

**The Dark Side of Politics:  
How Anti-Social Personality Traits and Anti-Establishment Views Promote Beliefs in  
Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation**

**Abstract (150):** The Trump era highlighted the darker side of American politics. However, social scientists' conventional understanding of political behavior, often focused on mainstream actors and attitudes, is inadequate for understanding many of the beliefs currently dominating public discourse. For example, elite influence and partisanship alone cannot account for beliefs in election fraud, QAnon, or COVID-19 conspiracy theories, or for why people become wedded to and commit violence on such ideas. Social scientists must therefore develop new theories combining political, psychological, and social factors tailored to darker beliefs and behaviors. We therefore examine the linkages between the dubious beliefs highlighting the Trump era and anti-social psychological traits and anti-establishment political views using a unique national survey. In opposition to popular accounts blaming cognitive shortcomings or social media, we find that these beliefs are associated with psychopathy, narcissism, a predisposition towards physical conflict, and anti-establishment views, all likely activated by Donald Trump.

**Keywords:** Donald Trump, Dark Triad, Anti-Establishment, Conspiracy Theory, Misinformation

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**Data and Replication:** All materials will be made available on Harvard's Dataverse upon acceptance.

During the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic, beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation about the disease were closely associated with the utilization of untested medical treatments (Tuccori et al. 2020), vaccine hesitancy (Romer and Jamieson 2020), the stockpiling of weapons (Imhoff and Lamberty 2020), the refusal to socially distance and mask (Hornik et al. 2021), attacks on 5G cellular towers (Nakashima 2020), and even other forms of violence (Kaplan 2021), including attacks on health care workers (Harper 2021), altercations at government meetings (Thompson 2021), and an engineer's effort to crash a train into a hospital ship (Zaveri 2020). The same is true of beliefs in conspiracy theories about election fraud and QAnon: these beliefs were linked to criminal activity (Collins 2020), violence (Bump 2019), and the attack on the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021 (Armaly, Buckley, and Enders 2022).

Despite widespread corrective efforts, large, but varying, portions of Americans continue to believe dubious ideas related to COVID-19, QAnon, and the 2020 election, having become important fixtures of public opinion during the Trump era. However, social scientists' conventional understanding of political behavior, often focused on mainstream actors and attitudes, is inadequate for understanding many of the beliefs currently dominating public discourse. For example, elite influence and partisanship alone cannot account for beliefs in voter fraud, QAnon, or COVID-19 conspiracy theories, or for why people become wedded to and commit violence on such ideas. Social scientists must therefore develop new theories combining political, psychological, and social factors tailored to darker beliefs and behaviors.

We surveyed the American public in July 2021 about beliefs in a range of conspiracy theories and misinformation regarding COVID-19, QAnon, and election fraud. We additionally measured respondents' personality traits, political views, and behavioral tendencies.

Belief in conspiracy theories and misinformation regarding COVID-19, QAnon, and election fraud vary. First, we find that the factors typically employed by social scientists to explain political attitudes and behaviors (i.e., political identities such as partisanship and ideology) are only sporadically associated with the beliefs we examine. Second, and in opposition to many popular narratives, cognitive deficiencies and social media use also offer only limited explanatory power. Instead, the beliefs examined here appear to be adopted by people who harboring antagonisms toward the mainstream political establishment (e.g., populist views) and who display anti-social personalities traits (e.g., psychopathy) and conflictual behavioral styles (e.g. using physical violence to settle disputes). Further, support for Donald Trump is consistently related to such beliefs. Anti-social personality traits and anti-establishment views tend to outpace support for traditional political identities in explaining several of these beliefs, Donald Trump, educational attainment, and social media use in explaining beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation.

Our findings suggest that many current politically relevant attitudes cannot be adequately explained by the factors usually invoked by social scientists. Mainstream liberal-conservative ideology and partisanship, even extreme versions of those, are not well-suited to explaining the darker side of American politics, which has become plainly visible, and more influential, during the Trump era. By focusing more on anti-social traits and anti-system views, social scientists can better understand not only which people will adopt which views, but also what personality and behavioral traits people bring with them into the political sphere when they are activated to do so by leaders. Thus, we suggest a theoretical approach in which anti-establishment elites strategically activate anti-social, conflictual, and anti-establishment people into political action; we show the value of this approach by applying it to the January 6<sup>th</sup> attacks on the Capitol.

