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# Exploring the impacts of conspiracy theories on election dynamics in Spain and Turkey

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## ABSTRACT

The academic literature has increasingly emphasized examining the impact of conspiracy theories on political and social behaviour. However, there is a notable dearth of studies on the potential effects of conspiracy theories on elections. This study addresses this gap by discussing the plausible social mechanisms through which conspiracy theories might influence individuals' voting behaviour. It proposes three social mechanisms through which conspiracy theories influence election results: (1) stimulating conspiracy intuitions, (2) intensifying affective polarization and (3) unintended consequences arising from efforts to debunk conspiracy theories. In sum, this research contributes to the scholarship by elucidating the potential significance of these mechanisms in contemporary Spanish and Turkish politics and posits suggestions for policy interventions.

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**KEYWORDS** Conspiracy theories; disinformation; elections; polarization; Spain; Turkey

## Introduction

Can conspiracy theories influence election results? Despite the pervasive presence of conspiracy theories preceding and succeeding elections, along with empirical evidence linking conspiracy mentalities to voting behaviour (Lamberty et al., 2018), scholarly attention remains inadequate on the influence of these narratives on electoral behaviour. This study addresses this gap and contributes to the discourse by discussing the potential relationship between conspiracy theories and elections. It emphasizes the implications of conspiracy theories for the democratic process and outlines

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possible policy interventions. This article proposes three social mechanisms that might explain the impact of conspiracy theories: (1) instigating conspiracy intuitions, (2) exacerbating polarization and (3) the unintended consequences of debunking efforts. The mechanisms are not exogenous categories but ideal types meant to comprehend how conspiracy theories might shape electoral outcomes. They may manifest synergistically, overlapping and interweaving rather than exerting discrete effects on election results.

To evaluate the potential impact of conspiracy theories on voter behaviour, the study presents examples from Spain and Turkey. Although these two cases do not offer a complete representation of European Mediterranean societies, they provide a suitable basis for meaningful comparisons regarding the effects of specific factors. Our case selection approach is predominantly founded on typological, temporal and regional congruities among countries as well as the absence of any prior comprehensive comparative analysis in this particular context (Beck, 2017). Situated at opposite ends of the Mediterranean Sea, both nations connect Europe to other continents, serving as crucial points of passage along migration routes. Additionally, they share parallel histories of conquest, empire and decadence, and both have grappled with anxieties about their territorial integrity, fuelling conspiracy theories. Furthermore, both countries are democracies, with their current constitutions ratified roughly four decades ago (1978 in Spain, 1982 in Turkey). They are officially secular, with relatively homogeneous religious populations; the prevailing religious affiliations in Spain and Turkey are Catholicism and Islam, respectively. In summary, investigating the impact of conspiracy theories on electoral behaviour in present-day Turkey and Spain could provide a more nuanced understanding of their influence on democracies facing stress factors related to migration routes and territorial integrity. This exploration also allows for distinctions arising from variations in democratic structures and predominant religious affiliations.

In addition, both countries have recently hosted elections marked by the prevalence of conspiracy theories. Before the 2023 Spanish general election, a conspiracy theory was circulated alleging that the incumbent left-wing government, led by the Socialist Party (PSOE), intended to manipulate the results through the private company Indra. In parallel, during the 2023 Turkish general election campaign, President Erdogan showcased a manipulated video alleging that the leadership of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)<sup>1</sup> endorsed Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of the main opposition coalition. This video falsely claims to feature Murat Karayilan, the de facto leader of the PKK, seemingly expressing support by singing and clapping alongside the opposition's campaign song. Subsequently, despite nearly all major polling companies in Turkey predicting the opposite outcome, Erdogan and his political party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP),

emerged victorious. It should be noted that the study does not provide a systematic comparison but explores the nexus between conspiracy theories and electoral behaviour. Thus, the cases might not represent the other contexts; they are used as illustrative examples to support the arguments presented.

It is crucial to establish working definitions for the two concepts: conspiracy theories and conspiracy intuitions. Conspiracy theories are explanations of 'events in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons -the conspirators- acting in secret' (Keeley, 1999, p. 116). Conspiracy intuition is 'the subjective sense that an event or circumstance is not adequately explained or accounted for by existing narratives, potentially for nefarious reasons' (Roberts & Risen, 2022, p. 1). Whereas conspiracy theories describe events as the result of covert collaborations among individuals, conspiracy intuitions represent a psychological condition marked by scepticism. Possessing a conspiracy intuition does not necessarily entail embracing a specific conspiracy theory; rather, it signifies a general suspicion that the established explanation for an occurrence or lack thereof is insufficient and potentially conceals a deliberate effort to obscure the truth. The paper proceeds by delving into the significance of the aforementioned social mechanisms. Subsequently, the paper concludes by discussing policy relevance.

