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Exploring the Extremes: The Impact of Radical Right-Wing Populism on Conspiracy Beliefs in Austria

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Abstract: (1) Background: Populist radical right-wing parties and politicians have used conspiracy theories to perpetuate the antagonism between an evil elite conspiring against the good and unknowing people. Yet, less is known about whether and to what extent radical right-wing populism at the individual level is associated with different conspiracy beliefs. This analysis explores how the main components of radical right-wing populism—populist, nativist, and authoritarian attitudes—relate to both a general conspiracy mentality and specific conspiracy theories prevalent in political discourse. (2) Methods: Using data from an original 2023 online survey conducted in Austria, a stronghold of the populist radical right, this study includes new questions on immigration, COVID-19, and climate change, as well as a conspiracy mentality scale. (3) Results: The analyses reveal that all the main components are positively associated with different conspiracy beliefs, albeit to varying degrees. Across models, the strongest predictor is populism, followed by nativism and authoritarianism. Nativism varies the most across different conspiracy beliefs and is particularly associated with the belief in conspiracy theories related to immigration and climate change. (4) Conclusions: The results highlight the prevalence of radical right-wing populist attitudes across various conspiracy beliefs, reflecting how populist radical right-wing actors leverage conspiracy theories in their political discourse.

Keywords: conspiracy mentality; conspiracy beliefs; radical right-wing populism; political attitudes



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1. Introduction

In an age when truth sometimes appears stranger than fiction, conspiracy theories provide explanations pertaining to what some believe to be the truth behind official accounts of events. Synthesizing the basic structure of different conspiracy theories as stories of how powerful groups with a malicious intent to harm others secretly orchestrate an evil plan, scholars suggest that there is an underlying way of thinking that unites people in their conspiracy beliefs. This phenomenon is often referred to as a conspiracy mentality (Bruder et al. 2013; Imhoff et al. 2022b; Imhoff and Bruder 2014).

Research has extensively addressed both the idea of a general conspiracy mentality (CM) as well as the belief in specific conspiracy theories (CTs). While *conspiracies* refer to “a coordinated and concealed effort by two or more actors to bring about an outcome” (Douglas and Sutton 2023, p. 281), Douglas and Sutton (2023) define a *conspiracy theory* as “a belief that two or more actors have coordinated in secret to achieve an outcome and that their conspiracy is of public interest but not public knowledge” (Douglas and Sutton 2023, p. 282) which, as Butter (2020a) describes, combines intentionality, secrecy, and the dualism between good and evil forces (Butter 2020a). A *conspiracy mentality* refers to the general tendency to believe in the presence of conspiracies—regardless of the content of specific conspiracy theories—and explains why people believe in not only one CT but also in others and possibly even contradictory ones (Imhoff et al. 2022b; Miani and Lewandowsky 2024; Wood et al. 2012). In this paper, I use the term “conspiracy beliefs” to describe both a conspiracy mentality and the belief in specific conspiracy theories.

On the supply-side, scholars focus on the content, use, and communication of conspiracy theories of radical-right political parties and politicians (Hameleers 2021; Pirro and

Taggart 2022), whereas on the demand-side, scholars examine the role of political factors such as ideology in strengthening conspiracy beliefs. Less attention has been paid to the main components of radical-right populism on the individual level, namely, populism, authoritarianism, and nativism, and the extent to which different conspiracy beliefs are a function of these attitudes remains understudied. Thus, this study explores the role of these factors and their interactions, while distinguishing between a conspiracy mentality and the belief in specific conspiracy theories, and asks the question:

How is individual-level radical right-wing populism associated with (1) a conspiracy mentality and (2) the belief in specific conspiracy theories?

In this paper, I examine how individual-level radical right-wing populism is associated with different conspiracy beliefs measured as a general mentality or as specific narratives common in radical right political discourse. To do so, I use the example of Austria, a stronghold of the populist radical-right and no stranger to conspiratorial political discourse, as a case study. While conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon, political discourse in Austria has increasingly incorporated conspiratorial talk in an attempt to delegitimize official accounts, mainstream media, and political elites, and it has been used as a mobilization strategy in the process of campaigning for political support. In Austria, the COVID-19 pandemic, the immigration crises of 2015/16, and the ongoing threat of the climate crisis, have fueled conspiratorial discourse further. Politicians from the populist radical-right party FPÖ, in particular, use conspiratorial discourse and thus foster anti-elite and anti-science suspicion. In the Austrian context, conspiracy theories have become more relevant than ever and have left their mark on the Austrian electorate, with the FPÖ coming in first in the national election.

Given this context, my colleagues and I conducted an original online survey as part of the FWF-funded project PopCon, with new questions in November 2023, providing a sample of 1.509 respondents who answered questions about their conspiracy beliefs and political views. This representative sample of the Austrian population forms the basis of the analysis and provides insight into the political dimension of conspiracy beliefs in Austria. In particular, the survey allows for the analysis of radical right-wing populism as a combination of populist, authoritarian, and nativist attitudes across a general conspiracy mentality, as well as the belief in specific conspiracy theories. These narratives are based on conspiracy theories circulating in Austrian public and political discourse and deal with three main topics, namely, immigration, COVID-19, and climate change, all of which remain controversial topics in the Austrian context. In the analysis, I run two regression models per conspiracy belief with robust standard errors and provide average marginal effects across conspiracy beliefs in order to examine the role of, and compare, the effect of radical right-wing populism.

The results show that, while controlling for ideology, radical right-wing populism is still an important part of explaining conspiracy beliefs. The effects of these factors differ between the models, but they do so only in effect size as none changed in direction. Overall, populism, nativism, and authoritarianism are all positively associated with conspiracy beliefs across different conspiracy beliefs. While populist attitudes are the strongest predictors across models, authoritarianism is the weakest predictor. The strength of the effect of nativist attitudes is narrative-specific. The two-way interactions between the three variables only seem to matter in explaining the belief in the Covid-CT, where the interaction between populism and nativism shows a small amplifying effect. These results highlight that conspiracy beliefs are both a function of right-wing ideology and, specifically, radical right-wing populism, regardless of whether one looks at a general conspiracy mentality or specific conspiracy theories.