## Data and Methods

The survey of 2,065 adults was conducted between July 17–August 5, 2021. Qualtrics recruited a sample that matched 2019 U.S. Census American Community Survey records on sex, age, race, education, and income. Approval to conduct this research was granted by the University of [REDACTED] Human Subject Research Office (Protocol #20210618). In line with emerging best practices for self-administered online questionnaires (Berinsky et al. 2021), four attention check questions were included in the questionnaire. Participants who failed to complete all four correctly were excluded from the data set. A soft-launch test of the questionnaire (n=127) yielded a median time to complete of 8.9 minutes; participants who completed the questionnaire in less than one-half the median time were discarded. The sample’s demographic composition appears in the appendix.

Our dependent variables include beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation surrounding COVID-19, QAnon, and voter fraud. Chosen because pushed by Trump. In Table 1 we present the percentage of American adults who either “agree” or “strongly agree” with each of 17 different conspiracy theories or pieces of misinformation we asked about. Several patterns are noteworthy. First, COVID-19 misinformation regarding the vaccine finds less support, on average, than conspiracy theories about COVID-19, QAnon, and election fraud. That said, we observe variability in each category of conspiracy beliefs.

For example, a quarter or more of Americans believe that the dangers and impact of COVID-19 have been exaggerated while only 9% and 11% believe that 5G cellular technology or Bill Gates are behind the spread of coronavirus, respectively. Moreover, while 35% of Americans believe in the “deep state,” only 14% believe that Donald Trump would be reinstated as president on August 13, 2021—a theory spawned in the QAnon community. Second, election

fraud conspiracy theories find the most support. Approximately 30% of Americans support the general idea that U.S. elections are frequently rigged, while 27% believe that Joe Biden won the election through fraudulent means. We observe a sharp partisan divide in these beliefs: whereas 50% of Republicans express support for the general election rigging idea, only 18% of Democrats do. The breakdown is even starker when it comes to the Biden fraud belief, which finds support among 51% of Republicans and only 12% of Democrats. While it is not uncommon for those on the losing side of major elections to express skepticism about the outcome, the elevated levels are, as far as past polling data can reveal, uncommon (Enders et al. 2021a).

*Table 1: Questions about beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation and the percentage of the mass public that either “agree” or “strongly agree.”*

Conspiracy/Misinformation Belief Question	% Agree
<u>COVID Misinformation Beliefs</u>	
The COVID-19 vaccine can give you COVID-19.	18
The COVID-19 vaccine is a scam by the pharmaceutical companies to make money.	15
The COVID-19 vaccine will alter your DNA.	12
The COVID-19 vaccine causes infertility.	11
People receiving the COVID-19 vaccine will "shed" dangerous chemicals from that vaccine.	11
<u>COVID Conspiracy Beliefs</u>	
The number of deaths related to the coronavirus has been exaggerated.	29
The threat of coronavirus has been exaggerated by political groups who want to damage President Trump.	25
Coronavirus was purposely created and released as part of a conspiracy.	25
The coronavirus is being used to force a dangerous and unnecessary vaccine on Americans.	20
The coronavirus is being used to install tracking devices inside our bodies.	12
Bill Gates is behind the coronavirus pandemic.	11
5G cell phone technology is responsible for the spread of the coronavirus.	9
<u>QAnon-related Conspiracy Beliefs</u>	
There is a “deep state” embedded in the government that operates in secret and without oversight.	35
“QAnon movement” feeling thermometer (average rating, 0-100 scale).	21*
Donald Trump will return to the White House on August 13th in a second inauguration.	14
<u>Election Fraud Conspiracy Beliefs</u>	
Elections in this country are often rigged.	30
Joe Biden won the presidential election through voter fraud.	27

\*Respondents were asked to rate the “QAnon movement” on a 0–100 scale where 0 represents very cold/negative feelings and 100 represents very warm/positive feelings. We report the mean thermometer score.

Even though much is known about the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and various political, social, and psychological orientations and mechanisms (Douglas et al. 2019), we sought to explicitly consider a host of anti-social personality traits and anti-establishment

orientations that have only been idiosyncratically and incompletely examined by social scientists seeking to explain political attitudes and behaviors. Our goal was to focus on explaining beliefs and behaviors that are outside of traditional left-right politics.

