similar cacophony. Peter Knight’s analysis suggests conspiracy theorizing has been fairly constant across American history (Knight 2003). Gordon B. Arnold (2008:9) and Robert Goldberg (2001:xii) assert that conspiracy theorizing in the United States rose markedly after World War II, while Daniel Pipes (1997:xii) counters that conspiracy theories reached crescendo at the outbreak of World War II, but declined steadily afterwards. Historian David Brion Davis claimed that conspiracy theories were widespread in the nineteenth century, but are confined to “only a few crackpots and extremists” in modern times. He has since repented and argued that “a world weary pessimism and cynicism” has driven a new era of heightened belief in conspiracies (Davis 2003:x). So, who is right?

This chapter aims to make two contributions to the debate. First, we present a robust method for measuring the relative levels of conspiracy theorizing over broad swaths of time: letters

⁵ Krauthammer (1991).

⁶ Geyer (1977).

⁷ (“The Warren Commission Report” 1964).

⁸ Douthat (2010).

to the editor of major daily newspapers. We manually analyze over 100,000 letters encompassing more than a century to provide the first long-term systematic measure of the prevalence of conspiratorial beliefs. Second, we use this measure to determine the vacillations of conspiracy theorizing from 1890 to 2010. This allows us to make the argument that conspiracy talk peaked at the turn of the previous century and in the early 1950s, but has gradually diminished since then. There are ages of feverish conspiracy theorizing in the United States, but the present age is not among them.

The rest of this chapter is organized in the following manner. The first section discusses alternate routes to assessing conspiracy theories, and why we choose not to take them. The second section elaborates our approach to measuring conspiratorial beliefs and addresses possible problems with it. The third section discusses how we identify conspiracy talk in letters to the editor, and the final section details our results.

Roads Not Taken

There are very good reasons that previous accounts disagree on the apogee of American conspiracy theorizing: measuring beliefs, particularly unusual beliefs, is difficult and costly. This is not an insurmountable barrier; social science has amassed an array of approaches to overcome these obstacles in the past. In this section we examine three of these approaches—polling, Internet content analysis, and news coverage—and show why we find them less attractive avenues of inquiry for our purposes.

The most obvious path to opinion is polling, yet polls have a number of drawbacks. To begin with, they are somewhat temporally limited; nationally representative surveys have only been employed regularly since the 1940s. Even if valid questions about conspiratorial beliefs were asked consistently, this would only illuminate the period following World War II. And such questions have

not been asked consistently. From time to time, major polling organizations have asked about belief in particular conspiracy theories, e.g. the J.F.K., Truther, and Birther conspiracy theories (CBS 2009) (Nyhan 2009, Berinsky 2010, 2012). But these questions are sporadic, fragmentary, and tap only beliefs in one or a few specific theories, not conspiracy theories in general. There is no reason to suspect that the fluctuations in the belief of J.F.K. conspiracy theories is an accurate bellwether for conspiracy theorizing—any more than the stock price of General Motors is the best indicator of the stock market.

Survey instruments are not a complete loss; proper questions can access broader conspiratorial attitudes and some of these batteries have been administered in the past (McClosky and Chong 1985, Goertzel 1994, Abalakina-Paap, et al. 1999). Such batteries of questions can mine the overall current of conspiratorial beliefs because they do not focus only on one or a few theories. Unfortunately, appropriate questions have not been widely or sufficiently repeated on representative national samples. In chapter 6, we circumvent these problems by administering our own panel survey. Although this offers only a short series of snapshots, it is a helpful supplement to flesh out the dynamics of conspiracy beliefs.

Content analysis of the Internet may provide some promising avenues, but at the price of broader views. Many conspiracy theories are given homes on the Internet; people post about them on blogs, personal websites, public forums, etc. In fact, many credit the internet for ushering conspiracy theorizing into its modern incarnation (McMahon 2004, Heins 2007). Unfortunately, since the Internet has only been in wide use since the late 1990s, this data source affords only a small window. To investigate the claims made across the sweep of American history, some other tool must be used.

News coverage, on the other hand, has existed for many years and is readily available, but is a suboptimal gauge of public opinion. The stories that journalists write and broadcast may tell us

about the public's information environment, yet there is not a strong empirical connection between the information environment and public attitudes. Admittedly, news coverage and public belief systems bear *some* resemblance to each other (Uscinski 2009), but there are firmer foundations to build upon. The best available foundation is letters to the editor.

The Promise and Pitfalls of Letters to the Editor

U.S. newspapers have carried letters to the editor sections for nearly three hundred years; they form a public sphere in which citizens communicate on the issues of the day (Page 1996, Perrin and Vaisey 2008). Best of all, studies show that letters to the editor correlate well with survey measures of public opinion (Hill 1981, Sigelman and Walkosz 1992). No other approach offers such leverage on public attitudes over such a long time. However, no approach is perfect and scholars must handle letters to the editor with care. We first introduce the data sources we draw on, and then appraise the potential pitfalls of using letters to the editor, and how we manage those concerns.

In essence, we use letters to the editor in lieu of other more randomized techniques of sampling representative opinions (e.g. surveys). Therefore, we want to be sure that the sources of letters we sample provide opinions that are as representative as possible. As a myriad of studies in recent years have shown, newspapers, like other media outlets, have their own 'flavor' (e.g. Groseclose and Milyo 2005). This could stem from the mode of ownership, the style of ownership, the editorship and news-making bureaucracy, the journalists, or the demands of the specific media market (Sigelman 1973, Bozzell and Baker 1990, Gilens and Hertzman 2000, Chomsky 2006, Dunaway 2008). Whatever the case, coverage in different newspapers will vary politically, as well as along a variety of other dimensions. So as not to present a lopsided view of conspiracy theorizing and be representative of the country as a whole, we choose newspapers that have as large a general readership as possible.

For these reasons, our primary data source is the *New York Times*. The *Times* has been in existence since 1851, boasts one of the largest circulations both historically and currently, and is often referred to as America's "paper of record." These attributes have made the *New York Times* a staple of academic study (e.g. Chomsky 1999, Mayhew 2005, Chomsky 2006, Wasserman, et al. 2006, Puglisi 2011). Our sample derives largely from *The New York Times Historical Index* database.