This paper is structured as follows: the next chapter briefly discusses the literature and introduces some theoretical expectations. The subsequent section details the data and method used to facilitate the analysis in chapter four. Following a discussion of the results, the conclusion considers the potential implications of this empirical study of conspiracy beliefs for future research.

2. Theoretical Considerations

The literature identifies various factors that are important in explaining conspiracy beliefs, which can be summarized as (1) sociodemographic factors, (2) psychological explanations, and (3) political determinants. Sociodemographic factors examined in the literature include age, gender, education, unemployment, etc. (Douglas et al. 2019; Drochon 2018; Freeman and Bentall 2017; Smallpage et al. 2020; Uscinski and Parent 2014), whereas psychological explanations range from a variety of factors such as lack of control, anxiety, and uncertainty (Swami et al. 2016; Van Prooijen 2019; Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017; Van Prooijen and Jostmann 2013) to seeing patterns and agency in random events (Brotherton 2015; Brotherton and French 2015; Douglas et al. 2016). Political science literature specifically focuses on the political factors underpinning why people believe in conspiracies. These include, for instance, left-right orientation, populism, authoritarianism, and views towards democracy (Balta et al. 2022; Bergmann and Butter 2020; Bilewicz and Imhoff 2022; Castanho Silva et al. 2017; Czech 2022; Grzesiak-Feldman 2015; Imhoff et al. 2022a; Krouwel et al. 2017; Müller 2022; Pantazi et al. 2022; Papaioannou et al. 2023a, 2023b; Walter and Drochon 2022).

While scholars have previously studied the role of populism and authoritarianism in isolation, they have yet to analyze the role of individual-level radical right-wing populism specifically on different conspiracy beliefs. Radical right-wing populism consists of three main components: populism, nativism, and authoritarianism (Mudde 2007), which are found together as consistent attitudes among individuals (Rooduijn 2014). These attitudes are said to be closely related to voting for populist radical-right parties—political actors in Western Europe and North America who also utilize conspiracy theories in political discourses to mobilize supporters and simultaneously delegitimize their political opponents (Bergmann and Butter 2020; Hameleers 2021; Pirro and Taggart 2022; Rooduijn 2014; Rydgren 2017).

The literature suggests that populist attitudes are related to conspiracy beliefs, as people who see the world as divided into corrupt elites and the good people may be more inclined to believe that these elites are also conspiring in secret against the interest of the people (Sawyer 2022). Studies show that populist attitudes are positively associated with conspiracy beliefs, whether measured as a conspiracy mentality or the belief in specific CTs (Castanho Silva et al. 2017; Christner 2022; Eberl et al. 2021; Stecula and Pickup 2021; Van Prooijen et al. 2022; Mehl et al. 2024). But as Mudde (2004) suggests, populism is considered a thin-centered ideology, with no ideological core, and can be found both on the left as well as on the right. When it comes to the concept of radical right-wing populism, the ideological core further includes authoritarian and nativist attitudes (Mudde 2004; Sawyer 2022; Rooduijn 2014). While some find no empirically unique effect of conspiracy thinking on (right-wing) authoritarianism isolated from other “unwarranted epistemic beliefs” (Smallpage et al. 2023, p. 2), other research suggests a positive relationship between (right-wing) authoritarianism as well as views on democracy and conspiracy beliefs (Grzesiak-Feldman 2015; Richey 2017; Pantazi et al. 2022; Papaioannou et al. 2023a), as people holding more pronounced authoritarian views may also be more inclined to see the world in conspiratorial terms. Less research has focused on nativism as a specific form of nationalism (Mudde 2007; Rooduijn 2014), rather than a more general ideological positioning. Nevertheless, some have found both ideological extremism (Bilewicz and Imhoff 2022; Enders et al. 2023; Imhoff et al. 2022a; Van Prooijen et al. 2015) and right-wing ideology (Galliford and Furnham 2017; Miller et al. 2016; Nera et al. 2021) to be associated with different conspiracy beliefs. Nativism as the ideological core of radical right-wing populism (Rooduijn 2014) has yet to be examined in the context of conspiracy beliefs, but it may be more narrative-specific as the belief in conspiracy theories specifically related to immigration should be particularly influenced by nativism.

As this study looks at the case of Austria, the political context and political debate should be considered in the argumentation. Apart from the Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ) and the satirical protest party “Bierpartei”, which, in national elections, fails to win

enough votes to cross the 4% threshold into parliament, there are no relevant (radical) left-wing parties in Austria at the national level that take part in the public discourse on the three issues analyzed. In terms of immigration, COVID-19, and climate change, the debate is primarily dominated by the radical right-wing FPÖ, the center-right ÖVP and, to a lesser extent, the center-left SPÖ, the liberal-centrist NEOS, and the progressive-left Greens. The FPÖ in particular, which is currently leading in the polls ahead of the upcoming national elections in autumn 2024, has engaged in a politically polarizing and, at times, conspiratorial discourse on all three issues. Furthermore, earlier analysis by [Imhoff et al. \(2022a\)](#) finds the relationship between ideology and conspiracy mentality to be skewed towards the right in their Austrian sample ([Imhoff et al. 2022a](#)). These findings and the political circumstances in Austria lead to the general expectation that conspiracy beliefs should be positively associated with all three main components of radical right-wing populism.

