When Democracies Disappoint:

A Cross-National Quantitative Study Investigating the Impact of Democratic Quality on Political Conspiracy Beliefs and the Role of External Political Efficacy in This Relationship

Author: Lauren Gerber
May 19th 2025

Master's Thesis

MSc in Social Scientific Data Analysis

Graduate School

Lund University

Supervisor: Robert Klemmensen

Word Count: 19,324

Abstract

The rise of the internet, social media, and populist leaders in recent years has turned attention towards conspiracy theories, making them appear as phenomena which are becoming increasingly widespread. Although conspiracy beliefs have not necessarily increased over time, their growing visibility has emphasized the negative consequences associated with belief in them, such as heightened political violence. These dangerous consequences necessitate a thorough understanding of their causes, so that more effective solutions can be created to address them. While past research has focused extensively on the individual-level causes of all conspiracy beliefs, asserting that they are responses to unmet psychological needs, structural-level causes, particularly the effect of democratic quality on topic-specific conspiracy beliefs, have been overlooked.

Therefore, drawing on an adapted version of Compensatory Control Theory (CCT) alongside political and democratic concepts, this study investigates how democratic quality impacts political conspiracy beliefs, and whether this effect operates through individual perceptions of external political efficacy. To answer these questions, this study uses multiple linear regression and a mediation analysis on individual-level survey data from six democracies, analyzing responses from the 2023 Comparative Conspiracy Research Survey (CCRS) in combination with democratic quality scores from the Varieties of Democracy (VDEM) dataset. The results of the analysis indicate that low democratic quality is one of the strongest factors associated with political conspiracy belief, and that this relationship can be partially explained by low feelings of external political efficacy. These findings suggest that the causes of conspiracy beliefs are topic-specific and arise from many levels. With this understanding, more targeted and effective solutions can be developed.

Keywords: Political Conspiracy Belief, Democratic Quality, External Political Efficacy, Political Psychology, Quantitative Analysis, Regression Analysis, Mediation Analysis

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Significance, Objectives, and Questions

Conspiracy theories, the assertion that a small group of powerful individuals are involved in an actual conspiracy, where these elites secretly create circumstances that benefit themselves and hurt the general public, are not a new phenomenon, they have existed across time and cultures (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p.33). For example, the Emperor Nero was accused of starting a catastrophic fire in Ancient Rome in 64 A.D. so that he could revamp Rome in his own image (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017). Additionally, the American Revolution in the late 1700s was partially motivated by the colonists' beliefs that the British Empire wanted to take away their freedoms and oppress them (Butter, 2020, p.650). Since the late 20th century, conspiracy theories may have begun spreading faster and reaching a broader range of people due to the invention of the internet and social media (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Belief in conspiracies, however, has most likely not increased over time (Uscinski et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, belief in conspiracy theories can have dangerous consequences for society, such as encouragement of political violence, further distrust of political institutions even when unwarranted, and anti-science attitudes which can impede social progress regarding climate change and vaccines (Hornsey et al., 2023a). Holding conspiracy beliefs which differ significantly from the social norm can also strengthen bonds between the individuals who believe them, making them more likely to be fact-resistant to avoid straying from the group (Klintman, 2022). Understanding the causes of conspiracy theories is therefore crucial due to these potentially dangerous consequences. Recognizing these factors can enable those with the capacity, such as policymakers and social movement leaders, to strive to minimize the conditions under which they arise.

Existing studies exploring the causes of belief in conspiracy theory have tended to focus on individual level predictors, such as political and psychological causes. Furthermore, these studies typically examine conspiracy theories within a single

country, most often Western ones (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). The United States has been the focus of a vast amount of this research, likely due to the perception that conspiracy beliefs are especially common there. For example, one study suggests that 50% of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver & Wood, 2014). Furthermore, the U.S. President Donald Trump has made conspiracies an integral part of his campaigns, and some studies suggest that a large amount of the American population believe that the 2020 election was stolen (Pilch et al., 2023; Peters, 2022). However, despite the notion that conspiracy beliefs are an "American" problem, belief in conspiracy theories are universal across time and cultures (Hornsey & Pearson, 2022; Van Prooijen & Van Vugt, 2018). For example, one study has shown that Europeans are just as likely as, or even more likely than, Americans to believe conspiracies (Drochon, 2018).

The universal nature of conspiracy theories suggests that their underlying causes may not be purely individual. If they were, conspiracy beliefs might not be as widespread. This indicates the likely influence of broader macro and national level factors, such as the quality of democracy, on conspiracy beliefs. Given that conspiracy theories are an attempt at understanding one's environment, especially when it feels uncontrollable or uncertain, it follows that these factors could meaningfully impact individuals' beliefs (Douglas et al., 2017; Hornsey & Pearson, 2022). While the role of national-level factors on individual conspiracy beliefs remains largely unexplored, some existing research suggests that low gross domestic product (GDP) and economic inequality at the national-level contribute to higher levels of conspiracy beliefs, as they decrease individuals' governmental trust (Hornsey et al., 2023b). These studies suggest that individuals' perception of illegitimate institutions are the key to understanding the relationship between structural factors and conspiracy belief. Despite this, research has under-examined the impact of democratic quality, understood as the functioning of electoral and liberal democratic institutions—such as the regularity of free and fair elections and a

commitment to equality and equity—on conspiracy beliefs (Dahl 1989; Lührmann et al., 2018; Hornsey et al., 2023a).

Rather than simply being an irrational way of thinking, political conspiracy beliefs, in particular, may emerge as a response to weak or insufficient democratic institutions, where they are used to address how individuals interpret their inability to influence their government and their general lack of political control (Stojanov et al., 2023; Hornsey & Pearson, 2022). In other words, individuals who live in countries with low democratic quality will likely view democratic institutions as insufficient (Easton, 1975). Because of these insufficient institutions, they may feel as though they lack external political efficacy, the ability to have influence on the political system (Craig, 1979, p. 229). As a response, individuals in these societies may be more likely to believe conspiracy theories about groups of national or international actors who unfairly and secretly influence local or world politics, as a way to explain their lack of control over their political environment (Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Landau et al., 2015; Stojanov et al., 2023).

Given the expectation that conspiracy beliefs arise from the recognition of democratic shortcomings, this study focuses exclusively on democracies. Additionally, this focus is further supported due to the scarcity of cross-national research, which has led to the predominant theoretical explanations for conspiracy beliefs to be based on studies conducted in Western democratic contexts (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Further, limiting the analysis to democracies allows us to acknowledge that not all democracies are of similar quality and to explore how even slight variations can impact conspiracy beliefs.

Additionally, by treating democratic quality, rather than specific countries, as the primary variable of interest, this research seeks to more precisely analyze institutional effects by disentangling them from economic and other country-level variables, such as education, that could influence political conspiracy beliefs. Nevertheless, this research will still focus on interesting cases—The United States,

Brazil, Germany, Canada, Australia, and South Africa are all democracies with diverse backgrounds and varying levels of democratic quality. This delimitation and the contextual variety of the sample will be further elaborated on in the literature review and methodology sections of this thesis.

This thesis thus attempts to address several important literature gaps. The first is the impact of democratic quality, a structural, macro-level factor, on political conspiracy beliefs. The second is exploring democratic quality's impact on political conspiracy beliefs, rather than all conspiracy beliefs. Focusing only on political conspiracy beliefs is a necessary theoretical delimitation that is overlooked in existing research (Stojanov et al., 2023). The third is to theoretically establish how democratic quality, a macro-level factor, influences feelings of external political efficacy, an individual-level factor that can help explain the underlying mechanisms linking democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2017). Addressing how structural factors can "provide the fertile ground" for individuals' beliefs in conspiracy theories to grow can highlight the fact that conspiracy beliefs are complex phenomena, and that the causes of them likely operate from many levels (Hornsey et al., 2023a, p.92).

Given these gaps, this thesis aims to quantitatively investigate the following questions using a cross-national survey that examines a broad range of individual-level predictors of conspiracy beliefs, as well as data on democratic quality at the national level:

RQ1: Do democracies with lower democratic quality have higher levels of political conspiracy beliefs?

If the relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs is still meaningful when taking into account other explanations, a second research question will be investigated.

RQ2: Do individual feelings of low external political efficacy mediate the observed effect of low democratic quality on political conspiracy beliefs?

While the level of democratic quality in different countries can influence individuals' thoughts and feelings, individual factors most likely ultimately determine whether one believes in conspiracies (Hornsey et al., 2023a). The second research question will seek to understand if the relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs can be partially or fully explained by insufficient feelings of external political efficacy. Loss of personal control, which is theorized as an individual-level factor influencing conspiracy belief, is represented in this context by a lack of external political efficacy, which can be understood as a lack of control in the political realm (Douglas et al., 2017; Craig, 1979).

1.2 Overview of the Thesis

The subsequent sections of the thesis are structured as follows: A review of the vast and interdisciplinary literature investigating the causes of conspiracy beliefs is conducted in the second section. This review highlights the literature gaps and the motivation for the present study. In the third section concepts are defined, and the theoretical framework which explains how democratic quality influences individual feelings of external political efficacy, and how these feelings can lead to political conspiracy beliefs is presented. Additionally, the specific hypotheses are provided. The fourth section details the methodological approach. The fifth section is the analysis/results section, which describes the key variables, presents a preliminary correlation analysis, and details the results of the statistical analysis and hypotheses. The sixth section, the discussion section, explores future avenues for research and interprets the results, theoretical and methodological implications, and limitations of

the current research. Finally, the seventh and last section offers concluding thoughts and reflections.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review discusses how research on the causes of conspiracy belief is a relatively new field, and how early understandings continue to affect some current scholarship. It introduces newer psychological frameworks that view conspiracy beliefs as attempts to fulfill epistemic, existential, and social needs, noting that much political science research focuses on the social dimension. It also explains how existential and epistemic needs are linked, and why they serve as better explanations than social needs. This review highlights that, although much research has been conducted at the individual level, there is a lack of theoretical work investigating how structural factors influence the individual development of conspiracy beliefs. Additionally, while some descriptive research addresses macro-level influences, the specific role of democratic quality remains underexplored. Finally, the rationale for the chosen individual level factor, external political efficacy, and for focusing exclusively on democracies rather than autocracies, is provided.

2.1 Early Conceptualizations of Conspiracy Theories and Beliefs

While conspiracy theories have always existed, most scholarly research on the topic began in the 1930s and 1940s as an attempt to make sense of the World Wars and the simultaneous rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe such as the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and fascist Italy (Thalmann, 2014, p.6). According to Thalmann (2014) and Butter & Knight (2018), the earliest conceptualizations of conspiracy belief developed by political psychologists Harold Lasswell and Theodor Adorno argued that the "authoritarian" and "agitator" are the two personality types most predisposed to engaging in "irrational" conspiracy theorizing due to deep-rooted psychological issues such as loneliness and sexual problems. Philosopher of science Karl Popper

provided another early perspective, arguing that conspiracy theories are an unscientific and simplistic way to understand society. Popper asserted that conspiracy theories are unscientific because they attribute all the misfortunes of human history to a group of bad actors, violating one of the main principles of science that theories should be able to be disproved.

In line with these perspectives, many later scholars began viewing conspiracies as unscientific expressions of "political extremists" that threatened democratic values. The focus on political extremism within these conceptualizations was largely a response to the American Red Scare and far-right movements in the 1950s and 1960s that championed conspiracy theories (Thalmann, pp.6-11; Butter & Knight, p.34). Hofstadter (1965), who arguably developed the most influential conceptualization of conspiracy belief, drew on both early perspectives and those from the 1950s and 60s. He argued that "paranoid" beliefs, which are held by a minority, are a response to discomfort with social change and that they impede societal progress. He also claimed that these beliefs are unscientific and irrational because they serve as resources to reassure the people who believe them by providing an alternative to a random, uncontrollable world. Finally, he pathologized believers by arguing that conspiracy beliefs allow those who believe them to attribute their own inappropriate desires to the enemy (pp.32-29).

These early conceptualizations of conspiracy theories, that reduced the causes of belief as simply irrational and unscientific, limited research interest until the 1990s, when scholars recognized that conspiracy belief might be more widespread than initially thought (Butter & Knight, 2018, p.37). The increase in conspiracy belief was partially because, in the United States, the public was uncovering more instances of ***actual*** government conspiracies, for example, the Iran-Contra affair in the 1980s. This scandal involved U.S. president Ronald Reagan's administration illegally selling weapons to Iran in exchange for the release of U.S. hostages, and using the proceeds to fund an anti-communist rebel group in Nicaragua. Other uncovered conspiracies

included the Tuskegee syphilis experiment in the 1970s, where the government denied life-saving treatment to African American men for experimental purposes, and the revelation that the reason behind the U.S. invasion of Iraq in the early 2000s was a lie (Olmsted, 2009).

Much conspiracy belief research since the 1990s has been within the field of psychology, and a significant portion of this research still aligns with early conceptualizations by assuming that conspiracy belief is abnormal (Butter & Knight, 2018, p.37). Even though these studies recognize that conspiracy belief may be widespread, Hofstadter (1965) himself theorized that even minority beliefs could come into focus during periods of dramatic social change (p.39). Many psychological studies, which explore the relationship between conspiracy belief and clinical, cognitive, and personality factors, align with Hofstadter's conceptualization by conceiving of them as pathological and illogical. Research exploring clinical factors has associated conspiracy beliefs with paranoia and psychosis. Personality research has also associated traits such as narcissism, machiavellianism, and psychopathy, with conspiracy belief. Cognitive research has also associated conspiracy belief with many fallacies, or thinking "based on faulty logic", such as confirmation biases. Cognitive analyses have further linked low analytical thinking, misunderstanding randomness, and over attributing patterns and intent to conspiracy belief (Hornsey et al., 2023a, pp.86-88).

Importantly, Wood et al. (2012) found that believing in two separate conspiracies that contradict each other is common. This influential finding led to extensive cognitive research which shows that one of the "most consistent [psychological] findings" is that initial belief in a conspiracy theory is one of the strongest predictors of believing in others, regardless of the content (De Fortuna & De Luca Picione, 2024, pp.8-9). However, the same study shows that the view that the authorities were "engaged in a cover up" explains belief in contradicting conspiracies (Wood et al., 2012, p. 767). In other words, conspiracy beliefs are "only

related to each other to the extent that they cohere with a higher-order belief system", such as a skeptical, competitive, or order-driven worldview (Douglas et al., 2019, p.7).

2.2 Needs-based Perspectives

A broader line of psychological research suggests that conspiracy beliefs are not irrational, but a solution to fulfill unmet psychological needs. From this perspective, the extent to which belief in different conspiracy theories satisfies the same need connects them (Douglas et al., 2019). Douglas et al. (2017) identify three different types of needs that people believe conspiracy belief can fill— epistemic, existential, and social. Social needs are those which aim to maintain "a positive image of the self and the in-group" (p.540). A significant portion of political science research investigates the causes of conspiracy belief at the group level, using social needs as a basis. For example, Miller et al. (2016) found that one's own ideological beliefs can be affirmed by believing in conspiracies which degrade others and "attribute nefarious intent" to the opposite political party (p.826). Additionally, some political science research finds that individuals on both sides of the extreme ends of the political spectrum are most inclined to believe in conspiracies (Douglas et al., 2019). Unfulfilled social needs can explain this finding, as individuals who identify more with their group have more of their self-image to be affected based on its standing.

Research on social needs claims that when one's social group is insecure, conspiracy beliefs which blame an outgroup are appealing. Aligning with this notion, researchers have found that being a part of an ethnic minority group or having weak social networks are associated with higher conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 10). Further, some studies suggest that conspiracy belief is higher among those whose ideological position is not currently represented in power, as a way to feel more secure in their own beliefs (Miller at al., 2016; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). While much conspiracy research has been conducted in the United States, Drochon (2018) found

that citizens of European countries believe in conspiracy theories at rates similar to, or higher than those in the United States. Drochon also finds that many Europeans believe in conspiracies about immigrants, which are generally considered as ideologically right-wing beliefs, even when right-wing governments are in power. This evidence suggests that unmet epistemic and existential needs may play a greater role in explaining conspiracy beliefs than social needs.

People may also find conspiracy beliefs attractive when they have unmet epistemic needs, such as when they lack knowledge about or explanations of circumstances. Individuals may turn to conspiracy beliefs to fulfill this need, reduce uncertainty, and make sense of things when information about events is scarce, contradictory, or unfair/dissatisfying (Douglas et al., 2017, pp. 538-539). Having high epistemic needs, or a reduced tolerance for complicated answers, can help explain why conspiratorial beliefs are associated with religious and paranormal beliefs (Douglas & Sutton, 2023, p.274). In addition to unfulfilled epistemic needs, conspiracy belief can also stem from unmet existential needs, when individuals feel unsafe in or out of control of situations. Research confirms that people who feel anxious, lack control over their socio-political and economic environments, and feel powerless tend to turn to conspiracy theories to attempt to regain control (Douglas et al., 2017, p 539).

As examples of conspiracy beliefs being used to restore a sense of control over one's environment, Swami et al. (2009) found that people who are cynical towards or feel the political system to be undemocratic have higher conspiracy beliefs (p.759). Similarly, research has found that unemployed and unmarried individuals, groups that may feel they lack power over their situations, have higher conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2019, p.10). While conspiracy belief as a response to unmet epistemic and existential needs can be examined separately, it is important to emphasize that epistemic and existential needs are very closely intertwined. Dominant perspectives researching lack of control assert that the drive to fulfill existential needs activates

sense-making practices aimed at satisfying epistemic needs (Landau et al., 2015). Additionally, it's worth noting that while these heightened needs can help explain conspiracy belief, there is scarce evidence that believing in conspiracies actually fulfills these needs (Douglas et al., 2017).

2.3 A Gap: Exploring How Insufficient Institutions Can Affect Individual Psychological Needs

Moving beyond individual-level causes, scholars have only recently begun exploring how macro-level factors, which differ cross-nationally, affect conspiracy belief. There is a line of research which shows that cultures with higher masculine, collectivist, and power-distance values have higher conspiracy beliefs. This research suggests that this is due to masculine cultures encouraging competition and intergroup conflict, collectivist cultures being evolutionarily primed to detect threats to the group, and cultures with high power-distance values needing to justify why they view hierarchy as desirable (Adam-Troian et al., 2020; Van Prooijen & Song, 2020). When exploring how cross-national differences affect conspiracy belief, however, it is more straightforward to focus on observable national characteristics, such as the quality of democracy, that allow countries to be the unit of analysis, rather than cultural values, which are derived from the sum of individuals (Imhoff, 2022). Instead of being the result of cultural values, conspiracy belief may, in fact, be a rational psychological response to insufficient government (Hornsey & Pearson, 2022).

