Conspiratorial Predispositions and Belief in Voter Fraud

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Abstract: Belief in voter fraud and election fraud more broadly has recently received attention as part of policy debates on Voter ID laws. We approach the topic from a political-psychological perspective, offering an explanation of a potential cause for individual-level belief in fraud. Using CCES survey data from the 2012 election, we show that a measure of conspiratorial predispositions can help predict belief in fraud, both before and after the election has occurred. In line with previous research, conspiratorial beliefs are also higher among the losing side of the political spectrum. We conclude with some thoughts about the implications for these findings and what they contribute to our knowledge of conspiratorial beliefs.

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Despite the assumption that they operate at the fringes of political thought, conspiracy theories are a part of everyday American life. Indeed, conspiracy theories may influence policy outcomes in many issue areas. For example, movements for campaign finance reform, vaccination regulations, and voter identification laws are to some degree fueled by a belief that shadowy figures are aligned against the public’s best interest. Yet we do not understand whether conspiracy theories are “politics by other means” (i.e., overly-heated partisan rhetoric) or if they are the product of a separate cognitive process. This paper examines that question by looking at the determinants of an individual’s belief in widespread voter fraud. We find that a separate conspiratorial dimension, in addition to the expected partisan (Republican) dimension, predicts belief in voter fraud. In other words, belief in voter fraud stems in part from a pre-political disposition towards conspiratorial thought.

The focus on voter fraud beliefs is especially important because these beliefs inform views on a specific, controversial policy recommendation: voter identification laws. Voter identification laws have been passed in several states since the turn of the millennium. Proponents argue that voter identification laws are necessary to prevent voter fraud, which some believe is widespread. Opponents argue that the laws are a solution in search of a problem: Voter fraud is neither rampant nor would voter identification prevent the most probable types of fraud if it were. Moreover, opponents say the burdens of voter identification laws fall most heavily on poor, minority, and elderly voters; therefore, they tilt the electoral field in favor of Republicans. Litigation contesting the laws’ constitutionality reached the US Supreme Court, which ruled that voter identification requirements, with certain restrictions, are constitutional (Crawford v. Marion County).

Our purpose in this paper is not to adjudicate the merits and drawbacks of voter identification laws. We do not call into question the sincerity of beliefs about voter fraud. Nor do
we say anything definitive about the actual existence of voter fraud. We intend to show that beliefs about voter fraud are more than a post hoc justification for Republicans to implement voter identification laws. Instead, the beliefs are a predictable outgrowth of a general psychological predisposition towards conspiratorial explanations for unseen negative phenomena. Voter fraud beliefs are partially a function of partisanship, but previous research indicates that this may be more an accident of the data’s timeframe than a truly causal connection.

We begin with a review of an emergent literature on conspiracy theories in American political psychology. For context on our specific empirical question – how conspiratorial predispositions affect belief in voter fraud – we additionally discuss some recent research on incidences of voter fraud. We test our hypotheses regarding the connection between predispositions and attitudes with unique, conspiracy-focused data from the 2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). We then present the preliminary results of our statistical analysis and discuss some possibilities for refinement moving forward.

**Conspiracy Theories and Voter Fraud: Definitions and Background**

Central to the systematic study of conspiracy theories is a clear definition of what exactly the author(s) mean by the phrase “conspiracy theory.” We adopt Uscinski and Parent’s (2014) definition: “an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good” (32). This conception of conspiracy theories builds on definitions provided by Keeley (1999), Aaronovitch (2010), and Coady (2003). A conspiracy theory contrasts with a conspiracy in that the latter “speak[s] to actual events that have occurred or are occurring” (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 31). In other words, a conspiracy theory is an explanation
for events (which may or may not be accurate, given available and emerging evidence), whereas a conspiracy is an objective act (agreement) between at least two people to cause a specific harm.

