

‘Complete losers’: conspiracy ideation and suspicion of elites in Great Britain

Hugo Drochon and Rolf Fredheim

Very rough draft, please do not quote or circulate without permission

Are conspiracy theories the preserve of the US? Our study of the prevalence in conspiracy theories in Great Britain suggests they are not: the Brits are as likely – indeed perhaps marginally more – to believe at least one conspiracy theory than the Americans. Drawing on survey data collected on collected on the 3rd and 4th February 2015 by YouGov across Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales – no Northern Ireland) from a representative sample of 1749 adults,¹ we argue that the strongest explanatory factor for belief in conspiracy theories is *complete political exclusion* (CPE). By this we mean not simply exclusion from political power when one’s party is in opposition, or a rejection of ideology, but rather exclusion from the political system *tout court*. The most important indicators for conspiracy ideation are a deep distrust in all political institutions and the rejection of the political system as a whole. After these political factors come socio-economic factors: we find that working-class men are most likely to believe conspiracy theories. Finally we find that exclusion from power within the political system – i.e. being in opposition – has only a marginal impact on conspiracy theorising, although more work needs to be done on this. Geographical distance from power appears to play no role in the prevalence of conspiracy theorising: if anything Scotland is the region the least likely to return high instances of conspiracy ideation. GB respondents overwhelmingly expressed a belief in elite rule within their democracy, much higher than those who believe a secret international group actually control world affairs. This raises a methodological issue about whether questions about elite rule and secret groups are in fact measuring slightly different things – one suspicion of elites and the other conspiratorial accounts of politics proper – which are often conflated in the literature. This opens up a space within which to talk about the effects of networks of power or collusion alongside more classic conspiracy theory accounts of politics.

¹ Results can be consulted here: http://candd.crash.cam.ac.uk/s_files/consp_poll/index.html

I: American Conspiracy Theories

Last year Joe Parent and Joe Uscinski published a ground-breaking study of *American Conspiracy Theories* with Oxford University Press (2014). Drawing on ‘big data’ they set about dispelling a number of myths, most prominent amongst these the notion that there is a rising tide of conspiracy theories in the US. Their work shows that, apart from peaks in the 1890s and the 1950s, times associated with monopoly trusts and the red scare respectively, conspiracy theorising has actually remained quite stable over the last two centuries, and has even started to tail off since the 1960s. Other myths they challenge include the idea that men are more likely than woman to speculate (they are not), or that they tend to live on the political extremes of society (moderates are as likely, in their findings, to be prone to catch the bug).

Certain stereotypes, however, seem confirmed: conspiracy theorists are more likely to be poor financially and in terms of education, are likelier to have a narrower group of friends (isolation), and are more likely to see violence as a solution to their problems and those of society. Perhaps one of the most interesting conclusions of their study is that Republicans and Democrats are as likely as one another to be conspiracy theorists, disproving in passing some of the rhetoric both camps put out. Which one is more likely to become paranoid at any given time depends on who is in power: if the Democrats are in power expect theories about an impeding communist plot from the right, whilst when it’s the Republicans’ turn expect the left to decry how big business is in cahoots with the government. Conspiracy theories track power: when one is out of it, one is more likely to theorise. Conspiracy theories are then, in short, for losers. It is a reaction to being away or out of power and fearing the consequences. The link to perceived menace is reproduced in the international field: foreign threats are a strong trigger for conspiracy theorising.

Uscinski and Parent close their book with a few suggestions for future research. The first, most obvious, issue that arises is that their study concentrates solely on America. What would our findings be if we ran the same, or similar, adapted to its context, opinion survey in Europe? What kind of answers would we get across western, eastern, southern and northern Europe? Whilst Parent and Uscinski addressed the question of the *long durée* of conspiracy theorising in the US through a study of letters to the *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* which might be currently out of our reach – could we do something similar with, say *Le Monde* and *The Times*?

– we could test the findings of results in Europe against theirs in the US. For instance, are conspiracy theories as rife across the European political spectrum? Are European men and women as likely to dip into the well? How much does the geopolitical situation – Russia, ISIS – impact on the prevalence of European conspiracy theorising?

Pursuing this study would allow us to address some of the issues Uscinski and Parent raise in their conclusion, namely their belief that proportional representation, because it does a better job at representing different interests, would see a reduced degree of conspiracy theorising within its midst. Membership of the EU also adds another dimension that Parent and Uscinski were wondering about, namely the impact of international organisations on conspiracy theorising.

II: Complete Political Exclusion

Whilst our study did not reproduce exactly Uscinski and Parent’s survey for a number of methodological reasons, some of which highlighted by Uscinski and Parent themselves, many of their key questions were reproduced, and we feel we are very much trying to get to the same information as they were. We asked our respondents to agree or disagree with a series of statements about conspiracy theories involving aids, aliens, Sharia law, 9/11, and global warming.² Like a number of recent studies we also asked some general questions, aimed at tapping into respondents’ proclivity for conspiracy theorising. Brotherton et al³ asked a battery of 75 questions, while Bruder et al⁴ asked 33 questions about specific conspiracy theories and 5 general questions

² Our data and findings have a number of serious limitations: we have no data for race or religion. Race consistently emerges as a significant variable (e.g. U&P), while at least one recent article has argued that a belief in the supernatural drives conspiracist proclivities (Oliver and Wood 2014). We are unsure about the direction of causality here, but it does seem likely that a wider range of meta-data about respondents might help explain more of the variation in results. Further, we don't have the UKIP data (yet) - the category 'Other' is dominated by UKIP, but results are diluted by support for regional parties such as the Welsh Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party, as well as the Green Party and various minority groupings further on the political fringes.