We begin with “dark triad” traits (i.e., narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism), which are malevolent personality traits characterized by a lack of empathy and a manipulative, hostile interpersonal style (Jonason and Webster 2010) and also include one’s propensity toward physical conflict when navigating disagreement (Conrad et al. 2010) and anti-establishment orientations, which are an amalgamation of populist, conspiratorial, and Manichean worldviews (Uscinski et al. 2021), often associated with the acceptance of political violence (Enders and Uscinski 2021). We also measured respondents’ traditional political identities (i.e., partisanship and liberal-conservative ideology) as well as measures of their cognitive abilities and social media use, all of which are often blamed for conspiracy theory beliefs and recent incidents of associated violent behaviors. We included a feeling thermometer measuring support for Donald Trump, which is often distinct from traditional political identities in both its levels and impact on other attitudes; this is particularly important given that Trump has encouraged beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, QAnon, and election fraud (Uscinski et al. 2020; Pennycook and Rand 2021; Enders et al. 2021c) among his followers. Finally, we collected a host of sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age, religiosity, gender, race).

Most of the central independent variables in question are operationalized vis-à-vis a multiple-item index. The Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy measures are each four-item scales with Cronbach’s alpha reliability estimates ranging from 0.83 to 0.87 (see the appendix for details). The anti-establishment orientations variable is—per previous work (Uscinski et al. 2021)—measured using a combination of items tapping conspiratorial,

Manichean, and populist sentiments ( $\alpha=0.85$ ). Science literacy is an additive index of correct (coded 1) or incorrect (coded 0) responses to 11 questions about scientific facts (Okamoto et al. 2001). The social media use variable is an additive scale of responses to a series of questions about how frequently respondents visit Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube ( $\alpha=0.70$ ) (Enders et al. 2021a). Finally, the predisposition toward physical conflict is measured with an additive scale XXX ( $\alpha=0.85$ ). See the appendix for item wording and descriptive statistics.

### **Findings**

The quantities presented in Figures 1–3 are the result of OLS regression models. Each of the variables appearing along the left-hand vertical axis of the figure are independent variables. Figures 1–3 plot standardized regression coefficients—both the independent variables (except for dichotomous independent variables, such as gender and racial self-identifications) and the dependent variables were standardized to produce these estimates. Hence, the coefficients can be interpreted as the number of standard deviations change in the dependent variable are associated with a single standard deviation unit change in the independent variable, holding other factors constant (precise estimates from these models are presented in tabular form in the appendix). The farther a given estimate is from the vertical line at 0, the stronger the relationship (positive to the right, negative to the left) between the characteristic and the conspiracy belief(s) in question.

In Figure 1, we examine the correlates of beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories and in COVID-19 misinformation. Numerous studies have found that such beliefs are negatively associated with disease preventative behaviors (Bierwiazzonek, Kunst, and Gundersen 2021). Of the factors we examined, we observe statistically significant relationships between one's propensity toward physical conflict, psychopathy, narcissism (only in the case of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs), and anti-establishment orientations, on the one hand, and beliefs in COVID-



19 conspiracy theories (open circles) and misinformation (solid circles) on the other. Traditional political orientations, partisanship and ideology, exhibit weaker and inconsistent effects with Republicans more likely to believe in COVID-19 misinformation and conservatives more likely to believe in COVID19 conspiracy theories. Higher levels of education and science literacy are associated with fewer beliefs in both COVID-19 conspiracy theories and misinformation, but social media use is not associated with beliefs in either. Thus, the strongest positive predictors of beliefs in COVID-19 conspiracy theories and misinformation are anti-establishment orientations, Trump support, psychopathy, and the predisposition towards conflict.