Despite its large audience, the *Times* in recent years has been shown to tilt to the ideological left (Groseclose and Milyo 2005, Puglisi 2011), while in earlier decades it showed several conservative biases (Chomsky 1999, 2006, Chomsky and Barclay 2007). To obviate concerns stemming from this, we employ two strategies. First, we construct a validating sample from the equally old *Chicago Tribune*. Where the *Times* is currently caricatured as liberal, elitist, and coastal, the *Tribune* is caricatured as more conservative, blue-collar, and heartland. We find that the *Tribune* sample mirrors the *Times* sample both in terms of the relative amount of conspiracy talk and in the distribution of various types of conspiracy talk (see appendix). Second, our later analyses employ statistical models which account for the *Times*' changing ownership, editorship, circulation, and competition. We find that the results of our analyses are unaffected by these factors, and that these have little explanatory power over our data. Taken together, this suggests that our results are largely unaffected by bias, and that letters to the editor from the *New York Times* are a valid measure of national attitudes.

However, these safeguards do not alleviate all concerns. Two factors mediate the letters sections in any newspaper: the choice of people to write letters, and the choices of editorial staffs to publish some letters and not others. Let's address each of these in turn.

First, the people who write the letters may bias the sample. Individuals who author letters are not randomly selected; writing a letter to a newspaper requires motive, means, and opportunity. Consequently, letter writers as a whole are unusual in terms of education, political interest, leisure

time, and other demographics (Cooper, et al. 2009). Because of this, there are good grounds to think that those writing letters are more articulate and informed than those not writing letters. However, previous research demonstrates that if the opinions of letter writers and non-letter writers differ at all, those differences are small (Buell 1975, Volgy, et al. 1977). As Sidney Verba et al. (1967:330) concluded in a study of letters to the editor during the Vietnam War, “basically letter writers are not different from non-letter writers,” and “they are no more likely to take extreme positions than the rest of the public.” So although letter writers as a group may be different from non-letter writers as a group, the published letters nevertheless hew quite closely to overall public attitudes. It may be that editors, in trying to sell as many newspapers as possible, do an excellent job of publishing representative letters. Yet this pushes us back to our second potential source of contamination.

The people who edit the letters may bias the sample. Published letters to the editor are mediated; the editorial staff chooses which letters to print and which to omit. This could happen in a few ways: editors could print more letters from elites, they could weed out letters written by ‘cranks,’ they could print mostly letters addressing items discussed in the news sections, or they could print only letters coinciding with the paper’s editorial positions. Let us address each of these hazards in turn.

Editors may be tempted to run letters from elites, which would crowd out lay perspectives and could pull a sample away from representing the public at large. In point of fact, editors do print a higher percentage of letters from elites than their percentage in the actual population. Yet editors may do this for representative reasons: elites often have a sound claim to be speaking on behalf of many non-elites, sometimes they possess unique and valuable information, and they may have reputations that signal a brand name for trustworthy opinions. Regardless, prior studies show that elites are just as prone to conspiracy theorizing as others (e.g. Davis 1969, Simmons and Parsons 2005). Furthermore, studies find that educational level and occupational category are not significant

predictors of belief in conspiracy theories (Goertzel 1994). But since science involves replicating results and an abundance of skepticism, in both this chapter and in Chapter 4, we separate letters from elites from letters from non-elites. The end product is that conspiracy talk is not substantively different between elites and non-elites.

Editors may also disproportionately discard letters from cranks, excising extreme or uncommon opinions from the public sphere. However, doing so would violate an editorial norm against excluding extreme opinions, uncivil voices, and open deliberation (Wahl-Jorgenson 2004). Thomas Feyer (2003), Letters Editor of the *New York Times*, states that “no subject is off limits, within the bounds of good taste.” We found that the *Times* has admirably elastic bounds of good taste. Feyer and his predecessors have aired a wide variety of unconventional and kooky views. One writer claimed to have personal relationships with leaders from other planets. Another darkly warned of the satanic powers of the number thirteen. Yet another thoughtfully debated the racial demographics of alien abductees. And wherever else he may have been sighted, Bigfoot made multiple appearances in the *Times*. If topics resonate in society, editors have a stake in providing their advocates a platform.

In an effort to focus on what they view as the topics of the day, editors may disproportionately print letters addressing stories reported in the news sections. This would help reinforce the audience’s interest in particular stories and perhaps sell more papers. However, prior evidence does not support this view. Editors generally acknowledge that the letters column is a place of free speech, and not just a place to discuss items in the newspaper (Perrin and Vaisey 2008:787). Again, to err on the safe side, we take steps to account for relevant news content in our later analyses and find significant divergences between these two parts of newspapers.

Finally, the editorial positions of the paper may drive editors to choose which letters to print. Evidence for this objection is wanting as well. Current scholarship shows that editors allow

dissenting opinions to be heard, regardless of the paper's official editorial positions (Butler and Schofield 2010). Other works repeatedly establish that the viewpoints in published letters are not substantially different than the viewpoints in non-published letters (e.g. Foster and Friedrich 1937, Renfro 1979). The upshot of the available research agrees that "little support is found for the hypothesis that newspaper policies bias letter opinion" (Hill 1981:384). Not ones to needlessly take matters on faith, we control for the *Times'* changing editorship, ownership, circulation, and local competition (as previously mentioned). The outcome accords with previous literature: these variables are inconsequential to our results (see appendices).

Summing the section, there are many potential paths of bias when using letters to the editor to analyze public opinion. Nonetheless, most of these obstacles are more apparent than real, and what problems remain can be overcome with properly attentive analysis. Letters to the editor, *faute de mieux*, are an unparalleled way to collect long-term, uniform measures of conspiracy theorizing in the United States.

Content Analysis

For present purposes, content analysis is a process by which researchers place written text into categories. Our central goal was to review a yearly sampling of letters to the editor and identify which ones discussed conspiratorial views, and which ones did not. A team of research assistants manually read every letter, with many letters being read multiple times.⁹ The set of rules used to

⁹ The principal investigators did not perform any of the coding, and coders were unaware of the hypotheses tested in this study. Coders underwent intense training and had to achieve a high level of agreement with a series of training samples (these samples included a higher proportion of letters containing conspiracies than the actual data, both to give the coders more experience with such letters and to provide a better test of reliability). The Krippendorff's alpha coefficient for the tests among trained coders ranged between .8 and 1.0; this is considered adequate by conventional standards. Because coder fatigue would likely be an issue given the size of the actual sample and that coders had to manually read the entirety of the letters, coders worked short shifts and were provided frequent breaks. Coders were periodically retrained and retested. To be sure that the coding of the actual data was reliable, we performed periodic tests, recoding portions of the sample using different coders. Coder agreement between conspiracy theory letters and non-conspiracy theory letters in these tests was consistently above 99 percent. Krippendorff's alpha in these tests met

place each letter into a category, also known as the *scheme* (no pun intended), asked coders to read each letter and categorize it on two basic dimensions.