³ Brotherton, R., French, C. C., & Pickering, A. D. (2013). Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale. *Frontiers in Psychology, 4*, 279. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00279

⁴ Bruder, M., Haffke, P., Neave, N., Nouripanah, N., & Imhoff, R. (2013). Measuring Individual Differences in Generic Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Across Cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire. *Frontiers in Psychology, 4*, 225. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00225

which formed the basis for a measure of ‘generic conspiracy belief’. Uscinski and Parent used a smaller battery still, asking three questions that tapped into the essence of conspiratorial thinking: ‘powerful groups covertly controlling events against the common good’ (p. 79).⁵ We targeted this, categorised by Brotherton et al as ‘malevolent global conspiracies’ where ‘small, secret groups exert total control over global events’ (p. 6) through the statement:

"Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments, media organisations and companies, there is a secret group of powerful people who really control world events like wars and economic crises"

We also included a less strongly worded statement, taken from Uscinski and Parent’s survey:

"Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things in this country anyway"

We read these statements as reflecting different positions on a spectrum, where imagined conspiracies range from the stereotypical secret plot hatched in a smoky room through to the effects of loosely coordinated networks where it might be more appropriate to talk about systemic biases and incentives. The first question taps into general suspicion of elites and cynicism regarding politicians and politics; the second, though, is more strictly a conspiracy theory, asking whether respondents accept that a secret cabal control the course of history. Whilst in the data we have seen from America responses to these questions are quite similar, we found great diversity; with this in mind, we read them as tapping into two related, but distinct ways of thinking about hidden power.⁶

⁵ Uscinski, Joseph E., and Joseph M. Parent. *American conspiracy theories*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁶ Moore 2015, in the conference proceedings

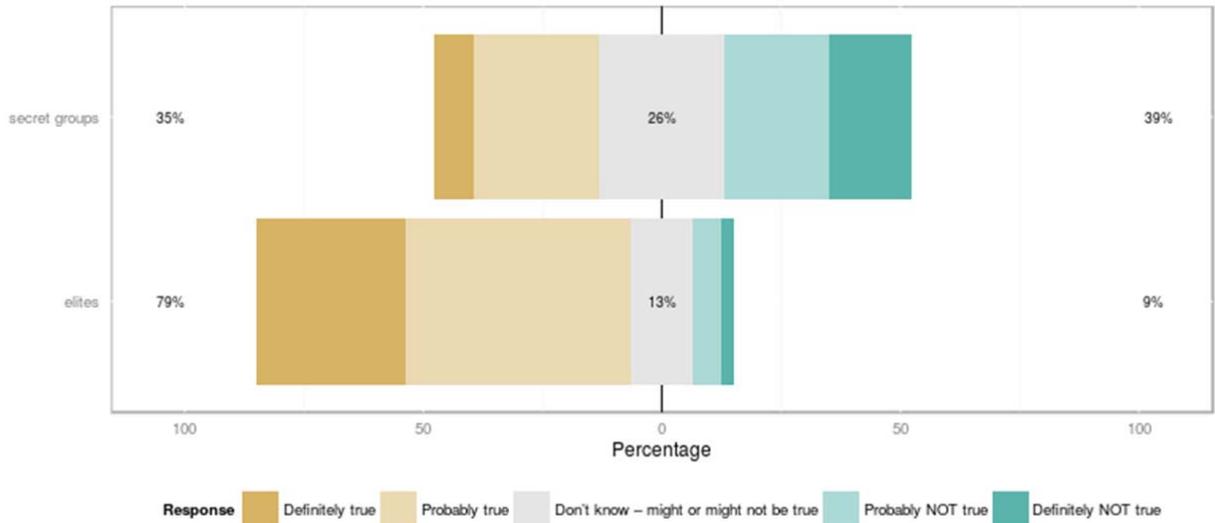


Figure 1: belief that elites control events versus a secret group

Uscinski and Parent’s American survey found 58% of respondents agreed with the statement about elites; in the UK we found 78% agreement. Belief in the secret group statement, though, was more similar: in the American survey 27% of respondents agreed, compared to 34% in the UK.⁷ If we account for the fact that a greater proportion of the American respondents chose the intermediate ‘neither agree nor disagree’ option, any disparity vanishes: among those polled who had a firm opinion, 47% of UK respondents agreed, compared to 46% of the American respondents. Thus while the secret group responses echo that seen in America, the British respondents expressed much greater cynicism of elites. Before turning to why this might be, and methodological implications this might have, let’s explore the responses to the statement about the secret group controlling world events.

Breakdown for secret group question

⁷ Uscinski and Parent’s wording was admittedly different: ‘Big events like wars, the current recession, and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us’

Not only were responses to the secret group question similar to those reported by Uscinski and Parent, we also reproduced a number of their main findings. Notably, we find that women (35%) are as likely as men (33%) to answer in the affirmative. On that same question those of a lower C2DE social grade responded positively 41% of the time whilst only 29% of the higher ABC1 grade did. Indeed, our research suggests that it is in fact working-class males over the age of forty, who trust trade unions and read The Sun, who are the most likely to be conspiracy theorists (inversely those who read the Financial Times are the least likely).

Please say whether you think the following nine statements are true or untrue.

"Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments, media organisations and companies, there is a secret group of powerful people who really control world events like wars and economic crises"



Figure 2: Men



Figure 3: Women



Figure 4: Middle class (above) v Working class

This aligns with Uscinski and Parent’s findings that individuals with lower financial status and levels of education are more prone to theorise. In this regard, UKIP voters – considered to be more on the ‘extremes’ of the political spectrum – were only marginally more likely to agree with the statement than were Labour voters

– considered more main-stream – at 46% and 43% respectively. So conspiracy theorising is rife across the political spectrum, and not just limited to its extremes.