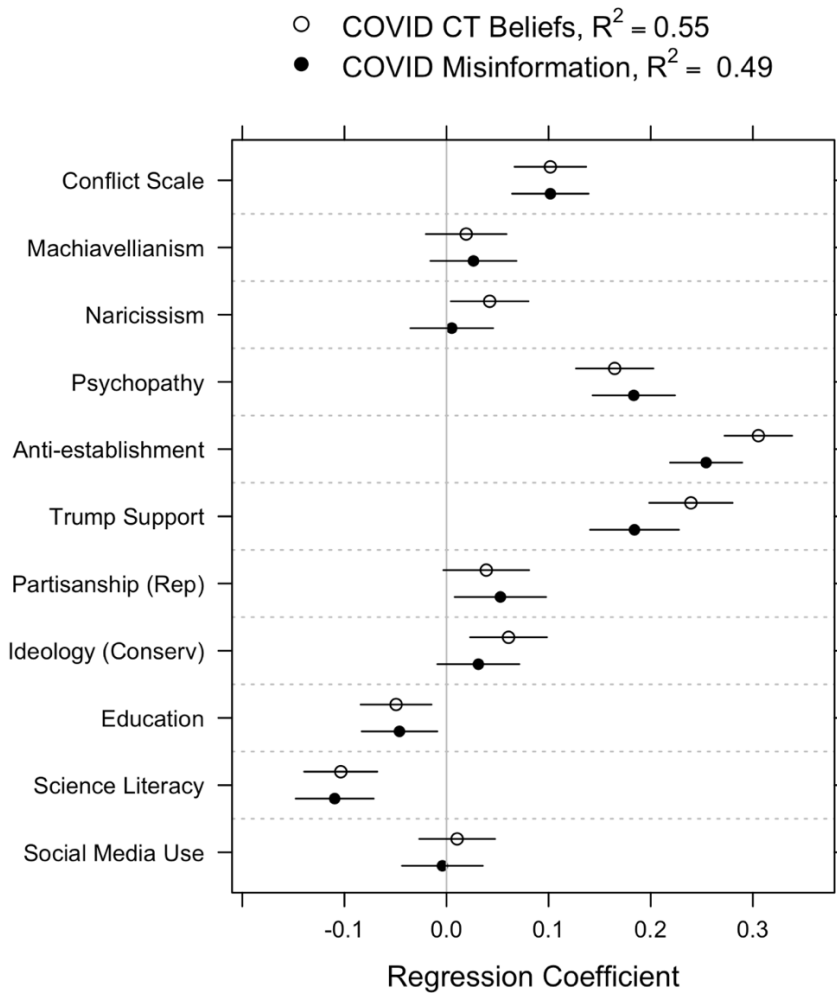


Figure 1: Standardized ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients, with 95% confidence intervals where dependent variables are beliefs in COVID-19 misinformation and conspiracy theories. The larger the absolute value of the coefficient (i.e., the farther a given plotting symbol is to the left or right of the dashed line, 0), the stronger the relationship between the independent variable (on the left) and COVID-19 beliefs ( $n=2,016$  for both models).

We observe a similar pattern when it comes to QAnon-related beliefs. Beginning with the most general conspiracy theory, the predisposition towards conflict, anti-establishment orientations, support for Trump, and right-leaning ideology are positively associated with belief in the “deep state.” The belief that Donald Trump would return to the White House in August 2021 is predicted by conflict, psychopathy, anti-establishment orientations, and Trump support; science literacy is negatively associated with believing Trump will be reinstated in 2021. For the

most direct measure of QAnon, the predisposition towards conflict, narcissism, psychopathy, Trump support, and partisanship are related to one's support for the QAnon movement as measured on a 0-100 feeling thermometer. While we observe very weak negative relationships between QAnon support and partisanship (significant) and ideology (not significant), this is primarily because we are controlling for Trump support. If we remove Trump support from the model, the partisanship coefficient becomes positive and marginally significant ( $p=0.063$ ). Further, science literacy, is negatively associated with QAnon support, and social media use is positively related.

The most consistent correlates of these three QAnon-related beliefs are Trump support, which is statistically significant across all three beliefs, and the predisposition toward conflict shows the same pattern, albeit with weaker relationships. Anti-establishment orientations positively predicts two and science literacy negatively predicts two of the three beliefs studied here. Partisanship and ideology are inconsistent predictors of these three beliefs, which cuts against most popular accounts of QAnon and QAnon-related beliefs.