For example, a Union supporter in April 1865 could have formulated a conspiracy theory regarding the role of Confederate sympathizers in Lincoln’s assassination, e.g. “Booth couldn’t have acted alone!” The actual conspiracy involving Booth, Atzerodt, Surratt, Herold, and Powell did exist, of course, but the hypothetical Union supporter still need not know of its actual existence in order to formulate his theory. Upon public revelation of the conspiracy, he could accept the facts, or he could engage in a further conspiracy theory, which might conjecture that Booth, et al. worked at the explicit direction of the “Slave Power” or another amorphous group.

This example underscores an important point: A conspiracy theory is not necessarily “wrong” per se. It is a theory, and, as such, requires evidence to support or disconfirm it. However, conspiracy theories are a distinctive type of theory in that they often incorporate what would be disconfirming evidence as support (Sunstein and Vermeule 2009, Clarke 2002). The lack of evidence or direct counter-evidence nevertheless supports a conspiracy theory because these merely prove how adept the alleged conspirators were at hiding their conspiracy.

Oliver and Wood (2014) come close to our definition, and in practice there is not much difference between theirs and ours. The definition has three parts: 1) Every negative thing that happens has an intentional and “malevolent” cause; 2) Malevolent causes are in constant conflict with beneficent causes; and 3) The so-called “official version” of events is designed to cover the malevolent cause’s tracks (Oliver and Wood 2014, 953). Our definition essentially reiterates points 1 and 2, with one slight difference. Whereas Oliver and Wood utilize the Manichean concept of a battle between (personified) good and (personified) evil, our definition only requires that a conspiracy theory posit an evil group of people in opposition to “the common good.” We think that this is more in line with conspiracy theories as they exist in the world. In the
Manichean conception of a conspiracy theory, the theory should include a definite counter-“conspiracy” against the evil one, e.g. the plot of *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. But more often conspiracy theories treat powerful people not in the alleged conspiracy as an unorganized, undifferentiated mass, which is a significant reason for the alleged conspiracy’s success. With respect to point 3, we do not think that a conspiracy theory need have an explanation for the “official story.” Indeed, the relaxation of this assumption allows us to examine beliefs about voter fraud, where a single “mainstream” or “official” account is probably lacking.\(^2\)

Voter fraud is a controversial topic. Some are convinced it occurs regularly and is widespread (e.g., Von Spakovsky 2012). Others argue that voter fraud is effectively a “myth” (e.g., Minnite 2010). While we do not speak to this controversy directly, it appears that the specific type of voter fraud that voter identification laws are designed to prevent – one person casting another’s ballot – is not at all common (Ahlquist, Mayer, and Jackman 2013). But there are other types of fraud that could occur out of public view and with little possibility of detection. Some examples include ballot stuffing, ballot de-stuffing, graveyard voting, or felon voting. Thus, the possibility of voter fraud, in combination with imperfect polling and disappointed electoral losers, gives rise to voter fraud conspiracy theories.

Voter fraud conspiracy theories are not the exclusive domain of one party. Conservatives alleging widespread fraud dominate the current discourse, but liberals, especially during the circumstances surrounding the 2000 and 2004 elections, also alleged a concerted effort to alter the vote. Though Republicans lately formulate theories that put the locus of conspiracy on individual voters in concert with, e.g., “community organizers,” Democratic voter fraud conspiracy theories focus on institutional actors’ malfeasance, e.g., the “lost” ballots in

\(^2\) The weight of academic opinion is on one side of the voter fraud debate, but it bears remembering that academic accounts and “mainstream” accounts are not exactly synonymous. Also, note that popularity and “mainstream” are not synonymous as well.
Brookfield, Wisconsin, that decided an important state supreme court race, uncounted Ohio ballots in 2004 that would have given Kerry the win (Parenti 2007), and “Sideshow” Bob Terwilliger’s rigging of the Springfield mayoral election (Oakley and Weinstein 1994).

The prevalence of voter fraud conspiracy theories on both sides of the political divide gives anecdotal support to our central contention that these conspiracy theories do not spring from a strictly ideological disposition. Instead, we expect belief in voter fraud conspiracy theories to emanate in part from ideology, and, given Republicans’ recent fortunes in presidential elections, Republicans will be more likely to believe in them. However, we expect that an orthogonal dimension – conspiratorial predispositions – will exert an effect independent of ideology.