TOTAL TRUE

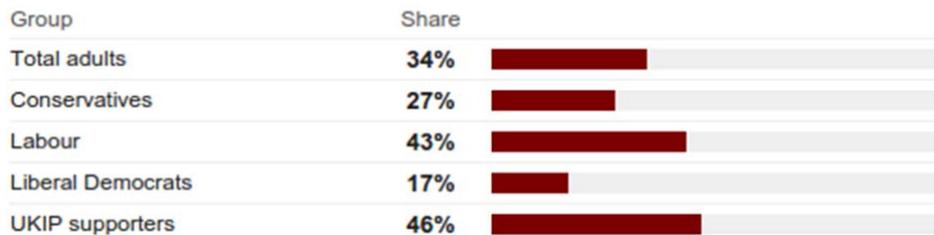


Figure 5: Division by voting intention

Trust, corruption, and the sense of being represented

In order to test whether political allegiance (and ultimately political system) has any bearing on the distribution of conspiracy theorising, we asked respondents whether they agreed with a series of questions about corruption in politics, trust in representatives of various institutions, and the feeling of being represented.

First, we asked whether ‘in general, the Parliament in this country does a good job or a bad job of representing the interests of people like you?’. Although we had prefaced that question with ‘putting aside your own party preferences or views on the current government’, answers split most definitely along party lines. So 68% of Conservatives and 41% of Lib-Dems thought they were well represented, whilst only 21% of Labour voters and 19% of UKIP voters thought they were.

TOTAL GOOD JOB

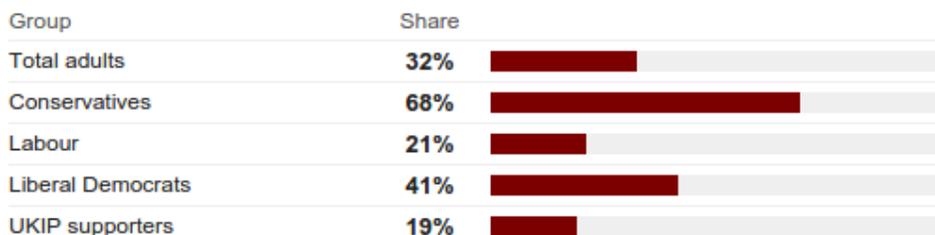


Figure 6: Percentage of respondents who feel the Parliament does a good job representing the interests of people like them, by voting intention

Great Britain of course does not, for its national elections, use a system of proportional representation – it is a ‘first-past-the-post system’ – but it does currently have a coalition government, which is usually more of a feature of a PR system.

In order to control for respondents' faith in the political system we asked a question about corruption in politics – 'How worried are you, if at all, that corruption will affect the result of the next national election in this country' – which yielded surprisingly high results: 38% of those polled answered in the affirmative (see Figure 11). Outright electoral fraud is a minority sport in the UK, and despite a few recent news-stories suggesting the postal vote system can be abused,⁸ we think responses to this question reflect concerns about corruption in politics generally. Consequently we interpret these results as a comment on the political system as such: it is 'corrupt' in the sense that the political system does not work as democratically as it should, which can lead us back to the question of elites within the democratic system. When placed between the question of elites and a true conspiratorial account of world politics, it would appear that the British public itself has a sense that if a conspiratorial account of politics does not best capture what is going on most of the time, nevertheless there is something fundamentally undemocratic about how the system works, with elites in some manner being able to capture the political process for their own good.

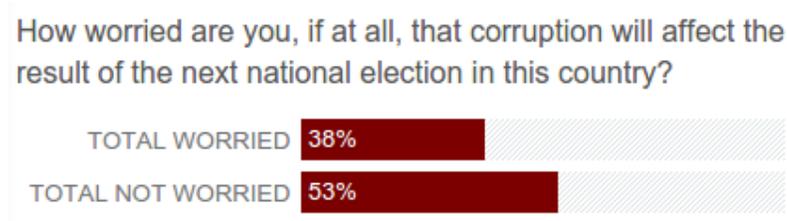


Figure 7: Perceptions of corruption in politics

On a related note, we asked respondents to rate the degree to which they trusted representatives of various domestic and international institutions. Gratifyingly, we found respondents trusted academics to tell the truth more than any other group. Next came military leaders at 48%, and journalists of such reputable broadsheets such as the Guardian at 41%; Tabloid newspapers, though, were trusted by only 12%. Trade union leaders (36%) fared better than 'people who run large companies' (25%). Fashionable scepticism of big business notwithstanding, it still fared better than government representatives, be that (UK) government ministers, trusted only by 18%, and even beaten marginally by the numbers for EU bureaucrats and the American

⁸ there were a number of media reports over the course of last few weeks about ballot rigging (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-31091096>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-norfolk-31021917>, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-31014171>).

government, at 19% and 20% respectively. The UN did well, at 41%, whereas very few respondents trusted either Isis (1%) or members of the Russian government (3%).

Belief in individual conspiracy theories

The picture presented thus far is complicated somewhat when we turn to belief in individual conspiracy theories. So to questions such as ‘The AIDS virus was created and spread around the world on purpose by a secret group or organisation’, ‘Humans have made contact with aliens but this fact has been deliberately hidden from the public’ and ‘The US Government played a deliberate role in making the 9/11 terrorist attacks happen in American on 11th September, 2001’ – arguably conspiracy theories more likely to appeal to the left of the political spectrum – UKIP voters find themselves in good company with Labour voters.

