

How Conspiracy Theories Increase Political Extremism

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One key finding is that conspiracy theories are more common at the left and right political fringes, as well as in radical extremist groups. Through what psychological processes are conspiracy theories connected to political extremism? This contribution proposes that conspiracy theories reinforce a worldview inherent to politically extreme movements, where the radical ingroup is portrayed as heroes fighting a diabolical enemy outgroup. Conspiracy theories specifically make perceivers' own group seem morally superior, and provide an excuse for failure. Moreover, conspiracy theories cultivate perceived enemyship by demonizing other groups such as societal elites, mutinationals, foreign governments, or minority groups. These processes jointly contribute to at least three societal expressions of political extremism: (1) conspiracy theories increase the likelihood of rejecting rules and regulations, supporting unlawful actions; (2) conspiracy theories predict a rejection of representative democracy, and increased illegal forms of protest (e.g., intimidation of political opponents); and (3) conspiracy theories increase the likelihood of violent action, both domestically (e.g., the 2021 Capitol Hill riots) and geopolitically (e.g., Putin's beliefs that the Ukrainian government is a regime of Nazis committing genocide on Russian minorities).