**Data and Methods**

Our data come from survey responses from both the common content and a private module of the 2012 CCES, in both the pre- and post-election surveys. Our independent variable of note is a measure of “Conspiratorial Predispositions,” first introduced in American Conspiracy Theories (Uscinski and Parent, 2014). We use the same measure in our work, which is derived from a factor analysis. The three survey questions used to produce this measure are listed below. Responses are on a 5 point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

*Please tell us whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:*

- *Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places*
- *Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway*
- *The people who really ‘run’ the country, are not known to the voters*
We test the effects of this variable on belief in voter fraud before and after the election, as well as on the belief that the election would be cancelled. Several demographic control variables are included, such as race, religion, age, gender, and education. Additionally, the political variables of ideology and tea party were included. In the models where survey responses were obtained prior to the election, we include party identification on a seven-point scale. In the models for post-election responses, we instead include vote choice. All models produced have state fixed effects.

Results

We first turn to an analysis of the factors that explain a stated belief that voter fraud affected the 2012 presidential election outcome. This analysis provides a direct test of our thesis that a predisposition to believe in conspiracy theories predicts belief that voter fraud occurred. Are complaints of voter fraud only an instinctive justification for losing the election (meaning they will be limited to persons whose presidential preference was Romney) or do they spring from a deeper predisposition of belief in conspiracy theory? We examine how presidential preference and conspiracy theory predispositions explain complaints that voter fraud swayed the election through these models.

Readers might ask whether our dependent variable in this model is adequately suited for testing our theory. The measure is directly related to our definition of conspiracy theory – a belief that vote fraud affected the election suggests successful, malevolent efforts to undermine the “common good.” Because President Obama won both the Electoral College and popular vote by secure margins, a belief that voter fraud affected the outcome of the election suggests a robust conspiracy was thought to be at work.
Table 1: Belief of Fraud Affecting the Election

|                                    | Estimate | Std. Error | t value | Pr(>|t|) |
|------------------------------------|----------|------------|---------|----------|
| Presidential Preference: Other/DK  | 0.14*    | 0.07       | 2.06    | 0.04     |
| Presidential Preference: Romney    | 0.27**   | 0.05       | 5.69    | 0.00     |
| Consp. Predispositions             | 0.16**   | 0.05       | 3.07    | 0.00     |

Control Variables

Education                      -0.03  0.04 -0.81  0.42
Age                             -0.00  0.00 -0.96  0.34
Ideology                        0.01   0.01  0.95  0.34
Female                          0.02   0.02  0.97  0.33
Immigrant                      -0.02   0.05 -0.38  0.70
Race: Black                    -0.02   0.05 -0.44  0.66
Race: Other                    0.01   0.05  0.12  0.90
Hispanic                        -0.06   0.07 -0.91  0.36
Unemployed                      -0.03   0.04 -0.72  0.47
Born Again Christian           -0.02   0.03 -0.74  0.46
Religious Importance           0.03   0.05  0.65  0.52
Church Attendance              -0.04   0.05 -0.84  0.40
Tea Party                       0.35** 0.05  6.51  0.00
Interest                        0.07   0.05  1.40  0.16

Table 1: Regression model parameter estimates with state fixed effects. * denotes p < 0.05 and ** denotes p < 0.01 (two-tailed test).

Table 1 above presents the results of this analysis. These suggest a role for presidential preferences in explaining perceptions of voter fraud. Those who preferred Romney were more likely to suggest a conspiracy was at work. This is suggestive that some Romney supporters were prone to justify loss due to illegitimate elections while Obama supporters claimed that their candidate’s win was legitimate. Interestingly, those who did not have a preference or preferred another candidate were more likely to complain about voter fraud than Obama supporters as well, but not to a significantly different degree than Romney supporters. The results regarding presidential preference, though interesting, are expected. They are indicative of “sore losers” and energetic winners. Unsure respondents and those who did not prefer a major party candidate were more likely to perceive the election results as illegitimate.
What is more interesting is the result for our measure of conspiracy theory predispositions. On top of presidential preference, this variable adds significant and substantial explanatory power to our model. Even taking account of presidential preference, Obama and Romney supporters alike explain outcomes in terms of conspiracy based on a psychological predisposition to believe in such theories. Our results suggest that conspiratorial predisposition is a real and robust psychological influence that paints the way many citizens perceive important events, even presidential elections. Conspiracy theories are not limited to sore losers.

