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Populist Conspiracy Theories and Candidate Preference in the U.S.

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Abstract:

The onset of the “post-truth” era, characterized by the accretion of conspiracy theories and “fake news”, has generally coincided with a rise in populist radical right politicians and groups who are often the receptors and propagators of such conspiracy theories. This study focuses on the consequences of conspiracism in populist candidates, arguing that conspiratorial ideation is not simply a tendency of populism but also holds instrumental value which can result in electoral benefits. Given the lack of detailed data concerning adherence to certain conspiracy theories, I incorporate data from Google Trends concerning interest in certain conspiratorial topics to overcome this lacuna. Taking the case of the 2016 presidential election in the United States, the results demonstrate a significantly positive relationship between certain conspiracy theories mentioned by Donald Trump and votes for him on the state level, testifying to the significant role that conspiracy theories played in the election.

Key words: *conspiracy theories; populism; Donald Trump; birtherism; Hillary Clinton; the radical right*

Introduction

The onset of the post-truth era, characterized by the accretion of conspiracy theories and “fake news”, has generally coincided with a rise in populist radical right groups and politicians who are often the receptors and propagators of such conspiracy theories (Jylha, Strimling, Rydgren 2019; Krasodonski-Jones 2019). Donald Trump, for example, is particularly notorious for spreading right-wing conspiracy theories as well as being the main proponent of “birtherism” (Klinkner 2014). Outside the United States, the picture looks very similar as many populist radical right politicians from Viktor Orban (BBC 2019) to Jair Bolsonaro (McCoy 2019) to the Le Pen family (Conspiracy Watch 2019), and parties such as the German AfD (Leconte 2019), have all made reference to conspiracy theories at certain points in time.

Even when we look back in time to the American populists of the late 19th century we find that conspiracism was a prominent means for explaining political phenomenon and constructing the conflictual narrative between themselves and their opponents (Davis 1971; Ostler 1995). As Ostler (1995) argues, conspiracy theories such as the ideas expressed in the conspiratorial pamphlet *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People* which alleged that an English conspiracy existed against American liberties involving both English and American bankers, were pivotal to the formation of

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the People's Party, the mobilization of its constituency, and spreading the ideas of the party. For example, while it is generally accepted that the party developed in states where a strong Farmers' Alliance was in existence, the utilization of conspiracy theories is argued to have been of use to the formation of party organizations in states such as Ohio where none were already in existence. As Davis (1971: 187-198) demonstrates, the "Crime of 1873"² was heavily emphasized in many of the critiques coming from the populist movement and served as a mechanism to simplify the complexities of economic and social change into a moral binary in which one side had "betrayed" the common people.

The election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States and the ascension of the radical right across Europe have many referring back to Hofstadter's (2008) original theory of the "Paranoid Style"³. While the concept was originally invented to describe the political style attributed to Joseph McCarthy or the John Birch Society, it could just as easily be applied to the new populists. The feeling of being "dispossessed" in one's own country leads many to "manufacture the mechanism of history" to explain their misfortune. Decisive events in history are interpreted not in the form of causal mechanisms or social facts, but in the consequence of one or more powerful individuals' personal will. The conspiracy theorist who sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms views the struggle with his opponents as one between "good" and "evil", leading to the demand that the enemy be totally defeated (Hofstadter 2008).

As populist parties gain in strength across Western democracies, it has become more and more relevant to understand the mobilization strategies used by these groups. While many researchers since Hofstadter's observations have also noted the link between the populist right and conspiratorial ideation as well as the populist supporters' adherence to conspiracy theories (Jylha, Strimling, Rydgren 2019; Krasodomski-Jones 2019; Silva, Vegetti, Littvay 2017), little research has been done on the political dynamic surrounding the populist's usage of conspiracy theories. What role, if any, do conspiracy theories play? Is it possible that there are benefits for populist political candidates that refer to and spread conspiracy theories in the electoral arena? The current article is interested in pursuing this route. Due to the close relationship that many populist radical right politicians have with various conspiracy theories the current paper intends to answer the following question:

RQ: Why do radical right populists refer to conspiracy theories when communicating with voters? Do they simply have a tendency towards conspiratorial ideation or do they serve a larger strategic purpose?

I argue that conspiracy theories serve as a means of communication that populist candidates can harness in order to gain votes by mobilizing their base, demonizing or Othering their political opponents, and spreading disinformation. As conspiracy theories, which usually target powerful forces in our societies such as national politicians, transnational corporations, international organizations, and wealthy capitalists, and populism, which emphasizes the division between the elite and the people both view the world in Manichean terms, it is thus feasible for populists, either ideologically or strategically, to merge the two

² The "Crime of 1873" is a conspiracy theory heavily associated with the original People's Party which alleges that the Coinage Act of 1873, which officially ended bimetallism, was a part of a larger conspiracy on behalf of American and British banks to reimpose a "tyranny" in the United States (See Ostler, 1995).

³ The reader should be reminded that by "paranoid", Hofstadter was not making a clinical diagnosis, but instead was attempting to describe the "political style" of the radical right.

in a way that combines the value judgments of both into one consistent picture. In short, not only are the “evil” elite against the people, but they are also involved in a sinister plot behind closed doors to the detriment of the people.

Conspiratorial ideation in the political communication of populist candidates has received little attention in the populist literature and even in those cases where this connection is discussed in detail, few studies have moved in the direction of empirical testing.⁴ With this in mind, this study investigates the connection between populist politicians’ usage of conspiracy theories and support for them during elections and provides empirical support for this connection.

This study is organized as follows. It begins with a brief review of the literature on populism and conspiracy theories, followed by the theoretical argument to be empirically investigated. The subsequent section takes a closer look at the two conspiracy theories which are to be empirically tested; birtherism⁵, the belief that Barack Obama was born in another country and is secretly a Muslim, and the “Clinton Body Count” conspiracy theory, which posits that Hillary Clinton is responsible for the murder of a large number of people in order to cover up corrupt dealings. The content and history of each conspiracy theory are investigated as well as the context behind their employment by the Trump campaign. From there, the hypothesis is then tested by way of regression analysis. So as to provide empirical support for the connection between the conspiracy theories referred to by Trump and votes for him in the 2016 election, OLS regression models are performed with state-level aggregate data, with the variable denoting interest in the two conspiracy theories coming from Google Trends (2019). Upon demonstrating that interest in these two conspiracy theories reveals significant positive relationships with votes for Donald Trump, this study concludes with an overall summary of the results and final remarks. From there, I describe possible promising directions for future research which could be undertaken in order to further investigate the results of this study.

Conspiracy Theories and Radical Right-Wing Populism

Ideology and Manichaeism

Studies have demonstrated that specific ideologies tend to have a higher tendency to believe in conspiracy theories (Swami 2012; Wright, Arbutnot 1974). In four studies undertaken by van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet (2015) political extremism and ideological radicalization are understood to be highly correlated with conspiratorial thinking. This was attributed to political extremists’ “*highly structured thinking style that is aimed at making sense of societal events*” (Fernbach, et al. 2013). Historians (Davis 1971), social scientists (Hofstadter 2008 [1964]), and psychologists (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, Sanford 1950) all demonstrate that conspiratorial thinking often plays a central role to ethnocentric and populist authoritarian worldviews in the West. In their original study of the “authoritarian personality”, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950: 92-101) reported on the specific “nuclear ideas” in the anti-semitic belief system that “pulls in” conspiracy

⁴ See, for example, Bergmann’s (2018) book which is one of the more comprehensive and up-to-date summaries of this body of literature.

