

CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE FOR LOSERS*

Joseph E. Uscinski
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Miami
Jenkins Bldg. 314B
Coral Gables, FL 33146
uscinski@miami.edu
(305) 284-3717

Joseph M. Parent
Assistant Professor
Department of Political Science
University of Miami
Jenkins Bldg. 314F
Coral Gables, FL 33146
parent@miami.edu
(305) 284-8859

Bethany Torres
Undergraduate Student
State University of New York, at Buffalo

* Paper presented at the 2011 American Political Science Association annual conference, Seattle, Washington, the University of Miami faculty paper series, the University of Miami Law and Policy Workshop, and the 2011 Florida Political Science Association. The authors are grateful to the participants of these meetings for valuable comments and to many research assistants, especially Jing Chen, for their exhausting labors. Generous financial support provided by the University of Miami College of Arts and Sciences. Enduring errors have nothing to do with the authors. Any flaws in the work are solely the fault of secretive powerful groups.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES ARE FOR LOSERS

Abstract: What drives conspiracy theorizing in the United States? Conspiracy theories can undermine the legitimacy and efficacy of government policy, and sometimes lead to violence. Unfortunately prior studies on the topic have been anecdotal and impressionistic. For purchase on this problem, we attempt the first systematic data collection of conspiracy theories at the mass and elite levels by examining published letters to the editor of the New York Times from 1897 to 2010 and a validating sample from the Chicago Tribune. We argue that perceived power asymmetries, indicated by international and domestic conflicts, influence when and why conspiracy theories resonate in the U.S. On this reasoning, conspiracy theories conform to a strategic logic that helps vulnerable groups manage threats. Further, we find that both sides of the domestic partisan divide partake in conspiracy theorizing equally, though in an alternating pattern, and foreign conspiracy theories crowd out domestic conspiracy theories during heightened foreign threat.

For all their disreputable notoriety, conspiracy theories are a popular perennial in American politics. The bulk of the Declaration of Independence accuses King George III of a concerted and far-reaching conspiracy: the king's actions "all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states." Since then there has been a steady stream of allegations, imputing anti-American conspiracies to the British, French, Spanish, Bavarian Illuminati, Freemasons, Bilderbergers, Abolitionists, Slave Power, Catholics, Jews, Mormons, Muslims, ethnic fifth columns, communists, capitalists, the United Nations, and many, many more.

To this day, polls repeatedly show that large segments of the public believe in one conspiracy or another. For example, decades after the fact, about ninety percent of the population agrees that the assassination of President John Kennedy was orchestrated by a conspiracy and covered up by the government (Goertzel 1994; CBS 2009). In 2006, about a third of the American populace believed that the Bush administration either planned or knowingly allowed the 9/11 attacks (Hargrove 2006). In 2009, almost a third of the population believed the "birther" conspiracy, that President Barack Obama was a foreign born citizen who had unconstitutionally ascended to power (Nyhan 2011). Why do conspiracy theories resonate so persistently?

Getting the answer right is imperative. While sometimes harmless, conspiracy theorizing is not confined to parlor games about who really shot Kennedy or who probed whom near Roswell, New Mexico. It signals political alienation and distrust, it undercuts the ability of government to lead, and it can lead to witch hunts and worse (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008:1; Chanley 2002; Wedel 2009; Oppel 2011). High profile examples are legion. During the 1990s, President Bill Clinton consumed much of his presidency fending off allegations that he was part of a conspiracy to cover up illegal activities—his administration ironically counterclaiming that it was the victim of a "vast right-wing conspiracy." Believing that the government was conspiring to violate individual rights, Timothy McVeigh bombed a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 and wounding hundreds

more. Conspiracy-related race riots and Red Scares inflicted incalculable damage to the country. And further afield, Anders Behring Breivik’s conspiratorial views killed scores and Adolf Hitler’s “stab in the back” myths killed millions.