TOTAL TRUE

Group	Share
Total adults	11%
Conservatives	6%
Labour	14%
Liberal Democrats	10%
UKIP supporters	18%

Figure 8: Percentage to agree with the statement "The US Government played a deliberate role in making the 9/11 terrorist attacks happen in America on 11th September, 2001", by voting intention.

But with questions such as ‘Some courts in the UK legal system are choosing to adopt Islamic “Sharia” law’, ‘The Government is deliberately hiding the truth about how many immigrants really live in this country’, ‘Officials of the European Union are gradually seeking to take over all law-making powers in this country’ and ‘The idea of man-made global warming is a hoax that was deliberately invented to deceive people’ – this time thought to be more right-wing – here UKIP voters find themselves closer to Conservatives, although how intensely that is felt is often much more pronounced. Thus 87% of UKIP voters believe the government is deliberately misleading the public as to the true number of immigrants in the UK, compared to 52% for Conservative and 57% for Labour (only 37% for Lib-Dems). Regarding the question of an EU take-over, 87% of UKIP voters agree with our statement, compared

to 67% for the Conservatives, and 42% and 38% for Labour and Lib-Dem voters respectively.

TOTAL TRUE

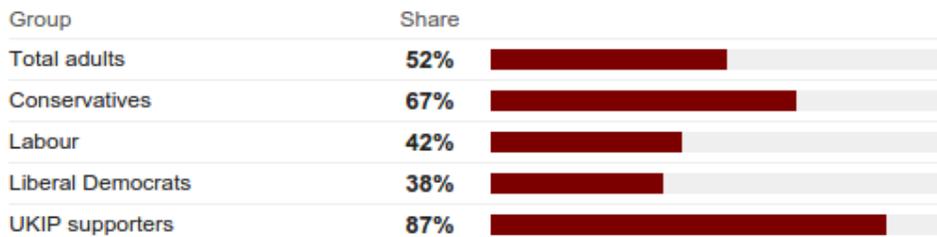


Figure 9: Percentage to agree with the statement "Officials of the European Union are gradually seeking to take over all law-making powers in this country", by voting intention.

TOTAL TRUE

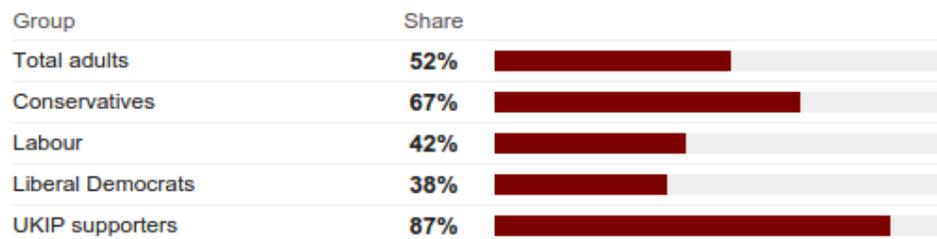


Figure 10: Percentage to agree with the statement "The Government is deliberately hiding the truth about how many immigrants really live in this country", by voting intention.

These findings tend to suggest that whilst Uscinski and Parent are correct in underlining how conspiracy theorists exist across the political spectrum, they are nonetheless felt more common at the extremes, at least in terms of the far right (we don't have data on the far left), and certainly less forcefully at the centre, as documented by the numbers for Liberal Democrat supporters. There is a clear ideological element to this – the conspiracy theories backed by UKIP voters are usually thought of as right-wing ones – although they are as inclined as left-wing voters to believe left-wing conspiracy theories, and this cross-cutting again suggests that more radical voters are more receptive to conspiratorial accounts of politics. If we could prove that radical left-wing voters also supported right-wing conspiracy theories as much as the right, and were much more prone to believe conspiratorial accounts of politics usually thought to be of the left than the rest of the left, than we would have to conclude that conspiracy theories are indeed more prevalent on the edges of the political spectrum.

TOTAL TRUE

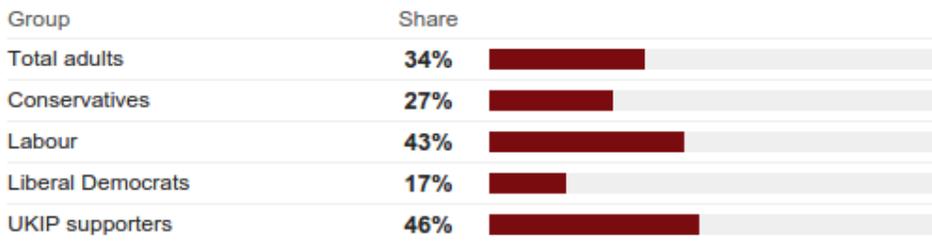


Figure 11: Percentage to agree with the statement "Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments, media organisations and companies, there is a secret group of powerful people who really control world events like wars and economic crises", by voting intention.

As it happens, the parties furthest to both the left and right of the political spectrum – Labour and UKIP are out of power. At first glance, figure 8 might thus confirm one of Uscinski and Parent's central claims, that conspiracy theories negatively track power: if you're out of it, you are more likely to speculate. Whilst 43% of Labour voters and 43% of UKIP voters agreed with our statement about a cabal controlling world events only 27% for Conservatives and 17 for the Lib-Dems, the current coalition. What is the main explanatory factor here? Being on the political fringes, or being out of power? Later we will use regression analysis to attempt to unpick this conundrum, but before we get there, it's worth considering whether respondents feel their political representatives do a good job of representing their interests.