⁵ The term “birther” will also be employed throughout this study to describe a believer of birtherism.

theories and “rumors”. Dobratz and Waldner’s (2016) study on conspiratorial ideation among the White Power and Tea Party movements found that overlapping conspiracy theories in both camps served as “bridging frames” that provided fertile grounds for some members of each movement to collaborate and possibly participate in both.

While populist radical right parties, leaders, and movements differ on a variety of issues, they all converge on central ideological pillars that allow them to be considered a “party family”: authoritarianism, nativism, and populism (Mudde, 2007: 11-31). The radical right places a strong emphasis on ethnonationalism, rooted in myths of a distant past and making the nation more homogeneous (Rydgren, 2007). The creation of an *ingroup* and *outgroup*, standard behavior for any identity building, is said to be of higher importance for the radical right (Geden, 2004; Pelinka, 2005). Given the largely homogenous and limited definition of the ingroup for the radical right, this means that those belonging to the *outgroup* are rather numerous. In general, psychological studies have shown that the extent to which an individual identifies with a certain *ingroup* and views other *outgroups* as a threat, they are statistically more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen, 2018). This is especially the case with nationalist (and populist) ideologies which believe in the exaggerated superiority of the ingroup (whether that be in national, cultural, religious, or racial terms) and cannot imagine the demise of the “good” people other than by secret conspiracy by the Other. As Hofstadter (2008 [1965]) noted, this merger of conspiracism and Manichaeism has a radicalizing effect in the modern-day radical right as they begin to see the world in “apocalyptic terms”.

While definitions of populism may differ, a consensus remains around the basic binary antagonistic division of society into the evil, corrupt, or conspiring elites and the pure and virtuous people, both of which are seen as being largely homogenous in terms of interests, backgrounds, and ideology (Mudde 2004; Taggart 1995; Urbinati 2019). The ideational approach goes further, emphasizing the *necessarily* moral dimension that is placed on these groups (Mudde, Kaltwasser 2018). Like populist rhetoric, conspiracy theories, also target powerful forces in our societies and define them according to the Manichean dichotomy of “good” and “evil” (Bergmann, 2018; Yla-Antilla, 2018). The role that conspiracy theories play in what Zúquete (2008) termed “missionary politics”, is to provide conspiring forces of evil necessary for the creation of a “quasi-religious” narrative wherein the charismatic populist leader leads the “chosen people” on a mission of salvation. It should, thus, be possible to combine the two into a narrative which posits the existence of a secret conspiracy which one’s political opponents are involved in. Historian David Brion Davis (1971) has emphasized in his works the extent to which the populist thematic reappears in many of the political conspiracy theories in the history of the United States, while Fenster (2008) argues that conspiracy theories all hold a populist core.

Social Change

Radical right-wing populism often occurs in times of fast-paced social, economic, or cultural changes (Mickenberg 2013). The fall of the post-war social democratic consensus and the transformation of society into a post-industrial society in the 1970s and 1980s is often cited as the beginning of the “cultural backlash” of the “new populist parties” in which closely intertwined social and economic changes encourage the “losers” of such changes to revolt against the mainstream and support populist parties (Mickenberg 2013). As a result, there

tends to be much overlap in terms of the “demand” factors engendering both populism and conspiratorial ideation. Economic insecurity and anomie have been found to be strongly correlated with conspiratorial beliefs (Goertzel 1994; Volkan 1985) and populism (Baumeister, Leary 1995; Inglehart, Norris 2019). Fear of strangers, of losing one’s job (migrants or minorities), of losing national autonomy, of losing old traditions and values, and perceived threats to what they perceive to be their nation, also tend to be positively correlated (Pels 2012; Van Prooijen, Van Dijk 2014; Van Prooijen, Van Lange 2014). There also tends to be a convergence when considering levels of education; those with fewer years of education tend to believe in conspiracy theories and favor populist politics at higher rates than those with more education (Mudde 2007; Prooijen, Krouwel, Pollet 2015; Stempel, Hargrove, Stempel III 2007; Rothwell 2016). During times of economic or social insecurity, or dissatisfaction with one’s life, individuals may feel the need for an enemy that can be blamed for their problems involving social phenomena that may be too abstract or complicated to understand (Volkan 1985), a simplification that sits well with the populists’ distinction between friends and enemies. In fact, the creation of this enemy has been found to be more effective in regulating stress and coping with these problems than admitting the role uncontrollable forces may play (Rothschild, Landau, Sullivan, Keefer 2012). Conspiracism in populist politicians, thus, could have the effect of simplifying these complex shifts of socio-economic forces which are at fault for their deprivation and directing that anger at specific individuals.⁶

Finally, populism and conspiracy theories tend to increase in contexts in which the institutions of mainstream society lack legitimacy on behalf of the people; mistrust in the governing bodies or the mainstream media, for example, are often correlated with populist and conspiratorial beliefs (Algan 2017; Jylha, Strimling, Rydgren 2019; Krasnodomski-Jones 2019). Cynicism or dissatisfaction with the way the system works have been found in both those who believe in conspiracy theories (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2015; Volkan 1985) and those who vote for populist candidates (Pels 2012; Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013). As the establishment and their existing institutions are viewed with mistrust, the relationship between populist leaders and their movement is one largely based on its opposite: trust through faith (Urbinati 2019). This relationship, as a result, is not conducive to public accountability because trust and love for the leader, despite any flaws, is all that is necessary to support them.

Populism, Social Media, and “Truth”

In order to retain the constant mobilization of its supporters, populism engages in permanent electoral campaigning by constantly reaffirming its identity with the people (Urbinati 2019). Thus, populists have a tendency of speaking directly to the people, often through social media, in lieu of more traditional channels (Kramer 2017). A prime example is the American President Donald Trump who sends messages on Twitter which allows him to

⁶ This explanatory role is reminiscent of one of Saul Alinsky’s (1989 [1971]) rules which argues that “*in a complex, interrelated urban society, it becomes increasingly difficult to single out who is to blame for any particular evil. There is a constant, and somewhat legitimate, passing of the buck. In these times of urbanization, complex metropolitan governments, the complexities of major interlocked corporations, and the interlocking of political life between cities and counties and metropolitan areas, the problem that threatens to loom more and more is that of identifying the enemy. Obviously there is no point to tactics unless one has a target upon which to center the attacks.*”

speak directly to a sympathetic audience and avoid many mainstream media outlets he holds contempt for (Downie, Sugars 2020).⁷

Online populist media operates in a similar way; the usage of social media and online forums as their medium of communication serves both the role of strategy and message for their anti-systemic political beliefs. Websites or online populist media operated by followers help in the construction of the people and the Other as they collect anecdotal evidence which ‘proves’ the danger posed by foreign actors or the corruption of elite figures (Kramer 2017). This form of knowledge permits more thorough analyses such as those involving statistics, to be disregarded as deception by elites or “obfuscation by complexity” (Kramer 2017). As a result, many online populist communities form echo chambers that serve a “self-socializing” function into the populist radical right worldview (Kramer 2017) and, in turn, promote the diffusion of right-wing conspiracy theories (Bessi, Quattrociocchi 2015). By developing a relationship with these communities, Trump was able to bring “fringe” ideas and beliefs to the mainstream (Barkun 2017).

