

When a conspiracy theory goes mainstream, people feel more positive toward conspiracy theorists

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Abstract

This paper uses an experiment and a follow-up survey immediately before and after the publicly revealed results of the Department of Defense’s 2021 report on unidentified flying object (UFO) origins to test how public opinion changes when government leaders across the political spectrum take an issue that had been on the margins of respectability seriously. In both studies, I find that when politicians acknowledge the possibility that UFOs are extraterrestrial visitors, people report more positive attitudes toward those who believe in conspiracies in general. Implications are that when government leaders publicly walk back a long-held consensus that a particular issue is not worth serious consideration, they may cause people to feel more favorable toward those perceived to hold other fringe views.

Keywords

Conspiracy theories, partisanship, American politics, unidentified flying objects

Introduction

How does bringing a previously fringe belief into the mainstream affect public opinion? This paper investigates the possibility that official legitimization of a hypothesis long relegated to the margins softens public attitudes toward those who believe in conspiracy theories. To do that, I leverage the timing of the public release of the results of the Department of Defense’s report on unidentified flying objects (UFOs), which raised the salience of a new bipartisan consensus that UFOs are worth studying and could even represent evidence of extraterrestrial activity. I find that when people receive information about either governmental interest in UFOs the day before the coincidental leak of the contents of the report or the actual results the following day, people feel more favorable to those who believe in conspiracy theories of all sorts.

Conspiracy theories attribute the causes of events to small groups of individuals acting in secret for their benefit and against the common good (Uscinski, 2020, 23). The idea that life may exist beyond Earth, and that intelligent life may have advanced technology, is not a conspiracy theory.

However, the idea that the government has evidence for extraterrestrial visitors that it has not provided to the public does fit this definition. Indeed, for at least 70 years, people have believed that such UFO activity remains hidden due to the actions of powerful people (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009, 205). One result of these conspiratorial beliefs about extraterrestrial activity was the “prohibition in the authoritative public sphere on taking UFOs seriously” that political theorists describe as a “UFO taboo” (Wendt and Duvall, 2008, 610). Those authors write that “UFOs have never been systematically investigated by science or the state, because it is assumed to be known that none are extraterrestrial.”

But much has changed since 2008. In December 2017, the *New York Times* revealed that the Pentagon had been investigating UFOs, and the Department of Defense

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subsequently declassified and released videos of Navy pilots tracking objects without an explanation for what these objects are or how they move. A definitive indication of the shift in the official U.S. government position toward UFOs came in 2020, when the Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 mandated that the Director of National Intelligence produce a public report detailing government research on UFOs. The released official report represented a change in the type of source providing information about UFOs and described “incidents that occurred between 2004 and 2021.” The implication was that the government had not immediately released all available evidence and this partially vindicated those who had been dismissed for their fringe belief that the government was taking the possibility that UFOs are extraterrestrials seriously.

Experiment

On 1 June 2021, the *Washington Post* published a story titled “Close Encounters: Democrats and Republicans unified in taking UFOs seriously.” The story references some well-known Democratic and Republican politicians and a former CIA director acknowledging the possibility that UFOs might be extraterrestrial visitors. On June 2, 1,545 U.S. residents participated in an experiment in which one-third read excerpts from that article and the other two-thirds served as the control group, receiving no information. I assigned most respondents to the control group to run a recontact study after the content of the Pentagon report became public, which by chance occurred the next evening.¹

The study takes advantage of real-world events surrounding the release of the UFO report to maximize external validity. At the time people were completing the experiment, public conversation about this issue emphasized that elites across the political spectrum were newly open to the possibility that UFOs are piloted by extraterrestrial visitors. Despite the fact that there had been substantial media coverage of UFOs for years, the run up to the release of the government report led to a unique focus on the bipartisan consensus emerging surrounding the issue. At the same time, despite long-standing media coverage of UFOs, no one outside the government knew what the upcoming report would reveal.

I recruited participants using Lucid—a survey firm which registered more than 30 million unique respondent IDs platform-wide in 2020—and used quotas to match the U.S. population. Respondents were 48% male, 73% white, and on average, 46 years old. 47% identify as Democrats and 35% as Republicans. The median respondent had completed some college but not finished their degree while reporting annual income between \$45,000 and \$49,000. Respondents were evenly distributed across experimental conditions.

Using an OLS model with no covariates, treatment caused people to feel 6% more positive ($p < 0.01$) toward conspiracy theorists. The 95% confidence interval for the effect size is between 3.1 and 9.4. Past work has documented that

when rating conspiracy theorists on the feeling thermometer scale, Republicans report more positive ratings (Smallpage, 2018, 193), motivating the inclusion of partisan identification. Figure 1 shows this second model, which includes indicator variables for partisanship. The effect of seeing politicians bringing such ideas into the mainstream is comparable in size to the effect of identifying as a Democrat.²

Recontact survey

At 7:55p.m. Eastern Time on 3 June 2021, after 98% of respondents had completed the first survey, the *New York Times* revealed that the upcoming Pentagon report would neither rule out nor include evidence that UFOs are alien spacecraft. In other words, just a few hours after almost all respondents completed the experiment, the results of the UFO report became public. The next day, June 4, I invited respondents to participate in a recontact survey that included an excerpt from that morning’s *Washington Post* article, with the headline “Report does not confirm, or rule out, UFOs in unexplained aerial events.”

