

POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories in Venezuela?**

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Conspiracy theories are central to political discourse in Venezuela and are widely supported. In the Americas Barometer Venezuela survey from 2016 to 2017, 54 percent of respondents expressed agreement for at least one of three political conspiracy narratives unsupported by evidence. Political loyalties to Chavismo or to the anti-Chavista opposition drive much conspiracy theory belief, but not all. Politically motivated reasoning pushes some citizens toward a given conspiracy narrative but others away. Other factors that are distinct from political loyalties, including low education levels, predispositions toward Manichaeism and fatalism, and belief in the supernatural are associated with conspiracism. This article presents new data on conspiracy theory beliefs in Venezuela as well as analysis of its individual-level correlates, then discusses how the current Venezuelan political environment fosters conspiracy and what changes might mitigate this phenomenon.

Las teorías de conspiración son fundamentales para el discurso político en Venezuela y son ampliamente apoyadas. En la encuesta de Venezuela del Barómetro de las Américas de 2016 a 2017, el 54 por ciento de los encuestados expresó su acuerdo con al menos una de las tres narrativas presentadas de conspiración política que no estaban respaldadas por evidencia. Las lealtades políticas al chavismo o a la oposición anti-chavista impulsan muchas creencias de las teorías de la conspiración, pero no todas. El razonamiento motivado políticamente empuja a algunos ciudadanos a una narrativa de conspiración dada, pero a otros a alejarse. Otros factores que son distintos de las lealtades políticas, como los bajos niveles de educación, las predisposiciones hacia el maniqueísmo y el fatalismo, y la creencia en lo sobrenatural están asociados con el conspiracismo. Este artículo presenta datos sobre las creencias de la teoría de la conspiración en Venezuela, así como el análisis de sus correlatos a nivel individual, luego analiza cómo el entorno político venezolano fomenta la conspiración y qué cambios podrían mitigar este fenómeno.

Who believes in conspiracy theories in Venezuela? To what degree is support for conspiracy narratives a manifestation of political loyalty, and how much do individual characteristics like age, sex, education level, or nonpolitical predispositions drive these beliefs? This article brings survey data from Venezuela to bear on these questions and in doing so sheds light on how politicians in Venezuela and elsewhere deploy conspiracy theories strategically, and on what factors might impede their use as a political tool.

Conspiracy theories hold that hidden groups are perpetuating secret plots to advance their own interests, even at the expense of the broader public good. Such narratives are ubiquitous across diverse political environments. In the United States, unsupported beliefs that the 9/11 attacks were engineered by the US government, that the 2008 financial crisis was orchestrated by Wall Street insiders, and that President Barack Obama was not, by rights, a US citizen, are notorious for their persistence (Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013; Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski and Parent 2014). In the Middle East, equally baroque narratives command widespread support—for example, that the United States created Islamic State (Hasan 2014; Weber 2014) or that Israeli's Mossad intelligence agency choreographed attacks ranging from 9/11 (Turki 2001) to sharks biting swimmers off the Egyptian coast (Fathi 2010). Public opinion researchers have explored the pervasiveness of conspiracy beliefs and the factors that contribute to them in the United States (Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016) and in other regions, including the Middle East (Lipstadt 2012; Klar and Baram 2014; Zeitzoff 2014), Asia (Radnitz 2015), and Europe (Uenal 2016).

Scholarship on public opinion in Latin America, by contrast, has not yet addressed how widely conspiracy theories are believed or the characteristics of those who embrace them.¹ It is not that Latin America lacks for conspiratorial subject matter. For example, in January 2015, Argentine federal prosecutor Alberto Nisman was found dead in his apartment the day before he was scheduled to present charges before Congress that then president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner had, herself, conspired to cover up Iranian involvement in a 1994 terrorist bombing in Buenos Aires. The president's opponents charged that Kirchner had further conspired with Argentine security agents to assassinate Nisman. The president, in turn, attributed Nisman's death to a conspiracy by her opponents to kill Nisman with the intention of discrediting her (Filkins 2015). The case remains unresolved. Examples from other countries are easy to summon (Hudson 1995; Torres Nabel 2016).

Across Latin America, Venezuela can stake a strong claim as the regional champion of conspiracy. In the past decade, the presidential administrations of Hugo Chávez and then Nicolás Maduro have promoted political conspiracy theories at a staggering rate. These narratives are advanced by high government officials, up to and including the president, and they are promoted and disseminated by state news agencies (Pérez Hernáiz 2008). This article draws on new data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project's (LAPOP) 2016–2017 Venezuelan survey to measure rates at which citizens in that country subscribe to political conspiracy theories, and explores the individual respondent-level characteristics that correlate with conspiracy beliefs.

The results illustrate the extent to which political elites can push conspiracy narratives into mainstream public opinion, and they support the proposition that conspiracy theory beliefs are largely motivated by respondents' political sympathies. When politically motivated reasoning drives conspiracy beliefs, the effect is polarizing. Partisan loyalties push some citizens to accept, and others to reject, the same narrative depending on its political slant. The results from Venezuela illustrate this effect, but they also show that individual-level characteristics distinct from political identity can affect conspiracy beliefs. These effects are more modest than those associated with partisanship, but their impact is not polarizing. Education discourages conspiracism across the board. Other psychological predispositions—such as belief in the supernatural, a Manichaeic worldview, and a sense of fatalism—have more limited effects, but when they matter, they push toward stronger conspiracy beliefs.

Previous Scholarship and Open Questions

Studies of conspiracy beliefs have experienced something of a boom in recent years, mostly among scholars of US public opinion. There is broad consensus that individuals are politically motivated to seek information consistent with their existing political beliefs and values, and to accept political narratives that confirm prior beliefs more uncritically than those that challenge them (Haidt 2012). A striking manifestation of this is willingness to subscribe to conspiracy theories that support one's own side in partisan battles (usually by vilifying opponents), and resistance to information that challenges such narratives (Berinsky 2015; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Uscinski and Parent 2014; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2015).