Populists are said to exhibit what Saurette and Gunster (2011) call *epistemological populism*, or the valorization of the “knowledge of the common people”. Further research has gone on to show that this tendency to eschew the advice of experts in favor of so-called “folk-wisdom” is indeed a trait that is common to populism (Wodak 2015, p. 45). As a result, conspiracy theories associated with “common sense”, feelings, identity, and anti-intellectualism, are one possible form of post-truth rhetoric associated with populism (Wodak 2015; Yla-Anttila 2018). The other, which Yla-Anttila (2018) terms *counter knowledge*, departs from epistemological populism due to its employment of scientific language and its radical defense of perceived empirical truths. Instead of an opposition to expert knowledge, counter knowledge opposes itself to the current knowledge authorities and is conspiratorial insofar as it deems opponents to be hiding the objective truth from the people.

Indeed, a large collection of research has proven the virility of conspiracy theories over the Internet (Bessi, Quattrociocchi 2015; Kalmar, Stevens, Worby 2018; Vicario, et al. 2016). One reason for this is due to the structural role the Internet plays in modern-day communications. In the 20th century, media communication was dominated by traditional media, such as the newspaper, the radio, and the television, which distributed information in a hierarchical fashion and held major influence in determining which issues would be important for public opinion (McCombs, Shaw 1972). With the introduction of the Internet, the diffusion of information has become democratized, permitting anyone to be able to effectively compete for audiences with the corporate outlets and allowing for alternative narratives to reach the surface (Bessi, Quattrociocchi 2015).

⁷ By this, I mean to say that Trump largely views those large media outlets such as CNN, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and MSNBC that are more antagonistic to his politics to be fundamentally disingenuous insofar as they publish “fake news” simply to undermine him, deeming them to be the “enemy of the people”. At times, even the right wing outlet Fox News has come under fire from Trump when he publicly chose to skip two Fox News debates over a conflict with one of the moderators and over the years has criticized certain anchors who have disagreed with him (Shafer 2019, Aug 30).

An Instrumental View of Conspiracist Forms of Communication in Populist Radical Right Candidates

While a number of researchers have merely observed the tendency that many populists have towards conspiratorial ideation, the current research, instead, argues that the promotion of conspiracy theories by populist candidates serves a larger function and is an important political strategy for populist candidates.⁸

Again, if one recalls the case of the People's Party, conspiracy theories should theoretically be politically to their benefit. The usage, manipulation, and propagation of the conspiracy surrounding the "Crime of 1873" aided in providing a strong populist critique of the Democratic and Republican parties permitting the People's Party characterize them both as being "owned" by the same financial powers (Ostler 1995). This permitted the party rank-and-file to help explain the GOP's reluctance to respond to the farmers' grievances, simplified global economic and social processes, and legitimized the formation of a new party in a time of crisis.

As Hofstadter (2008 [1964]) noted, a certain radicalizing effect takes place as the enemy is viewed not in terms of interests or differing opinions, but as essentially "evil", which justifies a struggle in which only the total defeat of the enemy will suffice. Assuming certain conspiracy theories mentioned by radical right candidates such as Trump can lead to a radicalizing effect in which the individual begins to view the world in Manichean terms, and the evil outgroup must be absolutely defeated, this would have the potential for reaping political benefits for said candidate by turning voters away from their opponent and rallying supporters to the conspiracist cause.

When used alongside ordinary populist forms of communication which shun expert knowledge in favor of "common sense" or counter knowledge which alleges a "cover-up" of an "empirical truth", populist candidates should expect to see electoral gains through the manipulation of the public's distrust of mainstream politics. Bergmann (2018, p. 172) has posited that conspiracy theories allow populist candidates to spread fear and distrust, to identify the enemies of the people, and "mainstream the margins". Ultimately, conspiracy theories should have the effect of strengthening the divide between the people and the establishment by emphasizing the "corruption" or the "evil" intentions of the latter, which could result in more votes for populist candidates in elections. This study, thus, will pursue the question of the political relationship between the radical right populist politicians and conspiracy theories. Taking the case of Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, I intend to provide empirical support for the following hypothesis:

⁸ To clarify, when referring to an "instrumental value" for conspiracist forms of communication in populist candidates, I do not mean to say that Trump or any populist actor is solely responsible for its diffusion. Conspiracy theories are largely produced and maintained in common by a whole community of believers, activists, and "spin-doctors". That being said, political candidates have a certain amount of power to redirect conspiracy theories in certain directions or amplify their message. Emphasizing conspiracy theories in one's speeches can signal to supporters conspiracy theories that they are on their side and believe in what they are saying. For others, the fact that a major public official puts into question an official narrative can lead them to consider the merits of the conspiracy theory and doubt the mainstream narrative with less hesitation. Even if the populist can spread disinformation and place a sense of doubt in the voter's mind, this is better than having them fully trust the knowledge authorities of the "establishment".

H1: Conspiracy theories were used by Trump, the radical right populist, as a prominent means of communication, resulting in more votes for him during the election.⁹

This study will test this hypothesis by exploring cases in which the Trump campaign referenced certain conspiracy theories during the 2016 presidential election and employing a quantitative analysis of conspiratorial beliefs in voters which will be introduced in the following sections.

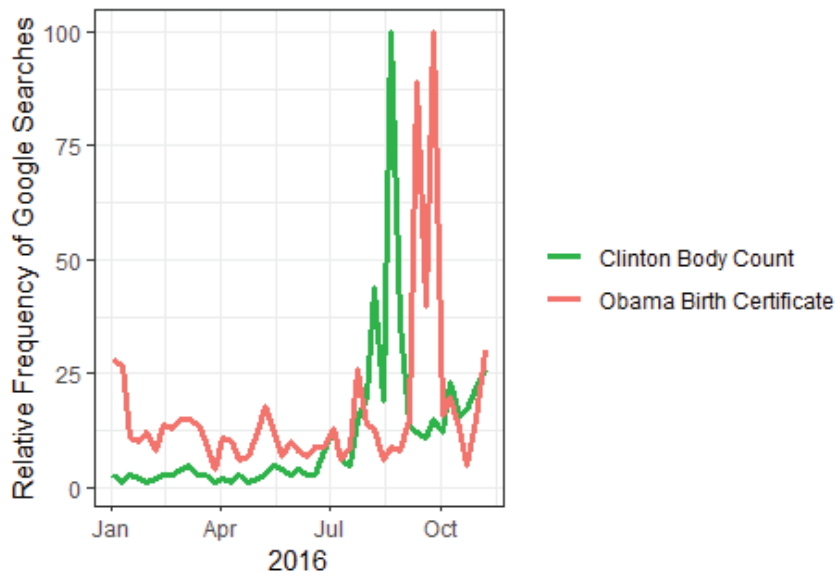
The case of Donald Trump's 2016 campaign for the presidential election has become a classic case of the populist radical right "backlash" over the last decade (Inglehart, Norris 2019; Mudde 2017). By referring to Trump as a "populist radical right" candidate, I mean to say, as per Mudde (2007), that the core of his ideological worldview consists of three central pillars; authoritarianism, nativism, and populism. While Trump may be defined in this way, it would be inaccurate to claim that the Republican Party as a whole is a populist radical right party. Rather, given the tendency of American political parties to provide a "big tent" to a number of various factions, it is more accurate to claim that Trump and the populist radical right *faction* of the Republican party emerged successful in the race for the party nomination. This phenomenon is not so dissimilar from other cases as Bolsonaro in Brazil who also emerged from a generally conservative political party (Mudde 2019).