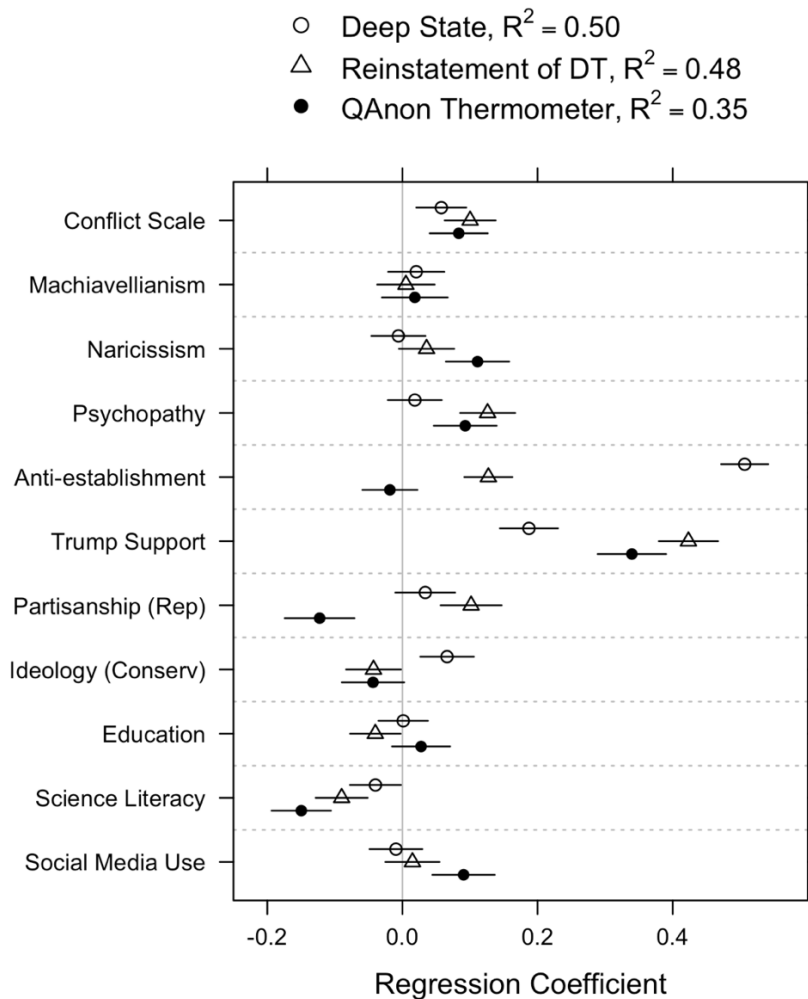


Figure 2: Standardized ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients, with 95% confidence intervals where dependent variables are QAnon-related beliefs. The larger the absolute value of the coefficient (i.e., the farther a given plotting symbol is to the left or right of the dashed line, 0), the stronger the relationship between the independent variable (on the left) and QAnon beliefs ( $n=2,016$  for deep state and reinstatement of DT models, 1,892 for QAnon thermometer).

Finally, we examine the correlates of beliefs in election fraud. For the more general belief, that elections are “often rigged,” we find that psychopathy, anti-establishment orientations, Trump support, partisanship (Rep.), and ideology (con) are positively predictive of belief. For the belief that President Biden won the election through fraud, the predisposition toward physical conflict, psychopathy, anti-establishment orientations, Trump support, and partisanship (Rep.) are positive predictors. Higher levels of education negatively predict belief in

this theory. The magnitude of the effects of the psychological traits rival those of partisan and ideological orientations, demonstrating that beliefs in particular conspiracy theories—even those with an obvious partisan component—are likely founded in personality traits and other orientations beyond partisanship and ideology.

Across all three sets of models, the only anti-social personality trait that systematically appears to be unrelated to conspiracy beliefs, at least controlling for other factors, is Machiavellianism. Every single other factor is associated with conspiracy beliefs in some, if not most, models. We also observe only inconsistent relationships between beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation and educational attainment, science literacy, social media use, and political identities.