"The AIDS virus was created and spread around the world on purpose by a secret group or organisation"



"Humans have made contact with aliens but this fact has been deliberately hidden from the public"



"The US Government played a deliberate role in making the 9/11 terrorist attacks happen in America on 11th September, 2001"



"Some courts in the UK legal system are choosing to adopt Islamic 'Sharia' law"



"The idea of man-made global warming is a hoax that was deliberately invented to deceive people"



Figure 12: Low levels of belief in conspiracy theories?

"The Government is deliberately hiding the truth about how many immigrants really live in this country"



"Officials of the European Union are gradually seeking to take over all law-making powers in this country"



Figure 13: EU and immigration

Overall, Figure 13 shows that only a minority of the British public believe conspiracy theories. Only 8% accept the claim about AIDS, 14% the one about aliens, 11% 9/11, 18% Sharia law and 18% global warming. However, on the question of immigration 55% believe that the government is deliberately hiding the truth about the number of immigrants living in the country: 52% for the Conservatives, 57% for Labour, 87% for UKIP – only the Lib-Dems are a minority with 37%. The EU is also a great source of speculation, with 52% total believing that its officials are gradually seeking to take over all law-making power in Britain, although this is quite markedly a right-wing concern: 67% and 87% of Conservative and UKIP voters believe it to be true, with 42% for Labour and 38% for the Lib-Dems. For these last two we feel, however, that we should sound a note of caution: they are not as clearly conspiratorial accounts of politics, instead of more simply political or ideological ones, than questions of AIDS, aliens and global warming. With questions such as these we are undoubtedly tapping into ideological as well as conspiratorial beliefs; perhaps for the EU a better question might have been ‘Germany is consciously trying to conquer Europe through the institutions of the EU’, and even that might not fit the bill.

TOTAL TRUE

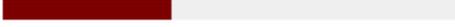
Group	Share	
Total adults	55%	
Conservatives	52%	
Labour	57%	
Liberal Democrats	37%	
UKIP supporters	87%	

Figure 14: Percentage to agree with the statement that "The Government is deliberately hiding the truth about how many immigrants really live in this country", by voting intention.

What does this say about British respondents? Let's again draw on an American parallel: Oliver and Wood (2014)⁹ found that 52% of Americans believed at least one of seven conspiracy theories. In our case, we found that 55% of respondents agreed with at least one of the statements about the secret group, aids, aliens, sharia law, or climate change. While not a direct comparison, there is certainly nothing to suggest that Americans are outliers – Brits appear every bit as likely to accept even outlandish conspiracy theories.

More than that, we find that Labour and Conservative voters are almost exactly as likely to believe at least one conspiracy theory: the percentage for Labour voters stands at 54%, while Conservatives are at 53%.

Distance from power

It is often suggested that distance from the centre of power would increase one's propensity to theorising, but these data do not support this assertion: levels of conspiracy ideation are relatively stable across the regions of London, Rest of South, Midlands/Wales and the North. In fact, the area with the lowest returns in terms of conspiracy theorising is actually Scotland, the furthest from Westminster (on the question of secret groups running things, the Scottish sample thought it true for 25% of respondents, compared to 34% for London and the Rest of South, and 36% for Midlands/Wales and the North).

⁹ Oliver, J. E., & Wood, T. J. (2014). Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style (s) of mass opinion. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(4), 952-966.

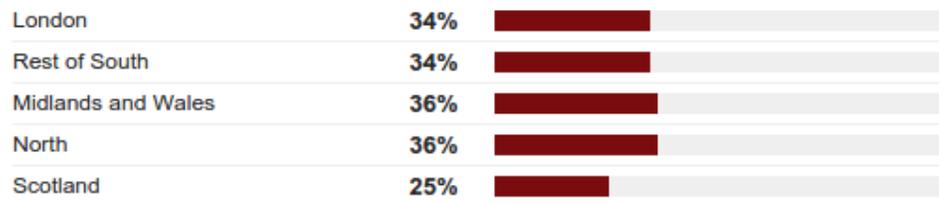


Figure 15: Regional breakdown for agreement with the statement "Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments, media organisations and companies, there is a secret group of powerful people who really control world events like wars and economic crises"

Of course Scotland has its own parliament, but given that the recent referendum on Scottish independence generated a degree of political turmoil, we were expecting to see a higher return. It is possible that the low numbers mask divisions within the sample (one might expect 'yes' voters to feel more disillusioned), but the relatively low numbers of respondents from that area – 160 out of 1749 – means we are unable to confirm such an effect.

The Scottish results, though, do give rise to a suggestion that we should concern ourselves less with physical distance than with perceived distance from power: one could live in London and feel more distant, in a very direct and personal way (on questions of AIDS and 9/11 London actually leads the way), from power than someone living further away. It is perhaps more the experience of feeling closer or excluded from power that is the key here.

If we cannot judge how political instability affects conspiracy theorising, we can certainly see that the EU is a great source of speculation, taking into account the caveat above, with 52% believing that officials are gradually seeking to take over all law-making powers in Britain. This then goes in the direction Uscinski and Parent thought it might with the impact of international institutions on conspiratorial ideation.

Suspicion of elites versus conspiracy theorising

As noted, views expressed by British respondents about conspiracy theories largely aligned with those found for their American counterparts, but exhibited dramatically higher levels of suspicion about elites.

Cynicism of elites is widespread. In our survey, the vast majority of respondents agreed that 'a few people would always rule things'; only 9% considered it to be false. What does this cynicism look like? Consider a contemporary example

from the Guardian, hot on the heels of the HSBC tax evasion scandal. Polly Toynbee described the Conservative Party's annual Black and White ball, where

more than 500 phenomenally rich donors gathered in London's Grosvenor House hotel – last year's guests were worth £22bn. Paying £15,000 for dinner was peanuts compared to sums this assembly of plutocrats will donate to the party – no wonder there's been a news lockdown.