Conspiratorial Narratives in Donald Trump's 2016 Electoral Campaign

Considering the fact that conspiracies, such as Watergate, do occur throughout history, it would be incorrect to place all conspiracy theories into the irrational category especially when some may have a large amount of evidence for their existence. In order to avoid this conceptual pitfall, I intend to examine two clear cases of *conspiracism*, which are characterized more by their wild and exaggerated claims without any evidence being provided, instead placing faith in theories based on their cohesion with their personal ideological beliefs (Cargile, et al. 2020, p. 78; Dentith 2018; Jardina, Traugott 2019). For the purposes of the current study, the two conspiracy theories analyzed are the "Clinton Body Count" conspiracy theory and "Birtherism", both of which are to be summarized in this section. These two conspiracy theories were chosen because they played a prominent role in the 2016 election as each conspiracy theory was, to a certain extent, promoted by the populist radical right candidate, Donald Trump. Instrumentally, the function of the "Clinton Body Count" conspiracy and other related anti-Clinton conspiracy theories was to demonize the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, whereas in the case of birtherism, the main intention of the continued invocation of this conspiracy theory was to attract and mobilize "a consistent group of supporters". Figure 1 displays the timeframe in which interest in both conspiracy theories spiked during the 2016 campaign.

⁹ Given the lack of survey data with covariates denoting belief in the two conspiracy theories utilized in this study, the current study does not intend to demonstrate the existence of the exact causal mechanisms involved (which seems a promising direction for future research) but will attempt to provide support for the general relationship between populist candidates' promotion of conspiratorial narratives and voter preferences.

Figure 1: Conspiracism during the 2016 presidential campaign



Note: The data provided by Google Trends (2019) comes in the form of aggregate search estimates scaled to 100. In other words, the time period with the most searches performed received a maximum score of 100 with the other periods assigned scores relative to 100 in proportion to their search frequencies.

Source: Google Trends (2019).

Birtherism

“Birtherism” is a collection of conspiracy theories popular among the American far-right which claim that President Barack Obama is not a natural-born citizen (the most common reiterations claim he was born in Kenya or Indonesia), is actually a Muslim, and as a result is not eligible to run for president of the United States (Neiwert 2017). Birtherism is a highly racialized conspiracy theory as it plays heavily on Barack Obama’s race and family origins as well as sympathies that he is un-American because of his alleged Muslim faith, the defining prejudice of the modern-day radical right (Mudde 2007: 27-30; Mudde 2019). This conspiracy clearly fits into Cas Mudde’s (2007: 69-73) second typology of radical right “enemies”: those who are “within the state, but outside the nation”. The picture painted is one in which Obama is not loyal to the United States due to his racial background and alleged “Muslim faith” or worse, he is planning, along with other radical Islamists to “subvert” American constitutional democracy. At the same time, there is the added allegation of corruption or unconstitutional behavior insofar as Obama ran for the office of the presidency despite not being eligible to as well as Democratic complicity.

Originating from chain emails that went viral during the 2008 election, the conspiracy continued into the end of Obama’s second term in office despite Obama having released both the short and long-form birth certificates which testified to him being born in Hawaii. Much of the appeal of birtherism was shown to come from many in the more conservative wing of the Republican Party who felt animosity towards the first African American president (Neiwert, 2017). For many of them, Obama’s election was seen in very apocalyptic terms. This racial resentment following the 2008 election formed the catalyst for the growth in birtherism as well as the growth and resurgence of right-wing movements such as the militias and the Tea Party (Mudde 2017; Neiwert 2017). Much of this resentment, as well as the basic birther claims, coalesced into a larger conspiracy which posited that

Obama held nefarious plans for the country. The more extreme variants of birtherism, for example, allege that Obama's Muslim sympathies signify his intention to impose sharia law on the United States or allow for foreign jihadists to enter the country. Much of this played into the more general "green scare" among the conservative movement which alleged an Islamic "infiltration" of the White House (Mudde 2017: 27-30). Thus, for them, America was at a crossroads and the 2012 and 2016 elections were viewed as the last chances to "take the country back" (Mudde 2017: 27-30). Hofstadter (2008 [1964]) noted a similar sentiment among the conspiracy theories of the radical right emerging in the 20th century. Faced with an America that has been *"taken away from them and their kind ... they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion"*.

While many in the Republican mainstream distanced themselves from birtherism in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election, Tea Party Republicans such as Sarah Palin and conservative journalists openly referenced it (Neiwert, 2017). For example, while on the campaign trail in 2008, John McCain responded to several supporters who articulated their belief that Obama was an "Arab" who *"cohorts with terrorists"* by stating that Obama was a *"decent, family man, and citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with"* which elicited several boos from the crowd (CNN 2015). In 2016 when Trump was asked a similar question from a supporter, he responded not by correcting the supporter but by saying that *"bad things are happening out there"* and that he would *"be looking at that and plenty of other things"* (WCCO - CBS Minnesota 2015).

For his part, Donald Trump was one of the most important propagators of the Birther conspiracy theory and only publicly distanced himself from the theory on September 16, 2016, just two months before the election (Klinker 2014; Neiwert 2017). Belief in the conspiracy theory reached its height in July 2010 when 41% of Republicans (CNN Opinion Research Corporation 2010) indicated that Obama was "probably" or "definitely" born in a different country. In Spring 2011, Donald Trump began publicly expressing doubts about President Obama's citizenship in live interviews over a span of several weeks, mentioning that the *"private investigators"* he had sent to Hawaii to investigate the matter *"could not believe what they [were] finding"*. The result was a dramatic increase in the polls for Trump in the event he would enter the 2012 presidential race, placing him among the top candidates (Klinkner 2014; Sides, Tesler, Vavreck 2018).

After Obama released his long-form birth certificate the following year, these numbers fell to around 13% of the total public (Morales 2011). Despite this, though, Trump and other birthers continued to claim that this birth certificate was a forgery. As a result, the increase in Republicans who believed that Obama was born in the United States was short-lived, and promptly rose back to the levels prior to the release of the long-form birth certificate. Polling of Republicans in 2012 averaged only 28% of respondents who claimed that Obama was born in the US and would only rise to 34% in 2014 (Klinker 2014).