There are, nevertheless, unresolved questions over whether and how we should expect politically motivated reasoning to vary by political loyalties. US-based studies raise questions over whether Republicans and Democrats differ on overall tendencies toward conspiracism and, if so, whether such differences are inherent or situational. Prominent studies find proclivities toward conspiracism to be distributed about evenly across partisans (Oliver and Wood 2014; Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016). Other research shows that Republicans perceive greater threats than do Democrats from an array of sources, and further that conservatives demonstrate less tolerance for uncertainty and greater need for cognitive closure than liberals do (Jost 2017). These traits suggest an inherently greater affinity for conspiracism among Republicans than Democrats in the United States, and there is some evidence pointing in this direction (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2015). If conspiracism is psychologically tied to conservatism, the implications beyond the United States could be for conspiracy theories to flourish among right-wing parties but wither on the left—for example, among Chavistas in Venezuela.

By contrast, a situational story holds that in-party versus out-party status accounts for partisan differences in conspiracy beliefs. Theory from social psychology posits that feeling a lack of control over one's life or immediate circumstances induces individuals, as compensation, to perceive patterns where none exist (Whitson and Galinsky 2008) and to attribute bad outcomes to intentional actions by enemies rather than to misfortune (Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild 2010). If out-party status is a political manifestation of lack of

¹ Briggs (2004) describes a conspiratorial narrative among members of the Warao indigenous group in eastern Venezuela to explain a cholera epidemic that ravaged their community in the early 1990s. Political marginalization of the Warao is central to his account, which is entirely ethnographic and does not rely on survey data.

control, we might expect partisans of the party out of government to be particularly receptive to conspiracy narratives. Or, as Uscinski and Parent (2014) succinctly put it, “Conspiracy theories are for losers.” A spike in conspiracy theory traffic among US Democrats in the immediate aftermath of President Trump’s inauguration offered suggestive evidence for a situational effect (Nyhan 2017). By contrast, evidence that conspiracism is more pronounced among supporters of the party in government than among those in opposition would run counter to the standard situational account, and that is what the results from Venezuela suggest.

This study illustrates the potential for politicians actively to foster conspiracy theory beliefs. It is well established that political elites, including high elected officials, can drive public opinion and policy preferences (Lenz 2012; Zaller 1992). Sunstein and Vermeule (2009) describe “conspiracy entrepreneurs,” who intentionally concoct and seek to disseminate conspiracy narratives, but their exemplars are financially motivated—for example, to foster book sales—rather than high public officials seeking to advance political agenda. Most research on political conspiracy beliefs has not attended to elite opinion leadership (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017). Venezuela offers an example of a government that systematically disseminates conspiracy theories as a matter of political strategy, and the survey data presented here illustrate the extent to which such narratives can gain traction.

Beyond politically motivated reasoning, the article also explores two types of individual-level characteristics that might affect conspiracy theory belief. The first are demographic and personal characteristics standard to public opinion research, including age, sex, income, and level of education. The primary question attached to these characteristics is whether, and to what degree, education affects conspiracy beliefs. On the one hand, existing research shows that conspiracy believers are often better informed about their subject matter than nonbelievers, suggesting that knowledge, per se, does not inoculate against conspiracism (Nyhan 2012; Carey et al. 2016). On the other hand, to the extent that education instills habits of evidence-based reasoning, we should expect more education to diminish conspiracy theory belief (van Prooijen 2017).

Finally, this article explores a number of psychological predispositions posited to establish affinity toward conspiracism. The first two build on work by Oliver and Wood (2014). *Manichaeism* is the proclivity to see the social world in terms of a struggle between good and evil. The rationale is that this predisposition is consistent with conspiracy theories which posit secret cabals pursuing their private interests at the expense of the societal good (Pérez Hernáiz 2011). Oliver and Wood also deploy a variety of survey questions related to supernatural phenomena, including respondents’ belief in angels, ghosts, Satan, and extrasensory perception. The rationale is that a predisposition to believe that such *unseen forces* act upon events in the physical world would be consistent with belief in hidden conspiracies determining outcomes in the political world. Finally, drawing on previous research showing that reduced perceptions of control can make people more prone to conspiracy theory beliefs (Whitson and Galinsky 2008; Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild 2010), I sought to test whether a sense of powerlessness or *fatalism* among respondents correlates with conspiracy theory belief in Venezuela. The rationale here is that a predisposition to believe that one’s fate is determined by forces beyond one’s control should be consistent with subscription to narratives in which politics is driven by covert plots.

To foreshadow, the evidence from Venezuela ratifies the idea that partisan-motivated reasoning is a central driver of conspiracy beliefs. It does not support the conservatism-conspiracy link, nor the proposition that opposition partisans should be more prone toward conspiracies than those in power. It supports the proposition that education discourages conspiracism. There is some evidence that psychological predispositions encourage belief in conspiracies, although these effects are modest and less consistent than those described above.

Venezuelan Conspiracy Theories

In addition to advancing class-based rhetoric focused on economic inequality, the presidential administrations of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro have consistently endorsed, and produced, conspiracy theories as weapons to discredit or demonize adversaries and to generate a fortress mentality among supporters (Piñeiro, Rhodes-Purdy, and Rosenblatt 2016). The Venezuelan sociologist Hugo Antonio Pérez Hernáiz chronicles the production of conspiracy theories under Chavista governments in academic research (Pérez Hernáiz 2008) and on his blog, the *Venezuela Conspiracy Theories Monitor* (Pérez Hernáiz, n.d.), which provides the best available catalogue of Chavista conspiracy theories. Drawing from Pérez Hernáiz’s work and related sources, some examples of recent government-sponsored conspiracy theories include the following:

- May 2016: The Chavista news site, *Aporrea*, published a story elaborating on a long-standing conspiracy theory that Hugo Chávez was killed by agents of the United States, advancing a new claim that US agents had deployed a “nano weapon” to inject Chávez with cancer-causing agents whose potency could be accelerated to hasten his death (Herrada Ávila 2016a).