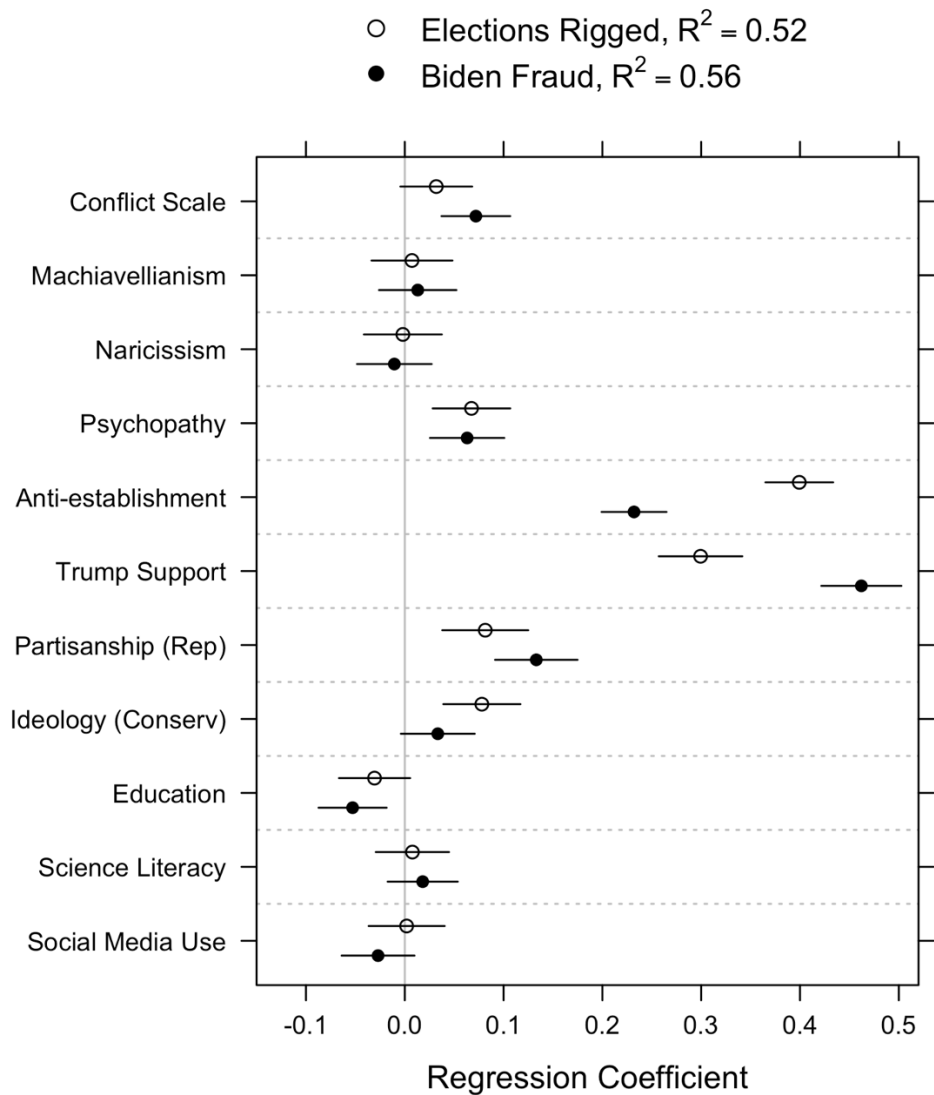


Figure 3: Standardized ordinary least squares (OLS) regression coefficients, with 95% confidence intervals where dependent variables are beliefs in election fraud conspiracy theories. The larger the absolute value of the coefficient (i.e., the farther a given plotting symbol is to the left or right of the dashed line, 0), the stronger the relationship between the independent variable (on the left) and election fraud conspiracy beliefs ( $n=2,015$  for both models).

Finally, we consider the relative importance of “dark” traits which are typically outside of traditional political orientations in relation to traditional political orientations, and factors focused on cognition and information. For this analysis, the dark traits include propensity toward conflict, Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and anti-establishment orientations;

political orientations include Trump support, partisanship, and ideology; and potential susceptibility to misinformation includes educational attainment, science literacy, and social media use. Figure 4 plots standardized Shapely regression values. These quantities provide an estimate of the relative importance of each set of predictors in explaining beliefs in the conspiracy theories and misinformation we examine—the greater the value, the stronger the predictive power.

The quantities presented in Figure 4 are standardized Shapely Regression values estimated using the “ShapleyValue” R package. Shapely Value Regression estimates the models described above using all possible combinations of predictors. This allows for the decomposition of the R<sup>2</sup> in an effort to understand which (groups of) predictors demonstrate the most explanatory power (Lipovetsky 2006). The values are the summed standardized Shapely values for each of these groups of predictors. Standardized Shapely values are scaled to range from 0–1 and sum to 1 for each dependent variable. We present the individual standardized Shapely values for each predictor variable in the appendix. These results are substantively identical to other approaches, such as dominance analysis (Johnson 2000).

In five of the seven cases, “dark” traits provide more explanatory power than the other factors. In the remaining models (reinstatement of Trump presidency and Biden fraud), political orientations provide more explanatory power than the dark traits or susceptibility to misinformation; this pattern makes substantive sense given that salient partisan figures are central characters in both of these conspiracy theories.

This analysis demonstrates the relative importance of anti-social personality traits and anti-establishment orientations compared to partisan political ones and one’s potential susceptibility to misinformation. Simply put, the psychological ingredients of conspiracy beliefs

are quite important, perhaps more so than other factors. Even though political figures like Donald Trump may facilitate beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation, certain personality traits and orientations toward the establishment may be necessary for toxic political rhetoric to take effect (Pavlović and Franc 2021). This is not to diminish Trump’s role, whose public behavior is geared towards attracting such folks (Hart, Richardson, and Tortoriello 2018). This is not to say, however, that beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation are not the product of under-education, science illiteracy, or potential exposure to dubious ideas on social media. While these factors exhibit weaker relationships than do dark traits or political orientations, more research is needed to understand causal pathways and the conditions under which a given factor promotes a belief in a conspiracy theory or misinformation.