Nonetheless, scholars have a poor understanding of the conditions under which conspiracies resonate. This is likely because the extant literature is temporally parochial, relying almost exclusively on anecdotes drawn from a handful of salient, usually contemporaneous cases.¹ For example, Michael Tesler and David Sears argue that “the driving force behind the dogged unwillingness of so many to acknowledge that Obama was born in the United States is not just simple partisan opposition to a Democratic president but a general ethnocentric suspicion of an African-American president who is also perceived as distinctly ‘other’” (2010:153). Many blamed the 9/11 “truther” movement on un-American attitudes (O’Reilly 2006) or “massive growth in free expression facilitated by online forums and weblogs” (Heins 2007:797). However, these ad hoc explanations are not set in comparative context and may have little explanatory power beyond the event each is meant to explain—racism, for instance, would likely not explain belief in either the truther or JFK conspiracy theories. A lack of systematic evidence has stunted the growth of general theories to explain and predict conspiratorial thinking. In consequence, policymakers have been largely left in the dark.²

This article aims to make a descriptive and an analytical contribution. First, we generate the first systematic data collection of conspiracy theories in the United States over a 114-year period,

¹ For example, contemporary authors focus mainly on the “birther” and “truther” conspiracies (e.g. Buenting and Taylor 2010; Chanley 2002; Nyhan and Reifler 2009; Berinsky 2010; Sunstein and Vermeule 2008) while authors in the 1990s focused on belief in the JFK conspiracy following the release of the Oliver Stone film, *JFK* (e.g. Butler, Koopman, and Zimbardo 1995; Keeley 1999; McHoskey 1995).

² For example, Sunstein and Vermeule (2008:22; see also Richardson and Introvigne 2001) suggest that the government should combat conspiratorial beliefs by “cognitively infiltrating” groups that hold conspiratorial views. In Western Europe, government agencies have recently issued questionable “anti-brainwashing” legislation to address roving cults that are apparently conspiring to brainwash people (Richardson and Introvigne 2001:143). There is little evidence that such strategies are cost-effective solutions.

1897 - 2010. This data is based on a content analysis of 100,000 published letters to the editor of the *New York Times*, supplemented by a validating sample from the *Chicago Tribune*. We focus on letters that either propagate or refute a conspiracy theory. From these letters, we separate mass from elite opinions and compile information about when and how often various groups are accused of conspiring.

Second, we advance a general theory of conspiracy theorizing, arguing that conspiracy theorizing in the United States is driven by power asymmetries. The causes of conspiracy theories are not primarily philosophical, psychological, or sociological—they are political. Conspiracy theories tend to resonate when they help vulnerable groups manage threats. They do this because successful conspiracy theories have a strategic logic that sharpens internal cohesion and focuses attention on dangers. During times of low external threat, we find regular alternation between left-wing groups out of power blaming right-wing groups in power for conspiring against them followed by the reverse. During times of high external threat, we find infighting receding and foreigner-fearing conspiracy theories coming to the fore. Because defeat is their biggest inducement, conspiracy theories are for losers (speaking descriptively, not pejoratively.)

To make our case, we begin by setting down definitions and the analytical scope of the work. The second section overviews the literature and assesses its strengths and weaknesses. In the third section, we elaborate the logic of our argument. The fourth section dilates on our data, and the fifth analyzes our findings. The final section offers conclusions and policy recommendations.

DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE

We define a *conspiracy* as a secret arrangement between two or more powerful actors to usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions (e.g. Pigden 1995:5). Conspiracies happen: President Richard Nixon and

members of his administration conspired to break into the Watergate Hotel, and later conspired to cover-up that and other crimes (Mearsheimer 2011:49, 58). By a *conspiracy theory* we mean, a proposed explanation of historical events which cites as a main causal factor, a small group of powerful persons (the conspirators) acting in secret for their own benefit, against the common good (Keeley 1999:116; Aaronovitch 2010:5-6). So, for instance, the redemption movement claims that when the U.S. government went off the gold standard it conspired to use its citizens, without their knowledge or consent, as loan collateral. While a conspiracy refers to an act, a conspiracy theory refers to a perception (Pipes 1997:21).