Some descriptive research aligns with this view, showing that countries with high corruption and low democratic quality have higher levels of conspiracy beliefs (Cordonier et al., 2021; Hornsey & Pearson, 2022; Walter & Drochon, 2020). Other research suggests that governments that have lower GDPs or are involved in scandals have increased conspiracy beliefs due to these factors decreasing government trust (Hornsey et al., 2023b; Einstein & Glick, 2013). These latter studies, however, either do not test political trust as a variable in the analysis or clearly explain how it

theoretically operates. Instead, there is a need to explore how insufficient institutions influence individual psychological needs, which are more directly linked to the formation of conspiracy belief. This approach can offer a more robust theoretical understanding of how structural factors influence conspiracy belief (Hornsey et al., 2023a).

As previous research indicates, a lack of control in the political realm and feeling as though the system is undemocratic are both existential needs which have been associated with conspiracy belief (Douglas et al., 2017, p 539; Swami et al., 2009, p.759). Additionally, only conspiracy beliefs which satisfy the same needs are connected (Douglas et al., 2019). This motivates the present study to examine whether democracies with lower democratic quality have higher levels of political conspiracy beliefs, in particular. Furthermore, it will explore how individual-level feelings of low external political efficacy, which can be understood as lacking control in the political realm, affect this relationship.

This research will focus exclusively on democracies, rather than examining both democracies and autocracies, due to the fact that most of the research regarding conspiracy belief has been conducted in democratic countries. Thus, the same theoretical assumptions may not hold in autocracies, where leaders often use conspiracies about opponents to justify and maintain their consolidation of power. This suggests that, in autocracies, belief in conspiracies may arise less from unmet needs and more from deliberate manipulation (Giry & Gürpinar, 2020, p.318). Additionally, individuals in authoritarian nations may be less likely to express suspicions about the government due to fear of repercussions (Hornsey et al., 2023a, p.91). Therefore, the present study is limited to democracies, where individuals can freely express their beliefs. In these contexts, political conspiracy theories may emerge as a response to perceived threats against democratic stability, rather than as a tool of state propaganda.

III. THEORY

The theoretical section explores how lower democratic quality can reduce citizens' external political efficacy and ultimately increase political conspiracy beliefs. It defines democratic quality, external political efficacy, and distinguishes between conspiracy theories, conspiracy beliefs, and real conspiracies. Drawing on Compensatory Control Theory, it argues that low feelings of external political efficacy may lead to political conspiracy beliefs, specifically, in order to regain a sense of political control. A political conspiracy belief is subsequently defined by integrating elements of previous definitions and hypotheses are formulated. Finally, the section concludes by reiterating the relationship between concepts and clarifying how political conspiracy beliefs and external political efficacy differ from populism, rational political responses, and political trust.

3.1 Defining and Evaluating Democratic Quality

Dahl (1989) states that democracy, by definition, literally means a rule by the people. By comparison, an oligarchy is a rule by a few, and an autocracy a rule by one (p.106). Democracy is the best system to maximize individual freedom and interests, given the principles that "no person is intrinsically superior to another" and "everyone should be assumed to be the best judge of his or her own good" (p.85, 100, 88). Due to its abstract definition, Dahl defines democracies by the governing processes which differentiate them from autocracies or oligarchies (p.106). More specifically, distinct criteria define a perfect democratic process. The first two criteria are "effective participation" and "voting equality at the decisive stage", meaning all citizens should have equal opportunity to voice their concerns and vote at the final/deciding stage. The next principle is the one of "enlightened understanding", which sets forth that all citizens should have equal opportunity to educate themselves and debate issues at hand. Finally, all citizens must have "control of the agenda", meaning control over the matters that will later be democratically decided on (pp.109-114).

A theoretically perfect democratic process, however, does not and may never exist (p.117). Instead, Dahl argues that some countries, called "polyarchies", have reached "an important threshold of democracy" (p.117). All polyarchies ensure the rights to "freedom of expression", to access "alternative information", to join and form organizations, and for almost all adults "to run for office" and vote. Additionally, control is entrusted only to "elected officials" as a result of regular "free and fair elections" (p.221). Even if these requirements are fulfilled, the reality is that the democratic ideals of equal participation and access to education on important issues may not exist, and a democratic majority may infringe on minority rights (p.176). Thus, Dahl additionally suggests designing "voting, election, or legislative procedures" that safeguard minority rights and opportunity. Another way countries can protect non-dominant groups is to utilize courts that possess the authority to challenge laws and have the final say, such as the Supreme Court in the United States. Dahl cautions, however, that these courts should not acquire more power than the people and undermine democratic accountability (pp.185-191).

Dahl's definition of polyarchy allows us to draw a better line between autocracies and democracies and acknowledge that not all democracies are of equal quality. While a minimalist definition may define democracy as simply holding "de jure [by law] multiparty elections", elections are not always "de facto [in practice]" free, open, and fair. Thus, to be considered a democracy, a society should de-facto meet Dahl's conditions (Lührmann et al., 2018, pp.62-63). Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that some, but not all, democracies have processes which ensure no one takes power from the people and safeguard minority rights. As a result, a "liberal democracy", which provides checks and balances, a strong rule of law, and "protection of individual liberties…and equality before" the law, is different from an "electoral democracy", which merely fulfills polyarchy requirements (Lührmann et al., 2018, p.63). Thus, a country's ***quality of democracy*** will be defined as the extent to which they meet the previously outlined electoral/polyarchy requirements and

liberal democratic principles. For example, a democracy that fulfills all of Dahl's polyarchy conditions and has a strong rule of law will be considered of higher quality than one which only meets polyarchy conditions.

3.2 Definitions Regarding Conspiracies

Before continuing, it is important to define and differentiate exactly what a conspiracy belief is. This research will conceptualize ***conspiracy theories*** as "an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good." Following from this definition, a "***conspiracy belief***" is a belief "in a specific conspiracy theory" (Uscinski, 2018, p. 236). This definition of a conspiracy theory, unlike older conceptualizations, allows us to acknowledge that ***conspiracies,*** secret "arrangements between two or more actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions" do in fact sometimes exist (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p.33). While real conspiracies involve illegal behavior, conspiracy theories do not inherently assert this. However, given that actual conspiracies do occur in reality, the "proper authorities" opinion, such as scientists and legal courts, determine the line between a conspiracy theory and an actual conspiracy. For example, Watergate was a conspiracy theory until the courts ruled it an actual conspiracy (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p.33).

This definition of a conspiracy theory further allows us to distinguish between conspiracy theories, paranoia, and misinformation. Misinformation does not attribute bad intent to specific actors, and individuals who are paranoid largely see ***themselves*** as the intended target while conspiracies see society/"the common good" (Hornsey et al., 2023a, pp.86, 88). More precisely, individuals who are paranoid are suspicious of people in general, while conspiracy believers are only suspicious of people they perceive as powerful (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018, p.922). Finally, as the chosen

definition centers conspiracy beliefs around perceived power and powerlessness, it refrains from making a value judgement about conspiracy beliefs. In other words, individuals might use conspiracy beliefs as a useful dissent tool against increasingly corrupt governments, but they might also use them to scapegoat powerless groups perceived to have more power than they actually do (Uscinski, 2018, p.235).

3.3 Low Democratic Quality, Lack of External Political Efficacy, and Political Conspiracy Beliefs

To understand how democratic quality affects conspiracy beliefs, it is helpful to understand how a country's democratic quality can change over time and how lower democratic quality affects citizens' views of political institutions. Based on Dahl's requirements for polyarchies, it can be said that democracies consist of institutions that allow "people to formulate and signify preferences… [which are then] weighed by their elected representatives" (Bermeo, 2016, p.5). It is important to note, however, that the political landscape of democratic countries is constantly evolving. This means that democracies' statuses can shift between electoral and liberal democracies, or even towards autocracies over time. These shifts can be caused by freely elected leaders dismantling institutions that challenge their power with or without support from a majority (Bermeo, 2016, p.11). Therefore, citizens of democracies with lower democratic quality— whether their countries once, and no longer, possessed liberal tendencies, are sliding towards autocracy status, or have always merely fulfilled electoral requirements—may begin to feel less supportive of their countries institutions, democratic performance, or their country as a whole (Norris, 2011, p.23).

Easton (1975) defines these attributes as dimensions of "diffuse support", which he describes as "evaluations of what an object [such as a country or government] is or represents…not of what it does" (p.444). Diffuse support differs from "specific support" which is defined as satisfaction with the actions of elected

representatives (p.437). While specific support fluctuates frequently, citizens tend to decrease diffuse support, and decide that the "object" as a whole is unworthy of support, only after evaluating "[the object's] outputs and…performance over a long period of time" (p. 446). Since individuals' levels of support are difficult to observe, Easton argues that those with low levels of diffuse support express their discontent by viewing "political objects" as illegitimate (p. 447). In other words, citizens who perceive democratic performance as insufficient will feel as though the institutions which are supposed to ensure an equitable input among the people are not working. As a result, they will feel like they have low levels of ***external political efficacy***, the ability to influence their government through their actions (Craig, 1979, p. 229).

External political efficacy, which can also be understood as "responsiveness", is separate from internal political efficacy, which regards the extent an individual feels "competent" enough to access institutions (Craig, 1979, p. 229). Individuals with low external political efficacy do not necessarily view political elites as criminals, but rather believe that they are unresponsive and that there is a large perceived distance between themselves and the elites. Those who seek higher external political efficacy do not inherently believe that the people should be "ultimately sovereign", like populists, but that political elites should listen to and respond to their concerns (Geurkink et al., 2019, pp.251-252). Additionally— much like specific support—lack of political trust is distinct from lack of external political efficacy, as the former only concerns evaluations and the effectiveness of, rather than individuals' influence on, the government (Craig, 1979, p. 229). For example, individuals can have low levels of external political efficacy, but feel that the elites in charge are creating good policies. An example is that U.S. citizens generally trust the Federal Reserve, even though it is a political institution that operates independently and lacks direct accountability to the public (Geurkink et al., 2019, pp.251-252).

As feelings of low external political efficacy rise, Compensatory Control Theory (CCT) helps explain how these feelings can lead to an increase in political

conspiracy beliefs. This theory combines the perspectives that conspiracy beliefs are a result of unmet existential and epistemic needs, stating that individuals will seek explanations that restore order to their situations if their need to feel personal control over the world is insufficient. If individuals feel they lack personal control, they will restore order by believing that somebody else is in control— relying on "external sources" such as God or the government to ease their feelings of ambiguity. Conspiracy belief, which attributes the state of events to powerful actors, can serve as one of these external sources (Landau et al., 2015). However, CCT states that "benevolent" external sources are usually preferred because external sources should be "culturally accessible and socially acceptable" (Kay & Sullivan, 2013, p.188, 193). Additionally, because individuals value autonomy, external sources which provide an optimal level of order are sought out more than those which provide too much (Kay & Sullivan, 2013, p.202).

In order to conceptualize conspiracy belief as an external source to restore order, these conditions suggest that research should not treat conspiracy belief as a monolithic worldview, a notion which was expanded on in the literature review. A conspiratorial worldview would provide too much order to individuals lacking control. In other words, as conspiracy beliefs are inherently about power and politics, it is necessary to conceptualize a lack of control in political, rather than personal, terms (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018, p.911).

This notion implies that not all conspiracy beliefs address general personal control needs. Instead, in the political realm, only political conspiracy theories, those positing that groups of national or international actors unfairly and secretly influence local or world politics without proper input from the people, are used to restore a sense of political control[1]. Additionally, to account for the conditions that external

[1] Due to a lack of research that treats different categories of conspiracy theories as distinct, this is my own definition developed by combining the core definitional aspects of external political efficacy and conspiracy theory beliefs with the measures included in the available dataset. This definition will be used throughout the rest of the thesis (Stojanov et al., 2023; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Craig, 1979; Geurkink et al., 2019; Bordeleau et al., 2023b).

sources should be socially acceptable and benevolent, Stojanov et al. (2023) theorize that conspiracy belief can only act as an external source when "other systems are unavailable or frustrated". In line with this hypothesis, they found that individuals with an "incompetent government" believed conspiracy theories more than those who did not (p. 6348). Consequently, when individuals see democratic or governmental institutions as insufficient, belief in political conspiracy theories should increase as a mechanism to explain individuals' lack of external political efficacy/control. Thus, the following hypotheses are generated:

Hypothesis One: Democracies with lower democratic quality will have higher levels of political conspiracy beliefs.

Hypothesis Two: Individual feelings of low external political efficacy will mediate the observed effect of democratic quality on political conspiracy beliefs.

In summary, democracies consist of electoral and liberal institutions which safeguard citizens from harm and allow equal participation in governmental matters. If a country has lower democratic quality, citizens may perceive these institutions as inadequate and feel that they can not effectively influence political outcomes. To restore their sense of political control, they may turn to political conspiracy theories, which provide a simplified explanation for their lack of representation.

To illustrate how political conspiracy beliefs and external political efficacy are distinct from other concepts, imagine a citizen who is passionate about environmental issues and lives in a democracy where the courts increasingly side with the executive. This individual does not feel like their representatives can advocate for their interests, as the executive, which values corporate over environmental issues, is slowly strengthening. Rather than demanding judicial reform, this individual may begin to believe that fossil fuel companies are secretly working with the government to

suppress environmental legislation. They may still trust the economy, choosing not to acknowledge that the government views environmental regulation as a threat to short term economic performance. Crucially, unlike populists, this individual does not believe that the people should rule, but wishes their representatives could make a difference (Geurkink et al., 2019, pp.251-252).

IV. METHODOLOGY

The thesis's research questions will be examined quantitatively using a multi-step approach to multiple linear regression. This approach ensures that the first research question is sufficiently answered before considering the second. In addition to the analytical strategy, the methodological section discusses the chosen datasets and their data collection processes, noting when additional considerations are necessary. Additionally, it addresses the specific variables used to operationalize theoretical concepts and account for competing explanations, and the steps taken to prepare the data for analysis. The section concludes with a discussion of the countries included in the sample, explaining how their respective backgrounds provide an interesting variation for the analysis. The code used to prepare the data for analysis is available for reproduction at:
https://github.com/laurlaur3917/Master-Thesis-2025-Lauren-Gerber.

4.1. Dataset Selections, Collection Methods, and Considerations

This research chooses the "Comparative Conspiracy Research Survey (CCRS)" to measure conspiracy belief across countries, as it seems to be the only dataset available that measures various individual-level predictors at a diverse, not exclusively Western, country level (Bordeleau et al., 2023a, 2023b). Additionally, many past datasets have used very specific conspiracy theories, such as those surrounding 9/11 or about the death of Princess Diana, to measure cross-national belief in conspiracies. This assumes that individuals in different countries will believe

in the same conspiracy theories, rather than acknowledging that citizens of non-Western countries may not even be aware of the most popular Western conspiracy theories (Hornsey & Pearson, 2022, p.1).

The present dataset addresses this issue by measuring conspiracy beliefs through agreement with generic, rather than specific, statements (Bordeleau et al., 2023a). Finally, many other cross-national datasets measuring conspiracy belief include group-level variables, such as the degree to which a country has collectivist or masculine values, that researchers have used to extrapolate arguments to both the national and individual level. This can lead to “ecological fallacies”, the assumption that all individuals in collectivist countries have collectivist values, for example (Hornsey & Pearson, p.2). The chosen dataset overcomes this issue by focusing on individual responses, allowing researchers to more easily make conclusions about the broader population (Bordeleau et al., 2023a).

This research additionally uses the World Bank’s (2023) World Development Indicators and Coppedge et al.'s (2025a) Varieties of Democracy datasets to obtain the sample’s GDP and democratic indicators. The World Bank’s dataset is chosen over the IMF’s because of the organization's focus on long-term social development, which aligns more closely with this study’s objectives, compared to the IMF’s focus on short-term economic policy advice (International Monetary Fund, 2022). Additionally, the Varieties of Democracy dataset is chosen because, in addition to covering a vast amount of countries, it provides indicators which most closely align with theoretical understandings of democracy (Varieties of Democracy, n.d.).

The CCRS utilized the research firm Cint to recruit and reward participants to the study through a non-probability panel. Cint administered the online survey in “Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Lebanon, Morocco, South Africa, and the USA”. They translated the survey into “French, German, Portuguese, and Arabic” so that participants in the respective countries could easily understand and answer the questions (Bordeleau et al., 2023a, pp.3-5). Additionally, informed consent was

collected from all participants to collect sensitive personal data, such as political opinions and religious beliefs. However, no identifiable personal data was collected (Bordeleau et al., 2023c). Researchers collected the data from late 2022 until early 2023 and gathered responses from 8,101 respondents (Bordeleau et al., 2023a, pp.4-5). Since this research focuses only on democracies, however, this analysis drops Lebanon and Morocco from the dataset leaving 6098 respondents (Bordeleau et al., 2023b; see Tables 1, 2).

Although Cint only recruited participants over 18 years of age, which slightly increased the average age of the sample compared to the overall population, they included quotas for age and gender to "ensure the samples… [were] representative of the population". Since no quotas were introduced for other sociodemographic variables— whose distributions are shown for both the full sample and by country in Tables 1 and 2—the discussion section will further expand on the limitations of the CCRS data (Bordeleau et al., 2023a, pp. 4-5).