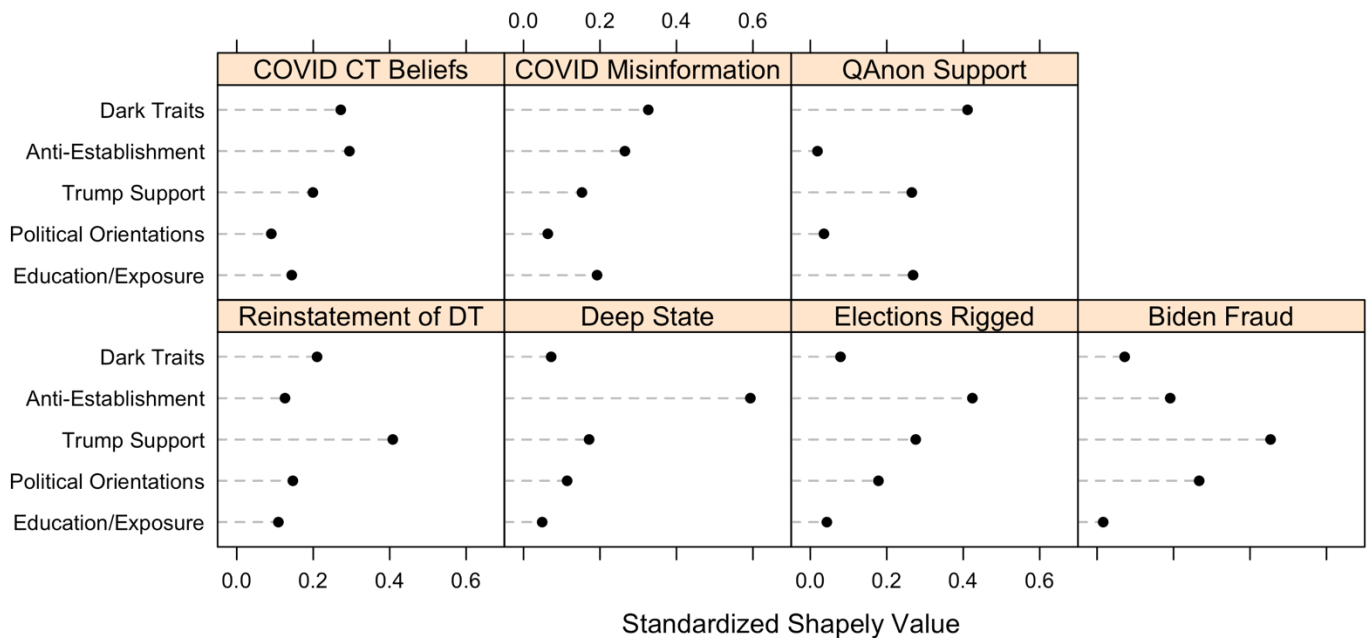


Figure 4: Standardized Shapely regression values. Quantities represent the average importance of each group of predictors to the overall variance explained in each of the seven dependent variables—the larger the value, the greater the importance. Values sum to 1.



## Discussion

We further find that beliefs in the conspiracy theories and misinformation surrounding COVID-19, QAnon, and election fraud are strongly related to a host of anti-social traits. At least some of the beliefs investigated are positively related to narcissism, psychopathy, a propensity toward physical conflict, and anti-establishment political orientations.

Conspiracy theorists have long had a reputation for dogmatism and conflict—our findings suggest this reputation may be deserved. This finding also bodes poorly for the development of strategies to prevent or correct beliefs in misinformation and conspiracy theories. While some techniques offer great promise (Roozenbeek, van Der Linden, and Nygren 2020), researchers have also found that some people resist correction (Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013) and cling more strongly to closely-held beliefs in the face of disconfirming evidence (Gal and Rucker 2010). Our findings might explain why: certain beliefs attract people with anti-social and conflictual styles who are inherently less hospitable to correction from outside forces.

Trump will eventually leave politics, if not in retirement then in death. So, our findings regarding Trump support may be limited in terms of what it says about the future. However, other can do what Trump has done by activating anti-establishments sentiments. But more importantly, shows that leaders can activate anti-social traits and anti-establishment sentiments. Much of American political behavior is based on studies of mainstream partisan leaders; having a president (trump) and other leaders (Marjorie Taylor Green) sort of a new thing, which changes the rules of the game. PID and ID less important. Leaders activate these other things and the people being brought in bring with them anti-social traits. Fights at Trump rallies, lock her up, proud boys.