Without putting the issue to rest, Trump did not bring the conspiracy theory up at many of his 2016 rallies, instead, allowing his surrogates, such as Joe Arpaio, to do so. When prompted though, Trump would defend his record of questioning the birth of Barack Obama and (falsely) place the blame on other candidates (Trump 2016c). On September 16, 2016, only two months before the election and in advance of the first debate with Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump publicly disavowed birtherism, instead blaming Clinton and her 2008 campaign for starting the conspiracy theory. This is the position that Trump would hold with regard to his past "birther" statements up until the election.

In an interview with Yahoo News, former campaign advisor Sam Nunberg admitted to using “birtherism” as a campaign strategy that allowed Trump to retain “a consistent group of supporters” (Richardson 2018). Although it is speculation, Trump himself is also alleged to have known the strategic effects of diffusing birtherism:

“We [MSNBC host Mika Brzezinski] confronted him about ‘birtherism’ ... We said it’s bad, it’s wrong. And he said in a low voice, ‘I know it’s bad but it works’” (Wise 2018).

Regardless of whether Trump is a true believer or not, the effect of this strategy is evident; a poll taken after the 2016 election showed that the percentage of Republicans who believed that Barack Obama was born in Kenya had shot back up to 51% (The Economist/YouGov Poll 2017).¹⁰

Anti-Clinton Conspiracy Theories and the “Clinton Body Count”

The “Clinton Body Count” is group of conspiracy theories that alleges that the Clinton family is responsible for the murder of a large number of people, some of which were political competitors, while others were murdered in order to prevent the release of incriminating evidence or corrupt activities. This list of alleged Clinton murders, which was started online in the 1990s, continued to be propagated by conspiracy theorists in the run-up to the 2016 election and reached new heights due in part to the Trump campaign. The conspiracy theory originally began in the 1990s during the presidency of Bill Clinton and only gradually started including Hillary Clinton into the alleged crimes as her political career was launched afterwards. Once Hillary Clinton entered the 2016 race for the presidency, this conspiracy theory again resurfaced, especially around the time of the Democratic National Convention when conspiracy theorists began blaming Hillary Clinton and her associates for orchestrating the murder of DNC worker Seth Rich for whistleblower activities. Donald Trump’s appearance on Alex Jones’ *Infowars*, a conspiracy theory “superspreader”¹¹ which boasted more than 50 million viewers on *Youtube* at the time, seemed to confirm his endorsement of many of the more outrageous Clinton-based conspiracy theories. Trump’s advisor of “dirty tricks”, Roger Stone, was one of the main Trump affiliates who continuously claimed that the Clintons were responsible for the murder of many more bureaucratic and political figures (Hananoki 2016). On a separate occasion, Donald Trump made specific mention of the Vince Foster case, a friend of the Clintons whose suicide was the catalyst for the invention of the “Body Count” conspiracy theory. During a *Washington Post* interview on May 23rd, he stated that the case was “very fishy” and that the claims about foul play were “very serious” (Bixby, McCarthy 2016).

If birtherism was an attempt to demonize a president who was “outside of the nation”, the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory provides us with an example of an elite being demonized from “within the nation and the state”. As Cas Mudde (2007: 65-9) points out, these “enemies” are meant to be made out as “traitors” of the nation who destroy the nation for their own profit.

¹⁰ Increased levels of conspiratorial ideation in voters, such as birtherism, is of interest to Trump politically as this would render voters more susceptible to his nativist and populist messaging during the election.

¹¹ “Super spreaders”, which are responsible for a disproportionate amount of the conspiratorial material and “fake news” found online, are individual social media accounts dedicated to the spreading of conspiracy theories online (See Starbird 2017; Waszak Kasprzycka-Waszak, Kubanek 2018).

Many of Donald Trump's statements regarding his opponent consisted of clear falsehoods such as his claim that she and Barack Obama had "founded ISIS", that she intended to abolish the Second Amendment to the Constitution, and that Clinton was paying protesters "\$1500 plus an iPhone" to be violent at Trump rallies (Trump 2016b; Vanity Fair 2016). One of the better examples of Donald Trump's invocation of the anti-Clinton conspiracies occurred at a campaign rally on October 13, 2016 when he argued that Clinton "*meets in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of U.S. sovereignty in order to enrich these global financial powers*" (Trump 2016a). What is interesting to note is the way in which Trump would take actual critiques of Hillary Clinton, especially from the populist angle, and move into a clearly conspiratorial direction. The case mentioned above clearly demonstrates this. While Clinton was known for and heavily critiqued on both sides of the political spectrum for her connections to Wall Street firms and positions on free trade and globalization, the notion that she meets in secret with them to "*plot the destruction of US sovereignty*" is conspiracist in nature. This has the effect of simplifying the narrative, a function that many modern conspiracy theories hold in common, from one in which socio-economic forces instigate societal changes to one in which the evil Clinton thirsts for power and domination at the expense of everyone else. Whereas structural dynamics are difficult for many people to visualize, a personalist touch ensures that even low-information voters¹², understand the idea being communicated.

All of Trump's claims merge into a larger conspiracy theory which places the Clintons among a group of "globalist elites" who exist solely to "protect and enrich itself" (Miller 2016).

"They [The Clintons] are criminals ... This is well documented. And the establishment that protects them is engaged in a massive cover-up of widespread criminal activity at the State Department and the Clinton Foundation in order to keep the Clintons in power" (Trump 2016a).

Due to the structure of the anti-Clinton conspiracy theory, and its resemblance to other Manichean conspiracy theories, it was flexible enough to merge with other previously existing ones as demonstrated in the case of her connection to "global financial power". One event of relevance which grabbed headlines and demonstrated the flexibility of the conspiracy theory occurred when Donald Trump retweeted an edited photo by a white supremacist user with Hillary Clinton next to a Star of David and in front of a background with piles of U.S. currency with the caption "Most Corrupt Candidate Ever", a less than subtle appeal to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (Marwick, Lewis 2015).

Data and Methods

The method employed by this study involves the use of a standard Ordinary Least Squares regression due to the normally distributed dependent variable. The dependent variable used for this study to measure support for the populist radical right candidate Donald Trump in the 2016 election is the percentage of the vote for Donald Trump in each state, taken from the United States Election Project (McDonald 2019).

¹² A "Low-Information Voter" is someone who may vote but is poorly informed on the issues (Ralfrey, Poole 1987).

Independent Variables

As there is no long-term polling to date concerning belief in these two conspiracy theories, especially on the state, local, or individual level, I intend to make use of Google search data available from the site *Google Trends* for the independent variable of interest in order to overcome this (Google 2019). For the purposes of this study, geographical data will be used for each of the 50 states in order to compare the level of interest in the two conspiracy theories with electoral results of the given populist candidate during elections.¹³ The two search terms employed for the 2016 U.S. presidential election are “*Obama birth certificate*” to measure levels of support for birtherism, and “*Clinton Body Count*” to measure a number of Hillary Clinton-related conspiracy theories.¹⁴ In order to gather a full and accurate measurement of each search term, the dates to be included for each search term ends on the day of the election, November 8th, 2016 and begins eight years prior. These two terms were chosen because they played a prominent role in the 2016 election as each conspiracy theory was, to a certain extent, endorsed by the Republican candidate for president, Donald Trump.