Characteristic	Australia N = 1,026[1]	Brazil N = 1,024[1]	Canada N = 999[1]	Germany N = 1,027[1]	South Africa N = 1,016[1]	United States N = 1,006[1]
Education						
None	0%	0.2%	0.6%	0.4%	0.1%	4.6%
Elementary	25%	2.5%	3.2%	7.0%	0%	28%
Secondary	28%	3.5%	52%	41%	36%	33%
University	29%	77%	41%	41%	20%	19%
Postgrad	18%	17%	3.0%	10%	44%	15%
SES						
Lower-Class	24%	26%	24%	28%	21%	31%
Middle-Class	67%	67%	72%	69%	75%	61%
Upper-Class	8.6%	6.8%	3.7%	3.0%	4.2%	7.7%
Employment						
Full-Time	50%	73%	53%	48%	65%	46%
Part-Time	16%	6.1%	9.7%	19%	10%	12%
Retired	18%	7.3%	22%	20%	5.8%	18%
Unemployed	6.5%	7.1%	6.2%	3.4%	10%	11%
Student	1.6%	3.3%	2.4%	2.5%	7.2%	2.9%
Other	8.7%	3.5%	6.7%	6.4%	1.8%	10%
Age	44	39	47	47	37	44
Gender						
Female	49%	51%	51%	52%	49%	56%
Male	51%	49%	49%	48%	51%	44%

Table 1. *Distribution of Sociodemographic Variables by Country*

Characteristic	N = 6,098[1]
Education	
None	1.0%
Elementary	11%
Secondary	33%
University	37%
Postgrad	18%
SES	
Lower-Class	26%
Middle-Class	69%
Upper-Class	5.7%
Employment	
Full-Time	56%
Part-Time	12%
Retired	15%
Unemployed	7.3%
Student	3.3%
Other	6.3%
Age	43
Gender	
Female	51%
Male	49%

[1] %; Mean

Table 2. *Distribution of Sociodemographic Variables For the Entire Sample*

Due to the initiatives to ensure both data validity and reliability during and after collection, the VDEM and World Bank datasets can be used without the need for additional considerations. VDEM combines directly observable variables, which can be gathered from countries' official data, with scholarly experts' coding of unobservable variables, such as the fairness of an election, to create democratic indices for every country and year. To ensure reliability, VDEM uses a minimum of five experts for each country-year variable and a model to determine how much each expert's opinion should contribute to the final estimate. The model calculates how much weight to give each expert's opinion by comparing the consistency of their

answers and interpretations of the response scale to those of other experts. After these calculations, the model gives both an estimate for the democratic indicator, and a range of values which the actual estimate could fall into. This range is larger when there is more variability and disagreement among experts (Coppedge et al., 2025b). The World Bank, on the other hand, ensures reliability by gathering its data from countries' official sources and implementing measures to evaluate and improve the data quality from these sources (World Bank, n.d.).

4.2 Analytical Strategy

This research will use multiple linear regression and a mediation analysis to test whether individuals living in democracies with lower democratic quality have higher political conspiracy beliefs, and if so, to explore whether low feelings of external political efficacy drive this relationship. More specifically, to answer the research questions, this study will follow Aneshensel's (2013) elaboration model, which provides a framework for conducting quantitative research in a theoretically grounded way.

Thus, the study's independent variable is the quality of democracy, the dependent variable is the level of belief in political conspiracy theories, and the mediating variable is feelings of external political efficacy. To model this relationship, the following general equation for a multiple linear regression is used:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{i1} + \beta_2 X_{i2} + \cdots + \beta_{p-1} X_{i(p-1)} + \epsilon_i \, , \; i = 1,2,\ldots,n$$

In this equation, Y_i is the dependent variable for the i-th observation in the dataset and β_0 , the intercept, is the predicted value of the model when all predictor variables ($X_{i1} \cdots X_{i(p-1)}$) are set to zero. Since the intercept is included in the model, the last predictor term is set to p-1. Further, the regression coefficients ($\beta_1 \cdots \beta_{p-1}$) represent how much the dependent variable is predicted to change with a one-unit change in the

corresponding independent variable, holding all other variables constant. Finally, ϵ_i is the error of the model's prediction for the *i*-th observation , the difference between the actual value of the dependent variable and the predicted value from the model (Dalpiaz, 2021).

Before even addressing the research questions, the elaboration model recommends beginning with a simple bivariate regression between the independent and dependent variables to establish whether a significant relationship beyond chance exists between the two. If this condition is met, the analysis will continue with an "exclusionary" approach to answer the first research question and test ***Hypothesis One.*** The exclusionary strategy tests whether a significant relationship between the independent and dependent variables is present outside of alternative explanations by using control variables to test for spuriousness and redundancy. Spuriousness is when the relationship between the independent and dependent variables can be explained by a joint association with a third, "confounding", variable. Similarly, redundancy is when the relationship can be explained by competing theoretical explanations. In other words, if the relationship disappears when these variables are added to the model, the proposed explanation can be fully accounted for by its association with other factors (Aneshensel, 2013, pp. 408-409).

If a relationship between the independent and dependent variables is still present after testing for spuriousness and redundancy, the analysis will continue with an "inclusionary" approach to examine the second research question and test ***Hypothesis Two***. The inclusionary approach further scrutinizes the theory in question by testing whether the relationship between the independent and dependent variables operates through the hypothesized mediating/"intervening" variable. With this approach, the "validity of the theory…[is reinforced if the relationship between the independent and dependent variables] is substantially reduced or eliminated" (Aneshensel, 2013, p. 409).

To carry out the inclusionary strategy, the analysis will follow Baron & Kenny's (1986) steps to formally conduct a mediation analysis. While continuing to control for other explanations, the steps suggest testing the relationships between the independent and dependent variables, the independent and mediating variables, and all of them together. These steps ensure that the mediating variable is significantly associated with the independent variable, and allow for an examination of how the main relationship changes with the inclusion of the mediating variable. Finally, the bootstrapping approach is used to test the significance of the indirect/mediation effect. This approach simulates the indirect effect across a large number of samples and constructs a confidence interval of where the actual size of the effect is likely to fall. The bootstrapping approach is preferred to other approaches because it does not assume that the mediation effect is normally distributed and functions well regardless of sample size (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

4.3 Operationalization of Variables

4.3.1 Independent Variable: Democratic Quality

As elaborated on in theory, de facto polyarchy requirements form the basis of all democracies, no matter whether the democracy takes extra measures to ensure equality and protect against a tyrannical majority. However, democracies which do take these measures can be considered as higher quality. Thus, this research will use VDEM's ***liberal democracy index***, which takes into account both polyarchy and liberal components in a way aligned with theory, to measure ***democratic quality,*** the main independent variable. A particular country's polyarchy score, which VDEM calls the "electoral democracy index", is aggregated with its "liberal component index" score to create the liberal democracy index. Thus, democracies with higher liberal democracy index scores, measured on a scale from 0-1, will be considered of higher democratic quality. How VDEM measures the electoral democracy index,

liberal component index, and aggregates them is described in the following subsections (Coppedge et al., 2025c).

4.3.2 Electoral Democracy Index:

Aligning closely with Dahl's requirements for polyarchies, Coppedge et al.'s (2025c) electoral democracy index (measured on a scale from 0-1) is estimated by aggregating a country's "suffrage" rating with its scores on the "freedom of association", "clean election", "freedom of expression and alternative sources of information", and "elected officials" indices (p.40). The freedom of association index is created by aggregating scores that measure the degree to which parties can form and are repressed, whether opposition parties exist, and if multiple parties run in elections (p. 67, pp. 99-101) Additionally, the index measures the extent to which each country restricts and has control over the activity of "civil society organizations" (pp. 203–204). The clean election index is created by aggregating whether a country's election is considered "free and fair", whether there was an "accurate voter registry" used, "vote buying", "intentional irregularities", "intimidation" by the government/ ruling party, or election-related violence among civilians. Further, the government's control over, and the amount of resources provided to, the body overseeing elections are included in the index (pp. 65-73).

Coppedge et al.'s (2025c) freedom of expression index and alternative sources of information index is measured by aggregating the extent to which men, women, academia, and the general culture have freedom of political discussion, whether the government tries to censor the media, and if journalists are harassed, killed, or self-censor (pp. 190-192, 210-213). Additionally, the extent to which the media regularly criticizes the government, has broad perspectives, or has "bias against opposition parties" is included (pp. 210-213). The elected officials index aggregates whether the head of state (president/monarch) and government (prime minister) are directly elected and confirmed by the legislature, the extent to which the legislatures

(parliaments/congresses) are directly elected, how much control the head of state/government has over the cabinet, and the relative power of the head of state compared to the head of government (pp. 137-142, 123-132, 155-166). Finally, suffrage is measured by calculating the percentages of adults with the right to vote (pp. 63-64).

The final electoral democracy index is created by adding half of the weighted sum of its components, where the elected officials index and suffrage estimate weigh half as much as the other components, to half of the multiplication of the terms. This formula is a compromise between recognizing that democracies can vary in strengths while still ensuring the score is punished if the country is missing key democratic components (Coppedge et al., 2025b, p.5).

4.3.3 Liberal Democracy Index:

Coppedge et al.'s (2025c) liberal democracy index, measured on a scale from 0-1, consists of the electoral democracy index and the liberal component index (p.47). The liberal component index consists of the indices "equality before the law and individual liberties", "judicial constraints on the executive", and "legislative constraints on the executive", which is set to zero if no legislature exists (pp. 52-53). The equality before the law and individual liberties index consists of variables which measure impartial, transparent, and systematic enforcement of the law; freedom of religion, to move, and from harm; and equal access to property and justice (p.53). The judicial constraints on the executive index includes variables capturing executive observance with and the independence of both low and high court rulings, and the head of government/state's overall respect for the constitution (p.53). Finally, the legislative constraints on the executive index contain variables indicating the ability for the legislature, other oversight body, or opposition party to question and investigate the executive (pp. 156-158).

The final liberal democracy index is created by adding half the sum of the electoral democracy and liberal component indices to half of the multiplication of these two terms. However, the electoral democracy index is raised to the power of 1.585 in this formula, assuring that the electoral democracy score must be relatively high for a high liberal component score to affect the overall score in a positive way (Coppedge et al., 2025b, p.6). A list of the variables used to create the electoral democracy and liberal component indices is provided in Table 3.

Freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index	v2x_freexp_altinf
Freedom of academic and cultural expression	v2clacfree
Freedom of discussion for men	v2cldiscm
Freedom of discussion for women	v2cldiscw
Media bias	v2mebias
Government censorship effort—Media	v2mecenefm
Print/broadcast media critical	v2mecrit
Harassment of journalists	v2meharjrn
Print/broadcast media perspectives	v2merange
Media self-censorship	v2meslfcen
Freedom of association index (thick)	v2x_frassoc_thick
CSO entry and exit	v2cseeorgs
CSO repression	v2csreprss
Elections multiparty	v2elmulpar
Barriers to parties	v2psbars
Opposition parties autonomy	v2psoppaut
Party ban	v2psparban
Share of population with suffrage	v2x_suffr
Percent of population with suffrage	v2elsuffrage
Clean elections index	v2xel_frefair
EMB autonomy	v2elembaut
EMB capacity	v2elembcap
Election free and fair	v2elfrfair
Election government intimidation	v2elintim
Election other voting irregularities	v2elirreg
Election other electoral violence	v2elpeace
Election voter registry	v2elrgstry
Election vote buying	v2elvotbuy
Elected officials index	v2x_elecoff
HOG selection by legislature in practice	v2exaphogp
HOS selection by legislature in practice	v2exaphos
Chief executive appointment by upper chamber	v2exapup
Chief executive appointment by upper chamber implicit approval	v2exapupap
HOS appoints cabinet in practice	v2exdfcbhs
HOS dismisses ministers in practice	v2exdfdmhs
HOG dismisses ministers in practice	v2exdfdshg
HOG appoints cabinet in practice	v2exdjcbhg
HOS = HOG?	v2exhoshog
HOS appointment in practice	v2expathhs
HOG appointment in practice	v2expathhg
Relative power of the HOS	v2ex_hosw
Legislature bicameral	v2lgbicam
Upper chamber elected	v2lgelecup
Lower chamber elected	v2lgello
Percentage of indirectly elected legislators lower chamber	v2lginello
Percentage of indirectly elected legislators upper chamber	v2lginelup
Equality before the law and individual liberty index	v2xcl_rol
Access to justice for men	v2clacjstm
Access to justice for women	v2clacjstw
Freedom of foreign movement	v2clfmove
Freedom from political killings	v2clkill
Property rights for men	v2clprptym
Property rights for women	v2clprptyw
Freedom of religion	v2clrelig
Freedom from forced labor for men	v2clslavem
Freedom from forced labor for women	v2clslavef
Freedom of domestic movement for men	v2cldmovem
Freedom of domestic movement for women	v2cldmovew
Rigorous and impartial public administration	v2clrspct
Freedom from torture	v2cltort
Transparent laws with predictable enforcement	v2cltrnslw
Judicial constraints on the executive index	v2x_jucon
Executive respects constitution	v2exrescon
Compliance with judiciary	v2jucomp
Compliance with high court	v2juhccomp
High court independence	v2juhcind
Lower court independence	v2juncind
Legislative constraints on the executive index	v2xlg_legcon
Legislature investigates in practice	v2lginvstp
Legislature opposition parties	v2lgoppart
Executive oversight	v2lgotovst
Legislature questions officials in practice	v2lgqstexp

Table 3. *Operationalizations of the Electoral Democracy and Liberal Component Indices*

Taken from Coppedge et al. (2025c), p.40, 423

4.3.4 Dependent Variable: Belief in Political Conspiracy Theories

The dependent variable in this study is the level of belief in ***political conspiracy theories,*** defined as conspiracy theories about groups of national or international

actors who unfairly and secretly influence world or local politics without proper input from the people (Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Craig, 1979; Geurkink et al., 2019). The CCRS uses Brotherton et al.'s (2013) psychometrically validated "generic conspiracist beliefs scale" to measure belief in conspiracy theories. Belief in generic statements, for example the belief that the government perpetrates "terrorist activities on their own citizens", often predicts belief in more specific conspiracy theories, such as those concerning specific terrorist attacks like 9/11 (p.2). Generic conspiracy beliefs are preferable in cross national studies because the content of the belief is not country specific (Hornsey & Pearson, 2022).

Brotherton et al.'s (2013) 15 item scale consists of five categories that include three generic conspiracy belief statements each. These categories include conspiracy beliefs about "government malfeasance", involving allegations of criminal activity within governments; "extraterrestrial cover-up", referring to the concealment of aliens' existence; "malevolent global conspiracies", which claim that "secret groups exert total control over global [and political] events"; "personal well being", focused on the violation of one's body; and "control of information", referring to the withholdment of important information by various actors (p.6).

To restrict the analysis to belief in political conspiracy theories, only generic statements about "malevolent global conspiracies" will be used to measure the dependent variable. These specific statements are: "the power held by heads of state is second to that of small unknown groups who really control world politics", "a small, secret group of people is responsible for making all major world decisions, such as going to war", and "certain significant events have been the result of the activity of a small group who secretly manipulate world events" (Brotherton et al., 2013, pp. 6-8). Other statements were excluded either because they did not ***explicitly*** concern politics or because they did not mention political actors as the perpetrators.

Notably, government malfeasance items were omitted, as they concern governmental criminal behavior rather than politics. Specifically, these statements

assert that the government is “involved in the murder of innocent citizens”, “perpetrates acts of terrorism on its own soil [while] disguising its involvement”, and “uses people as patsies to hide its involvement in criminal activity” (Brotherton et al., 2013, p. 8). Excluding government malfeasance statements also aligns with the theoretical perspective that individuals who endorse political conspiracy theories as a means of restoring political control do not necessarily view the actors controlling politics as criminals, and that conspiracy theories do not always describe illegal behavior (Geurkink et al., 2019, pp.251-252; Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p.33).

The CCRS uses a 5-point scale to measure individual beliefs in these specific statements, where “0” is labeled as “definitely not true”, “1” as “probably not true”, “2” as “not sure/cannot decide”, “3” as “probably true”, and “4” as “definitely true” (Bordeleau et al., 2023c, p.18). When creating scales, the average of all the questions is often taken to create an overall indicator. Although this treats technically ordinal data as continuous, research has found that this does not negatively impact analyses (Norman, 2010). This supports the use of linear regression rather than ordinal regression as a method in this analysis. Accordingly, the average of the “malevolent global” conspiracy items will be used to measure the level of belief in political conspiracy theories. A value of “0” represents “low [political] conspiracy beliefs”, while a value of “4” reflects “high [political] conspiracy beliefs” (Bordeleau et al., 2023d, pp. 9-10).

4.3.5 Control Variables and the Mediating Variable:

This analysis will include the standard “sociodemographic characteristics” as control variables. These variables will be “gender”, “age”, “socioeconomic status”, “education”, and “employment status” (Aneshensel, p. 200). While the CCRS Questionnaire includes questions about race/ethnicity, specific religion and income, and a non-binary identifier for gender, this information is not included in the final dataset (Bordeleau et al., 2023b, 2023c). These limitations will be addressed in more

detail in the discussion section. Thus, the categories for the control variables are "female" and "male" for gender; "lower", "middle", and "upper class" for socioeconomic status; "no formal", an "elementary", a "secondary", a "college/university", or a "postgraduate" education; and "working for pay full-time", "working for pay part-time", "retired", "unemployed/looking for work", "student (not working)", or "don't know/prefer not to say/other" for employment status (Bordeleau et al., 2023d, pp.1-2). The analysis also includes the GDP per capita of the countries in the sample as a variable testing for redundancy. Specifically, the analysis uses GDP adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP) in 2021 international dollars. PPP reflects the standard and cost of living in each country, allowing for easier cross-national comparison (World Bank, 2023).

Additional variables testing for redundancy in this research will be individuals' self placement on a continuous political left-right scale, where "0" is "left" and "10" is right; their average trust in the government and politicians on a continuous scale, where "0" means "no trust at all" and "10" signifies "a lot of trust"; and whether they are "not a religious person", "a religious person", or they "don't know…[or] prefer not to answer". Again, participants' specific religious identities were not in the final codebook/dataset due to country inconsistencies (Bordeleau et al., 2023d, pp.2-3, 6).

Webster & Kruglanski's (1994) need for cognitive closure (NCC) scale, which measures the "desire for predictability, preference for order and structure, discomfort with ambiguity, decisiveness, and close-mindedness", is also included as a redundant variable as it closely aligns with cognitive and epistemic explanations of conspiracy belief (p. 1049). The CCRS uses an adapted 15-item NCC scale. This scale uses five ordinal points, ranging from "1" to "5", to measure the extent to which participants agree with the statements. An answer of "1" indicates complete disagreement, and "5" complete agreement. This analysis will use the average of the 15 answers to measure the need for cognitive closure, where "1" represents a "low need for

cognitive closure" and "5" a "high need" (Bordeleau et al., 2023d, pp.7-9; Roets & Van Hiel, 2011). The complete list of the 15 NCC statements is provided in Table 4.