Of course, conspiracy theories are unlikely to cause personality traits or worldviews; rather, the reciprocal is more likely (e.g., Cichocka, Marchlewska, and Zavala 2016). Therefore,

we should understand anti-social personality traits and conflictual behaviors as characteristics of the types of people that are *attracted to* the conspiracy theories and misinformation. While anti-social personality traits and behavioral tendencies may not prove sufficient to promote specific beliefs or actions, our findings suggest that politics may be a key connective ingredient. Specifically, the public endorsement of such ideas by prominent trusted officials may connect anti-social, conflictual people to those ideas, and then subsequently motivate them to act. While we do not observe a systematic relationship between beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation partisanship and ideology, we do observe a consistent and substantively strong relationship with support for Donald Trump. Applying our findings to the January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol Riot may be instructive on this point.

Trump was likely able to stoke conspiracy theory beliefs about the 2020 election and a riot at the Capitol for several reasons. First, Trump entered the race for president in 2015 against a crowded field of competitors and with no ready-made coalition; he used conspiratorial rhetoric to attract voters who were antagonistic toward the political establishment and who were already prone to believe conspiracy theories (Uscinski et al. 2021). Given their elevated levels of conspiracy thinking, these constituents were likely already more inclined towards disruptive and violent political participation, as well (Imhoff, Dieterle, and Lamberty 2020; Sternisko, Cichocka, and Van Bavel 2020; Rottweiler and Gill 2020). Second, during the pandemic Trump spread conspiracy theories and misinformation about COVID-19 (Uscinski et al. 2020), QAnon (Samuels and Rodrigo 2020), and election fraud (Benkler et al. 2020). Because political opinions are substantially driven by co-partisan elite discourse, many Trump supporters exhibited beliefs in these ideas (Berlinski et al. 2021; Pennycook and Rand 2021; Uscinski et al. 2020). Third, political and social circumstances likely influenced Trump supporters to adopt conspiracy

theories and misinformation as coping mechanisms, or out of motivated reasoning (Edelson et al. 2017): because Trump was an incumbent in an election year plagued by a pandemic and economic turmoil, supporters were more likely than non-supporters to downplay the seriousness of the pandemic, explain away political failures by appealing to the activities of the “deep state,” and allege fraud in the face of electoral defeat (Uscinski et al. 2020; Enders et al. 2021a).

Taking these factors together, January 6<sup>th</sup> was the culmination of anti-social traits, anti-establishment orientations, and motivated reasoning being fostered by cues from Trump and his allies—a natural consequence, rather than an idiosyncratic outcome. Although we find that anti-social personality traits and orientations are generally stronger correlates of beliefs in pandemic-related conspiracy theories and misinformation than political orientations, political leaders still play an important, distinct role as described above. By trafficking in conspiracy theories and misinformation, elites can activate into politics and mobilize people prone to non-normative behaviors, if even unintentionally. In this way, the ideas at the core of conspiracy theories and misinformation are only dangerous in so far as leaders are willing to spread them and believers are provided with reasons to act.

That we find only limited evidence for a relationship between beliefs in conspiracy theories and misinformation, on the one hand, and the typical markers of susceptibility to misinformation (e.g., educational attainment, science literacy, and social media use), on the other, underscores the importance of personality traits. Beliefs in dubious ideas are not just the product of a weak understanding of science or a lack of education. While these factors provide people a valuable context with which to interpret and understand politics, other bottom-up (e.g., anti-social traits) and top-down (e.g., elite discourse) pressures are equally, if not more, predictive of conspiracy theory beliefs.

A final implication of our findings is that beliefs in some conspiracy theories and misinformation are likely correlated with an inability to disagree civilly, to compromise. Because some beliefs are undergirded by narcissism, psychopathy, anti-establishment political views, and a propensity for violent conflict, changing some minds might require corrective measures more involved than most efforts currently being developed. Researchers must consider these stable, foundational personality traits and worldviews when developing strategies to limit the pernicious effects of those beliefs. Assuming that only casual misunderstanding or a lack of quality information or science literacy are to blame will only steer future efforts down unproductive paths.

We caution readers about generalizing beyond our specific findings. Beliefs in many conspiracy theories and pieces of misinformation not studied here may not necessarily be indicative of anti-social traits (Enders et al. 2021b). For example, we would not assume that the majority of Americans consistently believing conspiracy theories about the 1963 Kennedy assassination are sociopathic or unable to disagree without hostility. What likely sets the conspiracy theories and misinformation studied here apart from conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination, for example, is the disconnection of the former from both mainstream institutional consensus and social norms (e.g., Lantian et al. 2018). To believe that the pandemic is fake, a year into it, is to discount our shared reality on a matter of existential importance and to invite confrontation.

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