Therefore, I formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: *Populist attitudes are positively associated with conspiracy beliefs.*

H2: *Authoritarianism is positively associated with conspiracy beliefs.*

H3: *Nativism is positively associated with conspiracy beliefs.*

In addition to these positive main effects, I will also look at the interaction between these three attitudes to see if the effect of one of the variables is dependent on the level of another variable. As previous studies have already suggested, political attitudes may not only work in isolation but may also interact with each other ([Hawkins et al. 2020](#); [Sawyer 2022](#)). Including interaction terms allows us to delve deeper into the interplay between variables, and, in this case, it may help to better understand the potential interaction between the three main components of radical right-wing populism. This is also consistent with the view that populism, as a thin-centered ideology, is often combined with other ideological components, and that radical right-wing populism is then the combination of populism with nativist and authoritarian views ([Mudde 2004](#)). In the Austrian context specifically, I suspect an amplifying relationship between the variables in addition to the direct effects of radical right-wing populism. For example, the positive effect of one variable may be reinforced among people who also hold more pronounced views of one of the other attitudes.

The hypotheses are thus the following:

H1a: *The positive effect of populist attitudes is stronger among people with more pronounced authoritarian or nativist attitudes.*

H2a: *The positive effect of authoritarian attitudes is stronger among people with more pronounced populist or nativist attitudes.*

H3a: *The positive effect of nativist attitudes is stronger among people with more pronounced populist or authoritarian attitudes.*

3. Materials and Methods

The analysis is based on data the PopCon-project collected through an online survey fielded in Austria in November 2023. For this purpose, MarketInstitut drew a random sample of 1509 respondents from its pool of participants to complete the survey, providing a representative sample of the Austrian population. The survey included questions on sociodemographics, psychological factors, political attitudes, and behaviors, as well as various questions on conspiracy beliefs. The sample of 1509 respondents is representative of the Austrian population, with about 51% female respondents, an average age of 49 years, and 16.6% with migration background, meaning that either the individual themselves or at

least one of their parents was born abroad. The following tables (Tables 1 and 2) summarize the sample and the dependent variables.

Table 1. Sample descriptives.

	Range	Mean/Proportion	SD
Gender	1 (male)/2 (female)	51% (female)	0.50
Age	16–99	49.10	17.36
Education	1 (primary)–3 (tertiary)	1.49	0.77
Migration Background	0 (no)–1 (yes)	16.6% (yes)	0.37
Ideology	0 (extreme left)–10 (extreme right)	4.88	2.10
Populist attitudes	0–10	5.57	1.86
Authoritarian attitudes	0–10	3.69	2.56
Nativist attitudes	0–10	6.21	2.62

Note: $n = 1509$; the table shows the range, mean/proportion, and standard deviation of sociodemographic indicators and the main independent variables of the sample.

Table 2. Dependent variables reported means and correlations.

	Mean	SD	CM	COVID-19	Climate Change
Conspiracy Mentality	4.87	2.66			
COVID-19	4.17	3.71	0.660 ** (0.631–0.688)		
Climate Change	4.05	3.75	0.635 ** (0.603–0.664)	0.597 ** (0.564–0.629)	
Immigration	5.22	3.23	0.608 ** (0.575–0.639)	0.545 ** (0.509–0.580)	0.613 ** (0.580–0.643)

Note: $n = 1509$; *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$, the table shows the means, standard deviation, and Pearson correlations, with 95% confidence intervals in brackets.

Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations between the four dependent variables. The conspiracy mentality index and the three measures of specific conspiracy theories all range from 0 to 10. Overall, conspiracy agreement is either slightly below or around the scale center, with the highest agreement (mean = 5.22) on the immigration conspiracy narrative. All conspiracy measures show a significant positive correlation with each other.

The main dependent variables cover questions aiming to measure (1) a general conspiracy mentality and (2) the belief in specific conspiracy theories related to the three main issues. Looking at both phenomena and utilizing different measures of the dependent variable serves to highlight the potential differences between these beliefs as well as the overall robustness of the results. The former is measured using the five items of the German version of Bruder et al.'s (2013) Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al. 2013) (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.91, see Appendix A for items), which are then combined into a single index (mean). The belief in specific conspiracy theories is measured by agreement to specifically designed items ranging from do not agree at all (0) to completely agree (10) on three distinct topics: immigration, COVID-19, and climate change. As discussed earlier, the issues and the related conspiracy theories were chosen because they concern both controversial and politically salient issues in Austria and are part of the political debate, as politicians continuously campaign on these issues and their consequences. The items (Table 3) are worded as follows.

Table 3. Wording of conspiracy items.

German	English
Die aktuelle Zuwanderung nach Österreich ist keine natürliche Entwicklung, sondern wird von den Verantwortlichen in der EU so gewollt und gefördert.	The current immigration to Austria is not a natural development but is desired and encouraged by those responsible in the EU.
Pharmazeutische Unternehmen haben Menschen mit experimentellen COVID-19-Impfstoffen geimpft, um ein Milliardengeschäft zu machen.	Pharmaceutical companies have vaccinated people with experimental COVID-19 vaccines to make a billion-dollar business.
Die Behauptung, dass wir am Klimawandel schuld sind, ist ein Schwindel, denn Grün-Politiker wollen uns nur von oben herab Vorschriften machen, wie wir zu leben haben.	The claim that we are to blame for climate change is a hoax, because green politicians just want to dictate how we should live.

The following graph (Figure 1) shows the percentage of people who believe in these theories by recoding the main dependent variables into binary variables, where the cases with values from 0 to 7 are coded as not believing in conspiracies, and cases with values above 7 to 10 are coded as believing in conspiracies. Conspiracy beliefs in Austria range from 20 to 30% of the population, with the highest percentages believing in the immigration conspiracy theory and the lowest percentages exhibiting a general conspiracy mentality.