Finally, this analysis uses feelings of external political efficacy as the proposed mediating variable. As detailed in theory, external political efficacy captures individuals' perceptions of responsiveness and representation from political elites. External political efficacy is typically measured through survey questions asking whether respondents believe that "politicians strive to keep in close touch with the people", or if "politicians care about what ordinary people think" (Groskurth et al., 2021, p. 4).

1	I don't like situations that are uncertain.
2	I dislike questions which could be answered in many different ways.
3	I find that a well ordered life with regular hours suits my temperament.
4	I feel uncomfortable when I don't understand the reason why an event occurred in my life.
5	I feel irritated when one person disagrees with what everyone else in a group believes.
6	I don't like to go into a situation without knowing what I can expect from it.
7	When I have made a decision, I feel relieved
8	When I am confronted with a problem, I'm dying to reach a solution very quickly.
9	I would quickly become impatient and irritated if I would not find a solution to a problem immediately.
10	I don't like to be with people who are capable of unexpected actions.
11	I dislike it when a person's statement could mean many different things.
12	I find that establishing a consistent routine enables me to enjoy life more.
13	I enjoy having a clear and structured mode of life.
14	I do not usually consult many different opinions before forming my own view.
15	I dislike unpredictable situations.

Table 4. *Complete list of 15-item NCC Scale*

Taken from Roets & Van Hiel (2011), p.92

However, given that the CCRS does not include measures of political efficacy in their dataset, this analysis will instead rely on a proxy variable, a variable which is "strongly [conceptually] related to the unobserved variable of interest" ("Proxy Variable", 2004, p.878). Thus, external political efficacy will be measured by the extent to which respondents agree with the statement: "The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people", where an answer of "1" indicates strong disagreement and "5" represents strong agreement (Bordeleau et al., 2023d, p.6). While not a direct measure of responsiveness, individuals who perceive large differences between themselves and political elites are likely to believe that those elites are also unresponsive to their interests. To reiterate, this analysis will treat this ordinal variable as continuous to simplify the mediation analysis, as research has indicated that doing so has a minimal impact on results (Norman, 2010).

4.4 Data Preparation and Sample Selection: An Overview of the Cases

The sample in this research was limited to democracies to align with the theoretical framework. Lebanon and Morocco were thus dropped from the data to prepare it for analysis, leaving Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, South Africa, and the United States as cases (Bordeleau et al., 2023b). Additionally, since the cross-sectional CCRS data was collected into early 2023, GDP per capita PPP and liberal democracy scores for each country were limited to the year 2023 to account for any political developments that may have occurred after 2022 (Bordeleau et al., 2023a, p.4). For example, following the 2022 Brazilian election results, supporters of the losing candidate attempted a coup on January 8th, 2023 (Papada et al., 2023, p.22).

The chosen cases provide an interesting variation of democracy, with Germany, Australia, and Canada being considered of high democratic quality in recent years. While the United States has also had high democratic quality in the early 21st century, Donald Trump's first presidency eroded the liberal democracy score by 12%

with the consequences—such as high levels of polarization, misinformation, and distrust of elections—continuing into the Biden presidency. With the second election of Trump in 2024, researchers predict that the U.S. may lose its status as a democracy entirely in the coming years (Nord et al., 2025, p.46; Papada et al., 2023).

On the other hand, Brazil's democratic quality steadily declined in the years that President Bolsonaro and his right-wing party were in power, but has recovered since his defeat in the 2022 election (Nord et al., 2025, p.34). Finally, South Africa's dominant party for 30 years, the African National Congress (ANC), grew increasingly corrupt and slowly eroded democratic quality from 2012 to 2023 by progressively "undermining the rule of law". However, the quality of democracy has rebounded since the ANC's electoral defeat in 2024 (Nord et al., 2024, p.39; Nord et al., 2025, p.16; Mtimka, 2024). Limiting the analysis to democracies and including such different cases enables an analysis of how even slight variations in democratic quality can contribute to political conspiracy beliefs.

To prepare the data for analysis, the VDEM and World Development Indicators packages in R were used to create datasets with 2023 GDP per capita PPP and liberal democracy scores for each country included in the analysis (Arel-Bundock, 2025; Maerz et al., 2025). These datasets were merged with the CCRS data, and duplicates were checked, to create a single dataset containing all relevant variables. To ease interpretation, the liberal democracy index, originally on a scale from 0-1, was multiplied by 100. Similarly, the scale for the variable measuring external political efficacy was reversed. The variable measuring external political efficacy is now a statement where "1" indicates "strong agreement" that there is a large difference between the elite and the common people. Thus, the change allows low values to indicate lower political efficacy, rather than higher (Bordeleau et al., 2023d, p.6).

Additionally, to further prepare the data for analysis, two indices were created to measure political trust and belief in political conspiracy theories. The items "trust

in the government" and "trust in politicians" were averaged to create the political trust index, and the political conspiracy belief statements discussed in the operationalization section were averaged to create the political conspiracy belief index (Bordeleau et al., 2023d, p.3). Cronbach Alpha scores, that test the degree to which items of the indices are related to each other, were calculated to test the reliability of the indices. The scores were α=0.89 for the trust index and α=0.82 for the political conspiracy index, which are both good values (Tavakol, 2011). Further, numerical variables were converted to categorical variables with their levels renamed to reflect those in the CCRS codebook.

In order to run a mediation analysis, models have to be calculated on the same amount of observations. Thus, as a further step in preparing the data for analysis, an additional dataset with all NA values removed was created ***solely*** for use in the inclusionary strategy. Finally, as a last step, the number of NAs in each variable was calculated, revealing that only the religiosity variable had an amount of NAs (~7%) which could prove problematic. To address this, an additional category, "Other/Don't Know", was added to the religiosity variable, as individuals uncertain about their religious identification may provide meaningful insights for the analysis.

In summary, the VDEM and World Bank datasets will be used in the analysis without further considerations, while the limitations of the CCRS's non-probability sample will be addressed in the discussion section. The analytical strategy will assess how the coefficient (β) for democratic quality changes as additional variables, including sociodemographic variables, alternative explanations, and external political efficacy, are included. A country's democratic quality is measured on a scale from 0-100 by aggregating its scores on key electoral and liberal democratic components. Similarly, political conspiracy beliefs are measured on a scale from 0-4, reflecting the average agreement with three statements about the perceived influence of global and local actors on politics. Finally, external political efficacy is measured on a scale from

1-5, using a proxy variable based on agreement with a statement regarding the perceived gap between political elites and ordinary citizens.

V. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analysis and results section presents a detailed evaluation of the research questions. The research questions are answered by following the analytical strategy outlined in the methodology section, and testing the robustness and validity of the findings. Additionally, this section describes the characteristics of the data and conducts a preliminary correlation analysis to uncover interesting patterns and to assess whether further considerations are necessary when using the data to answer the research questions. The code used for the analysis, along with instructions for reproducing the results, is available at: https://github.com/laurlaur3917/Master-Thesis-2025-Lauren-Gerber.

5.1 Description of Data

The final dataset consists of a sample size (n) of 6,098 respondents, with 1,026 respondents from Australia, 1,024 from Brazil, 999 from Canada, 1,027 from Germany, 1,016 from South Africa, and 1,006 from the United States. The average age of respondents is 43 and 51% of the sample is female. As previously expanded on, the proportion of females in each country's sample is representative of the population, while the average age is slightly higher due to the minimum age requirement for participation in the survey (Bordeleau et al., 2023a, p.5).

As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, the distribution of sociodemographic variables for the entire sample appears relatively representative of the population. By country, however, some interesting patterns emerge in the distribution of the education and employment variables. High educational achievement and low unemployment appear to be underrepresented in Australia and the United States, while overrepresented in Brazil and South Africa. Specifically, ~33% of the

American sample and 25% of the Australian sample have achieved less than a secondary education, while 94% of the Brazilian sample and 66% of the South African sample have a university degree or higher. Unemployment rates follow a similar pattern, with 11% and 6.5% seeming slightly high for the U.S. and Australia, and 10% and 7.1% appearing low for South Africa and Brazil (Statista 2024a, 2024b, 2025a, 2025b).

Tables 5 and 6 present descriptive statistics, reported both by country and for the full sample, for the remaining control variables which test for spuriousness and redundancy. These values show that the average political ideology for the entire sample, measured on a scale from left to right, is 5.4, indicating a moderate political stance. Unsurprisingly, respondents in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States are slightly more conservative than those in Australia, Canada, and Germany.

Characteristic	N = 6,098[1]
Left-Right Scale	
Mean	5.4
Median	5.0
Q1, Q3	4.0, 7.0
Average Political Trust	
Mean	3.92
Median	4.00
Q1, Q3	1.50, 6.00
Religiosity	
Not Religious	42%
Religious	51%
Other/Don't Know	6.6%
Average Need for Cognitive Closure	
Mean	3.57
Median	3.53
Q1, Q3	3.13, 4.00

[1] %

Table 5. *Descriptive Statistics of Additional Control Variables For the Entire Sample*

Characteristic	Australia N = 1,026[1]	Brazil N = 1,024[1]	Canada N = 999[1]	Germany N = 1,027[1]	South Africa N = 1,016[1]	United States N = 1,006[1]
Left-Right Scale						
Mean	5.4	5.7	5.3	4.9	5.8	5.6
Median	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0
Q1, Q3	5.0, 7.0	4.0, 9.0	4.0, 7.0	4.0, 6.0	5.0, 7.0	4.0, 8.0
Average Political Trust						
Mean	4.88	3.32	4.66	3.91	2.45	4.29
Median	5.00	3.50	5.00	4.00	2.00	4.50
Q1, Q3	3.00, 7.00	1.00, 5.00	2.50, 6.50	1.50, 6.00	0.00, 4.00	2.00, 6.50
Religiosity						
Not Religious	58%	25%	53%	58%	20%	40%
Religious	34%	71%	38%	34%	76%	53%
Other/Don't Know	7.5%	4.3%	8.8%	7.9%	4.3%	7.1%
Average Need for Cognitive Closure						
Mean	3.50	3.75	3.52	3.50	3.67	3.51
Median	3.47	3.73	3.47	3.47	3.67	3.47
Q1, Q3	3.07, 3.87	3.33, 4.20	3.13, 3.93	3.13, 3.93	3.27, 4.07	3.07, 3.93

[1] %

Table 6. *Descriptive Statistics of Additional Control Variables by Country*

Political trust[2], defined as trust in government and politicians, is notably low across countries, averaging 3.92 on a 0-10 scale where 0 denotes no trust and 10 indicates full trust. 25% of the entire sample have political trust scores less than 1.5. Like the left-right scale, trust scores are predictably lowest in South Africa and Brazil and highest in Australia and Canada. Interestingly, however, political trust is higher in the United States (an average of 4.29) than Germany (an average of 3.91). Even though the German government provides stronger social benefits for its citizens than the American government, Germany's lower trust scores may be due to the fact that they are the most left-leaning country in the sample, meaning they may be less patriotic and more likely to question authority (Haidt & Graham, 2007).

Further, it is logical that South Africa, Brazil, and the United States are the three most religious countries in the sample. However, it appears that the percentage of respondents who identify as religious is underrepresented compared to the

[2] It's important to note that while the values for political trust, political conspiracy beliefs, and the need for cognitive closure were derived by averaging responses across several survey items, they will henceforth be referred to as political trust, political conspiracy beliefs, and need for cognitive closure to reduce confusion when reporting country averages.

population as a whole (Statista, 2025c). Finally, all countries uniformly demonstrate slightly high levels of need for cognitive closure, with the sample averaging 3.57 on a scale from 1 (low need) to 5 (high need).

A graph of each country in the sample's democratic quality score, as measured by the rating on the liberal democracy scale from 0-1, is provided in Figure 1. Additionally, graphs of and summary statistics for political conspiracy belief and external political efficacy by country are provided in Figures 2 and 3 and Table 7. Figure 1 shows that Germany has the highest democratic quality in the sample (0.812), followed by Australia (0.804), The United States (0.771), Canada (0.746), Brazil (0.698), and lastly South Africa with a score of 0.6 (Coppedge et al., 2025a).

Following the same direction, Figure 2 shows that average political conspiracy beliefs—measured on a scale from 0 (low belief) to 4 (high belief)—are lowest in Germany (1.52), followed by Canada (1.71), Australia (1.79), Brazil (2.02), the United States (2.05), and finally South Africa (2.51). In fact, both Germany and Canada had 25% of respondents average a political conspiracy belief score of less than one. A point to note, however, is that the United States deviates a bit between its values for democratic quality and level of political conspiracy beliefs. While the U.S. is ranked third highest in democratic quality, its average values for political conspiracy beliefs are ranked second highest, instead of third lowest. Additionally, the U.S. has a larger spread of scores (1.67) than Brazil (1.34) and South Africa (1), indicating larger variation. These points will be further elaborated on in the discussion section.

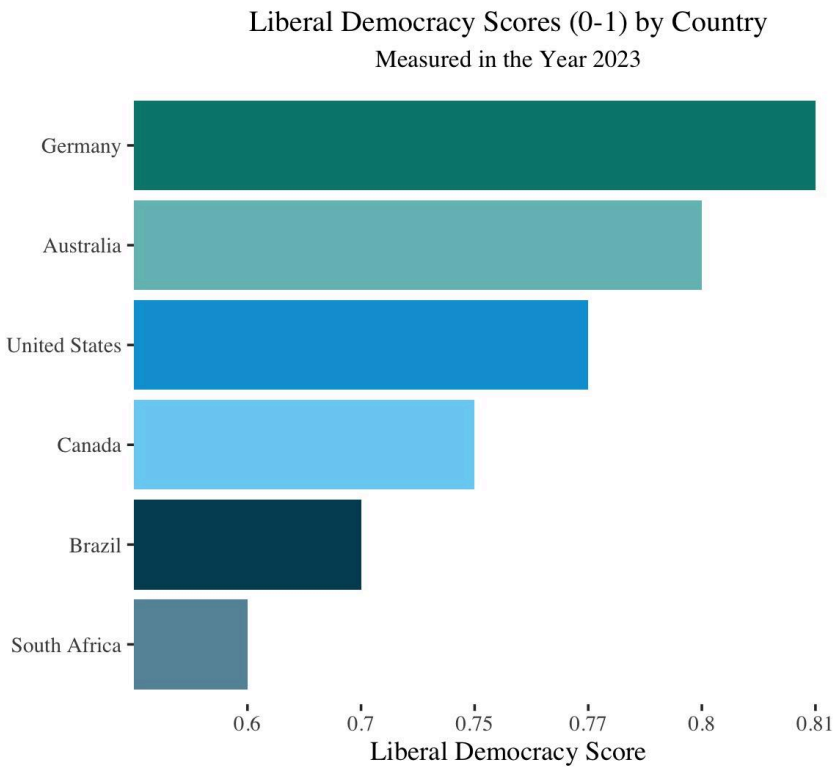

Figure 1. *Graph Depicting Democratic Quality by Country in 2023, as Measured by the Liberal Democracy Score (0-1)*

Finally, average external political efficacy scores by country—measured by the level of agreement with the statement that there is a large difference between the political elites and regular people on a scale from 1 (strong agreement indicating low external political efficacy) to 5 (strong disagreement indicating high external political efficacy) —also follows a similar direction to democratic quality and average political conspiracy belief scores, although uniformly low across countries (Bordeleau et al., 2023d, p.6). Australia has the highest levels of efficacy (2.45), followed by Canada/Germany (2.38), The United States (2.34), Brazil (2.11), and finally South Africa (2.03). Overall, Germany, Australia, and Canada have lower average political conspiracy beliefs and higher average external political efficacy scores than Brazil, the United States, and South Africa.