She then asked rhetorically:

Are these the people who really run the country, buying an election to ensure government by their people, for their people? That's for voters to consider in May: Cameron's government has certainly been kind to its funders.¹⁰

We read Toynbee's comment as an extreme form of cynicism, which suggests political elites act in the interests of their financial rather than electoral backers. A more tempered cynic would point to the professional nature of the political class, and the limited effect voters exert on agenda setting. In either case, though, cynicism of politics is some way off a fully articulated belief in hidden actors controlling world events to their own nefarious ends.

There are surely historical and social reasons for the higher levels of cynicism in Britain – the existence of a monarchy, whether constitutional or not, and the long-standing view of the existence of an 'establishment' – and on the other hand ideological explanations on the other side of the pond: the 'American dream' is alive still for a good section of the population. Moreover, there is a difference in political systems here: whereas Americans can vote directly for their President (without going too much into the details) the parliamentary system in the UK means voters only elect their local MPs, which gives elections less a sense of immediacy than the American Presidential system. But this raises the very interesting possibility that people may hold an 'elite' conception of democracy without holding a conspiratorial one, and it is in this space that much of the conceptual work of trying to distinguish between collusion and conspiracy takes place.

¹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/10/with-penalties-so-weak-tax-evasion-is-worth-the-risk>

What distinguishes distrust in elites from a belief in conspiracy theories?

Looking more closely at the survey responses yields some interesting suggestions in this regard: firstly, it's worth noting that while the variables are highly correlated (0.43) they also follow distinct patterns: consider the heatmap in Figure 16: if the variables were strongly correlated, we'd expect the lighter blue areas to run neatly from the bottom left corner to the top right. To a degree they do this, but the dominant trend veers off horizontally: many respondents who believe elites will always run things anyway reject the idea that a secret group controls wars and crises. These respondents are cynics, not conspiracy theorists.

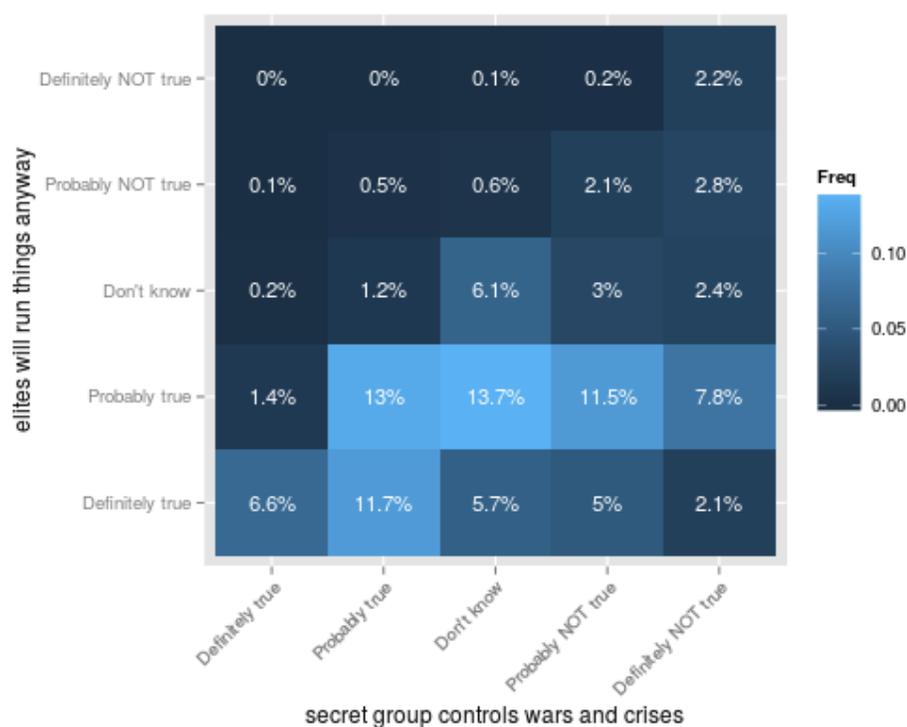


Figure 16

In Venn diagram terms, this shows it is rare, though not completely impossible to believe in the secret group but not elites:



Figure 17

Off the diagram in Figure 17 above, 342 respondents rejected both statements. Amongst those who accepted at least one, the majority accepted only the statement about elites. Those who believe in the secret group, will also be sceptical of elites.

When attempting to explain who is more likely to be a conspiracy theorist, we decided initially to leave the question about elites aside, and use the question about the secret group in isolation as a proxy. Our immediate concern in this regard was whether or not to predict responses to the question across the likert scale, or whether to zoom in on respondents who believed the statement to be definitely true. In the first instance, we chose to do the latter, using a binomial regression. As table 1 (below) shows, a number of variables emerged as significant. Most notable are our control variables: the average level of trust in representatives of institutions, and the belief the political system is fundamentally corrupt. Trust in certain institutions is also weakly associated with conspiracy theorising, notably trade union leaders, ISIS representatives, and trust in the Russian government. Social demographics emerge as secondary explanatory variables: the working class are almost twice as likely to be conspiracy theorists. Similarly, those over the age of 25 are more likely, though it's only statistically significant for the bracket 40-59. Gender is also telling: working class men are significantly overrepresented among conspiracy theorists. By conspiracy theorists, we refer to those who with great conviction agreed that a secret group controls world events. Most notable are the factors that appear irrelevant: regional location, party affiliation, and even feeling represented.