Aside from the article on new public information about the report for people to read, survey questions were identical across the two studies. Because the original experiment used a between-subjects design, respondents assigned to that study’s treatment condition cannot provide useful data for the recontact survey; their responses were affected by the information they received. The result is that about a thousand respondents from the previous day’s control group allow for a pre-post comparison. Given an anticipated low response rate for the recontact survey, all participants in this second study read the article excerpt. 304 people who had been in the first wave’s control group completed the follow-up study. When these people read coverage of the leaked results from the UFO report, they reported about 6% more positive ratings toward people who believe in conspiracy theories than they had in the initial survey ($p < 0.03$).³ Their median feeling thermometer response was 27 in the initial survey, rising to 36 in the recontact wave.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that when political elites take seriously a possibility that had been ridiculed, and associated with those who believe in conspiracies, people feel more positive toward conspiracy theorists. To be sure, conspiracy theorists do not make up a cohesive group, and many who hold such beliefs do not identify as such. Furthermore, many conspiracy theories outside the UFO case are pushed by partisan actors, potentially limiting the generalizability of these results. That said, a recent review argued that “there is surprisingly little research into how people who espouse conspiracy theories are viewed” (Douglas et al., 2019, 23) and this result motivates further

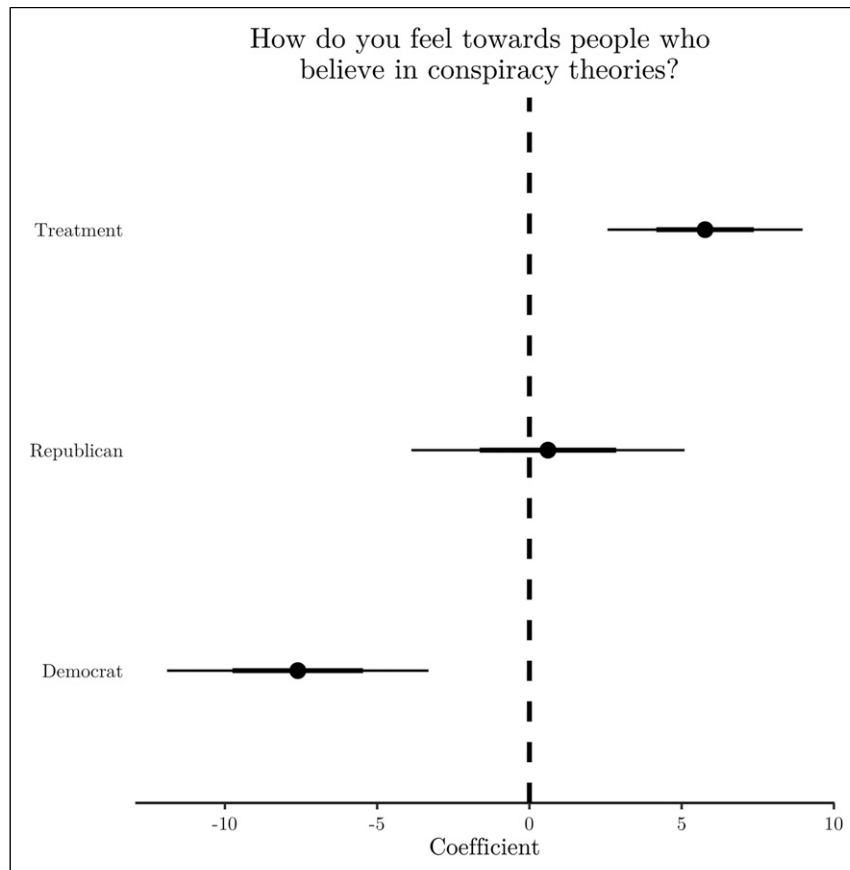


Figure 1. This figure shows the effect of reading about bipartisan interest in investigating unidentified flying objects during the survey’s first wave on people’s attitudes toward those who believe in conspiracy theories. “Treatment” is an indicator for random assignment to read the *Washington Post* article. “Republican” and “Democrat” are indicators for whether someone identifies with a political party, and independents are the omitted category. No other controls were included. Feeling thermometers are on a 0 to 100 scale, so the OLS coefficient can be read as a percentage point change where positive values mean that respondents report more favorable attitudes. Error bars are 95% and 90% confidence intervals.

work on the spillover effects of cases where something was previously seen as outside the mainstream, such that people who believed it were considered to be on the margins of respectability, and then this changed rapidly. Past work also finds that people hide some opinions because they fear social consequences (Lantian et al., 2018), suggesting that increasingly positive attitudes toward those who believe in conspiracies will increase the willingness of those who engage in conspiracy thinking to reveal those beliefs.

Future work will benefit from expanding this approach beyond the UFO case and evaluating how support for conspiracy theories themselves change as elite opinion changes. New information may also emerge, as former President Barack Obama said: “what is true – and I’m actually being serious here – is that there is footage and records of objects in the skies that we don’t know exactly what they are.”

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Notes

1. This study was approved by Duke University's institutional review board on 2 June 2021. An amendment to launch the recontact with the post-leak *Washington Post* article was approved on 4 June 2021. The accompanying data-file contains anonymous survey data, code, and materials. This study was originally designed to run as part of a larger project. In a preregistration (<https://osf.io/jg8kr>), I expected that this experimental treatment would reduce polarization and increase reported likelihood that UFOs are aliens. I did not find evidence for those hypotheses. Consistent with past work (Huddy and Yair, 2020)—bipartisan consensus that UFOs should be taken seriously does not reduce people's negative feelings toward political opponents.
2. Past work finds that conservatives are more supportive of conspiracy theories than liberals (Miller et al., 2016). See also, Enders et al. (2020). But one potential limitation of the UFO case is that those who believe in UFO cover-ups may be systematically different from those who believe in other conspiracy theories (Frenken and Imhoff, 2021). This would be especially likely to be an issue if survey respondents implicitly understand such variation and think of UFO conspiracy theorists differently from others, an assumption which cannot be tested using the data in this paper.
3. The 95% confidence interval for the effect size is between 0.9 and 10.4.

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