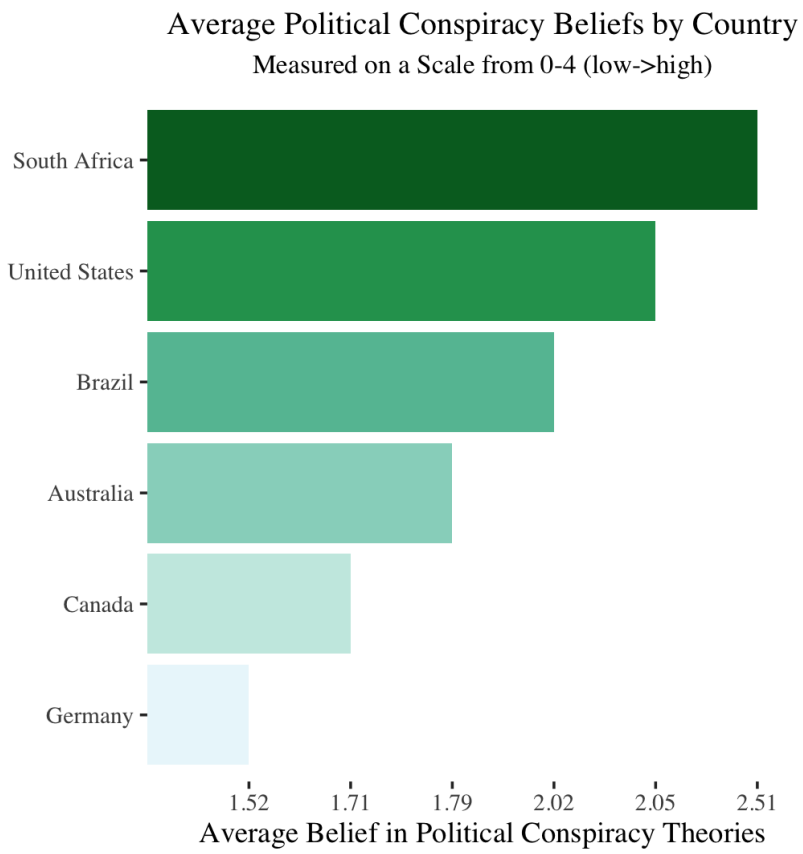

Figure 2. *Graph Depicting the Average Belief in Political Conspiracy Theories by Country, Measured on a Scale From Low (0) to High Belief (4)*

Characteristic	Australia N = 1,026	Brazil N = 1,024	Canada N = 999	Germany N = 1,027	South Africa N = 1,016	United States N = 1,006
Average Political Conspiracy Belief						
Mean	1.79	2.02	1.71	1.52	2.51	2.05
Median	2.00	2.00	2.00	1.67	2.67	2.00
Q1, Q3	1.00, 2.67	1.33, 2.67	0.67, 2.67	0.33, 2.33	2.00, 3.00	1.33, 3.00
External Political Efficacy Score						
Mean	2.45	2.11	2.38	2.38	2.03	2.34
Median	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00
Q1, Q3	2.00, 3.00	1.00, 3.00	2.00, 3.00	1.00, 3.00	1.00, 3.00	1.00, 3.00

Table 7. *Descriptive Statistics of the Average Belief in Political Conspiracy and External Political Efficacy by Country*

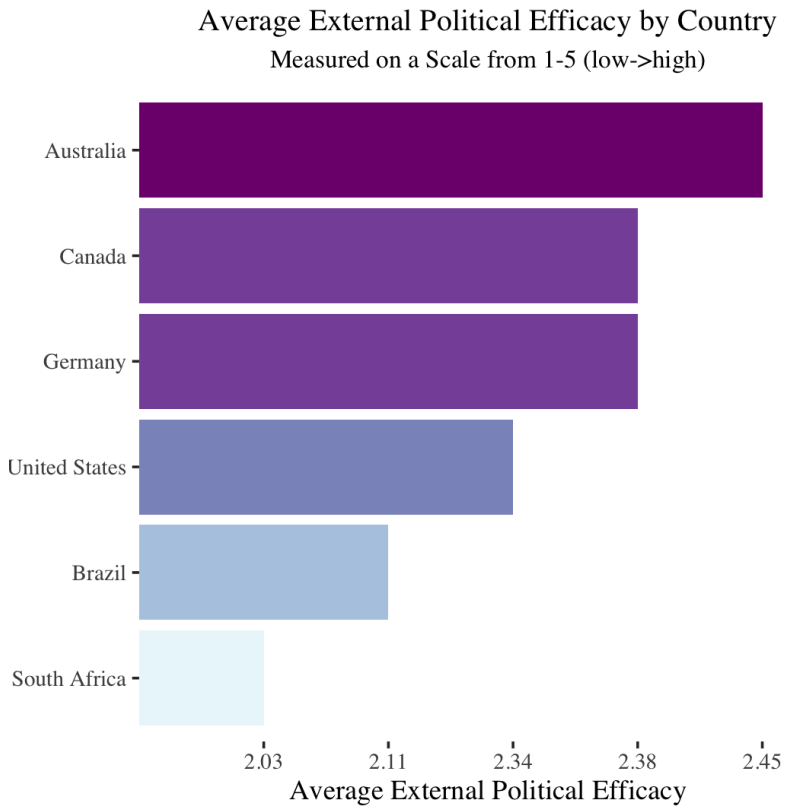

Figure 3. *Graph Depicting the Average Agreement with the Statement Evaluating External Political Efficacy by Country, Measured on a Scale From Low Efficacy (1) to High Efficacy (5)*

5.2 Preliminary Correlation Analysis

Before the main analysis is conducted, a preliminary correlation analysis is performed to understand the strength and direction of association between variables. This can help determine if any non-theoretically chosen variables should be removed from the model if insignificant or strongly correlated with another variable (Aneshensel, 2013). It's important to note that even though the main analyses will treat ordinal variables as continuous, the correlation analysis will be conducted using a "Spearman rank correlation" due to the ordinal nature of some variables. This method uses the ranks of values, rather than the actual values, to calculate the association between the variables. The significance of the association, which measures the likelihood of the observed correlation coefficient (*r)* given no association between the two variables,

will also be calculated to determine the plausibility of an association between variables (Schober et al., 2018, pp. 1765-1766). The correlation analysis is presented in Figure 4 with associations crossed off which have a significance level of less than 0.1 or 10%.

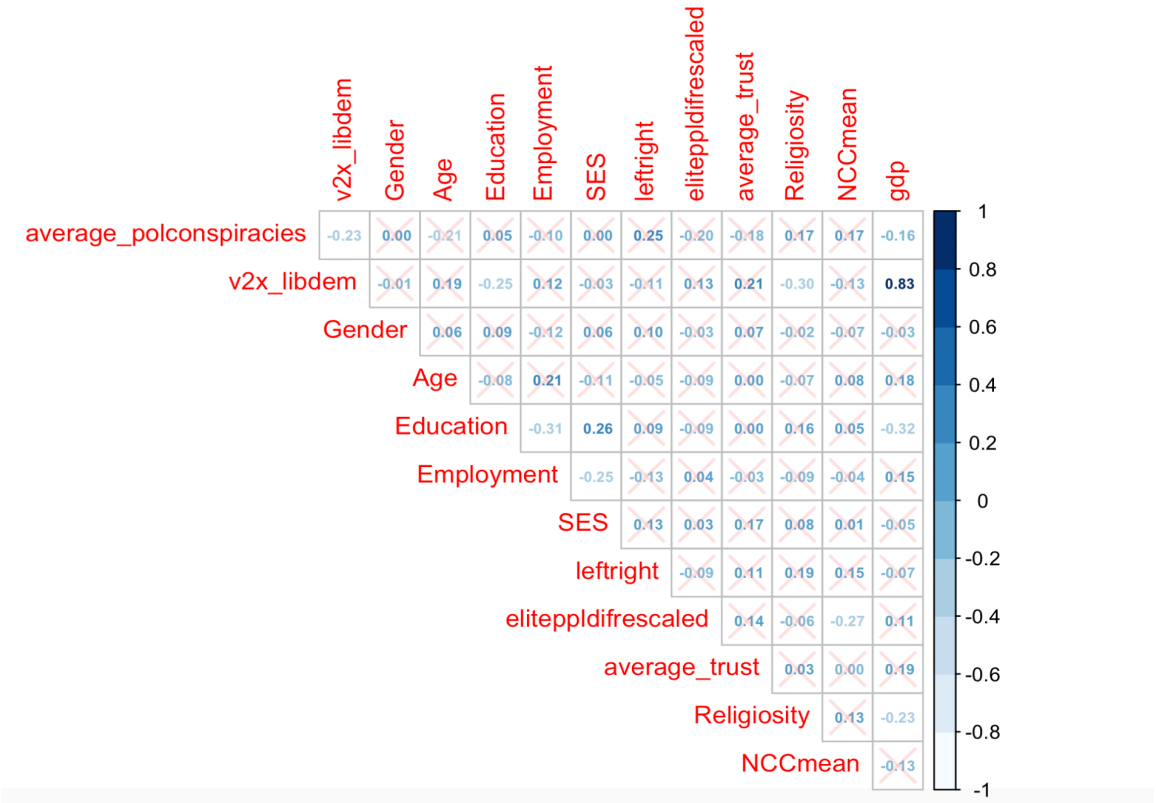

Figure 4. *Correlation Matrix With Insignificant Associations (p<0.1) Crossed Off*

The correlation matrix shows that the only variables significantly associated with belief in political conspiracy theories are the quality of democracy and GDP. These variables have a "weak" negative correlation with the average belief in political conspiracy theories, meaning that higher democratic quality or GDP decreases belief. Notably, a country's democratic quality has a stronger correlation with belief in political conspiracy theories than GDP, supporting the focus of this research. The standard sociodemographic variables are also associated with each

other, as education has a weak negative correlation with employment, where lower scores indicate higher levels of employment, and a weak positive correlation with SES. Interestingly, religiosity has a weak negative correlation with GDP and education has a weak negative correlation with GDP and democratic quality. The latter observation could be due to the fact that educated and employed people appear overrepresented in the Brazilian and South African samples (Schober et al., 2018).

Most importantly for the analysis, however, is the fact that democratic quality is strongly positively correlated with GDP, and that the statement used to measure one's external political efficacy only has a weak negative correlation with one's need for cognitive closure. Regarding the first observation, it is logical to expect a strong correlation between a country's democratic quality and its GDP. However, since this research aims to isolate the effects of democratic quality on political conspiracy belief, particular attention will be paid to its correlation with GDP in the main analysis. Concerning the second point, the correlation analysis reveals that the particular proxy used to measure external political efficacy may not be associated with political conspiracy belief, and thus not an acceptable mediating variable. These considerations will be revisited following the presentation of the main results.

5.3 Main Analysis

5.3.1 Bivariate Analysis:

The main analysis begins with a simple bivariate regression between the independent and dependent variables to establish whether a relationship beyond chance exists between the two. ***Model One*** (*average_polconspiracies~v2x_libdemrescaled),* which tests the relationship between democratic quality and belief in political conspiracy theories, is thus run with results presented in Table 8.

The *F* statistic (see code for details), which tests the probability of obtaining the model's coefficients given the assumption that they are zero, is significant for Model One with $p<0.001$. In other words, the *F* statistic tests whether the model provides a

significantly better fit than one that only predicts the sample's mean political conspiracy score. Since the *F* statistic is significant, we can confidently interpret Model One (Aneshensel, 2013, p.135). The model's intercept, 4.76, represents the average belief in political conspiracy theories in a particular country whose democratic quality score is zero.

Since no country in the sample has a democratic quality score of zero, the model extrapolates beyond the observed data to predict the intercept, assuming that the estimated linear relationship between the variables holds infinitely. Thus, while belief in political conspiracy theories is measured on a 0-4 scale, the model predicts an average value of 4.76 for respondents from countries with a democratic quality score of zero. While autocracies may score near zero on democratic quality, this research focuses only on predicting belief in political conspiracy theories within democratic countries. Therefore, while extrapolating can be problematic, this research does not aim to interpret the intercept or generalize beyond the chosen sample to address the research questions (Martin, 2021, pp. 47-49).

Average Belief in Political Conspiracy Theories

Variables	*Coefficients*	*Std. Error*	*CI*	*P-value*
Intercept	4.76 ***	0.14	4.48 – 5.03	**<0.001**
Quality of Democracy	-0.04 ***	0.00	-0.04 – -0.03	**<0.001**
Observations		6032		
R^2 / R^2 adjusted		0.062 / 0.062		

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

Table 8. *Bivariate Regression Analysis Between the Main Independent and Dependent Variables*

Table 8 further shows that the P-value for Quality of Democracy is <0.001, meaning a relationship between democratic quality and belief in political conspiracy theories exists beyond chance. More precisely, under the assumption that there is no

relationship between the variables, there is less than a 0.1% probability of observing a relationship as strong as this due to random chance. Due to its significance, the quality of democracy coefficient (β= -0.04) can consequently be interpreted. This coefficient means that for every one unit increase in the quality of democracy score (measured on a scale from 0-100), the model predicts belief in political conspiracy theories to decrease by 0.04 points on a scale from 0-4, or about 1%. In other words, higher democratic quality will decrease political conspiracy belief (Aneshensel, 2013, p.128). Further, the standard error of the coefficient —how much the coefficient is estimated to differ across different samples —is 0 for the democratic quality estimate, meaning it is very reliable. In fact, the model is 95% confident that the true coefficient for democratic quality lies between -0.04 and -0.03 (Aneshensel, 2013, pp.134-136).

Model One's predictive equation is as follows, where $\widehat{y}$ represents a country's predicted average level of belief in political conspiracy theories (Dalpiaz, 2011):

$$\widehat{y} = 4.76 - 0.04 * \text{quality of democracy score}$$

This equation can be used to predict the average level of belief in political conspiracy theories in the United States, for example, where the quality of democracy score is 77.1. The predicted value would be $\widehat{y} = 4.76 - 0.04(77.1) = 4.76 - 3.084 \approx 1.7$. The sample average for the United States is 2.05, thus the residual—the difference between the actual and predicted value—is 0.35. The average size of the residuals is given by the model's residual standard error, which is 1.077 for the bivariate regression (see code for details). Further, the model's R^2 value, which gives the amount of variation in belief in political conspiracy theories that can be explained by the quality of democracy, is 0.062 or 6.2% (Aneshensel, 2013, p.138). Finally, it's important to note that since 66 responses to the questions measuring political conspiracy belief were missing, the regression was run with n=6032.

5.3.2 Exclusionary Strategy:

Given that there is a significant bivariate relationship between democratic quality and the level of belief in political conspiracy theories, the analysis continues with an exclusionary strategy to test ***Hypothesis One*** and whether the relationship between these two variables is still present outside of alternative explanations. If the coefficient for democratic quality (β) is still significant after the addition of third variables, a relationship with belief in political conspiracy theories still exists. If the coefficient (β) for democratic quality is reduced with these additions, however, it indicates partial spuriousness and redundancy (Aneshensel, 2013, p. 213).

	Average Belief in Political Conspiracy Theories			
Variables	*Coefficients*	*Std. Error*	*CI*	*P-value*
Intercept	3.91 ***	0.28	3.36 – 4.45	**<0.001**
Quality of Democracy	-0.04 ***	0.00	-0.05 – -0.03	**<0.001**
Male	0.05	0.03	-0.01 – 0.11	0.076
Age	-0.01 ***	0.00	-0.01 – -0.01	**<0.001**
No Education	0.10	0.15	-0.18 – 0.39	0.486
Elementary Education	0.14 **	0.05	0.05 – 0.24	**0.004**
Secondary Education	0.08 *	0.03	0.01 – 0.15	**0.019**
Post-Grad Degree	0.03	0.04	-0.05 – 0.11	0.489
Employed Part-Time	-0.09 *	0.04	-0.18 – -0.00	**0.042**
Retired	-0.25 ***	0.05	-0.35 – -0.15	**<0.001**
Unemployed	-0.04	0.06	-0.16 – 0.07	0.447
Student	-0.04	0.08	-0.20 – 0.12	0.626
Other Employment	-0.01	0.06	-0.13 – 0.11	0.826
Middle-Class	-0.12 ***	0.03	-0.18 – -0.05	**<0.001**
Upper Class	0.07	0.07	-0.06 – 0.21	0.275
Left-Right Scale Placement	0.09 ***	0.01	0.08 – 0.10	**<0.001**
Average Political Trust	-0.07 ***	0.01	-0.08 – -0.06	**<0.001**
Religious	0.18 ***	0.03	0.12 – 0.24	**<0.001**
NA Religion	0.06	0.06	-0.05 – 0.17	0.303
Average Need For Cognitive Closure	0.26 ***	0.02	0.22 – 0.30	**<0.001**
GDP	0.00 ***	0.00	0.00 – 0.00	**<0.001**
Observations	5357			
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.215 / 0.212			
	** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*			

Table 9. *Multivariate Regression Analysis to Test if Main Relationship Still Holds Outside Of Controls*

To conduct the exclusionary strategy, ***Model Two*** (*average_polconspiracies ~ v2x_libdemrescaled + Gender + Age+ Education+ Employment+ SES+ leftright+ average_trust+ Religiosity+NCCmean + gdp)* is run with results presented in Table 9. The *F* statistic (see code for details) for the overall model is significant with $p<0.001$, meaning the model can be interpreted. Interestingly, now that all variables are added to the model, the intercept — representing the estimated average level of belief in political conspiracy theories when all variables are zero—no longer extrapolates beyond the observed values in the sample. On a scale from 0 to 4, the intercept is now estimated at 3.91. However, the relatively large standard error for the intercept suggests that, across different samples, this estimate could exceed 4.

Most importantly, after the addition of third variables, the main variable of interest—democratic quality— still has a significant relationship ($p<0.001$) with the main dependent variable, the level of belief in political conspiracy theories. Moreover, the coefficient ($\beta= - 0.04$) for democratic quality is the exact same as in the bivariate analysis, meaning that the relationship with the level of belief in political conspiracy beliefs exists without any influence from third variables. The coefficient is again very reliable, with the standard error remaining at zero. Due to the unchanged relationship, ***Hypothesis One***—which stipulates that democracies with lower democratic quality have higher levels of political conspiracy beliefs— can be accepted.

While the third variables do not alter the main relationship, the statistically significant variables offer valuable insights into other factors associated with political conspiracy belief and will therefore be discussed. The third variables with the most significant relationships ($p<0.001$) are age, political placement on the left-right scale, political trust, the need for cognitive closure, GDP, being retired, being religious, and self-identifying in the middle class. A one unit increase in age and political trust— indicating more trust— decreases belief in political conspiracy theories by 0.01 and

0.07 points, or by 0.25% and 1.75%. By contrast, a one unit increase on the political left-right scale —indicating higher identification with the political right—and on the need for cognitive closure scale, signifying higher needs, increases political conspiracy belief by 0.09 and 0.26 points (by 2.25% and 6.5%). However, since an increase of one international dollar in GDP per capita is negligible in scale, political conspiracy beliefs are not affected despite the significant relationship between the two variables. Additionally, individuals who are retired or identify as middle-class have political conspiracy beliefs that are 0.25 and 0.12 points lower (6.25% and 3%) than those who are employed full-time or a part of the lower class, on average. On the other hand, those who are religious have, on average, scores 0.18 points higher (4.5%) than respondents who are not.

Beyond the most statistically significant predictors, several other variables show weaker, but still statistically significant, relationships with political conspiracy belief ($p<0.05$ and $p<0.01$). For example, individuals who only have an elementary or secondary education have, on average, political conspiracy belief scores which are 0.14 and 0.08 points higher (3.5% and 2%) than those with a university degree. Additionally, those employed part-time, on average, have scores 0.09 points lower (2.25%) than full-time employees.

The overall model deleted 741 observations due to missingness (n=5357) and explains 21.5% of the variance in the level of belief in political conspiracy theories ($R^2 = 0.215$), representing a 15.3% improvement in explanatory power over the first model ($\Delta R^2=0.215-0.062=0.153$). Although the overall R^2 value appears low, R^2 values between 0.1 and 0.5 are considered acceptable for social science research if there are a substantial number of statistically significant predictors. Low values are acceptable because the goal of this research is not to predict an individual's exact level of political conspiracy belief, but to understand the factors associated with it (Ozili, 2022, p.1, 10). Moreover, the model's residual standard error is 0.995, which is slightly lower than the first model's value, but still relatively high given the small

range of the dependent variable. The high residual standard error is likely because political conspiracy theory beliefs are complex phenomena that are influenced by many factors beyond those included in the model (Aneshensel, 2013, p.103).