- July 2016: After crowds looted supermarkets in the face of severe shortages of basic consumer goods, the vice president of the governing United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, PSUV), Diosdado Cabello, claimed that the looting was coordinated, and the looters paid, by leaders of the opposition party Voluntad Popular (Arismendi 2016).
- July 2016: Various agencies of the Venezuelan government released a Twitter storm of statements, supplemented with infographics, laying out a theory of nonconventional war conducted against the government by US special forces in cooperation with domestic traitors and multinational corporations. The strategy involved paramilitary operations, sabotage against the financial system and the electrical grid, hoarding, price speculation, usury, and the encouragement of street crime (Pérez Hernáiz 2016).
- September 2016: *Aporrea* published a further story identifying the date US agents injected President Chávez with cancer-causing agents as September 15, 2005 (Herrada Ávila 2016b).
- October 2016: PSUV vice president Cabello announced that the government had uncovered a coup plot coordinated by Voluntad Popular leaders. The plot would unfold over four stages, starting with a call for a recall referendum against President Maduro, the collection of fake signatures, followed by a national strike (when the signatures are judged invalid), and culminating with a takeover of military installations in the ensuing disorder (*Correo del Orinoco* 2016).
- December 2016: President Maduro announced the discovery of a plot engineered by the US Department of Treasury and domestic conspirators to stifle the Venezuelan economy by sabotaging the timely arrival of new, higher denomination Venezuelan currency bills (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias 2016a). Two weeks later, on national television President Maduro announced that the US Embassy, together with leaders from Voluntad Popular and another opposition party, Primero Justicia, were behind a plot to sabotage the Venezuelan economy by disabling automated teller machines (ATMs) via cyber attack (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias 2016b).
- January 2017: President Maduro announced the formation of a unit headed by his newly appointed vice president, Tareck El Aissami, to monitor and thwart antigovernment coups (*Correo del Orinoco* 2017).
- March 2017: At a meeting of top cabinet officials, President Maduro declared that the greatest threat to his administration comes not from the Venezuelan far right, but from former government officials who had abandoned the Bolivarian project. He declared, "There is a group of traitors who were from the Bolivarian revolution, some are already living in the United States, others are still here trying to divide the revolutionary movement. I am going to deliver proof, regarding that group of traitors, of how they have worked for the CIA" (López 2017).
- May 2017: The state-funded Telesur network published a flowchart of how the US Pentagon fabricates and disseminates fake news that negatively portrays conditions in Venezuela as part of an overall strategy of unconventional warfare against the Maduro government (*Cuba por Siempre* 2017).
- June 2017: After having called for a new Constituent Assembly to replace the charter installed in 1999 under Chavez, President Maduro warned of a conspiracy among opposition groups to undermine the election for a new assembly, and called for solidarity to defeat the plot. In a speech at the nation's largest theater, Maduro admonished, "We must be alert to defend [the assembly] because there are those who want to overthrow the constitutional process. They are mounting a conspiracy against the constitutional process ... Be alert, people! Be alert to the traitors and to treason. The people to combat, the people to battle! Forward to the Constituent Assembly!" (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias 2017).

Many of the government's theories seem almost farcical, but their implications are grave. Announcements of conspiracies uncovered are often followed by the arrest and imprisonment of opposition politicians and activists. According to data collected by the Venezuelan human rights organization *Foro Penal*, in its first three years and ten months, Maduro's government imprisoned fifty-six political opponents on conspiracy charges (as well as another forty-eight, mostly on protest-related charges), sentencing twenty-one of them as of February 2017 (Amaro Chacón and Carey 2017, *Foro Penal* 2017).

It is important to acknowledge that, although conspiracy theories are central to government rhetoric, and the government deploys substantial resources disseminating them, it does not have an absolute monopoly on conspiracy narratives. For example, a longstanding narrative among the opposition portrays President Maduro (and before him, portrayed Chávez) as a puppet for a cabal led by the Castro regime in Cuba (Pérez

Hernáiz 2008, Martinoticias 2014). In short, the government has greater proclivity and resources to advocate conspiracies than the opposition, but it is still worth assessing how conspiracy beliefs are distributed among Venezuelans, and whether receptiveness works the same way across the spectrum of political identification with Chavismo, the opposition, or independence from either.

Conspiracy Theories and Respondent Characteristics on the Survey

The LAPOP 2016 Venezuela survey was fielded in October 2016 to January 2017.² I included in the survey a module that contained questions about belief in three political conspiracy theories. To ensure that the theories would resonate with respondents, I monitored the Venezuelan press, as well as the *Venezuela Conspiracy Theories Monitor* blog (Pérez Hernáiz, n.d.) throughout the summer and fall of 2016 and crafted statements consistent with narratives that were currently in circulation. Two were designed to appeal to government supporters and one to opponents:

Pro-Chavista

- Economic War: “Leaders of opposition parties conspire with foreign powers to foster economic warfare designed to bring about the fall of President Maduro.”
- Chávez Assassination: “Agents of the United States helped to kill President Hugo Chávez by giving him materials that induce cancer.”

Pro-Opposition

- PSUV Plot: “Leaders of the PSUV and top commanders of the Venezuelan military are secretly plotting to push aside President Maduro in order to preserve their own power.”