We intend *conspiratorial thought* as a person or persons' cognitive processes that seek to explain events as the product of a conspiracy. The trouble with conspiratorial thought is that it is hard to measure. One may believe that water fluoridation is a crafty communist ploy to conquer the country, but if that belief were not expressed the thought would be socially sterile. The best, albeit imperfect, way to access conspiratorial thought is through conspiracy talk. *Conspiracy talk* is recorded public discourse that results from conspiratorial thought. It seeks to expose conspiracies or engage in debate about a conspiracy theory or theories. And a *conspiracy theorist* is one who believes in conspiratorial thought, not necessarily one who originates conspiratorial ideas.

The central question of this article is: under what circumstances do conspiracy theories resonate? This subsumes a number of subsidiary questions such as who is advancing conspiracy theories, who are they accusing, why are they doing it, and what explains the timing of the accusations? Resonance refers to how extensive a conspiracy belief is. Like faces and snowflakes, each conspiracy theory is unique, but it is useful to classify them based on how popular they are and who plays the antagonist role. By definition, all conspiracy theories posit a knave out to subvert the common weal. By and large the victim remains the same stock character (i.e. the unsuspecting public), but the villains, though also stock characters, cycle through in great multiplicity. So

conspiracy theories vary chiefly through their antagonists and the number of their supporters at a particular time.

The scope of this paper is the United States from 1897 to 2010. We choose this time and place for a number of reasons. The period under study is conventionally considered the modern era of American politics and permits longitudinal analysis without committing violence to the historical record. Many consider the election of 1896 as solidifying class and business interests among the two parties (e.g. Gould 1981; Martin and Swank 2008:192). This period also bears the advantage of providing high quality information, allowing for ample controls and reliable measures. We examine conspiracy theories in the United States because there has been renewed interest, increasing the potential to inform debate and guide policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on conspiracy theories features thoughtful scholarship from many disciplines. Although we criticize our predecessors, we also borrow from them and freely admit that where we differ they still contribute valuable insights. Our main concern is that none of the rival views had the benefit of uniform measures over time on which to test their hypotheses. Consequently, their conclusions are often limited in application. Also, we caution that some of the authors below could fit in multiple categories—Richard Hofstadter, as the father of the field, belongs in all of them—and we try to situate authors based on their placement of primary causal emphasis. The explanations are grouped by disciplinary approach: philosophy, psychology, and sociology.

Philosophical Approaches

There is a wide literature on the epistemological issues of conspiracy theorizing, predominantly about distinguishing conspiracy theories from other kinds of theories (Buenting and

Taylor 2010; Keeley 1999, 2003; Raikka 2009; Pigden 1995; Heins 2007; Coady 2006). At base, philosophical approaches are about information: it is the quantity, quality, and employment of evidence that drives belief in conspiracy theories. The germane claim of this school is that people adhere to conspiratorial thought because they lack accurate and authoritative information (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008; Briggs 2004; McHoskey 1995).

Philosophical approaches catch some of the broad brushstrokes of conspiracy theories. With large numbers of people over long periods of time, evidence does change minds. Conspiracy theories with less quantity and lower quality evidence are less popular and less enduring. Standards of logic and evidence are crucial to the generation of durable knowledge, and the success of the natural and social sciences is indicative of the broad acceptance these standards have earned.

Nevertheless, as Hofstadter himself has shown (Hofstadter 1963:6), America's increasing dependence on scientists and experts has led to backlash and ambivalence toward them. Both philosophers (Boudry and Braeckman 2011) and social scientists (Nyhan and Reifler 2009; Nyhan 2010, 2011) demonstrate that conspiratorial beliefs are enormously hard to correct—even under optimal experimental conditions (Bullock, Gerber, and Huber 2010; Berinsky 2010). There may be a distrust of authoritative opinion for the traditional reasons that central authority is distant, powerful, and does not share local norms (Erikson and Parent 2007). The credibility of information depends on its source, and believers in conspiracy theories are the least likely people to find authorities outside their group credible (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008). The harder central authority tries to get its orthodoxy accepted, the more threatening and less credible it becomes.

Further, it has not been established that the resonance of conspiracy talk, which swings quickly, correlates with the flow of information, which tends to change slowly. Philosophical accounts weakly specify what their causal mechanisms are. And empirically, many people adhere to conspiracy theories with little or no information to warrant such beliefs (Shermer 2011). Without

systematic evidence and plainer causal mechanisms, this school of thought is unproven. In sum, philosophical approaches have at most unproven and at least limited utility in understanding the dynamics of conspiracy theorizing.