Finally, given that several of the variables in the second model are measured on different scales, it is useful to standardize them. Standardization places all predictors on the same scale, allowing for a more meaningful comparison of their relative effects on political conspiracy theory beliefs. In other words, although none of the third variables included in the model alter the main relationship, it is theoretically useful to examine whether democratic quality has the largest effect on political conspiracy theory beliefs. The process for standardization involves subtracting the variable's mean and dividing by the standard deviation for each observation. As a result, each standardized value reflects how many standard deviations it is above or below the variable's mean. The results of the standardized regression are presented in Table 10 with categorical variables excluded since they do "not have a useful interpretation" (Martin, 2021, pp.150-151).

	Average Belief in Political Conspiracy Theories			
Variables	*Coefficients*	*Std. Error*	*CI*	*P-value*
Quality of Democracy	-0.27 ***	0.03	-0.33 – -0.22	**<0.001**
Age	-0.17 ***	0.02	-0.20 – -0.14	**<0.001**
Left-Right Scale Placement	0.21 ***	0.01	0.19 – 0.24	**<0.001**
Average Political Trust	-0.18 ***	0.01	-0.20 – -0.15	**<0.001**
Average Need For Cognitive Closure	0.15 ***	0.01	0.12 – 0.17	**<0.001**
GDP	0.18 ***	0.03	0.13 – 0.24	**<0.001**
Observations	5357			
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.215 / 0.212			
	* *p<0.05* ** *p<0.01* *** *p<0.001*			

Table 10. *Standardized Regression to Examine the Effect Sizes of Each Predictor*

The standardized regression shows that democratic quality has the largest effect on political conspiracy beliefs, aligning with the theoretical framework and rationale for this study. Specifically, for every one standard deviation increase in democratic quality, political conspiracy belief decreases by 0.27 standard deviations (Martin, 2021, p. 151). The standardized regression also allows for the GDP coefficient to be interpreted easier, showing that political conspiracy belief increases by 0.18 standard deviations for every one standard deviation increase in GDP per capita (in 2021 international dollars). Overall, democratic quality has the strongest effect, followed by left-right placement, political trust/GDP, age, and finally the need for cognitive closure. Given the confirmation of the first hypothesis, the analysis can continue with an inclusionary strategy.

5.3.3 Model Assumptions and Diagnostic Checks:

Before performing the inclusionary strategy, it is necessary to evaluate whether the inferences drawn from the exclusionary strategy are reliable by checking if the assumptions of multiple linear regression are met. The main assumptions of multiple linear regression are linearity, that the relationship between the independent and dependent variable is linear; normality and homoscedasticity of the residuals, that the errors should be normally distributed and have equal variance; that there is an absence of influential outliers which could affect the main relationship; that errors are independent; and that there is an absence of multicollinearity, a phenomenon which occurs when two predictors are highly correlated with each other and measure the same thing (Martin, 2021, pp.52-53, 141). The diagnostic plots which check these assumptions are shown in Figure 5.

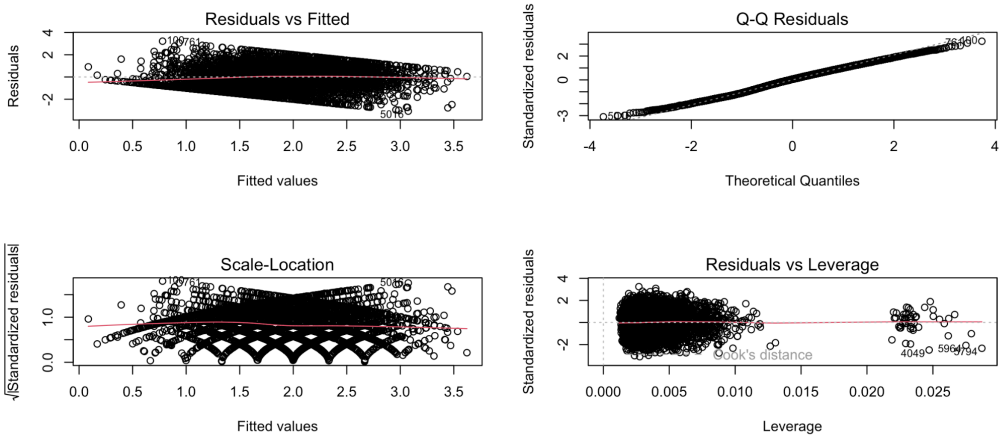

Figure 5. *Diagnostic Plots for Model Two*

In Figure 5, the first plot checks linearity, the second normality, the third homoscedasticity, and the fourth if there are influential outliers. The first and third diagnostic plots show that linearity and homoscedasticity hold, since the residuals do not have a curved or cone shaped pattern. While there is a slight stripe-like pattern in the first plot, this is normal given categorical predictors. Additionally, the second diagnostic plot shows that the condition for normality is met, as the residuals closely follow the reference line, indicating no significant deviations from a normal distribution. Further, the fourth diagnostic plot shows that no standardized residuals exceed three standard deviations, suggesting the absence of outliers that strongly influence the model (Martin, 2021). To ensure the independence of errors, the regression was also estimated with standard errors clustered at the country level. This was motivated by the possibility that individuals within the same country might uniformly have higher or lower conspiracy beliefs because of factors unrelated to democratic quality (Abadie et al., 2022). However, given that the clustered standard errors did not change the estimates or significance of the coefficients (see code for details), the results of Model Two are retained.

As the correlation analysis showed, democratic quality and GDP are strongly correlated with each other. Thus, multicollinearity was tested for to ensure that every

predictor in the model has a distinct influence on the dependent variable. Multicollinearity was tested through calculating the variance inflation factor (VIF) for each predictor, which measures how much the standard error of a predictor's coefficient is inflated as a consequence of multicollinearity (Martin, 2021, 142). VIF values should ideally be below five to conclude that there is not significant multicollinearity present. Given that this condition was met, democratic quality and GDP can be considered as having distinct influences on political conspiracy beliefs (Investopedia Team, 2024).

5.3.4 Inclusionary Strategy:

Since the exclusionary strategy showed that, independent of alternative explanations, low democratic quality is associated with higher political conspiracy beliefs and model diagnostics confirmed that these results are reliable, the analysis can proceed with an inclusionary strategy to test ***Hypothesis Two—***whether this relationship operates through the theorized variable of low external political efficacy. As discussed in the methodology section, this question will be evaluated by testing whether democratic quality is associated with external political efficacy and whether the inclusion of external political efficacy changes the relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs. These relationships will be tested while continuing to control for other possible explanations (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Model Three *(eliteppldif~ v2x_libdemrescaled + Gender + Age+ Education+ Employment+ SES+ leftright+ average_trust+ Religiosity+NCCmean + gdp)* tests if the independent variable and proposed mediator have a relationship. Additionally, ***Model Four*** *(Model Two + eliteppldif)* assesses whether the posited mediator affects the relationship between the main independent and dependent variables. As explained in the methodology section, a dataset was created with all NA values removed in order to properly execute the mediation analysis. Thus, Model's Three and Four are run on the same number of observations.

	External Political Efficacy				Average Belief in Political Conspiracy Theories			
Variables	*Coefficients*	*Std. Error*	*CI*	*P-value*	*Coefficients*	*Std. Error*	*CI*	*P-value*
Intercept	3.21 ***	0.29	2.65 – 3.77	**<0.001**	4.40 ***	0.28	3.86 – 4.95	**<0.001**
Quality of Democracy	0.01 **	0.00	0.00 – 0.02	**0.003**	-0.04 ***	0.00	-0.05 – -0.03	**<0.001**
Male	-0.04	0.03	-0.10 – 0.02	0.173	0.05	0.03	-0.01 – 0.10	0.104
Age	-0.01 ***	0.00	-0.01 – -0.01	**<0.001**	-0.01 ***	0.00	-0.02 – -0.01	**<0.001**
No Education	0.49 **	0.15	0.19 – 0.78	**0.001**	0.17	0.15	-0.11 – 0.46	0.236
Elementary Education	0.20 ***	0.05	0.10 – 0.30	**<0.001**	0.18 ***	0.05	0.08 – 0.27	**<0.001**
Secondary Education	0.05	0.04	-0.02 – 0.12	0.132	0.09 **	0.03	0.02 – 0.16	**0.008**
Post-Grad Degree	-0.04	0.04	-0.12 – 0.04	0.359	0.02	0.04	-0.06 – 0.10	0.578
Employed Part-Time	-0.00	0.05	-0.09 – 0.08	0.916	-0.09 *	0.04	-0.18 – -0.01	**0.038**
Retired	0.05	0.05	-0.04 – 0.15	0.280	-0.24 ***	0.05	-0.34 – -0.14	**<0.001**
Unemployed	0.04	0.06	-0.08 – 0.16	0.501	-0.04	0.06	-0.15 – 0.07	0.483
Student	-0.09	0.08	-0.25 – 0.08	0.302	-0.05	0.08	-0.21 – 0.10	0.505
Other Employment	0.15 *	0.06	0.02 – 0.27	**0.018**	0.01	0.06	-0.11 – 0.13	0.881
Middle-Class	0.07 *	0.03	0.00 – 0.14	**0.041**	-0.11 **	0.03	-0.17 – -0.04	**0.001**
Upper Class	0.10	0.07	-0.04 – 0.24	0.148	0.09	0.07	-0.04 – 0.22	0.187
Left-Right Scale Placement	-0.02 ***	0.01	-0.04 – -0.01	**<0.001**	0.09 ***	0.01	0.08 – 0.10	**<0.001**
Average Political Trust	0.04 ***	0.01	0.03 – 0.05	**<0.001**	-0.07 ***	0.01	-0.08 – -0.06	**<0.001**
Religious	0.01	0.03	-0.05 – 0.07	0.821	0.18 ***	0.03	0.12 – 0.24	**<0.001**
NA Religion	0.09	0.06	-0.03 – 0.20	0.144	0.07	0.06	-0.04 – 0.18	0.221
Average Need For Cognitive Closure	-0.45 ***	0.02	-0.49 – -0.40	**<0.001**	0.19 ***	0.02	0.15 – 0.24	**<0.001**
GDP	-0.00	0.00	-0.00 – 0.00	0.288	0.00 ***	0.00	0.00 – 0.00	**<0.001**
External Political Efficacy					-0.14 ***	0.01	-0.17 – -0.11	**<0.001**
Observations	5328				5328			
R^2 / R^2 adjusted	0.116 / 0.112				0.231 / 0.228			

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

Table 11. *Results of Both Steps of the Inclusionary Strategy*

The results of the inclusionary strategy are presented in Table 11. The results can be interpreted because both models have significant ($p<0.001$) *F* statistics and relatively normal diagnostic plots (see code for details). The results of model three show that democratic quality has a significant, slightly positive, relationship ($p<0.01$) with external political efficacy. Specifically, for every unit increase in democratic quality (measured 0-100), feelings of external political efficacy (measured 1-5) increase by 0.01 units. Although not the focus of this analysis, it is worth noting that having no formal or only an elementary education, and an individual's need for cognitive closure both exhibit strong, statistically significant relationships with external political efficacy. For every unit increase in the need for cognitive closure

(measured on a scale from 1-5), external political efficacy decreases by 0.45 points (11.25%). Similarly, individuals who have no education or only an elementary education have external political efficacy scores 0.49 (12.25%) and 0.20 points higher (5%) than those with a university degree, on average.

Since the independent variable has a significant relationship with the proposed mediator, the analysis will continue by evaluating how the mediator affects the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Model Four shows that the mediator has a significant negative relationship ($p<0.001$) with political conspiracy beliefs. For every unit increase of external political efficacy (measured on a scale from 1-5), political conspiracy beliefs decrease by 0.14 points (3.5%). Even with the addition of the mediator into the model, however, the coefficient for democratic quality remains statistically significant and has the same value as in Model Two ($\beta = -0.04$). While the unchanged relationship indicates that full mediation has not occurred, a formal mediation analysis using the bootstrapping approach will be performed to test whether any significant partial mediation occurs. However, given that Model Four explains 23.1% of the variance in average political conspiracy beliefs ($R^2 = 0.231$), which represents a 1.6% improvement in explanatory power over the second model ($\Delta R^2=0.231-0.215=0.016$), it can be said that external political efficacy makes an important "contribution to the explanation of the dependent variable beyond" what Model Two provides (Aneshensel, 2013, pp.262-263). Further, while not shown in Table 11, Model Four's residual standard error (0.985) is lower than Model Two's (0.995), indicating it makes better predictions and is thus a slightly better model.

The results of the formal mediation analysis in Table 12 show that the "total effect" (c), the effect of democratic quality on political conspiracy beliefs, is -0.04227. This value is slightly different from the precise value given in Model Two due to the sample size differences. The "direct effect" (c'), the effect democratic quality has on political conspiracy belief after accounting for external political

efficacy, is -0.04048. The direct effect shows that the coefficient for democratic quality only slightly changes when external political efficacy is introduced. More specifically, the mediated/ "indirect" effect, how much of the total effect operates through the mediator, is calculated by subtracting the total effect (c) from the direct effect (c'). This gives an indirect effect of -0.00179 (-0.04227+0.04048), which is very small but nonetheless statistically significant (Aneshensel, 2013, p.262; Baron & Kenny, 1986).

The results of the mediation analysis specify that ~4.2% of the total effect operates through the mediator. Thus, as external political efficacy significantly mediates the observed relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs, ***Hypothesis Two*** is partially supported due to the size of the effect being relatively small. A supplementary regression was conducted to test whether the need for cognitive closure served as a better mediator (see code for details). However, democratic quality was not significantly associated with the need for cognitive closure, suggesting that it is unlikely to serve as a mediator.

```
Causal Mediation Analysis

Nonparametric Bootstrap Confidence Intervals with the Percentile Method

               Estimate 95% CI Lower 95% CI Upper p-value
ACME           -0.00179     -0.00317         0.00  <2e-16 ***
ADE            -0.04048     -0.04937        -0.03  <2e-16 ***
Total Effect   -0.04227     -0.05103        -0.03  <2e-16 ***
Prop. Mediated  0.04227      0.01594         0.07  <2e-16 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Sample Size Used: 5328
```

Table 12. *Results of the Formal Mediation Analysis*

The final model, which accounts for alternative explanations and the mediation effect, is visualized in Figure 6. This visualization shows the model's predicted

relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy belief. In the figure, grey dots represent actual individual responses, and the grey band indicates the confidence interval around the model's prediction. To summarize, both the hypotheses can be accepted as there is a modest negative, yet significant, effect of democratic quality on political conspiracy beliefs which can be partially explained by low external political efficacy. The results are considered reliable due to satisfactory diagnostic checks and robustness tests.

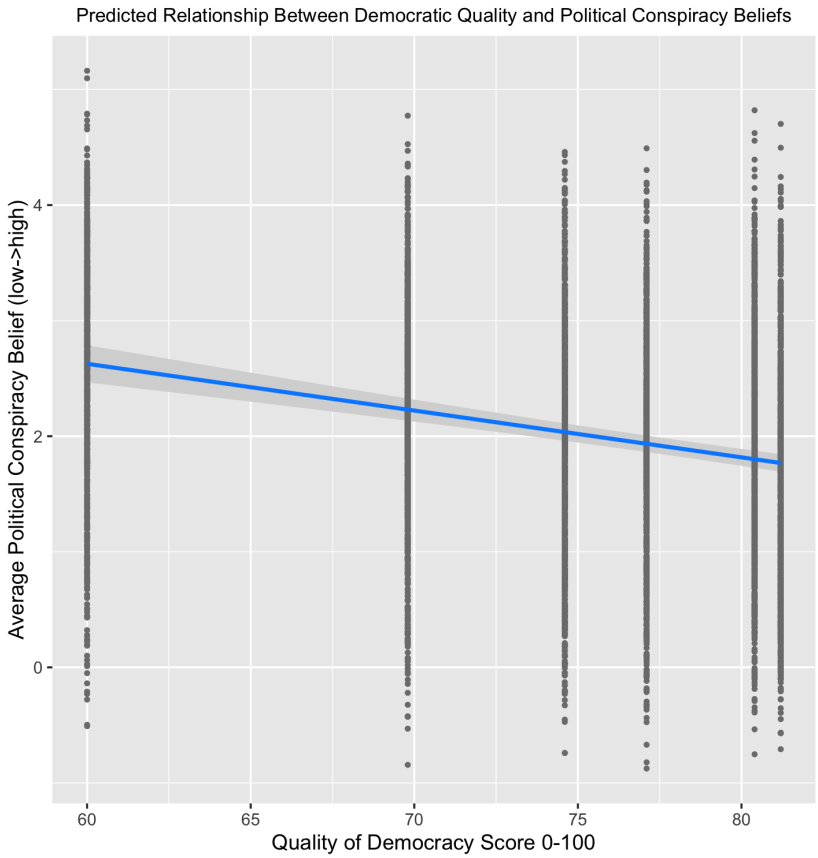

Figure 6. *Final Model Predictions vs. Real Values Visualized*

VI. DISCUSSION

This thesis explored whether democratic quality influences the level of belief in political conspiracy theories and examined the extent to which this relationship can be explained through individual feelings of low external political efficacy. The main analysis fully confirmed the first hypothesis, as lower democratic quality was associated with higher levels of political conspiracy belief. Additionally, the second hypothesis, which proposed that the relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs is mediated through individual feelings of low external political efficacy, received partial support. Although low external political efficacy was significantly related to both stronger political conspiracy beliefs and lower democratic quality, its overall mediation effect was minor, explaining only about 4% of the total effect. The remainder of the discussion section will contextualize the main findings, highlight additional notable findings, acknowledge the study's limitations, and suggest directions for further research.

6.1 Interpretations of Findings and Theoretical Implications

6.1.1 Alignment with Previous Research:

Much previous research has focused on the individual-level causes of belief in a broad range of conspiracy claims, identifying them as responses to three psychological needs: epistemic, the desire to seek satisfying and consistent information; existential, the need to feel in control and safe; and social needs, the motivation to maintain high levels of self-based or group-derived self esteem (Douglas et al., 2017, pp. 538-540). While this research has focused specifically on belief in political conspiracy theories, statements which assert that groups of national or international figures unfairly and secretly manipulate local or world politics, it has

nevertheless found support for many of these individual-level causes (Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Craig, 1979; Geurkink et al., 2019).