The response options were a seven-point Likert scale running from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree.”

The first two statements are straightforward. The economic warfare narrative and the proposition that US agents helped to kill President Chávez are long-standing staples of Venezuelan government rhetoric.

The appeal of the PSUV Plot statement is slightly less clear-cut, in part because the opposition is less active in promoting conspiracy theories than the government. That said, the narrative builds on factors that have sown divisions within the PSUV in recent years. A drop in oil prices starting in 2014 has plunged the Venezuelan economy into crisis and triggered massive street protests against the government (Nagel 2014). The PSUV’s loss in the 2015 National Assembly elections further undermined confidence in Maduro’s leadership. Throughout 2016, support for an opposition effort to force a recall referendum on the president highlighted the level of opposition to President Maduro (although the effort was blocked by the courts). In July 2016, President Maduro restructured responsibilities within his government, vastly increasing the authorities of his minister of defense, General Vladimir Padrino López, to include powers over the distribution of food and medicines. In this context, President Maduro was, quite plausibly, a political liability to the Chavista regime, and rumors circulated that military leaders and PSUV rivals were maneuvering either to marginalize Maduro within the government or to oust him altogether (Gunson 2016).

The PSUV Plot statement was designed to appeal primarily to regime opponents, who would embrace internecine battles within Maduro’s government as evidence of his fecklessness. It might, conceivably, also have resonated with some Maduro loyalists within Chavismo, although I would expect their numbers to be few and the appeal of a statement highlighting their champion’s weakness to be tepid.

I explore three categories of individual respondent characteristics as potential correlates to conspiracy theory belief: demographics, political loyalties, and personal predispositions. The first category includes individual-level characteristics—age, gender, household income, and level of education—that are conventional in studies of political opinion and are included in the standard LAPOP survey instrument.

With respect to political loyalties, we should expect Chavista partisans to embrace the Economic War and Chávez Assassination statements and to reject the PSUV Plot statement at higher rates than opposition partisans, with nonpartisans falling in between. To test this expectation, it is necessary to identify survey respondents with respect to their identification with Chavismo or the opposition. To do this, I rely on two

² The survey went into the field on October 3, 2016, and was intended to be completed in November. However, the survey vendor, Datanalisis, initially confronted problems of enumerator safety (some neighborhoods enumerators could not enter because of crime), and of unreliable response data. Confronting evidence that responses from some enumerators may have been fabricated, Datanalisis re-surveyed in those instances. Of the 1,558 responses in the overall survey, 423, or 27 percent, were collected after November – 119 in December 2016, and 304 in January 2017.

questions in the LAPOP survey, the first of which asked respondents whether they identify with any party, and the second (conditional on a positive response to the first), asked which party. I then classified respondents who identify with parties aligned with the government as Chavista partisans, and those who identified with opposition parties accordingly. The Party ID variable is coded as follows:

- Chavista partisan: Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela, Partido Comunista de Venezuela, Movimiento Revolucionario, Gran Polo Patriótico
- Nonpartisan: Identifies with no party
- Opposition partisan: Mesa Unida Democrática, Un Nuevo Tiempo, Primera Justicia, COPEI, AD, Voluntad Popular, Patria para Todo, Alianza por Cambio, Unidad Democrática, Movimiento Unidad, Partido Democrático Unidos por la Paz y la Libertad, or Other

The distribution of partisan identification among respondents in the LAPOP survey is shown in **Table 1**.³ A solid majority of respondents identified as nonpartisan. Among partisan identifiers, more identified with the opposition than with Chavista parties.

The final category of respondent characteristics I explore are non-political predispositions that are posited to animate, or foster, belief in conspiracy theories. I sought to examine three types of such predispositions: a Manichaeian worldview, belief in unseen forces, and fatalism. I included on the LAPOP survey three questions intended to reveal these predispositions:

- Manichaeian worldview: “Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil.”
- Unseen forces: “The exhumation of the Liberator, Simon Bolívar, in 2010, awakened a curse that killed, by sudden illness or accident, the politicians and dignitaries who were involved with that event.”
- Fatalism: “There is little I can do to change important things in my life.”

The response options were the same as with the conspiracy theory statements above. The questions on Manichaeian worldview and fatalism are straightforward. The question on belief in unseen forces requires further explanation because it was uniquely designed for the Venezuelan context.

The legend of Bolívar’s Curse stems from July 2010, when then president Hugo Chávez presided over the exhumation of the corpse of Venezuelan independence hero, Simon Bolívar. Chávez had various motivations. Some of the Liberator’s tissue was taken for chemical testing to determine whether his death may have been caused by poisoning rather than tuberculosis, as previous diagnoses had held. (The results were inconclusive.) More importantly, the event provided Chávez an opportunity to associate himself, and the political movement he led, ever more closely with Venezuela’s most prominent national hero. Before reburying Bolívar in a new coffin with Chávez’s government’s seal, Chávez communed with the Liberator’s bones and subsequently channeled a message to the nation: “I awaken every hundred years when the people awaken” (Halvorsen 2010).

The immediate motivation for the exhumation may have been macabre political theater, but the downstream events were even more unsettling. Various officials who had presided at the exhumation died within the next few years, including National Assembly Deputy Luis Tascón (colon cancer, August 2010), General Alberto Muller Rojas (undetermined health issues, August 2010), Guárico State governor William Lara (automobile accident, September 2010), Controller of the Republic Clodosbaldo Russián (stroke, June 2011),

Table 1: Political identification of LAPOP 2016 respondents.