It should be noted that this study makes no assumption that every search done for a given search term is done by sympathizers of said conspiracy theory, however, it does assume that it does provide a *relative* measure of support for or receptivity to the conspiracy theory within a geographical area. Previous studies using Internet search aggregates have shown the data to be a reliable measure of the public’s *general* interest in a topic (Brownstein, Freifield, Madoff 2009; Carneiro, Mylonakis 2009; Stephens-Davidowits 2014; Swearingen, Ripberger 2014; Vosen Schmidt 2011).¹⁵

¹³ The state aggregate data provided by Google Trends are relative, and not absolute in nature. This means that the data is normally distributed with figures between “0” and “100”, with “100” denoting the state with the most searches for the search term. Observations for the other states are assigned values along this scale relative to the state with the most searches performed. States without enough searches above a certain (undisclosed) threshold are not assigned a value. As DiGrazia (2017b) reports, this minimum value is high enough that many words and search terms do not reach the given threshold for many states, though the specific search terms utilized for this study were prominent enough that every state has an assigned value for both variables. The descriptive statistics for these variables can be found in Table A.1 in the Appendix.

¹⁴ An obvious question arises as to the criteria for choosing these two search terms. One could reasonably argue that other terms could also be used, such as, for example, “Clinton killer” or “Clinton murder”, for the Clinton Body Count conspiracy. The problem arises, though, whether these figures ultimately measure interest in the same topic as terms such as “killer” or “murder” could just as easily be made in reference to other topics such as decisions by the Clinton’s to engage in military action or address criminal justice reform. In this study, these two specific word choices were made to address relevant issues involving the balance of scope (choosing the term with the highest number of searches performed) and relevancy (providing a more accurate measure of adherents to these conspiracy theories). To address the latter, the specific phrasing used by the conspiracy theorists themselves was employed to limit the scope and delineate the results from more mainstream topics. For the former, the search term with the highest search ratio was chosen. A comparative look at similar searches can be found on Table A.2 in the Appendix.

¹⁵ While it is possible that non-believers of the two conspiracy theories could have been included in the count of searches performed, I believe that the overall effect of these individuals would be minimal. For one, the search term excludes mention of the term “conspiracy theory”, or “birtherism” which would likely be used by outsiders. Next, while it is theoretically possible that some non-believers could have used these exact terms, there is no reason why this effect would significantly impact the figures as they are relative, and not absolute measures of interest in the given search terms. Moreover, I would argue that even if non-believers did perform searches for the given search terms, it is likely that their interest in the topic could lead them to subscribe to such beliefs. Studies have demonstrated that simple exposure to conspiratorial material online leads to individuals being much more likely to subscribe to these views (Chou, Oh, Klein 2018; van der Linden,

Internet search data has become a useful way in which to overcome problems related to missing data, as is often the case with belief in conspiracy theories. For example, a number of scholars have successfully used Google Trends data to measures of public attention that have been able to detect outbreaks of influenza in real-time (Brownstein, Freifield and Madoff 2009; Carneiro and Mylonakis 2009), to forecast near-term economic indicators such as sales and consumer confidence (Choi and Harian 2012), to explain voter behavior during elections (Swearingen and Ripberger 2014), and Tea Party events (DiGrazia 2017b). As searches are done in relative privacy, search data has been shown to be more effective in avoiding non-response and desirability bias (Curtin, Pressner, and Singer 2005; Keeter, et al., 2006; PEW Research Center 2012). In Vosen and Schmidt's (2011) study of consumer spending, they discovered that *Google* search data at the national level actually outperform other indicators such as the Michigan Consumer Sentiment Index and the Conference Board Consumer Confidence Index. Moreover, DiGrazia (2017a) has shown that Google Search aggregate can be effectively measured to study conspiracy theories.

Control Variables

In order to control for social and economic factors, I introduce several variables to represent aspects of the various theories concerning the origins of radical-right wing populism, all of which can be found in Table A.1 in the Appendix. With the exception of the median household income, which is coded in absolute figures, each variable is coded as a percentage of the population, with decimal figures between 0 and 1.

The literature surrounding the effect that immigration has on votes for populist radical right parties is still rather contentious and the complex mechanisms by which it operates still unclear (Guriev, Papaioannou 2020). While cross-national studies have pointed to the higher levels of immigration in Europe and North America being responsible for the general success of radical right-wing populism over left-wing variants (Rodrik 2018), studies investigating the sub-national and meso-level have provided contradictory evidence. While a number of studies have pointed to the fact that increased immigration to certain regions and municipalities is statistically correlated with higher vote share for the populist radical right party, others indicate the exact opposite effect (Guriev, Papaioannou, 2020). In past American elections, the latter relationship has tended to prevail; on average, increased immigration has had a significant negative impact on Republican vote shares in elections (Mayda, Peri, Steingress 2016). Thus, to control for this, the percentage of the non-citizen population is to be added as a variable from the Kaiser Family Foundation (2019) which is expected to be negatively correlated with the percentage of the vote for Trump.

Minorities, on the other hand, tend to vote for populist radical right candidates at much lower rates due to the fact that radical right populists define *the people* in very exclusionary terms, either by racial, ethnic, linguistic, or religious characteristics, and view those groups that are "within the state, and outside the nation" with hostility (Mudde 2007, pp. 27-30). Previous studies have shown that those with minority status (African Americans and Hispanics) were significantly less likely to vote for Trump, whereas white voters demonstrated the opposite relationship (Lee 2019; Rothwell, 2016). While this split in ethnic voting preferences in the United States has been building for several election cycles now, it reached its

2015). As communication studies have revealed, mention of an issue by actors such as the media, can actually lead more individuals to support an issue (Vliegthart, Boomgaarden, Spanje 2012).

height in 2016 with Trump (Lee 2019). Moreover, feelings racial and ethnic hostility tended to correlate strongly with votes for Trump during the 2016 presidential election (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019). Thus, to control for the number of racial minorities living in a given state, a variable for the share of non-whites in a state is also taken. The data for both of these variables originates from the Kaiser Family Foundation (Kaiser Family Foundation 2019).