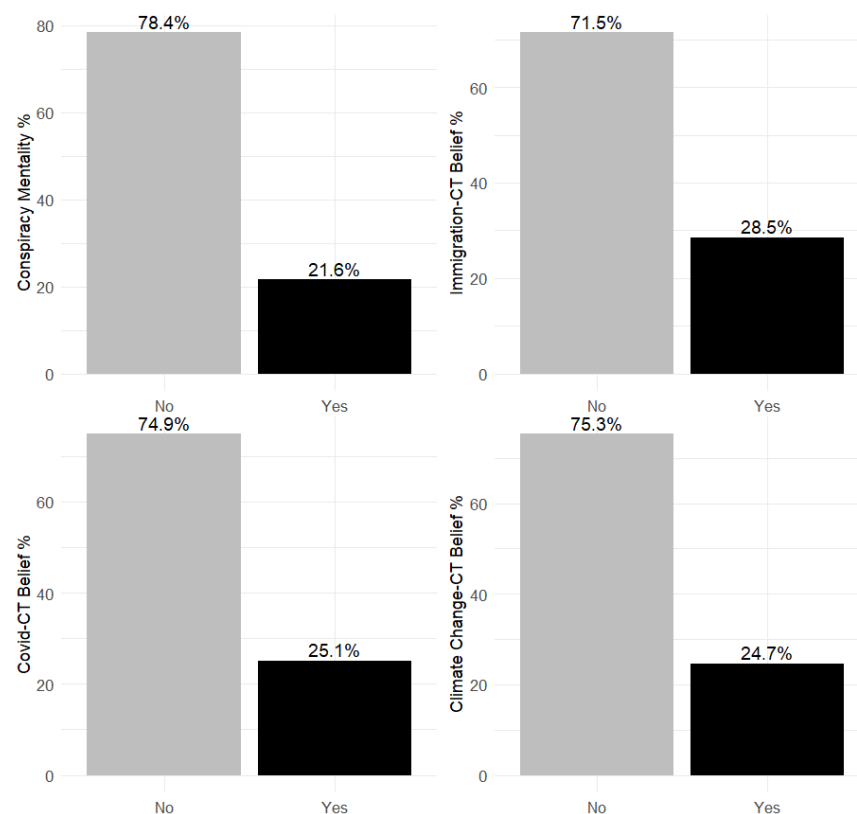


Figure 1. Conspiracy belief percentages.

The main independent variables concern the different components of radical right-wing populism and thus include populist attitudes, authoritarian views, and nativist attitudes. Populist attitudes are operationalized using an adapted scale of the Akkerman et al. (2014) scale (excluding items POP5 and POP8 from the original scale due to relevance; Cronbach’s Alpha = 0.78; see Appendix A for items) (Akkerman et al. 2014), in which items are combined into a single scale (mean). Authoritarian views are measured using

agreement on a scale ranging from 0 to 10, with higher values indicating stronger agreement on a single item (“Gehorsam und Respekt vor Autorität sind die wichtigsten Werte, die Kinder lernen sollten”). Nativism is measured using agreement on a scale with a single item as well (“Wird Österreich durch Zuwanderer zu einem schlechteren oder zu einem besseren Ort zum Leben?”), with 0 indicating “will become a worse place to live” and 10 indicating “will become a better place to live”. The responses were then recoded so that higher values indicate that Austria will become a worse place to live.

The control variables included in each model are the following: gender, age, migration background, education, subjective income, religiosity, social trust, satisfaction with democracy, and ideology (self-placement 0–10)—all factors that have been found to be related to conspiracy beliefs in previous studies (for an overview, see Douglas et al. 2019).

Since I include interactions in the models, as well as for interpretability purposes, all continuous independent variables were centered around the middle of the scale (5). Since all dependent variables range from 0 to 10, with higher numbers indicating stronger conspiracy belief, I run two OLS regression analyses per conspiracy belief with robust standard errors. For calculating the robust standard errors, I use the sandwich package in R (Zeileis 2006). Model 1 shows the results, including the controls as well as populism, authoritarianism, and nativism, and Model 2 reports the results while including the two-way interactions between these three variables.

4. Results

The following tables (Tables 4–7) report the results of the linear regressions for each of the four dependent variables (full models are displayed in Appendix A). The CM model accounts for 46% of the variance, the immigration model for 47%, the COVID-19 model for 37%, and the climate change model for 43%.

Table 4. OLS regression models—conspiracy mentality.

	Model 1	Model 2
(Intercept)	3.93 *** (0.17)	3.94 *** (0.17)
Populist Attitudes	0.55 *** (0.04)	0.54 *** (0.04)
Authoritarian Attitudes	0.05 * (0.02)	0.06 ** (0.02)
Nativist Attitudes	0.12 *** (0.03)	0.12 *** (0.03)
Populism × Authoritarianism		−0.00 (0.01)
Populism × Nativism		0.00 (0.01)
Authoritarianism × Nativism		−0.01 (0.01)
Controls	Included	Included
R ²	0.46	0.47
Adj. R ²	0.46	0.46
Num. obs.	1476	1476

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$. R-package “texreg” to create table (Leifeld 2013).

In the CM model (Table 4), the coefficients for populist, authoritarian, and nativist views are statistically significant and positive. This suggests that a conspiracy mentality seems to be more pronounced among those that show stronger populist, authoritarian, and nativist attitudes. Populist attitudes appear to be the strongest predictor as a 1 unit increase in populism from the center of the scale is associated with a 0.54 unit increase in conspiracy mentality, holding the other variables constant at the center of the scale. A 1 unit increase in nativist attitudes from the center of the scale is associated with a 0.12 unit increase in

conspiracy mentality, holding the other variables constant. Authoritarianism shows the smallest effect as a 1 unit increase from the center of the scale is associated with a 0.06 unit increase in conspiracy mentality, while holding the other variables constant. None of the interactions between the different components of radical right populism are statistically significant in this model.

Table 5. OLS regression models—immigration CT.