The initial dimension was whether the author was an “elite” or not. We defined elites as much previous literature does, as any person who (a) currently or in the past held an elected position in government, (b) served as an executive or spokesperson for a large corporation, union, interest group, or other institution, (c) was a member of the news or entertainment media, (d) was a member of a foreign government. Elites were easy to identify given that the vast majority signed the letter with their title. Those that did not included their title in the body of the letter.

The next dimension was whether the author engaged in conspiracy talk or not. These letters either proffered or discounted a conspiracy theory. Letters proffering a conspiracy theory are self-explanatory, but letters discounting a conspiracy theory have to recite the alleged plot but argue that the accusations were false. We analyze letters proffering and discounting conspiracy theories together because the letters discounting conspiracy theories, while not indicating that the letter writers adhere to the theory, indicate that the conspiracy theory is resonating in the population widely enough to merit writing and publishing a letter to discount it.¹⁰ To be coded as a conspiracy theory, the letter had to include all four elements found in standard definitions: (1) a group (2) acting in secret (3) to alter institutions, usurp power, hide truth, or gain utility (4) at the expense of the common good. Each facet deserves fuller treatment.

For the first element, a group could refer to any entity, from a collection of countries, a

conventional standards. Disagreements were settled by a third coder. This high level of agreement was expected given that most letters in the sample clearly did not meet the criteria that would indicate discussion of a conspiracy theory.¹⁰ Also, combining letters discounting and proffering conspiracy theories acts as a further check on editorial bias. Hypothetically, if the *Times* editorial staff were to show a left-leaning bias, we would expect them to favor letters that discounted conspiratorial allegations made at actors on the left as opposed to letters alleging conspiratorial actions by actors on the left (and vice-versa). Media coverage of the recent Birther conspiracy theory bears this out. Pew analysis of cable news coverage shows that MSNBC (the liberal outlet) gave as much attention as either CNN (the moderate outlet) or Fox News (the conservative outlet) to the recent Birther conspiracy theory (Moos 2011). The vast majority of this attention was to deny the conspiracy. On this logic, and should editorial ideological bias manifest, we would then expect the *New York Times* to publish fewer letters proffering the birther conspiracy and more denying it.

single country, an institution, a party, a religious sect, a trade union, interest group, to a small band of unaffiliated collaborators. Some letters name a single conspirator, but make clear that that person was in concert with others to orchestrate the plot. The groups could be out-of-power or in-power; they could be a large majority or a minor fringe; they could be political, economic, social or religious in nature. The conspirators need not have any official government power or title to be accused. There is no logical necessity inherent in the definition for conspiracy theories to originate with powerful or politically salient actors, though in practice they often do.

For the second element, acting in secret, the alleged actions of the villain had to take place outside of normal institutional channels. To provide a few examples, if a group openly advertised that it advocated and was willing to take part in the forceful overthrow of the U.S. government, this would not qualify because our coding excludes harms done in broad daylight. Likewise, if a writer contended that Mormons were supporting the election of Republican candidates, this would not be viewed as a conspiracy because such actions are part of normal democratic processes. However, if a letter contended that Mormons were orchestrating the stealthy stuffing of ballot boxes, then this would indicate that they were acting in secret and outside of normal channels.

For the third element, the letter had to indicate that the group was attempting to alter institutions, usurp power, hide truth, or gain some other form of utility for themselves. This might involve instituting a communist regime, illegally achieving election, concealing vital information from the public, or gaining illicit riches. For instance, the theory that NASA faked the moon landing fits this criterion because the allegation assumes that high-level government officials are hiding this fact (and other important facts about outer space) from the people.

For the fourth element, the letter writer had to claim that, if carried out, the plot would come at the expense of the common good. Judgments regarding harm were left solely to letter writers. This might involve swindling the unsuspecting out of large sums of money, brainwashing

naïve citizens, unleashing baleful legislation, or enslaving the country under an unscrupulous regime. Benevolent plots and private wrongs were excluded. So if one took Updike's conspiracy theory in our epigram or contended that secret forces were working to cure cancer, these would not fit our definition of a conspiracy theory. Or, consider the attempted homicide of a cuckold. If an adulteress and her lover were accused of conspiring to kill the woman's husband, it would not fit our definition either because the wrong is more injurious to private than public good. Conspiracy theories deal in wholesale, not retail.

These four conditions are restrictive enough to omit sharp critique and heated political rhetoric but permissive enough to capture a wide range of conspiratorial allegations. In fact, relatively few letters met all four criteria to qualify. Many conspiracy theories have been around for decades, have groups and websites dedicated to them, and are well known. Yet many are less celebrated but no less indicative of a conspiratorial atmosphere. Our coding scheme has the benefit of netting both the big and little fish of conspiracy theories.

Results

Our target was a sample collection of 1,000 letters for each year 1890-2010 stratified by month to ensure that each year was evenly sampled throughout.¹¹ Altogether we coded a total of 104,823 letters from the *New York Times* over a period of 121 years. This provides a mean of 866 letters, a median of 845 letters, and a range of 347-2,477 letters per year. The number of elite letters averaged 74 per year representing 8.5 percent of the total letters. Non-elite letters averaged 792 letters per year.

¹¹ A randomized counting process was used within each month to choose letters. Some years in the database, especially in the 1800s, did not contain 1,000 letters, but we sought to approximate that number as closely as possible. Also, some of the letters were unreadable and could not be coded. There is no reason to suspect the exclusion of these letters would bias the results in any way. In addition, we oversampled some years, but because of our mode of analysis, this does not affect our results.

In total, our coders identified 875 letters engaging in conspiracy talk. Of these, 240 were from elites, 635 from non-elites. This represents less than one percent of the total letters coded from the *New York Times*. This may seem at odds with previously mentioned polls showing that much of the population believes in one conspiracy or another. However, this relatively low percentage is a useful baseline measure and makes intuitive sense. People write letters to discuss a variety of issues, from culture to cooking and beyond.¹² Simply holding conspiratorial beliefs does not indicate that those beliefs are highly prominent in one's worldview, nor does it require one to write about those beliefs, nor need it be the most discussed issue of the day. Even if there is a stigma against voicing a conspiracy theory and our measure understates the underlying prevalence of conspiracy views in the populace, having a uniform baseline measure allows fair historical comparisons. As conspiratorial beliefs become more resonant they are likely to manifest in more published letters.

[Insert Table 3.1 about here]

In Table 3.1, we provide brief synopses of a sample of the conspiracy theories identified in our data collection efforts. Plots include foreign countries invading the U.S., electoral fraud, religious tyranny, brainwashing, propaganda, murder, and intrigue. According to conspiracy theorists, events and circumstances are rarely the product of happenstance; dark forces must be pulling strings. Watergate cannot be the result of Nixon's wrongdoings; it must instead be a plot carried out by the liberal media. Lesbianism cannot be another type of sexuality; it is a CIA machination. Fires do not happen by accident; firefighters set them to reap financial rewards. Congress can't pass a bill to protect sheep; it must instead be a clandestine device to kill our pet dogs. And presidents do not just die; a nefarious plot *must* lurk in the shadows.