Most of the control variables do not have a statistically significant influence on the dependent variable. Whether one is older, white, or more educated, for example, has no impact on belief in this specific belief. Rather, presidential preference and conspiratorial predispositions drive behavior. However, we do note that people affiliated with the Tea Party do have a strong and statistically significant influence on belief in this particular conspiracy theory. Tea party members had an especially strong likelihood to believe that voter fraud affected the 2012 election. Perhaps this indicates the intensity of this group’s affiliates (beyond simply having a presidential preference for Obama) at this time or their desire for repeated success on the heels of the 2010 midterm election. Alternatively, we suspect that a large amount of multicollinearity between vote choice and tea party membership may be driving some of the odd coefficients in both this model and the others. In any case, this variable seems to be limited to certain types of situations. Conspiracy theory predispositions, on the other hand, are a strong and consistent predictor in each analysis.

Next, we look at responses obtained before Election Day. How do partisan views and conspiratorial predispositions explain the possibility of a conspiracy influencing an upcoming election outcome? In this situation, we expect partisanship not to play much of a role. The election is still up for grabs, and partisans have less of a reason to differentially complain of
illegitimate election results because they do not know whether the election will deliver them a victory. At the same time, Democrats may be more confident of a potential win given polling trends and other circumstances. This analysis should give us a better idea of how predispositions of conspiracy theory predict conspiracies in a more general and abstract way. Our first analysis provided a more stringent test once a conspiracy has had the opportunity to occur.

The dependent variable in this analysis is a dichotomous variable that indicates if a respondent says voter fraud will have occurred only if their preferred president/party loses. We look at the strength of partisanship on a 7-point scale, in addition to conspiracy theory predisposition, as explanatory variables. We also control for the same set of variables as in the first analysis.

Table 2: Beliefs of Fraud if on the Losing Side

|                          | Estimate | Std. Error | t value | Pr(>|t|) |
|--------------------------|----------|------------|---------|---------|
| Not very strong Democrat | -0.145*  | 0.06       | -2.34   | 0.02    |
| Lean Democrat            | -0.09    | 0.06       | -1.68   | 0.09    |
| Independent              | -0.04    | 0.08       | -0.49   | 0.62    |
| Lean Republican          | -0.00    | 0.08       | -0.04   | 0.97    |
| Not very strong Republican| -0.15   | 0.08       | -1.75   | 0.08    |
| Strong Republican        | -0.01    | 0.08       | -0.14   | 0.89    |
| Consp. Predispositions   | 0.45**   | 0.07       | 6.41    | 0.00    |

*Control Variables*

- Education: 0.02 (t = 0.43, Pr(>|t|) = 0.67)
- Age: 0.00 (t = 1.59, Pr(>|t|) = 0.11)
- Ideology: 0.01 (t = 0.25, Pr(>|t|) = 0.80)
- Female: 0.05 (t = 1.53, Pr(>|t|) = 0.13)
- Immigrant: -0.04 (t = -0.62, Pr(>|t|) = 0.54)
- Race: Black: 0.12* (t = 1.98, Pr(>|t|) = 0.05)
- Race: Other: 0.02 (t = 0.24, Pr(>|t|) = 0.81)
- Hispanic: 0.03 (t = 0.32, Pr(>|t|) = 0.75)
- Unemployed: -0.07 (t = -1.18, Pr(>|t|) = 0.24)
- Born Again Christian: -0.05 (t = -1.15, Pr(>|t|) = 0.25)
- Religious Importance: 0.06 (t = 0.88, Pr(>|t|) = 0.38)
- Church Attendance: -0.08 (t = -1.24, Pr(>|t|) = 0.22)
- Tea Party: 0.09 (t = 1.30, Pr(>|t|) = 0.19)
- Interest: 0.15* (t = 2.02, Pr(>|t|) = 0.04)