	Model 1	Model 2
(Intercept)	4.09 *** (0.20)	4.10 *** (0.20)
Populist Attitudes	0.50 *** (0.04)	0.46 *** (0.05)
Authoritarian Attitudes	0.06 * (0.03)	0.08 * (0.03)
Nativist Attitudes	0.39 *** (0.03)	0.37 *** (0.03)
Populism × Authoritarianism		−0.01 (0.01)
Populism × Nativism		0.02 (0.02)
Authoritarianism × Nativism		−0.00 (0.01)
Controls	Included	Included
R ²	0.47	0.47
Adj. R ²	0.47	0.47
Num. obs.	1476	1476

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$. R-package “texreg” to create table (Leifeld 2013).

Table 6. OLS regression models—Covid CT.

	Model 1	Model 2
(Intercept)	2.98 *** (0.25)	2.98 *** (0.25)
Populist Attitudes	0.59 *** (0.05)	0.54 *** (0.06)
Authoritarian Attitudes	−0.00 (0.03)	0.03 (0.04)
Nativist Attitudes	0.21 *** (0.04)	0.18 *** (0.04)
Populism × Authoritarianism		0.00 (0.02)
Populism × Nativism		0.04 † (0.02)
Authoritarianism × Nativism		−0.02 (0.01)
Controls	Included	Included
R ²	0.38	0.38
Adj. R ²	0.37	0.37
Num. obs.	1476	1476

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$. R-package “texreg” to create table (Leifeld 2013).

Table 7. OLS regression models—climate CT.

	Model 1	Model 2
(Intercept)	2.87 *** (0.24)	2.85 *** (0.24)
Populist Attitudes	0.42 *** (0.05)	0.41 *** (0.06)
Authoritarian Attitudes	0.17 *** (0.03)	0.16 *** (0.03)
Nativist Attitudes	0.28 *** (0.04)	0.28 *** (0.04)
Populism × Authoritarianism		−0.00 (0.02)
Populism × Nativism		0.01 (0.02)
Authoritarianism × Nativism		0.01 (0.01)
Controls	Included	Included
R ²	0.44	0.44
Adj. R ²	0.43	0.43
Num. obs.	1476	1476

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$. R-package “texreg” to create table (Leifeld 2013).

In the immigration models (Table 5), the coefficients for all components of radical right-wing populism are again statistically significant and positive. Holding the other variables constant, a 1 unit increase in populist attitudes is associated with a 0.46 unit increase, and a 1 unit increase in nativist attitudes is associated with a 0.37 unit increase in the belief in the immigration-CT. The smallest effect again concerns authoritarianism, where a 1 unit increase is associated with a 0.08 unit increase while holding the other variables constant. This indicates that individuals who are more populist, nativist, and authoritarian are more inclined to believe that the current immigration to Austria is not natural but rather desired and encouraged by the responsible in the EU. Again, no interaction effects are statistically significant.

In the COVID-19 model (Table 6), the coefficients for populism and nativism are again both statistically significant and positive. A 1 unit increase in populism is associated with a 0.54 unit increase, and a 1 unit increase in nativism is associated with a 0.18 unit increase, holding the other variables constant. This shows that individuals who hold stronger populist attitudes are more inclined to believe that pharmaceutical companies have vaccinated people with experimental Covid vaccines in the interests of a billion-dollar business. Authoritarianism does not seem to play a role in this model, as the coefficient for authoritarian attitudes is not significant.

In addition, there is a small amplifying effect between populism and nativism as the interaction term between these two factors is significant at the $p < 0.1$ level. This suggests that the positive effect of populist attitudes on immigration-CT belief is stronger when individuals also present an increase in nativist attitudes. Similarly, the positive effect of nativist attitudes becomes more pronounced when people also show increased populist attitudes.

Looking at the final model on climate change (Table 7), the coefficients for populism, authoritarianism, and nativism are again significant and positive. A 1 unit increase in populist attitudes is associated with a 0.41 unit increase, a 1 unit increase in nativism is associated with a 0.28 unit increase, and a 1 unit increase in authoritarianism is associated with a 0.16 unit increase in the climate-CT belief. This indicates that individuals who hold stronger populist, authoritarian, and nativist views are more inclined to believe that the claim that we are to blame for climate change is a hoax because green politicians are just trying to dictate how we should live. No interaction term is significant in this model.

5. Discussion

Considering the average marginal effects (Figure 2) to compare the overall results, the effects of populism are fairly consistent across conspiracy beliefs, although the effect is strongest in the COVID-19 model. The graph shows that among the main components of radical right-wing populism, populist attitudes are the strongest predictor of conspiracy beliefs across models. In the Austrian context, populist attitudes are, on average, strongly positively associated with different conspiracy beliefs, regardless of whether one looks at a general and underlying conspiracy mentality or the belief in specific conspiracy theories, which supports H1.