¹² Before beginning the sampling and coding process, we performed a series of simple word searches in the *New York Times Historical Database*. Letters containing terms such as "conspiracy" yielded less than 1% of the letters in the database.

As the sample in Table 3.1 demonstrates, conspiracy theories run the gamut. Some impugn government officials, others accuse foreign actors. Even docile religious institutions, youths groups, and movie actors cannot escape suspicion. Some of the conspiracy theories in Table 3.1 will ring familiar; others have been far less resonant over time. Fears of communist entrenchment have been more or less prominent in the country for decades; however, fears of scientists using weather control to take over territory have been far less prominent. Our method of sampling provides the full range of common as well as extraordinary conspiratorial beliefs.

[Insert Table 3.1 about here]

In Table 3.2, we provide a non-inclusive sampling of those accused of conspiring. Readers may notice that these villains come from all over the world, from all regions of the US, from all political persuasions, and from all parts of society. Everybody is in on it. In a sense, conspiracy theories are highly egalitarian: everyone gets named as a villain. Even seemingly benign actors such as teachers, pacifists, and Jimmy Carter can be assumed to run afoul behind closed doors.

[Insert Figure 3.1 about here]

Figure 3.1 shows the yearly time series of non-elite letters engaging in conspiracy talk over time. We express this as the proportion of non-elite letters engaging in conspiracy talk to total non-elite letters in our sample each year. We first see that the line is jagged and few overarching trends are quickly discernible. However, a number of trends do stand out.

The main spikes appear in the mid-1890s and early 1950s, coinciding with labor unrest and McCarthyism, respectively. Still, beginning in the mid-1960s, conspiracy theorizing enters a gradual

descent. The real exceptions to this trend come in the late 1970s and mid-1990s. Yet from 1964 on, conspiracy theories occupy an average of 0.4 percent of the letters per year, while before 1964 conspiracy theories are more than double at 1 percent. While the 1964 demarcation is arbitrary, the data suggests that there is at least one compelling generalization about conspiracy talk in the United States since 1890: it has waned over time. We do not live in an age of conspiracy theories, and have not for some time.

[Insert Figure 3.2 about here]

Figure 3.2 shows the yearly time series of elite letters engaging in conspiracy talk over time. We express this as the proportion of elite letters engaging in conspiracy talk to total elite letters in our sample each year. Much like the non-elites, elites have become less conspiratorial over time. This is particularly evident since the mid-1970s. Spikes occurred in the 1890s and early 1900s. And, unlike non-elites, elites were relatively docile during the Red Scare of the 1950s. In Chapter 4, we will explore the relationship between elite and non-elite conspiracy beliefs.

Conclusion

In a sense, the data vindicates all previous authors on conspiracy theories; at every point in time Americans have seen fiendish plots afoot. But the evidence does not validate all arguments equally. Using the best available data, letters to the editor of the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune*, we found the prevalence of conspiratorial beliefs changes a great deal. The overarching trend is that conspiracy talk in the United States has diminished across time, especially since the mid-1960s. But there have been two major upticks, in the 1890s and 1950s, and two minor upticks, in the late 1970s and mid-1990s.

News outlets, it seems, treat their coverage of conspiracy theories much the way they treat coverage of other stories: with flagrant sensationalism. In lieu of evidence, journalists have been able to proclaim nearly every year the ‘age of conspiracy.’ Scholars have been only little more reserved.

Scholars, in general, have made claims more tethered to evidence; the only problem has been that the evidence has not been particularly systematic. It is precarious to make claims about the peaks and valleys of public attitudes with only the benefit of anecdotes and impressions. Our efforts here represent the first systematic collection of conspiratorial beliefs during a significant period of time. Hopefully, this will not be the last such effort. Going into the future, we look forward to the use of other methods, both survey and content based, that will begin looking at conspiratorial beliefs from the contemporary period on out.

But to this point, our discussion has been solely descriptive. We have established *when* conspiracy theorizing was particularly popular without showing *why* conspiracy theorizing was particularly popular. The authors who got the timing right may have only gotten lucky. There has been a glut of theories about conspiracy theories, but like their subject matter they have not used much in the way of high-quality evidence. In the following chapter, we move to remedy this gap.

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EXPLAINING CONSPIRACY TALK

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[4]

EXPLAINING CONSPIRACY TALK

History is much more the product of chaos than of conspiracy.

— Zbigniew Brzezinski

Everyone believes that their theories of conspiracies are true and follow from the evidence while others' conspiracy theories are false and follow from unfortunate circumstances. People, we tell ourselves, would not entertain such nutty notions were it not for the intervention of willful misinformation, desperate wishful thinking, or pitiable ignorance. Yet what do we really know about the ebb and flow of conspiracy theorizing? Why does its prevalence change in the United States over time?

A great deal rides on these questions. Conspiratorial clouds cast a long shadow over history: Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories drove centuries of discrimination, violence, and genocide against Jews. Witch-hunts and Red Scares have ruined careers and ended lives (Schmidt 2000, Latner 2006). More recently, the Ruby Ridge incident, the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, and the 1996 Olympic bombings all trace back to conspiratorial thought. Conspiracy theories also play an important role in legislative success and policy implementation (Gibson 1988). Health, welfare, and security measures, such as vaccinations (Kata 2010), Social Security (Lubove 1986, 6), and anti-terror measures (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008) are often opposed by suspicions of nefarious government conspiracies.

Even, recent efforts to reform health care were impeded by fears of secret “death panels” (Nyhan 2010). Foreign policy is also often faced with allegations of conspiracy: war opposition movements are generally fraught with conspiratorial thinking (Knight 2003), and on the opposite end, peace and treaty negotiations are often hindered by conspiracy theories. For example, opposition to a recently proposed U.N. sponsored gun treaty faced fierce opposition from gun rights groups who feared that hostile nations would infringe on their constitutional rights (Edwards 2012).

Given the importance of the topic, there has been no shortage of speculation about why conspiracy theories wax and wane across time. Yet the evidentiary support for these conjectures has been wanting. The studies to date have relied on anecdotal or impressionistic testing, following multiple conspiracy theories over a short time, a single conspiracy theory over a long period of time, or a cherry-picked set of famous cases at various intervals (Johnson 1983, Pipes 1997, Goldberg 2001, Knight 2002, Coady 2006). We added value in Chapter 3 by systematically measuring all conspiracy talk over more than a century. Now we use that data in an attempt to explain its peaks and valleys.