Psychological Approaches

Another school of thought focuses on cognitive or personality-level factors. There are three major branches of this approach: cognitive quirks, the authoritarian personality, and psychopathology. First, some scholars take the basically benign view that conspiracy theorizing is a cognitive quirk. They argue that conspiracy theories are mental shortcuts, which draw clear arrows between big causes and big effects (Popper 1966; Silverstein 2002; Taleb 2008). From this vantage point, conspiracy theories reduce randomness and shoehorn reality into a streamlined, if incorrect, form (Groh 1987; Zonis and Joseph 1994; Hofstadter 1965). The mental tradeoff is less precision for more parsimony.

An impressive literature in prospect theory has demonstrated that people are loss averse, economize on decisional costs (Simon 1997:88-91; Thaler 1994), and suffer motivated biases that conflate justice with what benefits one's self (Babcock and Loewenstein 2000). Indeed there are instances in the conspiracy theory literature where participants openly take cognitive shortcuts (Johnson 1983: 25; Tackett 2000:696; Hofstadter 1964:36; Wood 1982:429, 431; Keeley 1999:123), and indulge motivated biases (Pipes 1997:2; Wood 1982:410-411, 430).

Although this approach is illuminating, it is also underspecified. Apart from speculating that loss aversion may lead to conspiracy theories, these works say little about what particular circumstances are likely to ignite particular types of conspiracy theories. Cognitive quirks are more or less constant in the American populace, yet conspiracy theorizing varies. Moreover, Abalakina-

Paap et al. (1999:637) show no empirical support for the idea that people believe in conspiracy theories because they provide simplified explanations for complex events.

Other authors tie the literature on authoritarian personalities to conspiracy theories. While the early studies did not specifically address conspiracy theories, they did examine the correlates of holding extreme political views (e.g. Adorno et al. 1950; see Hetherington and Weiler 2009 for a more updated view of authoritarianism). The problem with the early work is that, due to problems of measurement, it associates the holding of extreme views almost exclusively with right-leaning ideologies (for an exception, see Shils 1954). This subsequently led many (e.g. Brown 1965; Altemeyer 1996) to associate extreme opinions with the right. For example, Jonathan Chait, Senior Editor of *The New Republic*, argues that the right “evinces a kind of paranoid thinking that...cannot be found in the mainstream left” (2007:242).

After resolving the measurement problems of Adorno et al., later work examined the holding of extreme opinions on the left as well. The result was that several scholars found that conspiratorial thought operates symmetrically on both ends of the political spectrum. People on the right and the left are equally prone to having less faith in democracy, equally prone to cynical and suspicious views, and equally prone to believing that politicians conceal their true aims and make decisions in secret (McClosky and Chong 1985). Both ends of the spectrum agree the country is headed for an abyss; the difference between the two lies in who the culprit is for this state of affairs (Pigden 1995). For the left it is conservatives and capitalists, for the right it is liberals and communists (McClosky and Chong 1985; see also Chong, McClosky, and Zaller 1983:404, 409).

There is evidence to support arguments about symmetry between polar opposites (e.g. Berinsky 2010). For example, Nyhan (2009) compares belief in the truther conspiracy (that George W. Bush was behind the 9/11 terror attacks) to belief in the birther conspiracy (that Barack Obama is a foreign usurper). Fifty-one percent of Democrats believed in the truther conspiracy, but only

seven percent in the birther conspiracy, while fifty-eight percent of Republicans believed in the birther conspiracy but only eighteen percent in the truther conspiracy.³ Yet authoritarian personality arguments shed little light on the timing of conspiracy theorizing. The main hypothesis here is that personality traits and political predispositions are the root of conspiracy theorizing. But personality traits and political predispositions change more gradually than the waxing and waning of conspiracy theories. So while partisan symmetry is an important piece of the puzzle, it needs to be augmented by factors that account for its timing.