First, the present results have reinforced many existing findings that explore epistemic factors as the causes of conspiracy belief, showing that having a high need for cognitive closure, being religious (as compared to non-religious), and having lower education levels, specifically only an elementary or secondary education instead of a university degree, increases beliefs in political conspiracy theories. This suggests that being religious and uneducated may heighten discomfort with change, leading it to be difficult to accept complex disempowering political realities (Douglas & Sutton, 2023). Second, the assumption that lower socioeconomic status increases conspiracy belief due to existential needs has found support, as this research finds that identifying in the middle-class, as compared to the lower-class, decreases political conspiracy belief. This result reinforces the expectation that people can use conspiracy beliefs to restore control and combat perceived socioeconomic powerlessness (Douglas et al., 2017, p 539). Contrary to predictions based on existential explanations, however, being employed part-time, as compared to full-time, decreases political conspiracy belief. A potential reason for this result is the overrepresentation of employed people in some of the samples' countries, which will be discussed more in the limitation section.

Additionally, the analysis does not find that males have higher beliefs than females, as some past research indicates (Douglas et al., 2017, p.10). It does, however, find that more conservative individuals have higher political conspiracy beliefs, reinforcing some previous political science research (Douglas et al., 2019, p.9). Finally, those who were older and retired have lower political conspiracy beliefs than full-time employed, or younger individuals. Although not a factor widely explored in the literature, Bordeleau & Stockemer (2024) suggest that younger individuals have higher conspiracy beliefs due to lower self-esteem (reflecting an unmet social need), higher levels of political disconnect (which may produce unmet

existential needs), and higher participation in activism/protests where conspiracy theories may spread (pp.4-6).

6.1.2 Contributions of the Current Research:

The main contribution from this research is the finding that, even after accounting for individual-level causes, a democracy's democratic quality affects its citizens' propensity to believe in political conspiracy theories. Overall, the final model, which shows the main relationship after accounting for alternative explanations and the mediating variable, explains 23.1% (R^2=0.231) of the variance in political conspiracy beliefs, allowing us to conclude that democratic quality is a significant predictor of these beliefs (see Table 11). Thus, democracies with a weaker rule of law, diminished freedom of expression and media, or unsafe elections are more likely to exhibit higher levels of beliefs in statements asserting that national or international figures unfairly and secretly manipulate politics which affect them (Coppedge et al., 2025c; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Craig, 1979; Geurkink et al., 2019). This reinforces the notion that macro-level factors likely set the stage for, and influence, political conspiracy beliefs as much as individual-level factors. Additionally, the research shows that democratic quality is distinct from, and has an effect beyond, GDP, one of the few macro-level factors that has been theoretically studied in this context before (Hornsey et al., 2023a). In fact, democratic quality had the largest effect on political conspiracy beliefs, surpassing both the numeric individual-level predictors and GDP (see Table 10).

The second contribution of this research is the finding that low feelings of external political efficacy increase political conspiracy belief and explain about 4% of the effect that democratic quality has on political conspiracy beliefs. Building on this finding, and as suggested in the literature review, there is evidence that having individual-level existential needs, which trigger sense-making processes aimed at satisfying epistemic needs, serve as a stronger mechanism linking democratic quality

to individual political conspiracy beliefs than the variables available to measure purely epistemic or social needs (Landau et al., 2015). For a full or partial mediation effect to occur, the coefficient for democratic quality should become insignificant or reduced when adding the mediator, since some or all of the relationship would then be explained through the mediating variable (Aneshensel, 2013). However, none of the variables testing for alternative explanations reduced the coefficient for democratic quality, suggesting no other variable would serve as a significantly better mediator than external political efficacy (see Tables 8, 9). Additionally, democratic quality was not significantly associated with the need for cognitive closure, one way purely epistemic needs have previously been studied, thus disqualifying it from serving as a mediating variable (Douglas et al., 2019; Aneshensel, 2013).

While the mediating effect of the available measure of external political efficacy was quite small (see Table 12), this effect may have been improved with a more precise measure of efficacy or inclusion of questions measuring political alienation in the dataset. Finally, aside from studies exploring COVID-19 conspiracies, this thesis contributes to the limited amount of research investigating how a lack of control in a specific domain leads to conspiracy belief within that same domain only (Stojanov et al., 2023).

6.2 Noteworthy Findings

Four particularly notable, yet unexpected findings emerged while describing the data (see Tables 5, 6, 7). The first two findings are that regardless of democratic quality, average political trust and external political efficacy scores are uniformly low across countries. On a scale from 0-10, every country has a mean average political trust score below five, with the entire sample averaging 3.92. Likewise, on a scale from 1-5, every country has an average external political efficacy score below 2.5. However, the fact that Germany's average political trust score is 3.91, compared to the United States' 4.29, and that their corresponding external political efficacy scores

are 2.38 and 2.34, respectively, lends further support to the notion that these are distinct concepts with different effects on political conspiracy belief. Similarly, the third finding is that the average need for cognitive closure is consistently high across countries. Measured on a scale from 1-5 (from low to high needs), every country has average scores greater than or equal to 3.5, with the sample mean being 3.57.

Valgarðsson et al. (2025) have found that trust in government and political parties ("representative institutions"), as opposed to trust in the courts and police ("implementing institutions"), has been declining globally in recent years (p.2). One possible explanation linking the first three findings is that the increasing unpredictability in the world — driven by threats like climate change, the rise of AI far-right leaders, and economic uncertainty—heightens people's need for certainty, leading them to turn to social media in search of information and reassurance. This, in turn, may decrease political trust and feelings of external efficacy due to misinformation and polarized narratives which are prioritized on social media sites (Dow et al., 2021). It is worth noting that the conspiracy data used in this study was collected before the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, an extremely uncertain time.

The last noteworthy finding is that, despite the negative relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs, the United States seems to deviate from this expected trend. Out of the countries in the sample, the U.S. ranks third in democratic quality, yet has the second highest average level of political conspiracy beliefs (see Figures 1, 2). Further, the U.S. has the third highest scores in average political trust and external political efficacy, taking into account that Germany and Canada are tied (see Table 6 and 7; Figure 3). The United States' political trust score is only about 14% lower than that of first ranked Australia's (4.29 vs. 4.88), yet notably around 9% higher than fourth-ranked Germany's (4.29 vs. 3.91), which, in turn, is 60% higher than last place South Africa's (3.91 vs. 2.45). Additionally, while South Africa, the U.S., and Brazil have the highest levels of political conspiracy

belief in the sample, the U.S. exhibits a wider spread (1.67) compared to South Africa (1) and Brazil (1.34) (see Table 7).

Instead of dismissing the assumptions of this research and simply accepting Hofstadter's (1965) concept of the "paranoid style", which he initially used to describe a distinctly American phenomenon rooted in right-wing movements throughout history, this finding might alternatively reflect that individuals who believe in conspiracy theories used as "tool[s] of political communication" by government actors may exhibit higher levels of political trust than those who believe in conspiracy theories not used by political actors, or even those who don't believe in them at all (Schlipphak et al., 2022, p.159). The rise of Donald Trump and his slogan "Make America Great Again", which asserts that he alone can save America from corruption and what the "elites have given away to globalization…cosmopolitan and universalist values", may have fostered increased trust in Trump himself, precisely because he positioned himself as the only trustworthy actor in a fundamentally corrupt system. He may have convinced individuals of this by promoting conspiracy beliefs such as a "deep state" working to prevent him from holding office, or that left-wing politicians aim to gradually replace "whites" with "immigrants" (Hellinger, 2023, pp.3-4). In other words, this pattern of high political trust and political conspiracy belief, regardless of democratic quality, may also be present in other democracies where populist leaders are gaining widespread support, such as in Italy (Vohra, 2023).

6.3 Limitations and Methodological Considerations

It is important to note this research's limitations—including methodological considerations, such as dataset constraints, as well as study design choices and omitted variables which could have been theoretically valuable to include.

6.3.1 Dataset Limitations:

As noted in the methodological section, the conspiracy data was collected through an non-probability sample where participants opted in to take an online survey for a reward. Additionally, only quotas for age and gender were introduced so that the sample could represent the population (Bordeleau et al., 2023a, p. 4).

While cost-effective, the use of an internet survey to collect the CCRS data affects the generalizability of the sample to the population for two reasons. First, it is impossible to know the population that the survey actually reached. Second, no quotas were applied based on country, employment status, or education and income levels. As a result, participants who were motivated to respond to an internet survey may be more likely to have higher incomes and levels of education, and more stable employment than the general population— a pattern which is seen in the Brazilian and South African sample (see Table 1). The second reason the sample affects generalizability is that individuals who choose to participate in internet surveys often do so due to specific interests or motivations, which can lead to biases (Andrade, 2020). For example, very low educational achievement and high unemployment are overrepresented in the Australian and U.S. samples (see Table 1). As homeschooling continues to grow in both countries, one possible explanation for this overrepresentation is that individuals who were home-schooled, often holding strong religious or anti-establishment beliefs, may have had greater motivation to participate in a survey to share their political beliefs (Forlin et al., 2023).

Another limitation of the CCRS data is that the original questionnaire includes important sociodemographic questions which the final dataset does not, such as race/ethnicity and specific religious identification (Bordeleau et al., 2023b, 2023c). These variables could have impacted the primary relationship in question or, at the very least, provided additional insights. To clarify the exclusions, I emailed the researchers, who explained that response inconsistencies across independent surveys in different countries led to the variables being dropped to facilitate the data merge.

Moreover, the analysis is constrained by the specific variables included in the CCRS dataset. For example, more of the relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs may have operated through external political efficacy if it was measured through an actual efficacy scale. However, the only related variables the CCRS had available were those from a "populist attitude scale" (Bordeleau et al., 2023d, p.6). Thus, the proxy variable chosen for external political efficacy was the item in the scale that most closely aligned with the theoretical concepts of responsiveness and perceived distance between citizens and their political representatives (Craig, 1979).

Further, while experiencing exclusively unmet epistemic needs—measured using the need for cognitive closure scale— did not mediate the relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs, the potential mediating effect of having unfulfilled social needs was not tested, as the only variable available to measure social or group identification in the dataset was self-placement on a left-right ideological scale from 0-10 (Bordeleau et al., 2023d, p.2). Variables more closely aligned with the theoretical understanding of having unmet "social needs", such as the motivation to maintain positive self or group self-esteem, could offer a more accurate test of whether unfulfilled existential needs which trigger epistemic processes are truly the strongest drivers of the relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2017, p.540; Landau et al., 2015).

For example, variables that measure how important an individual's ideological placement is to their identity, along with measures of attitudes towards those in other groups or on the opposite side of the ideological scale—such as "feeling thermometers" (how cold or warm one feels), "trait ratings" (e.g., perceived selfishness or honesty), or "trust scores"—- could better capture social needs related to the degree of in-group identification and perceived out-group threat (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019, pp.115-116; Hornsey et al., 2023, p.90). Alternatively, variables

measuring “collective narcissism”— the belief that one’s group is superior yet undervalued—such as the statement “not many people seem to fully understand the importance of [the U.S. in the world]”, could serve as an indicator of how secure one’s social and group identity is (Hornsey et al., 2023, p.90).

6.3.2 Study Limitations:

This study made a notable choice to focus on the effect of democratic quality, rather than the country itself, on political conspiracy beliefs across countries. Using countries as the main independent variables would capture a range of factors that may influence political conspiracy belief beyond democratic quality, including levels of polarization, social inequality, cultural values, migration patterns, media system functioning, and historical legacies or trauma. Instead, focusing solely on democratic quality ensures that the relationship with political conspiracy belief is not being driven by one of the aforementioned factors. While GDP, education levels, religiosity, and political trust were included in the analysis to account for baseline country differences, it is not feasible to include all the potential factors which differ between countries, many of which are heavily correlated (Hornsey & Pearson, 2022). Thus, future research should aim to include as many of these variables as possible to isolate the specific effects of each.

Additionally, this research operated under the assumption that the most recent conceptualization of conspiracy belief— as a response to unmet psychological needs— offered the most valid framework for analysis (Douglas et al., 2017). The CCRS dataset, however, does include questions on whether “most people can be trusted” and an “authoritarianism” scale with items such as, “the way things are going in this country, it’s going to take a lot of ‘strong medicine’ to straighten out… the criminals” (Bordeleau et al., 2023d, p.3; pp.6-7). While the social trust statement is not an ideal measure of paranoia, these variables could have been used to test the psychological needs based conceptualization against earlier theories, such as

Hofstadter's (1965) view that extremists hold paranoid beliefs due to discomfort with social change. Future studies should consider comparing current frameworks to earlier ones to strengthen current conceptual arguments.

Finally, this study used Aneshensel's (2013) elaboration model to investigate "whether a causal interpretation of the covariation between [democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs] is likely to be true" by testing whether the observed relationship holds beyond chance, alternative explanations, and third variables which could introduce spuriousness (p.121). While it is impossible to control for every alternative explanation and third variable, the inclusion of a mediating variable offered further insight into whether the theory operated through its proposed mechanisms. However, it is difficult to establish definitive causality in social science research, and results need to be replicated many times across studies before this can be concluded.

Nevertheless, causal inference could be further strengthened by confirming that democratic quality (the presumed cause) precedes political conspiracy belief (the effect), which is difficult to establish with cross-sectional data (Aneshensel, 2013). Alternatively, as Aneshensel (2013) suggests, this condition could be satisfied by testing whether theoretically identified variables that precede quality of democracy and follow political conspiracy beliefs behave as expected. Taking all of the limitations into account, the findings provide strong evidence that a causal interpretation exists between democratic quality and political conspiracy belief among adult internet users in Brazil, Canada, Germany, South Africa, Australia, and the United States. However, the exact population and full causality can not be claimed with complete certainty.

6.4 Directions for Further Research

While this study offered important insights into the relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs, several avenues remain for further

exploration. First, to address the limitations of the dataset used in this study— both in terms of its research design and the variables included— the survey could be redistributed in more democratic countries, particularly non-Western ones, using an experimental design that contains more variables, specifically political efficacy scales and those previously discussed which capture social needs. If an experimental design is too costly, attempts should be made to introduce quotas for education level, SES, and employment status while still allowing for a diverse respondent pool. A longitudinal research design, which has respondents answer the same survey over multiple years, could further help establish causality between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs by showing how individuals' beliefs change over time in response to varying democratic conditions ("Longitudinal Research", 2004).

A longitudinal research design, however, may not fully uncover the directionality of the relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs. Research has found that, in the United States, exposure to a political conspiracy theory decreases trust in the government (Einstein & Glick, 2015). Additionally, belief in generic conspiracy claims, although not specifically political, has been shown to decrease external political efficacy and political participation across the democratic countries of the U.S., Japan, UK, Poland, and Estonia (Ardèvol‐Abreu et al., 2020). Thus, further research is needed to determine whether lower democratic quality leads to diminished external political efficacy, which in turn increases political conspiracy beliefs, or whether political conspiracy beliefs decrease efficacy which, in turn, undermines democratic quality due to rising discontent or societal polarization. The relationship between these three variables may, in fact, form a self-reinforcing cycle. Additionally, further research should continue to examine whether the theoretical causes of conspiracy belief in authoritarian countries align with those in democracies, as this would allow for the study of how broader variations in democratic quality affect political conspiracy beliefs. Finally, future

studies would benefit from the continued exploration of domain specific conspiracy beliefs to increase theoretical precision and avoid overgeneralization.

VII. CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to explore how democratic quality influences political conspiracy beliefs, and how this relationship is impacted by individuals' sense of external political efficacy, through an analysis of six democracies. These aims addressed three important gaps in the literature. The first is the limited focus on the causes of political conspiracy beliefs, as opposed to all conspiracy beliefs. The second is the lack of attention to democratic quality as a distinct macro-level influence on political conspiracy belief. While the impact of macro-level factors on conspiracy beliefs in general have been understudied, even less attention has been given to democratic quality. The final gap involves understanding how democratic quality might cause low feelings of political control, a well-established individual-level driver of conspiracy belief. To address these aims, this study carried out a multi-step quantitative analysis using survey data on individuals' conspiracy beliefs and demographic, political, and psychological traits, as well as a measure of democratic quality, to answer the following research questions:

1. ***Do democracies with lower democratic quality have higher levels of political conspiracy beliefs?***

2. ***Do individual feelings of low external political efficacy mediate the observed effect of low democratic quality on political conspiracy beliefs?***

In line with expectations, the results offered full support for the hypothesis that lower democratic quality is linked to higher levels of belief in political conspiracy theories across the six-country sample of the United States, Canada, Australia,

Germany, Brazil, and South Africa. In fact, democratic quality had the strongest effect of all the variables tested, highlighting the importance of theoretically differentiating it from other macro-level factors and related concepts such as political trust. Additionally, the findings provided partial support for the expectation that low external political efficacy mediates the relationship between democratic quality and political conspiracy beliefs. While lower democratic quality does reduce external political efficacy, its role in explaining the overall relationship is relatively small, yet nevertheless statistically significant.

This research offered a new approach by using the only known cross-national dataset, that includes both individual level predictors and measures of conspiracy belief, to address the research questions. Although the data was drawn from a non-probability sample, limiting the generalizability of this study's findings, this approach helped fill a key gap in existing research, which has largely focused on either structural or psychological causes of conspiracy belief in isolation, rather than on their interaction in diverse contexts. Furthermore, while only partial support was found for the second hypothesis, this is likely because the dataset only contained an indirect measure of external political efficacy. Further research should consider repeating the current study with an experimental design and a survey which includes a direct measure of external political efficacy.

Overall, the findings support the notion that political conspiracy beliefs are most likely to emerge as a compensatory mechanism to restore a perceived loss of political control. This highlights the importance of examining domain-specific conspiracy beliefs as responses to loss of control within that specific domain. In this study, this meant investigating whether individuals who feel increasingly unable to influence politics are more likely to endorse beliefs such as the idea that politicians are being secretly influenced by a powerful, hidden group. However, this framework should continue to be applied across different domains. For example, by exploring whether the death of a vaccinated child from illness increases belief in science or

health related conspiracies, or whether economic hardship leads individuals to think greedy bankers intentionally create financial recessions to profit from them.