Our main finding is that most of the factors thought to correlate with the overall levels of conspiratorial beliefs do not. The comforting and simplistic stories we use to explain away supposed surges in conspiracy theorizing are as baseless as conspiracy theories are often held to be. Perhaps this will allow scholars and journalists to retire some worn-out explanations of American conspiracy theories. Still, though the overall picture is largely shrouded in shadow, there are some glimmers of light that offer promise. The evidence suggests that changes in elite rhetoric and the information environment do offer some analytical purchase on when the level of conspiracy theorizing oscillates. In the end, the

overall level of conspiracy theorizing responds to social cues, but we only have a rudimentary idea of what those cues are.

The rest of the chapter is organized in the following manner. The first section overviews our methods, our data, and how we reach our conclusions. The second section lays out six popular but unsupported stories – myths – about conspiracy theorizing. The third section elaborates the logic of the explanations that do work. And the final section sums the analysis and ties up loose ends.

Methods

Proving a causal relationship is difficult, but the first step is finding a correlation between causes and effects. A correlation is only a concise way to say that a cause and effect appear together in a non-random pattern. We use multivariate regression to search for correlations. Once a correlation is established, then subsequent research can poke and prod the relationship to make sure it is genuinely causal. But to reach that point, high quality data is indispensable.

As described in Chapter 3, using letters to the editor of the *New York Times*, we created a time-series of conspiratorial beliefs spanning 121 years, from 1890 to 2010. This is a numerical measure, in 121 yearly observations, with higher values indicating higher levels of conspiratorial belief in the public, and lower levels indicating lower levels of conspiratorial beliefs in the public. To be clear, this measure refers to all conspiracy talk rather than talk just about a specific theory.

Below, we operationalize concepts commonly thought to explain the amount of conspiracy talk by creating a series of numerical measures to represent them. Just like we created a numerical operationalization representing general levels of conspiracy talk in the

populace, we created measures that represent the explanations of conspiracy talk in order to make a statistical comparison. Naturally, no measure – quantitative or qualitative – is perfect, but we used the best available evidence and make our methods transparent to minimize error.

Essentially, we are looking for true and non-trivial causes. In other words, we seek to identify variables which rise and fall in tandem with levels of conspiracy talk, appear to come before, or drive levels of conspiracy talk, and have a substantive effect on the levels of conspiracy talk. Table 4.1 provides the results of this comparison.¹

[Insert Table 4.1 about here]

Table 4.1 presents the coefficients; stars indicate statistical significance suggesting that the explanatory variable is correlated with our dependent variable, levels of conspiracy talk over time. The sign (+/-) of each coefficient indicate the direction of the correlation. An increase in a variable with a positive sign leads to an increase in the levels of conspiracy talk increases; an increase in a variable that is negatively signed leads to a decrease in the levels of conspiracy talk. Next, we present the various explanations for the levels of conspiracy talk in the public, and then discuss how we operationalize each. We then interpret Table 4.1's statistical findings for each explanation.

¹ We constructed a series of control variables to test for potential biases stemming from the Times. We track changes in the *New York Times* ownership, editorship, circulation, and local competition. These variables provide little explanatory power, and therefore we exclude them from the shown model. However, models include these are available upon request.

Six Myths of Conspiracy Theories

When someone holding conspiracy theory beliefs makes national news, the media is quick to provide the answers their audience craves. How could someone believe such kooky ideas? What follows are six myths that have been successfully sold to the American public for some time without warrant.

MYTH #1: IT'S THE ECONOMY, STUPID

I think that at a time when the country is anxious generally and going through a tough time, fears can surface, suspicions, divisions can surface in a society.

Barack Obama
9/10/2010²

The false belief that Obama was not born in the U.S. or that he is a Muslim has been tracking upward with economic uncertainty and individuals' worries about the economy. Plenty of conspiracy beliefs go hand in glove with worries and fears about globalization and unexpected/unpredictable economic shocks.

James T. LaPlant
4/22/2011³

Perhaps the most convenient suspect is the economy. When the financial seas get rough and ordinary people feel tossed about like toy ships, they may seek a scapegoat for their woes (Gourevitch 1986 143-147, Kindleberger 1986, Jacobson 2010). Economic uncertainty and hard times cannot just happen, someone must be causing it and that someone must be very powerful. Or, perhaps through a different mechanism, the stress of economic uncertainty creates a conspiracy-laden paranoia. The logic is spare, plausible, and

² http://articles.nydailynews.com/2010-09-10/news/27075068_1_koran-islamic-society-president-obama

³ <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/04/21/barack-obama-and-the-psychology-of-the-birther-myth/no-winning-this-argument>

compelling, and prior studies have found a potential link between the two. And there is some evidence to suggest this: in a study of African-American conspiracy theories, Parsons et al. (1999) found that those who view the economy as worsening are more likely to believe in malicious conspiracy theories.

To test this hypothesis we examine measures of economic misery. When people lose their jobs, lose their money, or confront income inequality, these are the forces that are ripe for conspiracy theories. We track these forces through the yearly unemployment rate, yearly changes in GDP, and the GINI coefficient of income inequality.⁴ If economics drive conspiracy theorizing, it ought to show up in these indicators.

And yet it does not. None of the measures correlate. Despite the frequency with which the economy is blamed for conspiracy theories, economic performance does not predict conspiracy talk by the public, nor does the gap between rich and poor. Although economic conditions may well explain some famous cases of conspiracy theories, such as post-WWI Germany's embrace of the "stab in the back" myth when its middle class was wiped out, economic explanations appear not to be operative in the United States.

MYTH #2: IT'S BIG GOVERNMENT

Across the country, activists with ties to the Tea Party are railing against all sorts of local and state efforts to control sprawl and conserve energy. They brand government action for things like expanding public transportation routes and preserving open space as part of a United Nations-led conspiracy to deny property rights and herd citizens toward cities.⁵

⁴ For years prior to the national income tax, there is little way to calculate income inequality since personal incomes were not reported. However, we attempted to estimate the GINI coefficient for these years based upon accounts of economic historians.

⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/04/us/activists-fight-green-projects-seeing-un-plot.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all

The United States has a long history of fearing central authority and all its trappings: central bankers, standing armies, and the long arm of the taxman (Hofstadter 1963, 6, Gribbin 1974, 241-244, Hogue 1976, 291, Wood 1982, 407-420, Knight 2002, 7). This is based on one of the sturdiest axioms of politics: concentrations of power corrupt. If eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, then conspiracy theories may be liberty's early warning system against tyranny. At some point, the American state may become overgrown, suffocating freedom and allowing government authority to run amok (Fenster 1999, viii,xiv, Melley 2000, Olmsted 2011, 4, 8-9). But even short of tyranny or usurpation, concentrations of power could lead to insensitive and unresponsive actions by a remote central authority (Erikson and Parent 2007). Under such conditions, conspiracy theories represent a defense mechanism: citizens are proclaiming their alertness against burgeoning state power and their resolve to oppose it.