Third, some have employed a psychopathological lens to the subject. Work in this vein suggests that conspiratorial thought stems from or is akin to mental illness and delusion (Wulff 1988; see also Robins and Post 1997; Hofstadter 1965). Through some combination of environmental and genetic factors, emotional needs are susceptible to fear and manipulation. Apart from the individual pathologies, conspiratorial thought can also manifest collectively as mass paranoid delusion (Groh 1987). Experiments show that when people view groups from a distance, they more easily view them as united in a common, sometimes nefarious, purpose (Henderson 2009). In addition, the social identity theory literature argued that people are quick to form invidious in-groups and out-groups, even when group boundaries are obviously new and arbitrary, because such categories furnish identity and self-esteem. Further, individuals have a propensity to reward insiders and punish outsiders even when the personal incentive to do so is low (Tajfel 1981; Turner 1987).⁴

While a few conspiracy theorists are delusional (Wulff 1988:172), it is implausible to suggest that the striking numbers of Americans that subscribe to conspiracy theories are mentally ill (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008:9; Goertzel 1994). This is likely as true now as it was in the past.

³ Nyhan acknowledges difficulty in comparing the two questions given their different wordings. He takes steps to address this, and again, shows similar symmetry between partisans.

⁴ In fairness to social identity theorists, they argued that social categories are ubiquitous and constantly employed by normal people—only in extreme circumstances did social categories lead to lethal prejudice. Yet social identity theorists were vague in their description of behavioral triggers because much of their research was in the laboratory or on explosive cases of race and ethnic conflict. Ordinary politics was not the focus of their research and so their account of how regular politics turns pathological is problematic.

Historian David Brion Davis (1969:64) observed that those believing in the “Slave Power” conspiracy of the 1850s were, “clearly not misfits or marginal men. In terms of education, friendships, outgoing self-confidence and social effectiveness, they were an intellectual elite of their generation.” Like other psychological approaches, psychopathological explanations have a variance problem. The deleterious predispositions they describe are more or less constant, yet conspiracy theories shift over time and resonate among different groups at different moments. Psychopathology may grasp the lunatic fringe well, but it is of lesser value beyond that.

Sociological Approaches

Others have examined conspiracy theories from sociological and ethno-sociological viewpoints, arguing that culture is key in contextualizing conspiracy theorizing. How groups view themselves in relation to others helps determine how likely they are to view events as conspiracy related (Goldberg 2001; Locke 2009; Simmons and Parsons 2005; Waters 1997; Fenster 1999; Hellinger 2003; Melley 2000). By this logic, culture is a filter that screens out unflattering information and favors complimentary narratives. Inferior status is explained away by immoral machinations or illegal maneuvers, which grants the implied honor of being a worthy opponent or necessitating cheating to win.

Sociological approaches are adept at describing the worldview of conspiracy theorists, and internal group dynamics. But lush detail is the main strength and weakness of these approaches. By focusing on individual groups and individual conspiracies, sociological work sacrifices the systematic comparisons necessary to make conclusions with broader validity. These scholars accept conspiracy theories as an abstract concept, but have poured their energies into understanding the subject at a more granular level.

This touches a broader point. Conspiracy theories altogether are abidingly popular, but individual conspiracy theories vary widely in prominence and longevity. Nearly everyone is familiar with the theory that Fidel Castro, the mafia, and/or the CIA conspired to kill Kennedy, but few have heard about the conspiracy that lesbianism is part of a clandestine CIA operation or that the Department of Agriculture secretly schemed to exterminate the nation's pet dogs.⁵ The diversity, mutability, and evanescence of conspiracy theories makes them hard to capture and raises the temptation to only investigate the best known or most recent examples.⁶ Scholars have taken either an anecdotal approach, studying short slices of time (Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; McClosky and Chong 1985; Goertzel 1994; Latner 2006), or an impressionistic approach, studying a collection of the most salient conspiracy theories (Pipes 1997; Olmsted 2009).