Political identification	N	Percent
Chavista partisan	203	13
No party	971	62
Opposition	315	20
No response	69	4
Total	1,558	100

³ Venezuela’s traditional party system disintegrated in recent decades, untethering long-standing partisan loyalties (Lupu 2016). As a check on the validity of the Party ID variable, I also generated Political ID and Vote ID variables, the former based on responses to two questions about attitudes toward Chavismo and toward the opposition, the latter on expressed intentions for a vote in a future presidential election. These variables are strongly correlated with Party ID. The supplementary materials provided with this article include computer code to produce each variable and to replicate the statistical models presented here using each of the three political loyalties variables. The overall results are robust to various model specifications.

Deputy Robert Serra (murdered, apparent street crime, October 2014), and most prominently of all, President Chávez himself, from colon cancer, in March 2013. The string of deaths gave rise to a legend that Bolívar, like the Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun, visited revenge from beyond the grave upon those who had disturbed his eternal rest. By 2015, there was a paperback tracing the effects of the curse (Torres Rodríguez 2015).

The survey question on Bolívar's Curse aimed to tap into respondents' proclivities to believe in supernatural, unseen forces acting on the physical world. I found the question attractive for measuring belief in a uniquely Venezuelan phenomenon, and for economizing on survey space, relative to the four separate questions on supernatural and paranormal beliefs deployed by Oliver and Wood (2014). On the whole, the question worked. Thirty-eight percent of respondents agreed with it at least somewhat, and 22 percent strongly agreed. Unlike Manichaeism and fatalism, which are uncorrelated with political loyalties, belief in the curse is stronger among opposition partisans than among Chavistas, with 48 percent and 30 percent, respectively, agreeing at least somewhat. Why might this be the case? Some amount of politically motivated reasoning could be at work. Awakening a curse that kills oneself and one's compatriots is blameworthy, and finding fault with Hugo Chavez might be distasteful to Chavistas. Nevertheless, there is support for the curse narrative on both ends of the political spectrum, and the regression analyses presented below partial out partisanship associated with this predisposition.

In short, the LAPOP Venezuela 2016 survey included three questions on Manichaeism, on belief in unseen forces, and on fatalism. I use these to test the proposition that such predispositions contribute, distinctly from politically motivated reasoning and distinctly from other individual traits, to belief in political conspiracies.

Belief in Conspiracies

Turning to the political conspiracy theories themselves, two initial patterns are immediately apparent. First, these beliefs are widespread in Venezuela. Thirty percent of Venezuelans agree at least somewhat with the economic warfare narrative, 18 percent with the theory that Chávez was assassinated, and 28 percent with the idea that, as of late 2016, PSUV leaders were plotting to sideline President Maduro. Second, conspiracy beliefs track partisan loyalties in a way consistent with politically motivated reasoning. **Figure 1** shows the mean support level (seven-point scale) for each conspiracy statement by partisan identification. Narratives designed to appeal to Chavistas clearly did so. Chavistas subscribe to the economic warfare and assassination theories far more heavily than do nonpartisans, who, in turn, buy into those narratives more heavily than opposition partisans. The pattern is reversed, although less pronounced, for the PSUV plot conspiracy, which is embraced more willingly by nonpartisans and opposition partisans than by Chavistas.

Beyond political loyalties, what individual-level characteristics are associated with belief in conspiracies? **Table 2** presents OLS regression analyses of support for each of the conspiracy statements. The models include dummy variables for Chavista and opposition identification, with nonpartisans as the baseline category, as well as for level of education, age, sex, and income, plus the three predisposition variables measuring belief in unseen forces, Manichaeism, and fatalism.

As expected, the most powerful effects are for partisan identification. Relative to nonpartisans, Chavistas and opposition supporters always go in opposite directions. Politically motivated reasoning promotes polarization around conspiracies, with some embracing and others rejecting the same story.

Of the demographic measures, age, sex, and household income show no consistent patterns. The estimate on age is negative but not significant on the economic warfare and PSUV plot statements, whereas older Venezuelans, perhaps better able to recall CIA activities in the region during the Cold War, are significantly more likely to buy into the assassination story. Consistent with Lupu's assessment of socioeconomic class and support for Chavismo, the coefficients on income also vary in sign, although respondents from wealthier households were less inclined toward the assassination story (Lupu 2010). The negative coefficients on sex

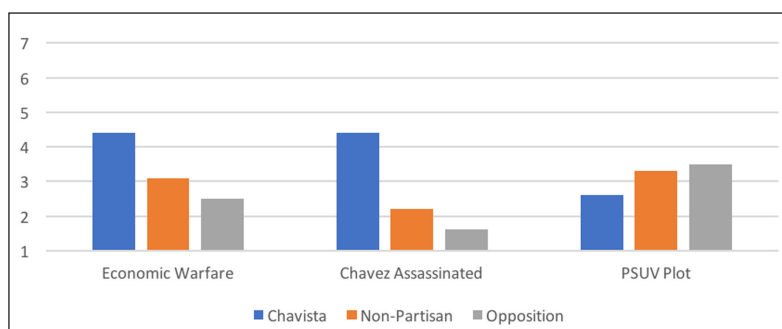


Figure 1: Mean support for three conspiracy theories by partisan identification.

Table 2: Regressions of Venezuela conspiracy theories on partisan identification, demographics, and predispositions.

	Economic warfare	US helped kill Chavez	PSUV leaders plot
Chavista partisan	1.379** (0.23)	1.987** (0.22)	-0.647** (0.18)
Opposition partisan	-0.553** (0.16)	-0.676** (0.12)	0.266 (0.17)
Years in school	-0.040* (0.02)	-0.049** (0.02)	-0.030+ (0.02)
Age	-0.001 (0.00)	0.010* (0.00)	-0.007 (0.00)
Sex	-0.025 (0.14)	-0.016 (0.11)	-0.036 (0.13)
Income	0.008 (0.01)	-0.025* (0.01)	-0.007 (0.01)
Manichaeian worldview	0.053 (0.03)	0.059* (0.03)	0.056 (0.03)
Unseen forces	-0.000 (0.03)	0.022 (0.03)	0.136** (0.03)
Fatalism	0.032 (0.03)	0.064* (0.03)	0.055+ (0.03)
Constant	3.157** (0.42)	2.053** (0.37)	3.036** (0.41)
Observations	1,117	1,093	1,103
Adjusted R^2	0.070	0.204	0.059

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses.