Table 1: regression predicting 'strongly agree' with secret groups statement

Table 1: Predicting 'strongly agree' with secret groups statement	
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	agreement with statement about secret group
genderFemale	0.300 (0.278)
socialgrC2DE	0.929*** (0.280)
age25-39	1.501* (0.780)
age40-59	1.510** (0.752)
age60+	1.484* (0.759)
partyid2Con	-0.052 (0.328)
partyid2Lib	-0.057 (0.448)
partyid2Others	0.217 (0.322)
partyid2DK/None	0.136 (0.283)
regionRest of South	-0.151 (0.322)
regionMidlands / Wales	-0.361 (0.343)
regionNorth	-0.380 (0.341)
regionScotland	-0.430 (0.428)
represented	-0.176 (0.109)
corruption	0.645*** (0.129)
violence	0.335 (0.248)
trust	-1.432*** (0.286)
trade_union_leaders	0.760*** (0.255)
isis	0.824 (0.599)
tabloid	0.606* (0.332)
Russian_gov	0.977* (0.535)
genderFemale:socialgrC2DE	-1.011** (0.413)
Constant	-5.421*** (1.294)
Observations	1,467
Akaike Inf. Crit.	751.379
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Conversely, if we examine the entire spectrum (leaving aside for a moment problems associated with treating likert scales as a numeric range), a rather different picture emerges: the trust and corruption variables are still significant, with trust in the Russian government emerging as a predictor of conspiracy theorists, but the main change is how liberal democrat voters, are statistically much less likely to be conspiracy theorists than are labour voters.¹¹

¹¹ All the estimates here are the wrong way round, because of the way the likert scale is ordered – I will obviously fix this before this goes into the proceedings.

Table 2: Predicting response to secret groups question

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	agreement with statement about secret group
genderFemale	-0.229*** (0.073)
age25-39	-0.181 (0.134)
age40-59	-0.418*** (0.123)
age60+	-0.541*** (0.126)
socialgrC2DE	-0.342*** (0.087)
partyid2Con	0.078 (0.088)
partyid2Lib	0.390*** (0.113)
partyid2Others	-0.057 (0.104)
partyid2DK/None	0.071 (0.087)
regionRest of South	-0.095 (0.099)
regionMidlands / Wales	-0.060 (0.105)
regionNorth	-0.029 (0.104)
regionScotland	0.166 (0.127)
represented	0.046 (0.031)
corruption	-0.335*** (0.037)
violence	-0.055 (0.082)
trust	0.518*** (0.082)
trade_union_leaders	-0.250*** (0.075)
isis	-0.224 (0.239)
tabloid	-0.312*** (0.096)
Russian_gov	-0.579*** (0.186)
genderFemale:socialgrC2DE	0.265** (0.124)
Constant	4.118*** (0.356)
Observations	1,467
Adjusted R ²	0.199
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

What inferences, if any, can we draw from this? We have switched our attention from the extreme (those who definitely agree with the statement about the cabal) to the entire spectrum. This means we are focusing equally on the variation amongst respondents who rejected the statement as those that agreed with it. Here we can thus see how for those of more moderate opinion, politics begins to matter. Whether or not this is a result of Labour being out of power and the Liberal Democrats in government is hard to say, but certainly there is variation here not explained by socio-economic circumstances, trust in institutions, or the conviction that politics is corrupt.

Political allegiance, then, is relevant only for explaining the spectrum as a whole, not for predicting whether a respondent firmly believes the statement about secret groups.

What about the cynics?

We argued above that it was almost impossible to accept the statement about the cabal, but reject that one about elites. It is worth considering these two categories as distinct, and asking, what, if anything, sets them apart. Let's try some hard stats to probe what distinguishes cynics from conspiracy theorists. We've seen which variables are associated with belief in the secret group. Let's add in responses to the question about elites:

Table 3: Predicting political cynicism, controlling for secret group statement

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	agreement with statement about secret group
genderFemale	0.035 (0.054)
age25-39	-0.108 (0.099)
age40-59	-0.135 (0.091)
age60+	-0.149 (0.094)
socialgrC2DE	0.046 (0.065)
partyid2Con	0.032 (0.065)
partyid2Lib	0.009 (0.084)
partyid2Others	-0.063 (0.077)
partyid2DK/None	-0.006 (0.065)
regionRest of South	0.013 (0.073)
regionMidlands / Wales	-0.010 (0.078)
regionNorth	-0.031 (0.077)
regionScotland	0.074 (0.095)
represented	0.166*** (0.023)
corruption	-0.067** (0.028)
violence	-0.078 (0.061)
trust	0.138** (0.061)
trade_union_leaders	-0.026 (0.056)
isis	-0.204 (0.177)
tabloid	-0.034 (0.071)
Russian_gov	0.067 (0.138)
secret_groups	0.264*** (0.019)
genderFemale:socialgrC2DE	-0.172* (0.092)
Constant	1.236*** (0.276)
Observations	1,467
Adjusted R ²	0.255
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 3 shows that responses to the question about secret groups is the most important factor when predicting responses to the elites question. Few significant variables remain: there is no suggestion that age matters, or that class matters. Trust is also largely irrelevant. Party preference appears insignificant, as does regional location.

Aside from the view that the system is corrupt, feeling represented by parliament is overwhelmingly the most significant variable. This variable, remember, had no predictive power when analysing belief in the secret group statement. Now, though, it is critical for predicting whether respondents are political cynics. This shows that different rules apply when analysing those cynical yet politically engaged

to when analysing CPE. Socio-economic variables go out the window, and even trust is of limited explanatory power.

When do politics and ideology matter?