### Triggering conspiracy intuitions

There is a Turkish saying: throw enough mud, and some will stick, encapsulating the idea that an ample barrage of accusations or allegations against someone – even if many are unsubstantiated – some may eventually be accepted as true. The continuous dissemination of negative assertions against a group heightens the likelihood that at least some will be accepted. Accordingly, it is plausible to argue that allegations of conspiracies possess the capacity to stimulate conspiracy intuitions within the electoral base, potentially influencing voting behaviour.

In Turkey, the AKP strategically leverages conspiracy theories related to historically significant traumas – particularly about dismemberment – during election campaigns. Various studies propose that conspiracy intuitions are shaped mainly by historical trauma in modern Turkey – notably known as the Sevres syndrome (Nefes, 2017). This syndrome revolves around apprehensions about the perceived threat of foreign powers and internal collaborators conspiring against Turkey. It derives its name from the Treaty of Sevres – signed in 1920 between the Ottoman Empire and allied nations following World War I – which allocated significant portions of Ottoman territory to foreign powers and Ottoman minorities. Turkish forces rejected these terms and waged the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923), eventually leading to the establishment of

modern Turkey in 1923. The memory of territorial loss in the Treaty of Sèvres remains a historical trauma in Turkey, symbolizing anxiety about the potential dismemberment of the country due to plots orchestrated by foreign powers and minorities. This contributes to the prevalence of conspiracy intuitions about outgroups by serving as historical evidence of their capacity to conspire against a country. Saglam's (2020) ethnographic study demonstrates the prevalence of conspiracy intuitions in everyday conversations among Turkish men. The study demonstrates that men construct a form of social bonding by voicing their conspiratorial interpretations of uncertain situations.

Similarly, we can interpret the potential influence of conspiracy theories during the 2023 general elections in Turkey. The manipulated video associating the PKK with the opposition could have elicited conspiracy intuitions among the general public, reawakening the historical trauma of dismemberment by minority movements. In turn, this might generate a sense of doubt regarding the main opposition's intentions and affiliations, particularly among undecided voters dissatisfied with AKP governance. These conspiracy intuitions could have prompted undecided voters to reconsider their support for the opposition. Given the narrow margin of victory (52 per cent to 48 per cent), conspiracy intuitions might have made a difference.

In Spain, a historically significant trauma in which contemporary right-wing conspiracy intuitions prevail is the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). The most influential conspiracy theory in 20th-century Spain was the domestic version of the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy theory, which justified the coup attempt that triggered the Spanish Civil War as a crusade against the internal enemies of the nation. Communists and Freemasons were perceived as conspiring with foreign forces to destroy the Spanish nation in the direction of Jewish masterminds. In the 21st century, conspiracy theories continue to focus on concerns about Spain's territorial integrity and its Catholic cultural identity, exemplified by the Spanish version of judeo-masonic conspiracy theories. This theory accuses left-wing politicians of plotting with Basque and Islamic terrorists to break up Spain by separating Catalonia from the Basque country to establish a totalitarian and anti-Christian regime.

Following electoral setbacks, contemporary conspiracy theories have proliferated by the Spanish right wing, aligning with Uscinski and Parent's (2014) contention about conspiracy theories being for 'losers' in political processes. However, their potential impacts are not necessarily restricted to right-wing voters. Negative attitudes towards Basque and Catalan nationalism are prevalent among left-wing voters from the southern regions, particularly heightened after the Catalan independence movement in 2017, reviving the historical fears of national dismemberment. It is conceivable that conspiracy intuitions fostered by conspiracy theories about left-wing politicians and independentist movements may have demobilized a section of those voters or even swayed some undecided ones towards voting for the right wing.

## Increasing affective polarization

Gracián (2015, pp. 25–26) posited that ‘better mad with the crowd than sane all alone’ because wisdom might be perceived as foolish if rare, and elucidated the critical advantage of not standing out in one’s in-group, even at the expense of truth. Conspiracy theories bolster in-group identities by attributing blame to an outgroup, exacerbating affective polarization and fostering increased animosity between opposing groups. This could create a feedback loop, where polarization makes conspiracy theories about the outgroup more convincing. Thus, it is probable that conspiracy theories strengthen affective polarization.