Source: LAPOP Venezuela 2016 Survey.

+ $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

suggest that women may be, on the margin, less supportive of conspiracies than men, but the estimates never reach conventional significance benchmarks. In this set, the variable that matters consistently is education. The estimates are always negative, and significant at 0.05 for the economic warfare and assassination statements, and 0.10 for the PSUV plot. More education is associated with greater skepticism toward all these conspiracies.

The effects of Manichaeism, belief in unseen forces, and fatalism are uneven but lean toward greater conspiracism. The coefficients on Manichaeism are all positive and consistent in scale, between 0.05 and 0.06, suggesting we should expect a hard-core Manichaeian to be about a third of a point higher than a non-Manichaeian on the seven-point scale measuring agreement with each conspiracy theory, other things equal. The estimates on fatalism are similar in direction and scale. But the estimates on both of these predispositions hover around the threshold of statistical significance, falling just short as frequently as they surpass it. On unseen forces, the estimated effect is stronger, but only for one conspiracy, the PSUV plot.⁴

The relative scales and directions of these effects are illustrated graphically in **Figures 2, 3** and **4**, each of which shows five panels, with the fitted values of the dependent variable, conditional on shifts in political

⁴ Some reviewers suggested investigating further whether effects of individual characteristics are, themselves, conditional on partisanship. The replication code provided with this manuscript (online supplement) pursues their specific recommendations, generating interactive terms between partisanship and level of education, and between partisanship and Manichaeism and including those in the models presented above. The results are mostly nonsignificant and vary in direction. The potential number of conditional effects one could test is, of course, extremely large. Establishing clear theoretical motivation and a set of expectations before proceeding with empirical testing is essential.

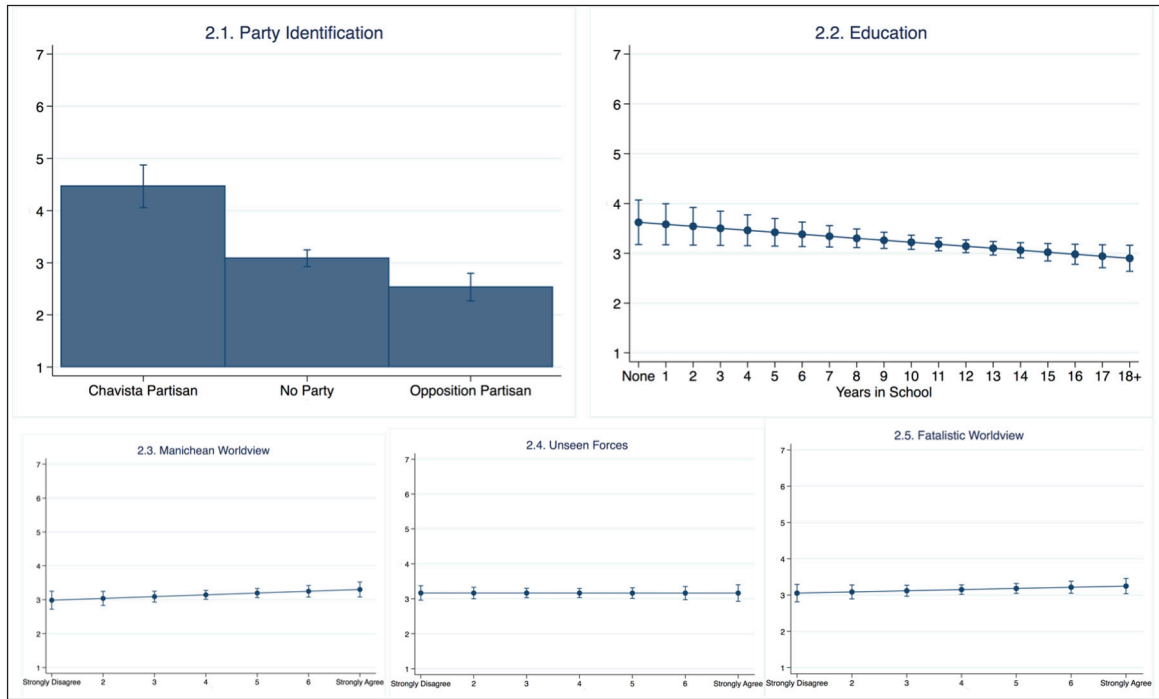


Figure 2: Belief in economic warfare conspiracy theory, fitted values.