Cynics who rejected the secret cabal statement were 20% more likely to think parliament did a good job representing people like them. How do we account for this difference? The best explanation for this might be the fact of being excluded not just from power but the sense that one is excluded from the political system *tout court*: conspiracy theorists were those most likely to think that the political system is corrupt, and to have the least trust in any political institution. So when we say conspiracy theories are for losers, we mean that they are for *complete political losers*. They are not for those whose party is simply out of power, but who feel excluded from the political system *altogether*. They are working class men who do not feel at all part or represented by the political system, which they overwhelmingly distrust. These respondents tend to vote UKIP, but that is because of their social and political exclusion, not because they are UKIP voters.

An interesting aspect of our data, though, is that both suspicion of elites and belief in the secret group were evenly spread across the electorate. Yes, voters who in 2010 voted for a party other than the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, or Labour (generally speaking this is UKIP) on average had the highest response ratios in both cases. Conversely, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats had the lowest levels. These differences, though, are explained more by social factors: respondents who distrust formal institutions, believe the system to be corrupt, and feel poorly represented by Parliament will tend to strongly agree with these statements. Certain demographic variables are also telling: working class respondents and the elderly are also disproportionately sceptical. But political preference does not emerge as a significant variable when predicting agreement with either question.

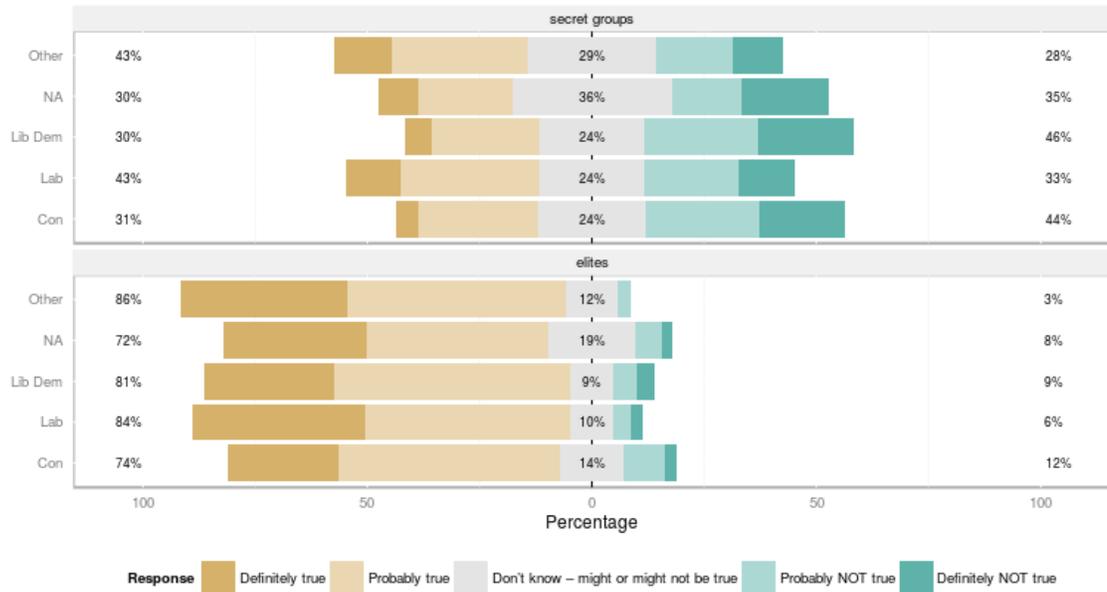


Figure 18: Breakdown by party affiliation

Conclusions and Future Research

Moving forward we will be extending our revised survey to Germany and Sweden in the first instance, then hopefully one or two of Italy, Spain, Portugal. We will also rerun the survey in GB after the elections there in May. Germany uses a ‘Mixed member proportional representation’ system and Sweden a PR ‘list’ system, so in expanding there we want to measure the impact proportional representation has on the level of conspiracy theorising. If our conclusion is that *complete political exclusion* is the strongest indicator of conspiracy ideation, we would expect to find that proportional representation will have no measurable impact on the level of conspiracy theorising, as it only addresses representation *within* the political system itself: conspiracy theorists reject the political system *as a whole*. Indeed, our findings show that the feeling of being represented has no bearing on whether one is going to be a conspiracy theorist, which suggests that whether the political system is representative or not will have no impact whatsoever on the prevalence of conspiracy ideation.

Political disenfranchisement is a complicated matter, but there are socio-economic factors associated with it too. We might thus expect to find that countries – namely Sweden, in this case – that have lower levels of inequality as measured by the

Gini coefficient, and to whom we might impart a higher level of socio-political integration, might return lower levels of conspiracy theory. This is because it would address the second explanatory factor we identified in our study, namely one relating to exclusion relating to social class, which might then translate into feelings of higher political integration. Conversely, we would expect to find that in countries that have higher Gini coefficients, in particular Portugal, would return higher instances of conspiracy ideation than, for example, Sweden, even though it also uses the same proportional list system. If this proves to be the case, then this might have certain policy implications we will attempt to flesh out. However, we suspect that there will always remain a residual element of conspiracy theorising, which is the price to pay for the existence of a sceptical mindset fundamental to the existence of a functioning democracy.

A rerun in GB after the elections would allow us a better insight into the our third factor of conspiracy ideation, of whether being in or out of power has an impact of prevalence of conspiracy theorising, particularly if the elections return a different governmental coalition. As part of our revision of the survey, we wish to make the question of the corruption of the political system more precise, add one about Manichean world-views and about belief in the free market, alongside attempting to disentangle some of the more political aspects to two of our conspiracy questions on immigration and the EU take-over. This will permit us to better address questions about the impact religious belief has on conspiracy belief, and whether trust in the free-market makes one less likely to believe in climate change.