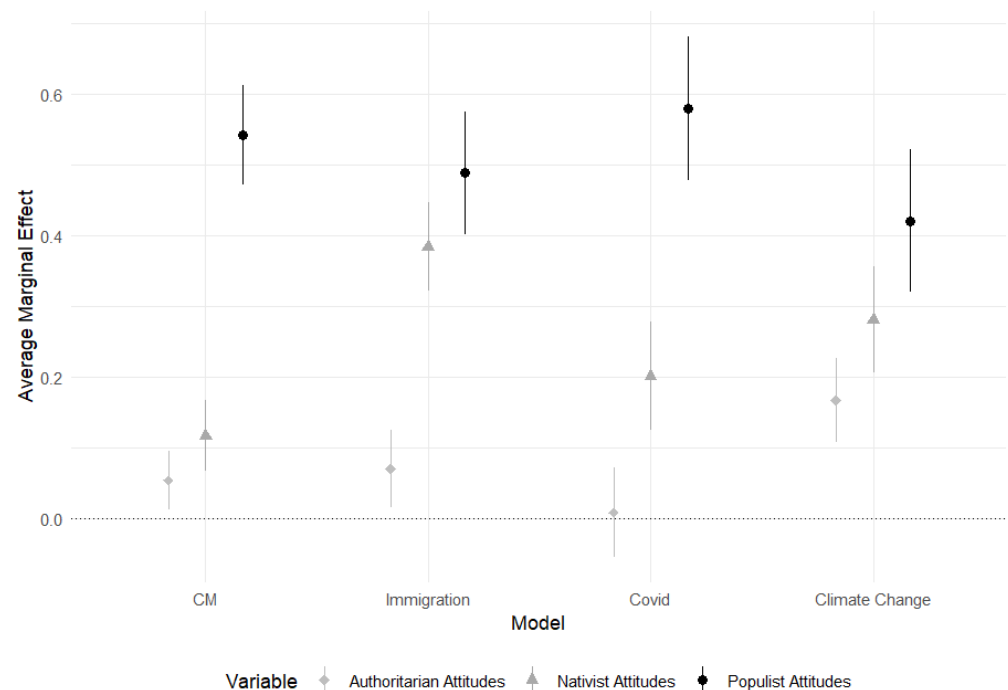


Figure 2. Average marginal effects—populism, nativism, authoritarianism. Note: Average marginal effects using robust standard errors plotted with the “marginaleffects” (Arel-Bundock et al. forthcoming) and “ggplot2” (Wickham 2016) packages in R.

Authoritarian attitudes have the weakest positive effect across models and are not significant in the COVID-19 model, lending partial support for H2. While still weak in comparison to populism and nativism, the effect of authoritarian views is strongest in the climate-change model, which, incidentally, concerns the conspiracy theory in which political “authority” (Green politicians who represented part of the government during the time the survey was fielded) is questioned the most. This narrative implies that one should not obey or comply with the political decisions of the political elite.

The effects of nativist attitudes show more varied results across different conspiracy beliefs. Overall, the results lend support for H3 in all models, although the effect of nativism is not as strongly pronounced in the models on a conspiracy mentality. In the immigration model, however, the effect of nativism is almost as strong as the effect of populism. The stronger positive effect of nativism in the specific CT models rather than the CM model can be attributed to fact that the conspiracy theory items themselves contain more right-wing elements. This is particularly the case for both the immigration- and the climate change-CTs. The climate change-CT item refers to Green politicians and the immigration-CT to immigrants and the EU as conspirators, which are common targets of right-wing political discourse in the Austrian context. The FPÖ tends to blame the EU and the Austrian government for the immigration crisis, alleging either sheer incompetence or possibly even an evil plan. This, so it is argued, will ultimately lead to the so-called Great

Replacement (“Bevölkerungsaustausch, lit. “population exchange”) (FPÖ TV Online 2023). Regarding the climate change-CT, the FPÖ likewise questions the human impact on climate change and instead portrays it as a ploy by green parties to dictate people’s lifestyles (Jeitler 2021). For these two CTs, a stronger relationship in terms of nativism is more plausible than for the CM or Covid-CT. Yet, nativist attitudes are also positively associated with the belief in the Covid-CT. Since this particular conspiracy narrative places blame on pharmaceutical companies, this narrative should not intuitively be directly influenced by nativist attitudes, especially not while controlling for right-wing ideology. Nevertheless, viewing pharmaceutical companies as conspirators which aim to profit off mass-vaccinating unknowing people with experimental vaccines is a narrative that is also familiar to the right in Austria.

Moreover, no interaction effect is significant across models, with a single exception in the COVID-19 model. Here, I find a marginal amplifying effect between populist and nativist attitudes, which supports H1a, but only when it comes to the belief in the Covid-CT. Overall, however, the analysis shows that the main components of radical right-wing populism influence different conspiracy beliefs separately, rather than through their interactions with each other. Adding the interaction terms in most models does not increase the explanatory power of the models, suggesting that the individual factors appear to fully capture the main effects of radical right-wing populism on conspiracy beliefs.

6. Conclusions

For a long time, conspiratorial discourse and associated conspiracy beliefs were argued to be a fringe phenomenon (Barkun 2015), banned to the outskirts of society and delegitimized as “crazy talk”. Yet, scholars suggest that conspiracy beliefs are not solely present at the margins of society but rather a product and reflection of broader societal and cultural fears and concerns (Fenster 1999; Knight 2013). Fenster (1999) argues that the belief in conspiracy theories can be both irrational and rational, as well as dangerous and conducive to democratic systems (Fenster 1999). But regardless of whether the belief in conspiracy theories can be considered as an (ir-)rational response to current political developments, this paper highlights how, just like the growing success of radical right populist forces in Europe, conspiracy theories have found their way towards the center of public discourse. The more recent resurgence of conspiracy theories, so Butter argues, has been specifically facilitated by the rise of the Internet as conspiracy theories and their proliferators have become increasingly visible through alternative media outlets on the Internet (Butter 2020b; Butter and Knight 2020). In Austria specifically, not least the immigration crises of 2015/16, the fundamental political and societal changes related to the climate crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic have created deal conditions for the unveiling and spreading of conspiracy theories, reflecting an increase in societal anxieties as a response to these developments. These crises have heightened feelings of powerlessness, alienation, anxiety, and lack of control, making the emotional and moral simplicity offered by conspiracy theories as explanations for world events seem appealing. Along with the increasing popularity of certain conspiracy theories among the public, Austria is experiencing a shift in political discourse as the populist radical right FPÖ engages in conspiratorial discourse and came in first in the last national election. FPÖ politicians embrace conspiracy theories to mobilize voters, tapping into people’s feelings of uncertainty and lack of control ahead of the upcoming elections. In doing so, the recent crises are perceived not as random events but as part of a larger plan orchestrated in secret to circumvent the interests of the public. Given the growing support for such theories and for the political actors who propagate them, it is necessary to further understand why people hold conspiracy beliefs.