Understanding the unique causes of domain-specific conspiracy beliefs is important for developing effective, targeted solutions. For instance, belief in health-related conspiracies that form due to personal experiences may be addressed and improved with education initiatives. However, such initiatives are unlikely to reduce beliefs arising from both structural and individual factors. This study supports the idea that political conspiracy beliefs, in particular, are shaped both from low democratic quality, a structural factor, and low perceptions of external political efficacy, an individual factor. Thus, reducing these beliefs requires action on multiple levels. For example, to address the structural causes of political conspiracy beliefs, actors such as the media, foreign governments, opposition politicians, and civil society groups can exert pressure on governments to uphold stronger liberal democratic values. Simultaneously, local politicians, non-governmental organizations, and policy makers can promote efforts aimed at enhancing individuals' sense of external political efficacy, such as expanding voting access, providing education on how to run for office, or encouraging participation in local politics.

While this research has emphasized the influence of democratic quality and external political efficacy, it is likely that the causes of political conspiracy belief are complex and varied. Future research should further explore group-level factors, particularly those arising from social identity needs, as well as the directionality of the observed relationships, to deepen our understanding on how political conspiracy beliefs develop and persist, and to inform more effective strategies to address them.

REFERENCES.

Abadie, A., Athey, S., Imbens, G. W., & Wooldridge, J. M. (2022). When Should You Adjust Standard Errors for Clustering? *The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 138*(1), 1–35. https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjac038

Adam‐Troian, J., Wagner‐Egger, P., Motyl, M., Arciszewski, T., Imhoff, R., Zimmer, F., Klein, O., Babinska, M., Bangerter, A., Bilewicz, M., Blanuša, N., Bovan, K., Bužarovska, R., Cichocka, A., Çelebi, E., Delouvée, S., Douglas, K. M., Dyrendal, A., Gjoneska, B., … Van Prooijen, J. (2020). Investigating the Links Between Cultural Values and Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Key Roles of Collectivism and Masculinity. *Political Psychology, 42*(4), 597–618. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12716

Andrade, C. (2020). The limitations of online surveys. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine, 42*(6), 575–576. https://doi.org/10.1177/0253717620957496

Aneshensel, C. S. (2013). *Theory-Based Data Analysis for the Social Sciences*. SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506335094

Ardèvol‐Abreu, A., De Zúñiga, H. G., & Gámez, E. (2020). The influence of conspiracy beliefs on conventional and unconventional forms of political participation: The mediating role of political efficacy. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *59*(2), 549–569. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12366

Arel-Bundock, V. (2025). *WDI: World Development Indicators and Other World Bank Data* (Version 2.7.9) [R package]. https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=WDI

Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51*(6), 1173-1182. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.51.6.1173

Bermeo, N. (2016). On Democratic Backsliding. *Journal of Democracy*, *27*(1), 5–19. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012

Bordeleau, J. N., Stockemer, D., & Amengay, A. (2023a). The comparative conspiracy research survey (CCRS): A new cross-national dataset for the study of conspiracy beliefs. *European Political Science, 24,* 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-023-00463-4

Bordeleau, J.-N., Stockemer, D., Amengay, A., & Shamaileh, A. (2023b). *The Comparative Conspiracy Research Survey (CCRS)* [Data set]. Harvard Dataverse. https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VRRY9B

Bordeleau, J.-N., Stockemer, D., Amengay, A., & Shamaileh, A. (2023c). *The Comparative Conspiracy Research Survey (CCRS) Questionnaire* [PDF file]. Harvard Dataverse. https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VRRY9B

Bordeleau, J.-N., Stockemer, D., Amengay, A., & Shamaileh, A. (2023d). *The Comparative Conspiracy Research Survey (CCRS) Codebook* [PDF file]. Harvard Dataverse. https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VRRY9B

Bordeleau, J., & Stockemer, D. (2024). On the relationship between age and conspiracy beliefs. *Political Psychology,* 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.13044

Brotherton, R., French, C. C., & Pickering, A. D. (2013). Measuring belief in conspiracy theories: the generic conspiracist beliefs scale. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*, 1-13. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00279

Butter, M., & Knight, P. (2018). The History of Conspiracy Theory Research: A Review and Commentary. In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (pp. 33-46). New York: Oxford Academic. https://doi-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0002

Butter, M. (2020). Conspiracy Theories in American History. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (1st ed., pp. 648–659). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429452734

Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C. H., Lindberg, S. I., Teorell, J., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Bernhard, M., Cornell, A., Fish, M. S., Fox, L., Gastaldi, L., Gjerløw, H., Glynn, A., Good God, A., Grahn, S., Hicken, A., Kinzelbach, K., Krusell, J., ... Ziblatt, D. (2025a). *V-Dem [2025] Dataset v15.* Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds25

Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C. H., Lindberg, S. I., Teorell, J., Marquardt, K. L., Medzihorsky, J., Pemstein, D., Fox, L., Gastaldi, L., Tzelgov, E., Wang, Y., & Wilson, S. (2025b). *V-Dem Methodology v15*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C. H., Lindberg, S. I., Teorell, J., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Bernhard, M., Cornell, A., Fish, M. S., Fox, L., Gastaldi, L., Gjerløw, H., Glynn, A., Good God, A., Grahn, S., Hicken, A., Kinzelbach, K., Marquardt, K. L., . . . Ziblatt, D. (2025c). *V-Dem Codebook v15*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

Cordonier, L., Cafiero, F., & Bronner, G. (2021). Why are conspiracy theories more successful in some countries than in others? An exploratory study on Internet users from 22 Western and non-Western countries. *Social Science Information, 60*(3), 436-456. https://doi.org/10.1177/05390184211018961

Craig, S. C. (1979). Efficacy, Trust, and Political Behavior: An Attempt to Resolve a Lingering Conceptual Dilemma. *American Politics Quarterly, 7*(2), 225–239. https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X7900700207

Dahl, R. A. (1989). *Democracy and Its Critics*. Yale University Press.

Dalpiaz, D. (2021). *Applied Statistics with R: Chapter 7. Simple Linear Regression & Chapter 9. Multiple Linear Regression*. Retrieved from http://daviddalpiaz.github.io/appliedstats/

De Fortuna, A. M., & De Luca Picione, R. (2024). Searching for meaning through conspiracy theories: Considerations on the state of the art of psychological literature and definition of a research agenda from a semiotic dynamic cultural perspective. *Culture & Psychology, 31*(1), 116-145. https://doi-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1177/1354067X241246760

Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 26*(6), 538–542. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417718261

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding Conspiracy Theories. *Political Psychology, 40(*S1*),* 3–35. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568

Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2023). What Are Conspiracy Theories? A Definitional Approach to Their Correlates, Consequences, and Communication. *Annual Review of Psychology, 74*, 271–298. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-032420-031329

Dow, B. J., Johnson, A. L., Wang, C. S., Whitson, J., & Menon, T. (2021). The COVID-19 pandemic and the search for structure: *Social media and conspiracy theories. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 15*(9), e12636. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12636

Drochon, H. (2018). Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories in Great Britain and Europe? In J. E. Uscinski (Ed.), *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (pp. 337-346). New York: Oxford Academic. https://doi-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1093/oso/9780190844073.003.0022

Druckman, J. N., & Levendusky, M. S. (2019). What do we measure when we measure affective polarization? *Public Opinion Quarterly, 83*(1), 114–122. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz003

Easton, D. (1975). A Re-assessment of the Concept of Political Support. *British Journal of Political Science*, *5*(4), 435–457. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0007123400008309

Einstein, K. L., & Glick, D. M. (2013, August). Scandals, Conspiracies, and the Vicious Cycle of Cynicism. *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.*

Einstein, K. L., & Glick, D. M. (2015). Do I Think BLS Data are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories. *Political Behavior, 37(3),* 679–701. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-014-9287-z

Forlin, C., Chambers, D., & Banks, J. (2023). Developing a scale to measure the diversity of motivations and practices of home-schooling. *Educational Review, 77*(3), 750–763. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2229067

Geurkink, B., Zaslove, A., Sluiter, R., & Jacobs, K. (2019). Populist Attitudes, Political Trust, and External Political Efficacy: Old Wine in New Bottles? *Political Studies*, *68*(1), 247–267. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719842768

Giry, J., & Gürpinar, D. (2020). Functions and Uses of Conspiracy Theories in Authoritarian Regimes. In M. Butter & P. Knight (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 317–329). Routledge.

Groskurth, K., Nießen, D., Rammstedt, B., & Schäfer, T. (2021). An English-Language Adaptation and Validation of the Political Efficacy Short Scale (PESS). *Measurement Instruments for the Social Sciences, 3*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1186/s42409-020-00018-z

Haidt, J., & Graham, J. (2007). When Morality Opposes Justice: Conservatives Have Moral Intuitions that Liberals may not Recognize. *Social Justice Research, 20*(1), 98–116. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-007-0034-z

Hellinger, D. C. (2023). Introduction: Theorizing Conspiracy, Conspiracy Theories (pp. 1–36). In *Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories in the Age of Trump*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-44829-4_1

Hofstadter, R. (1965). *The Paranoid Style in American Politics: and Other Essays.* Harvard University Press.

Hornsey, M. J., & Pearson, S. (2022). Cross-national differences in willingness to believe conspiracy theories. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 47,* 1-6, 101391. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101391

Hornsey, M. J., Bierwiaczonek, K., Sassenberg, K., & others. (2023a). Individual, intergroup, and nation-level influences on belief in conspiracy theories. *Nature Reviews Psychology, 2*, 85–97. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00133-0

Hornsey, M. J., Pearson, S., Kang, J., Sassenberg, K., Jetten, J., Van Lange, P. a. M., Medina, L. G., Amiot, C. E., Ausmees, L., Baguma, P., Barry, O., Becker, M., Bilewicz, M., Castelain, T., Costantini, G., Dimdins, G., Espinosa, A., Finchilescu, G., Friese, M., . . . Bastian, B. (2023b). Multinational data show that conspiracy beliefs are associated with the perception (and reality) of poor national economic

performance. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *53*(1), 78–89. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2888

Imhoff, R., & Lamberty, P. (2018). How paranoid are conspiracy believers? Toward a more fine‐grained understanding of the connect and disconnect between paranoia and belief in conspiracy theories. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *48*(7), 909–926. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2494

Imhoff, R. (2022). Conspiracy theories Through a Cross-Cultural Lens. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, 5*(3). https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1175

International Monetary Fund. (2022, November). *The IMF and the World Bank.* https://www.imf.org/en/About/Factsheets/Sheets/2022/IMF-World-Bank-New

Investopedia Team. (2024, June 27). *Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)*. Investopedia. https://www.investopedia.com/terms/v/variance-inflation-factor.asp

Kay, A. C., & Sullivan, D. (2013). Cultural Unity and Diversity in Compensatory Control Processes. In M. J. Gelfand, C. Chiu, & Y.-Y. Hong (Eds.), *Advances in Culture and Psychology* (Vol. 3, pp. 181–226). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199930449.003.0004

Klintman, M. (2022). Knowledge Resistance. In M. Gross & L. McGoey (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies* (2nd ed., pp. 323–333). Routledge.

Landau, M. J., Kay, A. C., & Whitson, J. A. (2015). Compensatory control and the appeal of a structured world. *Psychological Bulletin*, *141*(3), 694–722. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0038703

Longitudinal Research. (2004). In M. S. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman, & T. F. Liao (Eds.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods* (pp. 598–601). Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589

Lührmann, A., Tannenberg, M., & Lindberg, S. I. (2018). Regimes of the World (ROW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes. *Politics and Governance*, *6*(1), 60–77. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i1.1214

Maerz, S. F., Edgell, A. B., Hellemeier, S., Illchenko, N., & Fox, L. (2025). *vdemdata: An R package to load, explore and work with the most recent V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy) dataset*. https://github.com/vdeminstitute/vdemdata

Martin, P. (2021). *Linear Regression: An Introduction to Statistical Models*. SAGE Publications Ltd. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529682731

Miller, J. M., Saunders, K. L., & Farhart, C. E. (2016). Conspiracy Endorsement as Motivated Reasoning: The Moderating Roles of Political Knowledge and Trust. *American Journal of Political Science, 60*(4), 824-844. https://doi-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1111/ajps.12234

Mtimka, O. (2024, June). *South Africa Has Entered a New Era.* Journal of Democracy. https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/south-africa-has-entered-a-new-era/

Nord, M., Lundstedt, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Borella, C., Fernandes, T., Gastaldi, L., Good God, A., Natsika, N., & Lindberg, S. I. (2024). *Democracy Report 2024: Democracy Winning and Losing at the Ballot.* V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.

Nord, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Fernandes, T., Good God, A., & Lindberg, S. I. (2025). *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg.

Norman, G. (2010). Likert scales, levels of measurement and the "laws" of statistics. *Advances in Health Sciences Education, 15*(5), *625–632. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10459-010-9222-y*

Norris, P. (2011). The conceptual framework. In *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (pp. 19–37). Cambridge University Press.

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. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12084

Olmsted, K. S. (2009). *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*. Oxford University Press.

Ozili, P. K. (2022). The Acceptable R-Square in Empirical Modelling for Social Science Research. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4128165

Papada, E., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Gastaldi, L., Köhler, T., Lundstedt, M., Natsika, N., Nord, M., Sato, Y., Wiebrecht, F., & Lindberg, S. I. (2023). *Defiance in the Face of Autocratization: Democracy Report 2023*. Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem Institute), University of Gothenburg.

Peters, M. A. (2022). Science, truth and conspiracy in the age of Trump. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 55*(14), 1647–1652. https://doi-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1080/00131857.2022.2148242

Pilch, I., Turska-Kawa, A., Wardawy, P., Olszanecka-Marmola, A., & Smołkowska-Jędo, W. (2023). Contemporary trends in psychological research on conspiracy beliefs. A systematic review. *Frontiers in psychology, 14,* 1075779. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1075779

Preacher, K. J., & Hayes, A. F. (2004). SPSS and SAS procedures for estimating indirect effects in simple mediation models. *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers, 36*(4), 717–731. https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03206553

Proxy Variable. (2004). In M. S. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman, & T. F. Liao (Eds.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods* (pp. 878–879). Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589

Roets, A., & Van Hiel, A. (2011). Item selection and validation of a brief, 15-item version of the Need for Closure Scale. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *50*(1), 90–94. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2010.09.004

Schlipphak, B., Isani, M., & Back, M. D. (2022). Conspiracy Theory Beliefs and Political Trust: The Moderating Role of Political Communication. *Politics and Governance*, *10*(4), 157–167. https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5755

Schober, P., Boer, C., & Schwarte, L. A. (2018). Correlation Coefficients: Appropriate Use and Interpretation. *Anesthesia & Analgesia, 126*(5), 1763–1768. https://doi.org/10.1213/ANE.0000000000002864

Statista**.** (2024a). *Employment-to-population ratio in OECD countries in 2022*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/268127/employment-rate-in-selected-industrialized-countries/

Statista. (2024b). *South Africa: Unemployment rate from 2004 to 2023*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/370516/unemployment-rate-in-south-africa/

Statista. (2025a). *Share of people with tertiary education in OECD and affiliated countries in 2022, by country*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1227287/share-of-people-with-tertiary-education-in-oecd-countries-by-country

Statista. (2025b). *Brazil: Unemployment rate from 1999 to 2023*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/263711/unemployment-rate-in-brazil/

Statista. (2025c). *Share of respondents in selected countries worldwide who believe in God or a higher power in 2023*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1387303/belief-god-higher-power-world/

Stojanov, A., Halberstadt, J., Bering, J. M., et al. (2023). Examining a domain-specific link between perceived control and conspiracy beliefs: A brief report in the context of COVID-19. *Current Psychology, 42*(8), 6347–6356. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-01977-0

Swami, V., Chamorro‐Premuzic, T., & Furnham, A. (2009). Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 24*(6), 749–761. https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.1583

Tavakol, M., & Dennick, R. (2011). Making sense of Cronbach's alpha. *International Journal of Medical Education, 2,* 53–55. https://doi.org/10.5116/ijme.4dfb.8dfd

Thalmann, K. (2014). "John Birch Blues": The Problematization of Conspiracy Theory in the Early Cold-War Era. *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies*, *15*(1). https://doi.org/10.5283/copas.182

Uscinski, J. E., & Parent, J. M. (2014). *American conspiracy theories*. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199351800.001.0001

Uscinski, J. E. (2018). The Study of Conspiracy Theories [Special Issue]. *Argumenta - Journal of Analytic Philosophy, 3*(2), 233–245. https://www.argumenta.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/3-Argumenta-Joseph-Uscinski-The-Study-of-Conspiracy-Theories.pdf

Uscinski, J., Enders, A., Klofstad, C., Seelig, M., Drochon, H., Premaratne, K., & Murthi, M. (2022). Have beliefs in conspiracy theories increased over time?. *PloS one, 17*(7), e0270429. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0270429

Valgarðsson, V., Jennings, W., Stoker, G., Bunting, H., Devine, D., McKay, L., & Klassen, A. (2025). A Crisis of Political Trust? Global Trends in Institutional Trust from 1958 to 2019. *British Journal of Political Science*, *55*, e15, 1-23. doi:10.1017/S0007123424000498

Van Prooijen, J.-W., & Douglas, K. M. (2017). Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations. *Memory Studies, 10*(3), 323–333. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017701615

Van Prooijen, J.-W., & Van Vugt, M. (2018). Conspiracy theories: Evolved Functions and Psychological Mechanisms. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 13*(6), 770–788. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691618774270

Van Prooijen, J., & Song, M. (2020). The cultural dimension of intergroup conspiracy theories. *British Journal of Psychology, 112*(2), 455–473. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12471

Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem). (n.d.). *Frequently Asked questions*. https://www.v-dem.net/about/faq/

Vohra, A. (2023, May 8). *Italy Now Has Conspiracy Theory as National Policy.* Foreign Policy. https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/05/08/italy-meloni-great-replacement-conspiracy-theory-immigration/

Walter, A. S., & Drochon, H. (2020). Conspiracy thinking in Europe and America: A Comparative Study. *Political Studies, 70*(2), 483–501. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720972616

Webster, D. M., & Kruglanski, A. W. (1994). Individual differences in need for cognitive closure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67*(6), 1049–1062. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.67.6.1049

Wood, M. J., Douglas, K. M., & Sutton, R. M. (2012). Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 3*(6), 767-773. https://doi-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1177/1948550611434786

World Bank. (2023). *GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2021 international $)* [Data file]. World Bank. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD

World Bank. (n.d.). *Data quality and Effectiveness*. World Bank Group. https://datahelpdesk.worldbank.org/knowledgebase/articles/906534-data-quality-and-effectiveness