In the 2023 Turkish elections, conspiracy theories could have exacerbated affective polarization and dissuaded AKP supporters from leaving the party ranks. Existing scholarly literature underscores the nexus between partisanship and beliefs in conspiracy theories (Uscinski et al., 2016). Nefes and Aksoy (2023) use two nationally representative datasets to demonstrate that people’s tendency to believe conspiracy theories about foreign powers before and after the Gezi Park protests changed in line with their partisan leanings. Accordingly, it is not too far-fetched to suggest that conspiracy theories employed during an election period could solidify voter bases by heightening affective polarization. By doing so, conspiracy theories may have assisted in preventing the loss of votes for the ruling AKP.

Similar dynamics may have influenced the Spanish context. The transition, following the 2015 and 2019 general elections, from a two-party to a two-bloc system, where the majority parties in the centre-left (Socialist Party/PSOE) and centre-right (Popular Party/PP) needed to form coalitions with extreme left (Podemos and Sumar) and extreme right (Vox) parties, has galvanized polarization. Research demonstrates how affective polarization was mutually reinforced with the deterioration of social trust in Spain from 2014 to 2019 (Torcal & Thomson, 2023), and conspiracy beliefs are fostered when social trust declines (Van Prooijen et al., 2022). When conspiracy theories depict political opponents as criminals, spreading these theories can increase affective polarization. For example, far-right conspiracy theories assert that the Socialist Party (PSOE) collaborated in terrorist attacks following the 2004 general election. Additionally, they suggest that, in partnership with the radical left-wing party Podemos, the PSOE executed a totalitarian plan for demographic control and the elimination of the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the centre-right PP did not directly accuse the left-wing Spanish government of exploiting the pandemic to establish a totalitarian regime, its leader accused the prime minister of enforcing a ‘constitutional dictatorship’ in late 2020. This character attack, fuelled by affective polarization, contributes to lending credibility to the more extreme accusations propagated in conspiracy theories.

## Unintended consequences of debunking conspiracy theories

Considering candidates' interests in refuting each other's criticism during election campaigns, the impact of debunking conspiratorial accusations could be significant. Such efforts may yield contrasting outcomes and potentially intensify the effects of conspiracy theories. These endeavours might be perceived as indirect mechanisms that could heighten the influence of conspiracy theories on voting behaviour, not directly compelling believers in conspiracy theories to vote for specific candidates but rather accentuating their influence on voting behaviour. Nevertheless, opposition supporters could perceive debunking campaigns as attempts at stifling free speech, thereby potentially mobilizing their voter base. This section focuses on the unintentional outcomes of debunking conspiracy theories by discussing the effects of Streisand and backfires.

The Streisand effect occurs when an attempt to hide information has the unintended consequence of drawing more attention to it, making it more widely discussed than if it were left alone (Jansen & Martin, 2015). The term originated in an incident involving American actor and singer Barbra Streisand. In 2003, Streisand attempted to sue a photographer who had taken an aerial photograph of her home in Malibu, California, to remove the image; this inadvertently sparked widespread interest and turned the image into an Internet sensation. While empirical studies have yet to quantify the relationship between the spread of conspiracy theories and debunking efforts, it is conceivable that such efforts could inadvertently draw the general public's attention and add to the spread of conspiracy theories. The use of montage videos in the 2023 Turkish elections may have influenced the results by ensuring the spread of conspiracy accusations. The opposition leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, debunked the videos, labelling Erdogan a fraudulent (video) fabricator, followed by heated discussions. Although Erdogan acknowledged the doctored nature of the video, the ensuing discourse may have kept conspiracy theories against the opposition at the forefront of voters' minds and eventually influenced their voting behaviour.

Another way the debunking efforts of the opposition could have augmented the impact of conspiracy theories could be related to the 'backfire effect'. This cognitive bias occurs when individuals, particularly those firmly entrenched in their political beliefs, react to contradictory information by further entrenching themselves in their original viewpoints. Confronted with information contradicting their political beliefs, individuals may experience cognitive dissonance and discomfort. To alleviate this discomfort, they may dismiss contradictory information altogether. In the context of Turkish elections, debunking conspiracy theories about the opposition could create a backfire effect among AKP supporters and contribute to consolidating its voter base.

Over the last decade, attempts to curtail political misinformation and debunk conspiracy theories in Spain have arguably triggered the Streisand effect, as evidenced by the 11 M Parliamentary Commission hearings. The hearings aimed to definitively determine the individuals responsible for the 2004 Islamist terror attacks in Madrid and disprove any associated conspiracy theories. However, the proceedings inadvertently provided a platform for advocating conspiracy theories. In 2020, the creation of a Permanent Commission Against Disinformation engendered new conspiracy theories alleging totalitarian attempts to cover up the truth; in this case, the backfire effect not only reinforced pre-existing conspiracy beliefs but also stimulated the development of new ones.