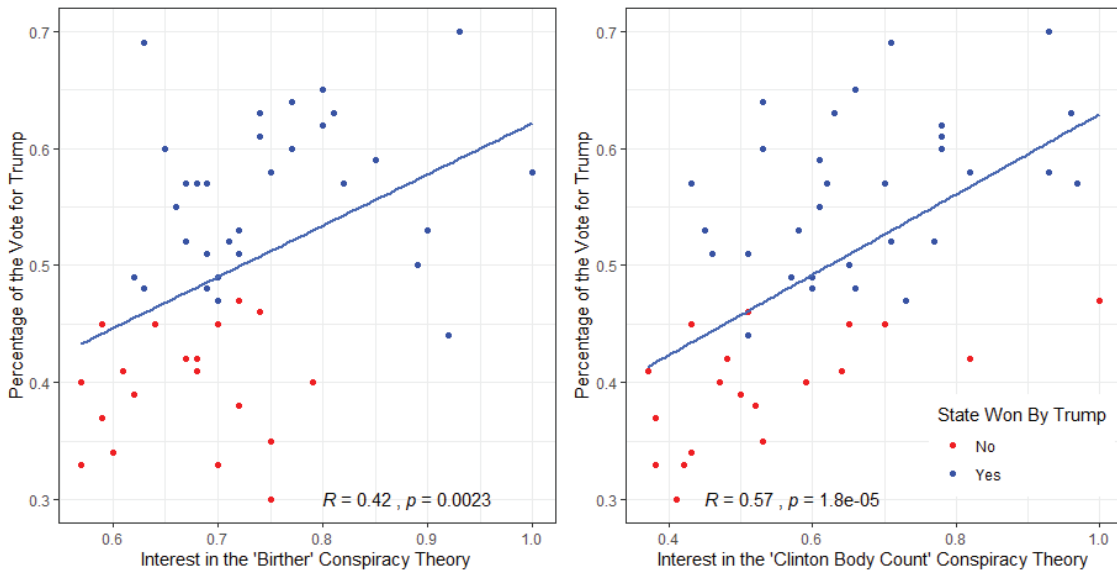
Aside from demographic factors, economic factors are also often important catalysts for the proliferation of populist parties as the transformation to a post-industrial society creates “losers” in the market who tend to vote for these candidates (Minkenberg 2013; Mudde 2004). Economic austerity, the recession of 2009, economic globalization, and the “China Shock”, have all been demonstrated to have negatively affected a segment of the population which have higher tendencies to vote for the populist radical right (Guriev, Papaioannou, 2020). In order to control for these factors, a number of indicators are incorporated involving economic factors and notions of social class. First, the median household income, from the Kaiser Family Foundation (2019) is added in order to control for the general level of income in a state. A variable for the level of poverty among whites is used as a control for a relevant economic indicator specific to the white community to test for economic deprivation among the dominant racial group (Kaiser Family Foundation 2019). Given the strong correlation between unemployed voters and support for populist parties (Colantone, Stanig 2018) another variable denoting the (seasonally adjusted) level of unemployment in each state was also added to the models from the Kaiser Family Foundation (2019). Next, as a measure of human capital, the share of the population above 25 years old with a high school degree from the American Community Survey (ACS) (US Census Bureau, 2019) is used as a means of testing for the role of education, which has consistently shown to be a strong indicator of support for populist parties (Colantone, Stanig 2018; Mudde, 2007). Finally, the Gini index was included to control for the levels of inequality found in each state (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2019).

Considering that the rural population is a common source of support for American Republican candidates, especially for Trump in 2016 (Scala, Johnson 2017), the share of the population in metropolitan areas has been added from the Kaiser Family Foundation (2019) to control for this divide.¹⁶ All of the data used in the subsequent tests are summarized in Table A.1 in the Appendix.

Results

With all variables accounted for, a simple scatterplot (Figure 2) indicates that the data from Google Trends demonstrates the seemingly positive correlation as theorized. From here, empirical testing will now demonstrate whether this relationship is statistically significant when the aforementioned control variables are added.

¹⁶ The demographic dividing line has been demonstrated to be a rather robust one in the 2016 election. In both large urban areas and their surrounding suburbs the Democrats fared rather well, whereas Trump and the Republicans polled well in rural areas and small suburban areas, which “resemble rural exurbia”, outside of small urban areas (Scala, Johnson 2017).

Figure 2: Conspiracism and Votes for Donald Trump

Source: Author.

In accordance with the previously stated methodological approach, an OLS regression performed on vote percentages for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election shows a significant positive relationship with interest in the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory with all controls accounted for (see Table 1, Model 1). Significant negative relationships with the controls for the median household income of a state and the share of the non-white population were also revealed. Controls for the share of the non-citizen population, the Gini index, the share of white poverty, the share of the population with a high school diploma, and the unemployment rate all turned out to be insignificant. Thus, as hypothesized, the independent variable for the level of interest in the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory remains significantly correlated in the positive direction with votes for Donald Trump with the addition of all controls.

An OLS regression with the second conspiracist variable denoting interest in birtherism also reports a significant positive relationship with votes for the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, as theoretically expected (see Table 1, Model 2). Moreover, a strong negative relationship with the share of the non-white population and the median household income can also be observed as with Model 1.

Finally, in an effort to examine which of the conspiracy theory variables demonstrates a stronger relationship with votes for Trump during the 2016 election, Model 3 includes both variables together. The results demonstrate a significant correlation in the positive direction between interest in birtherism and votes for Donald Trump, while interest in the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory turns insignificant. Also of note are the variables for the non-white population and median household income which retain their statistically significant negative relationships.

As is clear from these tests, both the “Clinton Body Count” and “Birtherism” variables have demonstrated statistically significant positive relationships with the percentage of the vote for Donald Trump, with the birtherism variable retaining this correlation when

both variables are included in the same model.¹⁷ Thus, it would seem that while the correlation between interest in the Clinton Body Count conspiracy theory and votes for Trump was statistically significant (as seen in Model 1), the variable for birtherism was much more so. In addition, this test also validates the significance of other control variables such as the median household income and the share of non-whites which demonstrated statistically significant negative correlations with votes for Trump throughout the series of tests.

Table 1: OLS linear regression of the percentage of the vote that Trump received in the 50 United States

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	Coef.	t	St. Coef. (beta)	Coef.	t	St. Coef. (beta)	Coef.	t	St. Coef. (beta)
Interest in "Clinton Body Count"	0.130* (0.071)	1.835	0.215				0.086 (0.069)	1.246	0.143
Interest in Birtherism				0.300*** (0.107)	2.812	0.288	0.264** (0.110)	2.407	0.254
Share of Non-Whites	-0.200** (0.096)	-2.091	-0.318	-0.295*** (0.096)	-3.069	-0.469	-0.280*** (0.096)	-2.910	-0.445
Share of Non-Citizens	0.036 (0.652)	0.055	0.011	-0.136 (0.581)	-0.234	-0.041	0.137 (0.617)	0.221	0.042
Gini Index	-1.151 (0.837)	-1.374	-0.204	-1.271 (0.779)	-1.631	-0.225	-1.058 (0.792)	-1.336	-0.187
Share of White Poverty	-1.164 (0.742)	-1.568	-0.275	-1.110 (0.707)	-1.571	-0.262	-1.059 (0.703)	-1.507	-0.250
Share of Population with a High School Degree	-0.770 (0.776)	-0.993	-0.220	-1.197 (0.720)	-1.662	-0.341	-0.970 (0.738)	-1.314	-0.277
Median Household Income, log	-0.354** (0.137)	-2.587	-0.587	-0.337** (0.130)	-2.589	-0.560	-0.327** (0.130)	-2.524	-0.543
Percent of Metro Area Population	-0.138 (0.090)	-1.531	-0.245	-0.071 (0.086)	-0.823	-0.126	-0.092 (0.087)	-1.063	-0.165
Unemployment	0.308 (1.234)	0.250	0.030	-0.068 (1.173)	-0.058	-0.007	0.064 (1.170)	0.055	0.006
Adjusted R-Squared	0.5909			0.6296			0.6347		

Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Source: Author.