Anecdotal evidence of this thesis is not hard to find. The Declaration of Independence is a celebrated instance of conspiracy theorizing, and there was plenty of concern during the Constitution's drafting and ratification about excessive concentrations of power, cabals, and subversive factions. More modern examples include a Colorado bicycle-sharing program, which faced stiff objections stemming from the belief that the bikes were part of a global plot to subjugate Americans to U.N. rule (Osher 2010). In California, others opposed a land-use ordinance because they thought it was a plot to subjugate property rights to government (Hurley and Walker 2004).

The key concept to test this hypothesis is changes in the size of government. Fortunately, this is fairly straightforward to track. We measure the yearly percentage change

in federal outlays, which furnishes a rough measure of the size and scope of government. Here too there is no statistically significant predictor of conspiracy talk. While many conspiracy theories speak to the encroachment of government on personal liberty, the overall levels of conspiracy theorizing appear to have little to do with the actual growth of government.

MYTH #3: IT'S RACE, CLASS, OR GENDER

The driving force behind the dogged unwillingness of so many to acknowledge that Obama was born in the United States is not just simple partisan opposition to a Democratic president but a general ethnocentric suspicion of an African-American president who is also perceived as distinctly 'other'"

Michael Tesler and David Sears (2010:153).

Maybe conspiracy theorizing is less about money and power than status. Individuals may fall prey to conspiratorial thought when they lose social standing (Hofstadter 1964, 32, 39, Davis 1969, 25-26, Lipset and Raab 1978, 460, 488, Wood 1982, 404-405, 411, 430, Hofman 1993, 33, Tackett 2000, 42, Aaronovitch 2010, 355). On this view one would expect conspiracy theories to arise during times of heightened social change (Waters 1997, Fenster 1999, Woods 2004). Believers could then blame their diminished place in society on cheating opponents, rather than losing fair and square. This coping strategy bears the distinct advantages of cutting unflattering corners off reality and absolving personal responsibility for negative outcomes. Or, it may be that the societal change brought by greater inclusion increases the propensity to see conspiracies.

In the past century, women and minorities have made the greatest strides up the social hierarchy. One can measure the improvement in their social acceptance by how

frequently they are gain elected office. Arguably the most sensitive indicators of this are the number of women and minorities in the House of Representatives. Yet no correlation appears. Just as women and minorities revolutionized American politics in the civil rights era, overall levels of conspiracy talk dip and remain relatively low.

MYTH #4: IT'S TECHNOPHOBIA

Facebook - the social networking monster that everyone's on - may have been created by secretive US government agencies hell bent on mining the personal information of millions, according to one theory. Part of Facebook's funding supposedly came - very indirectly - from the CIA, and from the DARPA's Information Awareness Office, which had the following mission statement: "...to gather as much information as possible about everyone, in a centralised location, for easy perusal by the United States government, including (though not limited to) internet activity, credit card purchase histories, airline ticket purchases, car rentals, medical records, educational transcripts, driver's licenses, utility bills, tax returns, and any other available data." An article about the dastardly plot has been the top-read story in nzherald.co.nz's Technology section for two years.

*The New Zealand Herald*⁶

Even before the fires were extinguished at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, conspiracy theories began flooding the Internet. A few quickly spilled out of Web sites and were widely circulated by e-mail before fading into oblivion.

*The New York Times*⁷

It's traditional for conspiracy theories to flood the internet after a major crime – and sure enough, there are a few bouncing around following the mass shooting in Aurora last week. One that's gained some traction in the digital world is that the US Government is to blame for the shooting. It staged the massacre, the theory says, to gain power over the population by having an excuse to disarm it.

*The Huffington Post*⁸

⁶ http://www.nzherald.co.nz/technology/news/article.cfm?c_id=5&objectid=10594797

⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/22/world/sept-11-as-right-wing-us-plot-conspiracy-theory-sells-in-france.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

⁸ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/07/24/james-holmes-the-conspiracy-theories_n_1697277.html

There are two main ways that technology could trigger an uptick in conspiracy theorizing. First, rapid change may alienate senescent generations and spark fears of retrograde progress, unchecked innovations, and utopian innovators. Citizens may feel overwhelmed by change and believe that technology erodes their autonomy (Hofstadter 1963, 1964). Second, increased communication may accelerate the spread of conspiratorial ideas, achieving a sort of echo chamber effect. With newer more efficient methods of communicating to large geographically disparate audiences, many surmise that conspiracy theories should spread farther and faster than ever before (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008). Hardly an article on conspiracy theories goes by without mentioning the Internet.

If dystopian anxieties or more efficient lines of communication drive conspiracy talk, we would expect to see them show up in variables related to innovation and communication. Consequently, we employ three variables tracking just that. The first is the percentage change in the number of approved patents. This provides a rough rate of technological innovation. As more products flood the market, the downstream effect should be modern-day Luddites up at arms. Second, we employ the percentage of the population with a television and the percentage of the population with an Internet connection. As more and more people have the marvels of technology brought into their living room and can join the highly segmented communities on the web, the amount of conspiracy talk should go up.

And still none of these register. The rate of patent approval goes up; the rate of patent approval goes down, but not in step with the amount of conspiracy talk. This may be because quantity is not the same as quality; lots of little inventions may not be as psychologically jarring as one mammoth invention. Yet even on this view, it is hard to explain the long-term curve of conspiracy talk. It would take a very selective accounting of

major innovations to account for the shape of that curve. So, too, with television and the Internet. Although TV may irritate conspiracy theorists, it appears not to do so more than word of mouth or radio did. And the Internet may make it possible for self-selected groups to find and encourage each other's worldviews, they appear to be self-contained enough not to influence the broader population appreciably. Of course, the Internet has not decreased conspiracy theorizing either.⁹

MYTH #5: IT'S THE MEDIA'S FAULT

The volume and influence of stigmatized knowledge have increased dramatically through the mediation of popular culture. Motifs, theories, and truth claims that once existed in hermetically sealed subcultures have begun to be recycled, often with great rapidity, through popular culture.

Michael Barkun (2006, 33)

Few scapegoats are as near at hand and multipurpose as the media. It could be that mass media stokes the flames of conspiracy theorizing, chasing audiences with stories of schemes and skullduggery (Jacoby 2008). The images and accounts of conspiracy disseminated through the media may affect the audience's conspiratorial attitudes. For example, many attributed supposed increases in conspiratorial thought in the 1990s to Oliver Stone's film *JFK*, or to Producer Chris Carter's television show *X-Files* (Butler, et al. 1995, Markley 1997).