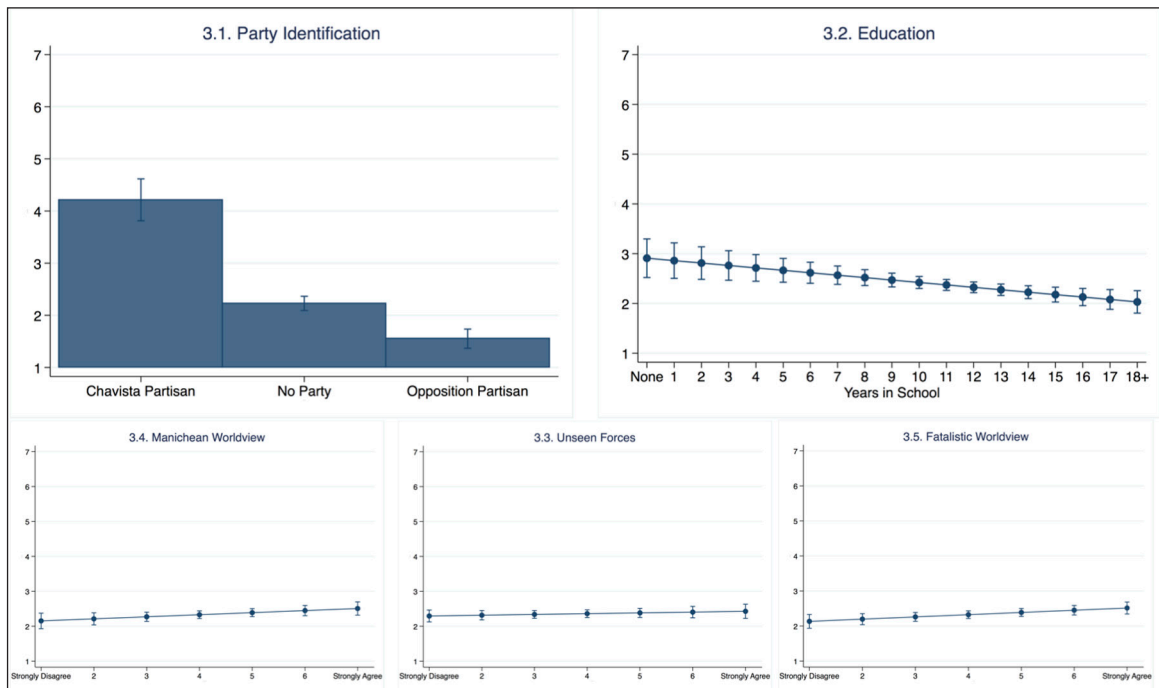


Figure 3: Belief in Chavez assassination conspiracy theory, fitted values.

identification, years of education, and the Manichean, unseen forces, and fatalistic worldviews, respectively. The error bars show the 95 percent confidence interval around each estimate.

Holding other factors constant, shifting from Chavista to opposition loyalist produces an expected drop of 1.9 points on the seven-point Likert scale of agreement with the economic warfare narrative. Shifting from no formal education to university level produces an expected drop of 0.7 points. On the Chávez assassination story, the effects of partisan identification and education are similarly powerful, and Manichaeism and fatalism provide a bit more leverage. Moving to the statement about the PSUV leaders’ plot to remove President Maduro, the divide by partisan loyalties is less stark, with about one point, rather than two, separating Chavistas from the opposition. More education, as always, diminishes belief in the conspiracy, but the stronger push here comes from belief in unseen forces as manifest in the Bolívar’s Curse narrative.

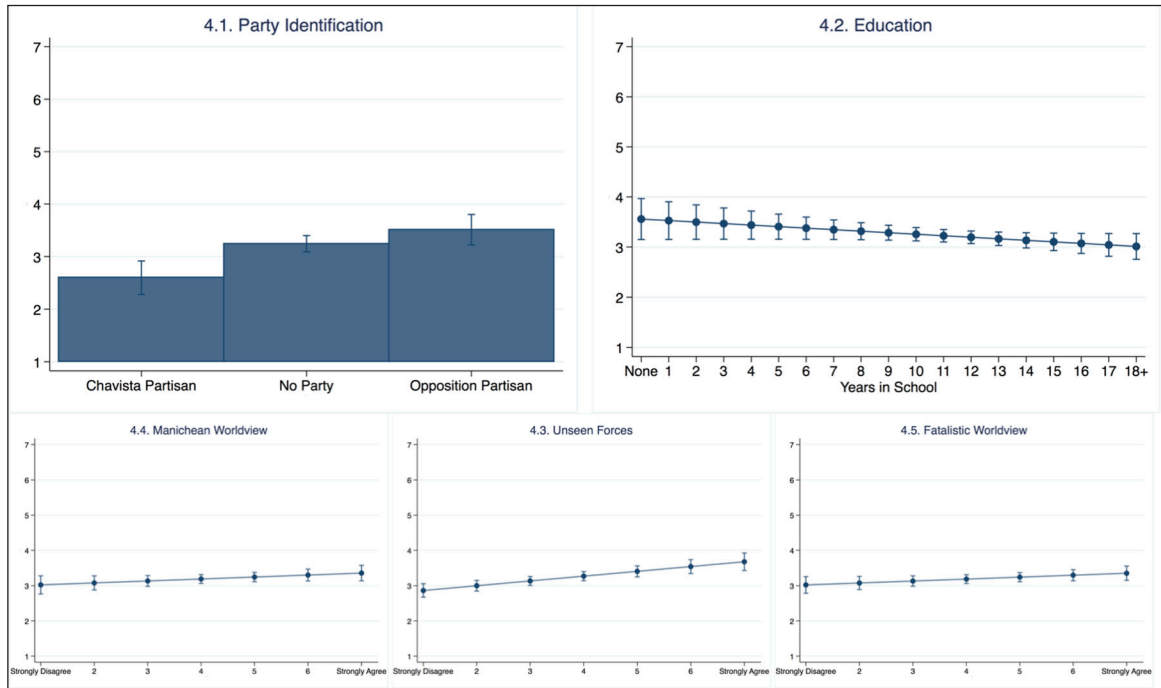


Figure 4: Belief in PSUV leaders' plot conspiracy theory, fitted values.

Other things equal, a strong believer in the curse registers almost a point higher than does a skeptic on agreement with the PSUV plot narrative.