Conclusion

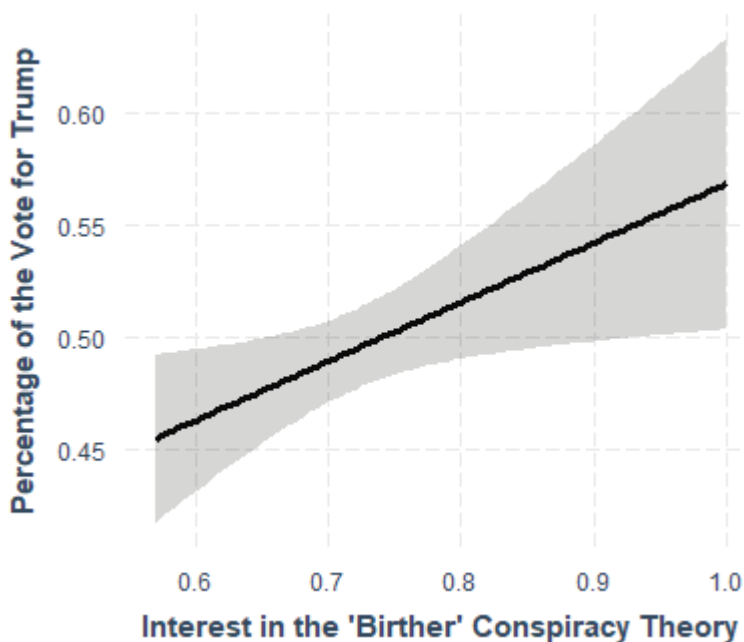
The rise of populist parties in Europe and North America, especially in the form of the populist radical right, is often accompanied in parallel by so-called post-truth politics. Indeed, a large number of studies have pointed to the robust connection that disinformation, conspiracy theories, and "fake news" have with the populist radical right (Jylha, Strimling, and Rydgren, 2019; Krasodonski-Jones, 2019; Silva, Vegetti, and Littvay, 2017). To the casual observer (and many researchers) it would seem as if conspiratorial ideation in the populist radical right was simply a tendency. The current research, instead, argues that the conspiracy

¹⁷ I would direct the reader to the standard coefficients for an approximation of the relative level of strength of each variable.

theories promoted by political actors such as populist radical right politicians, hold strategic or instrumental value as well. This study has as its main point of investigation the political relationship between the populist radical right and conspiracy theories as a means of communication with voters. Is it the case that these candidates simply have a tendency towards conspiratorial ideation coinciding with their political ideology or can this form of communication serve a strategic or instrumental purpose beyond this?

The results show that interest in the conspiracy theories that Trump referred to during the 2016 campaign are significantly and positively correlated with the percentage of the vote for him. Using Google Trends data representing interest in the “birther” and “Clinton Body Count” conspiracy theories in each of the 50 states, and when controlled for, a significant positive correlation was discovered between both of these variables and votes for Donald Trump. Furthermore, when included in the same model together, the variable denoting interest in birtherism retained its strong significant correlation, while the Clinton Body Count turned statistically insignificant, testifying to the strength of the birtherism variable. The findings from the previous tests, thus, provide support for the relationship between the conspiracy theories referred to by Donald Trump and votes for him in the 2016 presidential election. With this in mind, the results support the hypothesis. In those states in which interest in the specific conspiracy theories employed by Trump were prevalent, there tended to be a higher percentage of the vote for that candidate. This relationship was found to be significant when controlling for other socio-economic factors relevant to the rise of populist radical right politicians and parties. In Figure 3, the positive correlation between interest in birtherism and votes for Donald Trump is shown.

Figure 3: Marginal Effect of Interest in Birtherism on the Percentage of the Vote for Trump



Source: Author.

The tests performed in this study incorporate state-level data so as to provide a cross-sectional analysis of the effects of conspiratorial narratives in political campaigns while keeping the form of conspiracy theory constant. While these results are of significance, of course,

they can not be a full replacement for tests performed on data at the level of the individual. For more precise results, and to take into account other possible exogenous variables, tests involving data at a level lower than the state would be necessary to overcome the environmental fallacy implicit in state-level tests and to see if the same basic relationship holds.¹⁸ Without survey data, the current study is limited in explaining the exact mechanism which accounts for this relationship, which is something which should be investigated in future studies. Moreover, due to the specifications of the Google Trends data, it was impossible to acquire data for these two search terms on a regional or meso level, which reduced the number of observations in the dataset. Ultimately, this reduction in observations leaves open the risk for an overestimation of the effects associated with each of the variables included in the regression models, as is often the case with smaller samples. That being said, given that this study is exploratory in nature, I argue nonetheless that the results produced are still of importance in providing support for a relationship between conspiracy theory belief and votes for Trump, which justifies further investigation in subsequent studies. Further studies which test specifically for these causal mechanisms would seem to be promising directions for future research.

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¹⁸ In this way, it will also be possible to test for the level of distrust and dissatisfaction an individual has of societal institutions, governing bodies, or the mainstream media (Algan 2017; Jylha, Strimling, Rydgren 2019; Krasodomski-Jones 2019; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2015; Volkan 1985) which tend to be positively correlated with interest in populist politics and belief in conspiracy theories but could not be accounted for in the current study as relevant data for state-level tests could not be obtained.

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Appendixes:

Table A.1: Exploratory Data

	Mean	Min	Max	Standard Deviation
Trump Vote Percentage	0.4990	0.300	0.700	0.1008
Clinton Body Count	62.02	37	100	16.64
Obama’s Birth Certificate	72.02	57	100	9.67
Median Household Income	54963	35521	76165	9109.319
Metro Area Population	0.7452	0.31	1.0	0.1799
High School Degree	0.8691	0.799	0.918	2.876
Non-Citizen	0.0512	0.010	0.130	0.0303
White Poverty	0.0928	0.050	0.170	0.0238
Gini Index	0.4522	0.419	0.499	0.0178
Non-White	0.3094	0.060	0.810	0.1603
Unemployment Rate	0.0461	0.028	0.068	0.0098

Source: Author.

Table A.2: The search terms “Clinton Body Count” and “Obama Birth Certificate” were used to measure interest in these two conspiracy theories as they had the highest overall search volume and were associated with a number of similar search terms. Below, the reader can observe the related terms for both searches, demonstrating that the two chosen terms are associated with the content of the conspiracy theories, as well as the relative search volume of the other similar terms, demonstrating that the two chosen terms ranked higher in terms of search volume than the others.

Keyword 1: “Obama Birth Certificate”	Relative Search Volume	Keyword 2: “Clinton Body Count”	Relative Search Volume
Obama birth certificate	100	Clinton body count	100
Barack Obama	100	Hillary Clinton body count	100
Birth certificate Barack obama	99	Hillary Clinton	93
Obama certificate of birth	59	The Clinton body count	92
Obama birth certificate fake	39	Clinton body count list	40
Fake birth certificate	38	Bill Clinton body count	28

Source: Author.