To test this, we measure the number of movies released each year that include a conspiracy, the number of television series featuring conspiracies airing each year during

⁹ Some argue that conspiratorial rhetoric simply migrated to the web away from newspaper letters to the editor. We discussed the faulty logic of this argument in Chapter 3.

primetime, and mentions of the term “conspiracy theory” in books released each year.¹⁰

While the number of shows and movies may be driven by other factors, our regression model should be able to isolate how much of the variance correlates solely with media measures.

We find no evidence to suggest that any of these drive conspiracy talk. It is likely that because people self-select their entertainment, most conspiracy-laden entertainment is simply overlooked by those lacking a predisposition. This leaves this material to merely preach to the choir. If conspiracies sell, they tend not to see particularly well. *JFK* and *X-Files* were memorable, but they were hardly as profitable as *The Wizard of Oz* (in its ending, an anti-conspiracy theory movie) or *M*A*S*H*. The raw data shows this as well: the 1990s showed a wave of conspiracy related shows and movies, but rates of conspiracy talk remained rather low.

MYTH #6: IT'S FEARS OF FOREIGN INTRIGUE

In 1690 Frenchmen and Indians razed the town of Schenectady and struck forts on the coast of Maine, sending a frisson of fear through New York and New England.... That deplorable military situation and the panic it caused provided the context for one of the most infamous episodes in colonial history: the Salem witch trials.

Walter McDougall (2004, 106)

When foreign dangers loom large, there is a strategic logic that suggests conspiracy theorizing may be an adaptive response. With high outside threats, citizens are extremely

¹⁰ We note that we already include in the model a measure of conspiracies in hard news sources to measure Hypothesis 2. With news sources, it is difficult to disentangle the independent effect of news content from the independent effect of the actual events the news reports. A finding that hard news content leads to conspiracy talk may provide support for Hypothesis 2, Hypothesis 7, or both.

vulnerable to treachery and in such times it makes sense to put a premium on conformity, be especially on guard against treachery, and be particularly alert to potential plots (Montesquieu 1965, 8-9, Parent 2010, Olmsted 2011). On this logic, conspiracy theories are an early warning system, a way of economizing attention and energy on the most menacing perils to protect the most sensitive areas.

The difficulty with this explanation is that threats are quite subjective and hard to measure. Our best approximation of threat is to measure defense spending as a percentage of GDP. This roughly indicates the amount of threat the United States faces in a given year because societies reveal their preferences by making costly tradeoffs between consumption, investment, and security (sometimes referred to as “guns versus butter” decisions.)

Curiously, threat predicts the amount of conspiracy talk, and in the correct temporal ordering – but in the wrong direction. More defense spending leads to less conspiracy talk, though the effect is very small. There are some instances where an elevated sense of threat and hefty defense expenditures correlated with high-profile conspiracy theorizing, the Red Scares and McCarthyism are prototypical examples. Yet there are other instances where heavy defense spending and conspiracy talk do not correlate, such as World War II. It is hard to know what to make of this result. There may be specific kinds of threats that spur conspiracy theorizing or there may be a lag effect that increases in threat cause an increase in conspiracy talk and only later steeper defense expenditures. By the time defense spending goes up, that may be enough to defuse or manage the threat (but we are unable to find such). It may be that foreign dangers drive only conspiracy theories impugning foreigners, and perhaps at the same time, other more domestic conspiracy theorizing. We will discuss this possibility in Chapter 5.

In sum, there are five factors that are frequently thought to correlate with conspiracy theorizing that do not and another that correlates but in the wrong direction for opaque reasons. Thus, these factors conventionally thought to explain conspiracy theories either have little supporting evidence or a much more complicated relationship than previously known. This helps clear the ground for scholars to build more powerful explanations.

Explaining Conspiracy Talk

There may be sharp limits on our knowledge of conspiracy theorizing, but our ignorance is not encyclopedic. There are two factors that show most promise in helping to unravel the mystery of conspiracy theorizing: the information environment and elite cues. We investigate each in turn.

EVIDENCE OF CONSPIRACIES CAUSES CONSPIRACY THEORIZING

If you were a person who watched FOX News all day, it is possible you have been marinating in this conspiracy theory for long enough now that this seems feasible.

Rachael Maddow¹¹

Many have made the case that conspiracy talk grows more frequent because credible information of conspiracies is readily available (Rosnow, et al. 1986, Tackett 2000, 701, Hellinger 2003, 205-206, Wedel 2009, Olmsted 2011, 9). It makes intuitive sense: people are generally rational and when changes in information support conspiratorial beliefs, people will express them more. For instance, in the 1970s the volume of credible discussion of

¹¹ "THE RACHEL MADDOW SHOW for June 20, 2012." MSNBC. (June 20, 2012 Wednesday): 7503 words. LexisNexis Academic. Web. Date Accessed: 2012/08/03.

conspiracies went up, due to news coverage of Watergate. More recently others have connected the salience of the birther conspiracy theory in the media to the high levels of people that believe Obama was born somewhere else: “Much of the misinformation about Obama, from whatever the source, has been spread through the news media. According to Joshua DuBois, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, among those who think that Obama is a Muslim, 60 percent learned about his religion from the news media and talk shows.”¹²

The news media is perhaps the most prominent way that citizens would hear information about conspiracies and conspiracy theories, and it is perhaps the best way to measure the information environment. No doubt conspiracy theories pass through interpersonal communication as well, but because we are interested in examining conspiratorial beliefs at the mass level, it is appropriate to focus on wholesale sources of information and the broader marketplace of ideas.

To track this, we include two measures providing a rough estimate of news discussion of conspiracies and conspiracy theories. We performed word searches in the *NYT* Historical Database for the term “conspiracy.” One variable is the percentage of news articles in the paper mentioning the word conspiracy, and another is a variable tracking the percentage of articles on the front page mentioning conspiracy. These should adequately capture how exposed informed opinion is to evidence of conspiracies.

The results in Table 4.1 suggest that information environment predicts conspiracy talk in the public. This is not because of miscellaneous mentions here and there; discussion of conspiracies in the totality of the *Times* is not a statistically significant predictor of conspiracy talk in the masses. It is the prime real estate that matters. A one standard

¹² <http://news.discovery.com/human/why-obama-birther-conspiracy-theories-linger-110427.html>

deviation increase of conspiracy related discussion on the front page of the *Times* predicts an impressive increase of .2 standard deviations of conspiracy talk in the public.