Discussion

All the relationships estimated here are purely correlational. This analysis does not present a model for causal identification. Nevertheless, the opinions expressed in the survey data, and the relationships among respondents' characteristics and beliefs, illustrate some important elements of Venezuelan politics that previously had not been explored systematically. First, belief in conspiracy theories is widespread. Overall, 54 percent of respondents agreed at least somewhat, and 27 percent agreed strongly, with at least one of the conspiracy statements.⁵

For the most part, different sets of Venezuelans subscribe to different conspiracies. Political loyalties are the strongest factor driving support for particular narratives. Of the 54 percent of respondents who agree with any of the three conspiracy statements, 39 percent expressed support either for a pro-Chavista story but not for the pro-opposition story, or vice versa. The multivariate analyses confirm that political identification is the strongest single predictor of support for any given conspiracy theory. Venezuelans tend to support conspiracies that vilify their political adversaries.

In this light, politicians' promotion of conspiracy narratives as a method to rally support makes some sense. Del Tronco (2013), for example, demonstrates that fomenting distrust in traditional political actors and institutions increases populists' electoral prospects, at least in the short run. Successive Chavista governments have embraced this strategy, deploying an array of state resources to promote conspiracy theories. The results here suggest both the capacity and the limits for political elites in deploying conspiracy discourse as a political tool. Higher levels of conspiracy theory belief among Chavista partisans (74 percent embrace at least one theory) than among nonpartisans and opposition partisans (51 percent and 50 percent, respectively) suggest limits to elite persuasion. At the same time, the distribution of support for conspiracies in Venezuela challenges the premise that conspiracism is a trait of conservatives, or an attribute merely of the politically disempowered.

Next, motivated reasoning is not the whole story, and conspiracy belief is not limited to partisans. The rate of belief in at least one conspiracy was as high among nonpartisans as among opposition partisans.

⁵ These numbers are similar to those reported by Oliver and Wood (2014), who found that 55 percent of respondents in the United States subscribed to at least one of the seven conspiracy narratives on which they surveyed respondents. Unfortunately, to date, we lack cross-national data that would allow us to compare levels of conspiracism and test propositions about whether and how national-level conditions and characteristics affect conspiracy theory belief.

And 15 percent of respondents subscribed both to the pro-opposition narrative about a plot among PSUV leaders and to at least one of the pro-Chavista statements. Beyond politically motivated reasoning, there are individual-level characteristics that correlate with conspiracy theory belief and, unlike motivated reasoning, these predispositions do not push some respondents toward and others away from the same story. Their effects are consistent regardless of the conspiracy's content. Education diminishes both pro- and anti-Chavista conspiracism. Manichaeism and fatalism track with greater conspiracism of both varieties. These effects are not as large as that of partisanship, but they are measurable, particularly with regard to the Chávez assassination and PSUV plot narratives.

The results with regard to Manichaeism and fatalism are consistent with the proposition that, on the margin, events that induce people to see the world in terms of good and evil, or cause them to feel less control over their lives, can push them toward greater belief in political conspiracies (Pérez Hernáiz 2011). Both effects suggest that Venezuela's current political and economic context provides a perfect environment for conspiracy. The country's economic free fall is unprecedented, and more Venezuelans face economic insecurity than at any point in living memory (*Economist* 2017). Violent crime has also reached levels among the highest in the world (UNODC 2014). Venezuelans have plenty of reason to sense that their fates are buffeted by forces beyond their control.

Just as troubling, Venezuelan political leaders have been fostering narratives of good against evil for years (Corrales and Penfold 2015). If Manichaeism itself fosters conspiracism, then the Maduro government's relentless manufacture of such narratives has a self-fulfilling quality to it. The greater the supply of conspiracies, the more citizens see the political world as populated by villains and heroes, and the more they see the world this way, the more receptive is the environment to conspiracy beliefs. This is consistent with recent research indicating that heightened polarization increases the willingness of citizens—even those who value democracy and the rule of law—to overlook abuses of the democratic process by their own side in the interest of electoral victory (Svolik 2017). All this suggests that the fantastic nature of many of the government's conspiracy narratives may matter less than that they provide a reliably adversarial script.

The data and analysis here also suggests some possible shifts to reduce the hold of conspiracy theories over Venezuelan politics. Most reliably, increasing education levels diminishes support for conspiracy narratives, probably by increasing citizens' abilities to parse evidence and the premium they place on evidence in forming beliefs. Second, stabilizing the economy and reducing levels of violent crime could reduce levels of fatalism—measured in the LAPOP survey as the degree to which respondents feel they do not control important aspects of their lives—which in turn are associated with greater beliefs that politics is driven by secret plots and conspiracies.

Third, and most importantly, a political resolution to Venezuela's persistent and heightened polarization between Chavistas and the anti-Chavista opposition could roll back conspiracism in at least two ways—by reducing motivated reasoning and by mitigating the resonance of Manichaeism. The three years since Nicolás Maduro assumed the presidency have been marked by street protests, disputed elections, bitter conflict between branches of government, the usurpation of the legislature's authorities, and more street protests. The environment promotes depictions of politics that demonize political adversaries while exonerating allies, thus encouraging citizens to embrace and filter evidence selectively in ways that reinforce beliefs in perfidy among opponents and righteousness among one's allies (Haidt 2012). It also fosters good-against-evil worldviews that reinforce conspiratorial beliefs generally, rather than selectively.

It is important to acknowledge in closing that not all conspiratorial beliefs are misguided. Some conspiracies turn out to be real. Yet the conspiracy narratives examined here refer to secret plots for which verifiable evidence has not been produced. The normative skepticism toward conspiratorial politics reflects a normative preference for political discourse based on verifiable facts. Various sources have suggested that we are entering a postfactual era in politics—and not just in Venezuela (Pazzanese 2016; Suiter 2016)—but the operating premise here is that we should make every possible effort to resist any such transition.

Additional Files

The additional files for this article can be found as follows:

- **Data file 1.** Replication data file. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.88.s1>
- **Data file 2.** Replication code (Stata do-file). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.88.s2>

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