Table 2: Regression model parameter estimates with state fixed effects. * denotes p < 0.05 and ** denotes p < 0.01 (two-tailed test).
Table 2 presents our results. The results strongly suggest that conspiracy theory predispositions are widespread and play a significant role when respondents were presented with a clear but abstract situation. The only significant partisan influence comes from Not Very Strong Democrats – they are slightly less likely than Strong Democrats to believe that fraud will have occurred if they lose. Strong Democrats are no different than respondents who indicated their partisanship using other numbers on the 7-point scale, suggesting that the results of Not Very Strong Democrats is probably an anomaly.

Conspiratorial predispositions, on the other hand, have a very strong and statistically significant influence on believing that fraud will explain loss of the respondent’s preferred party, regardless of partisanship. This might be explained by the fact that all people have an incentive to say yes, regardless of party. And our first analysis suggested that non-partisans, or those who do not have a preference for a major party candidate, were more likely to believe elections were illegitimate. In any case, all respondents’ answers in this clear but abstract situation were driven by a predisposition towards conspiracy theories. Those who did not have this predisposition believed that the election would be legitimate whether or not any party lost.

The role of a few control variables ought to be noted as well. First of all, members of the Tea Party are not any more likely than others to believe a conspiracy sways the election before the results are in. Such concerns seemed to only arise after the fact (see Table 1). On the other hand, African Americans were more likely to believe in the potential for a conspiracy to occur. This may be due to historically discriminatory practices that have shaped this group’s perspective on the legitimacy of election outcomes. However, this potential did not materialize once the election had occurred (see Table 1). Also, we find that those with the most political interest saw the potential for conspiracy swaying the election. Those with the most interest may have absorbed political information in such a way as to convince themselves of their eventual win.
This phenomenon was exemplified by the continued insistence of Romney’s potential to win by Karl Rove on election night. The most politically interested may find it difficult to believe the opposing party can legitimately win the election.

We finish with an analysis of those which drive a general belief in voter fraud being likely, regardless of whether it does or might sway the election. This is less of a conspiracy in that it doesn’t focus specifically on secretive acts that lead to illegitimate outcomes but on the shadowy acts themselves. However, it may be instructive to understand what explains common concerns and complaints about individual efforts to inappropriately influence the election including bribery, machine manipulation, use of false IDs, intimidation and so forth. Using factor analysis, we create a single measure about beliefs of the likelihood of fraud occurring in the 2012 election. We then modeled this dependent variable using logistic regression. The explanatory variables include our presidential preferences variables and conspiracy theory predisposition. We include the same control variables as in the first two analyses.

Results for this analysis are presented in Table 3. These are very similar to the results from Table 1. Following the election, Romney supporters were more and Obama supporters less likely to say that fraud likely occurred, regardless of whether it swayed the election. This may be attributable to partisan desires to legitimize or invalidate election outcomes at the margins. Those with no presidential preference or who do not prefer a majority party are not any more likely than others to say this behavior was likely. The stronger gap between Romney and Obama supporters in this analysis than the first is instructive. The parties are further apart in explaining differences in the likelihood of individual fraud than they are in explaining fraud that actually swayed an election outcome. This should not be surprising given the decisive victory by President Obama.
In contrast to the first analysis, those with conspiracy theory predispositions are more likely to have higher perceptions of voter fraud likelihood than any partisan influence after the election. And, in general, the relationship is of the strongest yet seen in our analyses. It seems that partisanship is substantially primed when it comes to explaining election outcomes (Table 1) but less so when it comes to explaining instances of voter fraud regardless of election outcome. When partisanship is not primed, conspiracy theory predisposition has nearly the strongest explanatory power we have seen (but see Church Attendance). And, even when partisanship is primed, conspiracy theory predisposition continues to have an additional, substantial, and statistically significant effect on belief in voter fraud.