However, causation is seldom straightforward; the news may be responding to audience opinions, rather than the reverse. To analyze the direction of causation between the public and the news, we performed additional testing, which was inconclusive. So while the causal direction remains unclear, at least we now have some promising space on which future researchers can focus their attention.

ELITE CUES CAUSE CONSPIRACY THEORIZING

But what I am focusing on tonight is sitting members of the United States Congress, people in important positions of power, who are pointing fingers at individuals working in this government, making allegations or spreading innuendoes about them without any direct evidence. They're dragging people's names and reputations through the mud.

Anderson Cooper¹³

Elites are the obvious suspects for who is in a position to influence views on conspiracy theories (and much else besides). How elites talk about their domestic and foreign foes can cast a long shadow on public opinion because they are presumed to be in possession of the best information. We take no stand on whether elites sincerely believe a conspiracy is afoot or whether they make such accusations strategically to mobilize masses for political ends (Tackett 2000, Olmsted 2011, 6).

As explained in Chapter 3, there is an elegant way to follow elite opinion in our data. Elites send letters to the editor of the *New York Times* just as the public does. There is some

¹³ "Muslim Conspiracy Theory; Mitt Romney's Overseas Trip; Fight for Syrian City of Aleppo." CNN. (July 30, 2012 Monday): 7348 words. LexisNexis Academic. Web. Date Accessed: 2012/08/03.

correlation between elite and public conspiracy talk, about .40, which means the two track each other somewhat. This comes as no surprise; studies have shown that elites are devotees of conspiracy theories as well (Simmons and Parsons 2005). But it is not analytically controversial to say that elite rhetoric is an independent variable.

Indeed, conspiratorial rhetoric from elites is a statistically significant predictor of public conspiracy talk. The model estimates that a one standard deviation increase in elite rhetoric predicts a striking one quarter standard deviation increase in conspiracy talk in the public. Again, one must check to see if elites are driving rather than either the opposite, or if both elites and masses are responding to the same cues, we performed further testing using lags. The results show that elite rhetoric comes before conspiracy talk in the masses, which is a solid indication that elites are influencing the public.

If elites can influence the public to believe in conspiracy theories, this raises the issue that elites might propagate conspiracy theories for partisan advantage. Political polarization has been increasing in the United States for decades and there are good reasons to think that polarized politics raises the incentives to see one's opponents as conspirators. The hypothesis here is that, as elite factions spread farther apart in their belief systems and actions, rhetoric will intensify and accusations of conspiracy will escalate. This can lead the public to view the only viable political solutions as black and white: "In polarized political debate, the very fact of polarization tends to provoke doubt about the availability of any solution that would be widely acceptable. If people disagree so vehemently and persistently about a matter of policy, and if some even seem to reject the value of public justification itself, then it becomes tempting to say that no solution will avoid the political domination of one group by another" (Callan 1995, 315).

There is a standard measure of American political polarization, Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOM scores, which we use. One note of caution is that elite polarization and public polarization may be related; so that our measure may be tapping into elite sentiment, public sentiment, or both. In any event, we find no statistical relationship between polarization and public conspiracy talk, rendering the concern moot.

But the non-finding on polarization is actually quite fascinating. It signals that although politicians have an incentive to level conspiracy charges and countercharges at each other (see especially the sixteen year period of the Clinton and Bush Administrations), polarization does not increase these incentives, and thus, the total level of conspiracy talk is unaffected. It could also be the case that elite cues work jointly with the information environment. Elites cannot spin conspiracy theories out of nothing; they are at least minimally beholden to available evidence.

Conclusion

This chapter looked into some popular explanations of why conspiracy theorizing goes up and down over time. Our major findings were mostly negative: most of the factors presumed to influence conspiracy theorizing do not correlate with it. This includes such usual suspects as economic hard times, big government, new technologies, changes in social status, and fears of foreign intrigue. What does seem to impact the aggregate levels of conspiracy theorizing are shifts in the information environment, elite cues, and defense spending. These factors are great places to start the next leg of the journey to get to the bottom of conspiracy theories.

Yet the explanatory power of all of these explanations is far from spectacular. The adjusted R^2 is .15, which means we can explain about 15% of the variance. Much work

remains to be done. Yet the positive contribution of this chapter is that it tells us that journalists and academics have been putting forward unsupported arguments, confusing rather than clarifying matters. Until better evidence for them comes to light, five or six explanations ought to go dormant.

It is customary in conclusions not just to tie up loose ends, but to showcase lingering loose ends that might be tied up later. Chapters 3 and 4 highlighted how many factors we think should cause more conspiracy theorizing do not, and that the overall level has been coming down for some time. This provokes a number of yet unanswered questions that could reveal a great deal about U.S. politics. What has changed in American life that constricts the proliferation of conspiracy theories? Has monitoring and enforcement gotten better, deterring would-be conspirators? Are the sources of this mostly in the marketplace of ideas, with information traveling farther and faster? Or are the sources mostly of partisan provenance, with elites policing each other more diligently? How much of the changes are due to the legal system or the strengthening of norms? Do similar patterns obtain in other countries?

Ultimately, our findings are only semi-reassuring. It is comforting to know that the halcyon days of American conspiracy theories appear to be behind us, and we have some sense of why the tides of conspiracy theories go in and out. Yet it is disconcerting that we can explain only a small amount of the variance, we know only a small number of factors that correlate with conspiracy talk, and we lack more powerful theories to explain to level of conspiracy theorizing. Scholars should conspire to fix that.

Chapter 5 now turns away from the discussion of overall levels of conspiracy theorizing to an examination of particular types of conspiracy theories and why their levels fluctuate over time.

TABLE 4.1: Time Series Regression Results

VARIABLE	<u>Public Conspiracy Talk</u> COEFFICIENT
NYT FRONT PAGE	0.12* (0.08)
ELITE RHETORIC	0.05** (0.02)
DEFENSE SPENDING	-0.0002* (0.0001)
POLARIZATION	-.004 (0.01)
NYT TOTAL	-0.18 (0.28)
FEDERAL OUTLAYS	0.00 (0.00)
WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES	-0.00 (0.00)
BLACK REPRESENTATIVES	0.00 (0.00)
UNEMPLOYMENT	-0.00 (0.00)
GDP	0.00 (0.00)
GINI	0.01 (0.02)
PATENTS	-0.00 (0.00)
TELEVISION	-0.00 (0.00)
INTERNET	0.00 (0.00)
FILMS	0.00 (0.00)
TV SHOWS	-0.00 (0.00)
BOOKS	-0.00 (0.00)
Adjusted r^2	.15
Observations	121

NOTE: * = $p < .1$; (one-tailed); ** = $p < .01$; (one-tailed). Prais-Winsten regression; coefficients and standard errors rounded to two decimal places.

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