But while research has focused on the political supply-side of how radical right-wing populists use and communicate conspiracy theories, less is known about the political demand-side relationship between radical right-wing populism and conspiracy belief. Additionally, there is still a lack of understanding of how conspiracy beliefs vary based on the distinction between a CM and the belief in specific CTs. This study therefore examines

how radical right-wing populism at the individual-level is associated with (1) a conspiracy mentality and (2) the belief in specific conspiracy theories. Against the background of the Austrian political context, I look at three politically salient and controversial issues: immigration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and climate change. In Austria, these issues and their corresponding conspiracy theories are still part of the political discourse and election campaigns. And because of the popularity of these conspiracy theories among populist radical right actors in Austria, I specifically examine whether the same is reflected at the individual level and whether radical right-wing populist attitudes are associated with different conspiracy beliefs. This provides insight into the Austrian population's acceptance of conspiracy theories and how certain political attitudes are an important part of explaining why Austrian voters may relate to conspiracy theories.

To this end, I use data collected from an original online survey which was conducted in November 2023 in Austria, in which 1509 respondents answered various questions about their political views and conspiracy beliefs. Overall, I find a consistent association between all three main components of radical right-wing populism—populist, nativist, and authoritarian attitudes—and all conspiracy beliefs, with only one exception (authoritarian views are insignificant in the COVID-19 model). More specifically, populist attitudes are the strongest predictor of conspiracy beliefs, while authoritarian attitudes are the weakest. Nativist attitudes vary more strongly between different conspiracy beliefs. These results suggest that radical right-wing populism at the individual-level is an important predictor of conspiracy beliefs, and that the effect of certain ideological factors may be both context-specific and narrative/measurement-specific.

As a case study, this study is limited to the Austrian context, and further research comparing a conspiracy mentality and the belief in specific conspiracy theories is necessary. While the Austrian case highlights the connectedness between radical right populism, both at the supply- and demand-side, and conspiracy beliefs, research would benefit from a more diverse selection of conspiracy theories. Regarding the role of ideological components such as nativism, as this appears to be context-, narrative-, and measurement-specific, an analysis to understand this relationship should include conspiracy theories that contain specific partisan elements and compare them to other conspiracy theories without such elements. Future research should address these limitations in a more specified and comparative manner.

Nevertheless, these findings showcase the importance of individuals' views on how democracy is to be run, as well as the dominance of radical right-wing conspiracism among the population. This is particularly relevant in the context where conspiratorial discourse gains traction among populist radical right parties and politicians who are within reach of government participation, as is currently the case in Austria, where the FPÖ is poised to potentially take over the chancellorship—the most powerful political position in the country.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by Ethics Committee of the University of Salzburg (protocol code GZ 22/2023 and date of approval 12 July 2023).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the data are part of an ongoing study. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to the author.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire [Bruder et al. \(2013\)](#) (German Version).

Ich denke...
...es geschehen viele sehr wichtige Dinge in der Welt, über die die Öffentlichkeit absichtlich nie informiert wird.
...Politiker geben uns nie die wahren Motive ihrer Entscheidungen.
...Regierungsbehörden überwachen alle Bürger genau.
...Ereignisse, die auf den ersten Blick nicht miteinander in Verbindung zu stehen scheinen, sind oft das Ergebnis geheimer Aktivitäten.
...es gibt geheime Gruppierungen, die großen Einfluss auf politische Entscheidungen haben.

Table A2. Populism Scale [Akkerman et al. \(2014\)](#) (German Version).

Die Politiker im Parlament müssen dem Willen des Volkes folgen.
Die Menschen, und nicht die Politiker, sollten unsere wichtigsten politischen Entscheidungen treffen.
Die politischen Unterschiede zwischen den Eliten und dem Volk sind größer als die Unterschiede innerhalb des Volkes.
Ich lasse mich lieber von einem Bürger vertreten als von einem Berufspolitiker.
Politik ist letztlich ein Kampf zwischen Gut und Böse.
Was man in der Politik als „Kompromiss“ bezeichnet, ist in Wirklichkeit ein Verrat der eigenen Prinzipien.

Table A3. OLS regression results—conspiracy mentality.

	Model 1	Model 2
(Intercept)	3.93 *** (0.17)	3.94 *** (0.17)
Female	0.30 ** (0.10)	0.30 ** (0.10)
Age (16–29)		
30–39	−0.07 (0.18)	−0.06 (0.18)
40–49	0.38 * (0.18)	0.38 * (0.18)
50–59	0.18 (0.18)	0.18 (0.18)
60+	0.42 ** (0.16)	0.43 ** (0.16)
Migration Background	0.05 (0.15)	0.04 (0.15)
Education (Primary)		
Secondary	−0.41 ** (0.15)	−0.41 ** (0.15)
Tertiary	−0.50 ** (0.15)	−0.50 ** (0.15)
Subjective Income (Living Comfortably)		
Coping	0.33 ** (0.12)	0.33 ** (0.12)
Difficult	0.49 ** (0.18)	0.49 ** (0.18)
Very difficult	0.57 † (0.30)	0.57 (0.30)

Table A3. *Cont.*

	Model 1	Model 2
Religiosity	0.05 ** (0.02)	0.05 ** (0.02)
Social Trust	−0.09 ** (0.03)	−0.09 ** (0.03)
Satisfaction with Democracy	−0.20 *** (0.02)	−0.20 *** (0.02)
Right-wing Ideology	0.11 *** (0.03)	0.11 *** (0.03)
Populist Attitudes	0.55 *** (0.04)	0.54 *** (0.04)
Authoritarian Attitudes	0.05 * (0.02)	0.06 ** (0.02)
Nativist Attitudes	0.12 *** (0.03)	0.12 *** (0.03)
Populism × Authoritarianism		−0.00 (0.01)
Populism × Nativism		0.00 (0.01)
Authoritarianism × Nativism		−0.01 (0.01)
R ²	0.46	0.47
Adj. R ²	0.46	0.46
Num. obs.	1476	1476

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$.