### Table 3: Belief in General Vote Fraud

|                              | Estimate | Std. Error | t value | Pr(>|t|) |
|------------------------------|----------|------------|---------|----------|
| Presidential Preference: Other/DK | 0.18     | 0.50       | 0.35    | 0.72     |
| Presidential Preference: Romney | 0.84*    | 0.35       | 2.43    | 0.02     |
| Consp. Predispositions       | 1.03**   | 0.39       | 2.64    | 0.01     |

**Control Variables**

| Variable              | Estimate | Std. Error | t value | Pr(>|t|) |
|-----------------------|----------|------------|---------|----------|
| Education             | 0.06     | 0.32       | 0.20    | 0.84     |
| Age                   | -0.00    | 0.01       | -0.54   | 0.59     |
| Ideology              | -0.08    | 0.11       | -0.73   | 0.46     |
| Female                | -0.22    | 0.18       | -1.18   | 0.24     |
| Immigrant             | 0.03     | 0.43       | 0.07    | 0.94     |
| Race: Black           | 0.35     | 0.38       | 0.94    | 0.35     |
| Race: Other           | -0.27    | 0.39       | -0.68   | 0.50     |
| Hispanic              | -0.55    | 0.52       | -1.05   | 0.30     |
| Unemployed            | -0.32    | 0.31       | -1.04   | 0.30     |
| Didn’t Vote           | 0.40     | 0.45       | 0.89    | 0.38     |
| Vote Problem          | 0.48     | 0.61       | 0.79    | 0.43     |
| Born Again Christian  | 0.05     | 0.24       | 0.21    | 0.84     |
| Religious Importance  | 0.45     | 0.39       | 1.17    | 0.24     |
| Church Attendance     | -1.13**  | 0.40       | -2.83   | 0.00     |
| Tea Party             | 0.61     | 0.40       | 1.53    | 0.13     |
| Interest              | 0.06     | 0.40       | 0.16    | 0.87     |

Table 3: Regression model parameter estimates with state fixed effects. * denotes $p < 0.05$ and ** denotes $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed test).
Control variables continue to provide little additional explanatory power beyond what partisanship and conspiracy theory predisposition find. The exception in this case is Church Attendance, which has a strong, statistically significant, and negative effect on belief that voter fraud is likely. One rationale for this finding is that attending church and being involved in communities of faith lead to greater trust in other individuals. Thus, actively attending church makes you less likely to believe individuals will engage in bribery, cheating, and related activities. It does not make you more or less likely to believe voter fraud swayed an election, however (Table 1).

**Conclusion**

We have shown that conspiracy theory predisposition has a consistent and statistically significant influence on beliefs in voter fraud. The research design is set up in a way that it can test the common argument that complaints of voter fraud are motivated primarily by partisanship. Yet, we find this consistent evidence supporting the role of conspiracy predispositions even when controlling for presidential preferences or strength of partisanship. In some instances, partisanship plays a larger role and in others conspiracy theory predisposition does. For example, partisanship explains more variation in terms of differences in beliefs that voter fraud swayed an election (Table 1); however, conspiracy explains more if we look at voter fraud in general (Table 3); and conspiracy theory predisposition explains more than partisanship when we look at beliefs in the potential for conspiracy to sway a future election (Table 2).

Our theory is likely to hold up in other situations. For example, we also analyzed whether a belief in a warning that President Obama would cancel the election could be driven by conspiracy theory dispositions. The results in Table 4 shows this is the case, though the partisanship variables are difficult to explain.
Conspiracy theory is not a fringe topic, as sometimes portrayed in film and the media. Rather, the regular abundance of conspiracy theories throughout American history suggests it is an important aspect of American culture. Our research suggests that conspiracies are part of a broad phenomenon. Rather than being limited to the losing side of an election or to one particular party (which we take account of in our statistical analyses), we find that a propensity to believe in conspiracies is independently predictive of complaints or perceptions of voter fraud.

We contribute to the conspiracy theory literature in an important way. We use specialized questions included in a national survey to better understand what drives beliefs in vote fraud. Importantly, we show how the factors that do so are orthogonal to partisan
viewpoints. Instead of conspirators being limited to a few particular types of individuals, conspiracy beliefs span parties, gender, and race. These results strongly suggest that conspiracy theory is a fundamental aspect of American culture.
References