Despite the proliferation of anti-government conspiracy theories between the Spanish general elections held in November 2019 and 2023, the Socialist Party saw an increase in vote share from 28 per cent to 31 per cent. Any demobilizing effect on voters seems to have been counterbalanced by other factors, which may include a counter-mobilizing effect for the government in those who perceive conspiracy theories as unfair accusations – that is, the backfire effect. More interestingly, while the main party in the right-wing bloc (Popular Party) improved its results from the 2019 to 2023 elections, the extreme right party Vox has so far resisted the trend of consolidating far-right-wing votes. Conspiracy theories, which Vox has defended, and attempts to debunk them by official institutions, might have played a part in maintaining the loyalty of radicalized voters and thus contributed to the fragmentation of the right-wing bloc. When government institutions discredit right-wing conspiracy theories, the fact that the establishment opposes them might enhance their visibility (the Streisand effect). Such official attempts at debunking can then be circulated as proof that the theory has some truth since it is bothering ‘the elite’.

## Discussion and conclusion

First, we propose that the dissemination of conspiracy theories during election campaigns has the potential to trigger conspiracy intuitions. In the Turkish context, the allegations of conspiracies related to the historical trauma of dismemberment could have elicited such intuitions among the electorate. Similarly, in Spain, right-wing theories regarding conspiracies orchestrated by left-wing politicians and separatists might have demobilized certain left-wing voters. Second, conspiracy theories can influence electoral results by exacerbating affective polarization. In the 2023 Turkish elections, the ruling party's success could be attributed to its ability to consolidate its voter base despite the economic downturn. There is a notable correlation between polarization and far-right conspiracy theories in Spain. Both the centre-right and far-right



factions consistently perceived the left-wing government as untruthful. Although the centre-right opposition's critique of the left-wing government is not conspiratorial, it has the potential to lend credibility to far-right conspiracy allegations. Third, this study highlighted the potential unintended consequences of debunking. In the Turkish elections, the debunking efforts of the opposition could have further disseminated conspiracy theories and generated a reaction among supporters of the governing party. Likewise, attempts by Spanish government institutions may have unintentionally inspired conspiracy theories about truth suppression.

Policy initiatives can be implemented to mitigate the adverse effects of conspiracy theories, as these theories have the potential to exert undue influence on voting behaviour. In the first mechanism, the key is to establish incentives that respect free speech and avoid any form of censorship that could be harmful to democracy. This could involve implementing legal sanctions to hold the sources of disinformation accountable for the content they disseminate (De Blasio & Selva, 2021). The second mechanism suggests that addressing affective polarization helps mitigate the impact of conspiracy theories. Conversely, reducing the impact of conspiracy theories could help alleviate affective polarization. Polarization strategies may be deemed rational by political agents seeking to maximize their electoral outcomes. Thus, institutions unaffected by the immediate demands of daily political conflict could endorse proven successful initiatives, such as fostering cross-party dialogue among voters (Levendusky & Stecula, 2021) and tempering their own descriptive assertions regarding political polarization (Peters, 2021). Regarding the third mechanism, evaluating debunking efforts could help assess their effectiveness. Accordingly, policymakers can tailor their communication strategies based on empirical evidence to prevent the inadvertent amplification of conspiracy theories during debunking efforts. This could involve precisely targeting audiences based on their social and political characteristics, as mass campaigns may inadvertently popularize conspiracy theories they seek to debunk.

Including media literacy programmes that teach individuals to distinguish credible information from conspiracy theories in the educational curriculum could be a positive step towards these targets. Some countries have taken these steps; for instance, Estonian public schools have integrated media literacy into their curriculum since 2010. This policy seems to pay off, as Estonia ranked third among 35 developed countries in the 2021 Media Literacy Index (Yee, 2022). Media and information literacy designed to enable students to exercise their citizenship rights in an information society have been integrated into the French national curriculum since 2015 (European Digital Media Observatory, 2024). More recently, Spain established a national digital skills plan aiming to enhance media literacy and digital skills among

the population. It encompasses creating a national network of digital training centres providing online courses (MOOC) and integrating digital competencies into the curriculum (Government of Spain, 2023). Similarly, the Italian government approved a five-year strategic plan in 2019 to implement digital solutions. However, the plan lacks a government-led education initiative to impart advanced technological skills to future generations.

Amidst the rapid advancement of communication technologies, countries face a pressing need to mitigate the detrimental effects of disinformation and conspiracy theories. This study illustrates the profound effects of conspiracy theories on electoral dynamics within democratic frameworks, emphasizing the imperatives of implementing policies to enhance media literacy in the Mediterranean region and worldwide.

## Note

1. The PKK is a Kurdish separatist organization, recognized as a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States, the European Union, and many other countries due to its use of violence.

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