Table A4. OLS regression results—immigration.

	Model 1	Model 2
(Intercept)	4.09 *** (0.20)	4.10 *** (0.20)
Female	0.13 (0.13)	0.15 (0.13)
Age (16–29)		
30–39	0.16 (0.19)	0.17 (0.19)
40–49	0.44 * (0.21)	0.43 * (0.21)
50–59	0.30 (0.20)	0.29 (0.20)
60+	0.13 (0.19)	0.11 (0.19)
Migration Background	−0.07 (0.18)	−0.07 (0.18)
Education (Primary)		
Secondary	−0.53 ** (0.19)	−0.52 ** (0.19)
Tertiary	−0.32 † (0.18)	−0.32 † (0.18)
Subjective Income (Living Comfortably)		
Coping	0.50 *** (0.14)	0.51 *** (0.14)
Difficult	0.34 (0.22)	0.35 (0.22)

Table A4. *Cont.*

	Model 1	Model 2
Very Difficult	−0.37 (0.34)	−0.37 (0.35)
Religiosity	0.02 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Social Trust	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)
Satisfaction with Democracy	−0.11 *** (0.03)	−0.11 *** (0.03)
Right-wing Ideology	0.26 *** (0.04)	0.26 *** (0.04)
Populist Attitudes	0.50 *** (0.04)	0.46 *** (0.05)
Authoritarian Attitudes	0.06 * (0.03)	0.08 * (0.03)
Nativist Attitudes	0.39 *** (0.03)	0.37 *** (0.03)
Populism × Authoritarianism		−0.01 (0.01)
Populism × Nativism		0.02 (0.02)
Authoritarianism × Nativism		−0.00 (0.01)
R ²	0.47	0.47
Adj. R ²	0.47	0.47
Num. obs.	1476	1476

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$.

Table A5. OLS regression results—COVID-19.

	Model 1	Model 2
(Intercept)	2.98 *** (0.25)	2.98 *** (0.25)
Female	0.04 (0.16)	0.07 (0.16)
Age (16–29)		
30–39	0.37 (0.26)	0.38 (0.26)
40–49	0.84 ** (0.28)	0.83 ** (0.28)
50–59	0.22 (0.26)	0.20 (0.27)
60+	−0.23 (0.23)	−0.24 (0.24)
Migration Background	0.04 (0.21)	0.03 (0.21)
Education (Primary)		
Secondary	−0.29 (0.21)	−0.27 (0.22)
Tertiary	−0.52 * (0.22)	−0.51 * (0.22)
Subjective Income (Living Comfortably)		
Coping	0.60 *** (0.18)	0.61 *** (0.18)
Difficult	1.10 *** (0.27)	1.11 *** (0.27)

Table A5. *Cont.*

	Model 1	Model 2
Very Difficult	0.65 (0.46)	0.60 (0.46)
Religiosity	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
Social Trust	−0.09 * (0.04)	−0.09 * (0.04)
Satisfaction with Democracy	−0.26 *** (0.03)	−0.25 *** (0.03)
Right-wing Ideology	0.25 *** (0.05)	0.24 *** (0.05)
Populist Attitudes	0.59 *** (0.05)	0.54 *** (0.06)
Authoritarian Attitudes	−0.00 (0.03)	0.03 (0.04)
Nativist Attitudes	0.21 *** (0.04)	0.18 *** (0.04)
Populism × Authoritarianism		0.00 (0.02)
Populism × Nativism		0.04 † (0.02)
Authoritarianism × Nativism		−0.02 (0.01)
R ²	0.38	0.38
Adj. R ²	0.37	0.37
Num. obs.	1476	1476

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$.

Table A6. OLS regression results—climate change.

	Model 1	Model 2
(Intercept)	2.87 *** (0.24)	2.85 *** (0.24)
Female	−0.44 ** (0.15)	−0.44 ** (0.15)
Age (16–29)		
30–39	0.16 (0.24)	0.15 (0.24)
40–49	0.45 † (0.26)	0.45 † (0.26)
50–59	0.75 ** (0.25)	0.75 ** (0.25)
60+	0.95 *** (0.23)	0.94 *** (0.23)
Migration Background	0.10 (0.20)	0.11 (0.20)
Education (Primary)		
Secondary	−0.55 ** (0.21)	−0.55 ** (0.21)
Tertiary	−0.43 * (0.21)	−0.43 * (0.21)
Subjective Income (Living Comfortably)		
Coping	0.53 ** (0.17)	0.54 ** (0.17)

Table A6. Cont.

	Model 1	Model 2
Difficult	0.57 * (0.26)	0.58 * (0.26)
Very Difficult	0.48 (0.45)	0.48 (0.46)
Religiosity	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Social Trust	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)
Satisfaction with Democracy	−0.21 *** (0.03)	−0.21 *** (0.03)
Right-wing Ideology	0.39 *** (0.05)	0.40 *** (0.05)
Populist Attitudes	0.42 *** (0.05)	0.41 *** (0.06)
Authoritarian Attitudes	0.17 *** (0.03)	0.16 *** (0.03)
Nativist Attitudes	0.28 *** (0.04)	0.28 *** (0.04)
Populism × Authoritarianism		−0.00 (0.02)
Populism × Nativism		0.01 (0.02)
Authoritarianism × Nativism		0.01 (0.01)
R ²	0.44	0.44
Adj. R ²	0.43	0.43
Num. obs.	1476	1476

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.10$.

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