A hefty portion of the conspiracy theory literature is founded on the Kennedy assassination (McCauley and Jacques 1979; Butler, Koopman, and Zimbardo 1995; McHoskey 1995; Goertzel 1994; Keeley 1999). And much of the recent scholarship has been absorbed by conspiracy theories of the past decade, namely the birther and truther theories (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008; Bunting and Taylor 2010; Nyhan and Reifler 2009; Berinsky 2010). These cases may be topical or provocative, but they are not a scientifically valid sample of conspiracy theories. They obstruct scholars from discerning similarities and differences between high and low profile conspiracy theories, and may skew our perception of the overall population of conspiracy talk. In addition, the existing literature struggles with over-time dynamics that affect conspiratorial beliefs. Cross-

⁵ Evidence suggests that the cats are behind this plot.

⁶ Space constraints prevent us from lengthy discussion of them, but state and local conspiracy theories remain politically potent. For example, conspiratorial beliefs helped defeat a proposed conservationist land use policy in Nevada County, California. Opponents of the proposal argued that the policy was part of a grand "global environmental conspiracy" to eliminate property rights (Hurley and Walker 2004). In the 2010 Colorado gubernatorial election, the Denver bicycle sharing program became the object of conspiracy theorizing when the Republican candidate argued that the seemingly innocent program was "part of a greater strategy to rein in American cities under a United Nations treaty" that "could threaten our personal freedoms" (Osher 2010). Responding to the widespread conspiracy theory that President Obama was born in another country, a dozen state legislatures have considered legislation requiring presidential candidates to prove they were born in the United States (Johnson 2011).

sectional studies have been helpful (Pipes 1997; Olmsted 2009), but to be thoroughly tested they ought to be supplemented by long-term longitudinal studies. The bottom line is that there exists no general theory of conspiracy theories that is validated by long-term systematic evidence.

ARGUMENT: A POLITICAL APPROACH

All arguments recognize that conspiracy theories are profoundly political, but they locate their ultimate causes in philosophical, psychological, or sociological forces (Wood 1982:407; Lipset and Raab 1978:485; Pipes 1997:184; Tackett 2000:42; Hofstadter 1964:32, 39; Waters 1997:115; Davis 1969:25-26; Aaronovitch 2010:355; Hofman 1993:33). In contrast, we contend that causes of conspiracy theorizing are first and foremost political, though philosophical, psychological, and sociological forces act as important intervening variables.

Fundamentally, our explanation is about groups competing for power. Groups perform at least two functions: coordination and distribution. To compete against others, groups coordinate individuals to create or capture resources, broadly interpreted, and then distribute those spoils authoritatively. These two tasks are in tension; there are always incentives to cooperate to expand the size of the pie, and compete for a greater slice of the pie. The ratio between the two is primarily a product of external threat (Simmel 1964; Coser 1956; Stein 1976). So the larger outside dangers loom, the more in-group cooperation and less distributional strife there is likely to be.

But as external threat relents, conditions become safer to indulge the luxury of infighting. In these periods, subgroups with coordination and distribution systems of their own compete for a greater share of collective resources.⁷ Because victory brings relative gains that may bring future victories, defeated subgroups have strong incentives to be especially vigilant and vigorous after losses. By this reasoning, conspiracy theories have a strategic logic, and, whether or not conspiracy

⁷ This internal competition is a microcosm of external competition, and, though we do not pursue the idea here, may repeat itself in a fractal pattern at smaller levels.

theorists realize it, their talk must conform to this logic or it will not resonate widely. Conspiracy theories are opportunistic; they concentrate attention in an effort to recover from defeat; they provide a unifying narrative that helps overcome collective action problems; they help close ranks, staunch losses, and sensitize minds to perceived vulnerabilities; their tendency to scapegoat, however reprehensible, channels anger, avoids internecine recriminations, and aims at redemption.

In a nutshell, our main claim is that perceived power asymmetries drive conspiracy talk. We will focus on two types of asymmetries: those between domestic political groups and those between the U.S. and foreign actors. During periods of perceived low external threat, domestic groups vie fiercely for distributional benefits. In a democracy this takes the shape of elections because the winners authoritatively allocate resources based on the size of their mandate. The hypothesis that follows from this is that conspiracy talk is most likely to issue from domestic groups after they have lost a major election.⁸ Victory being a lax disciplinarian, once a subgroup has won, its level of threat and grievance decline, resulting in less subgroup cohesion and less conspiracy theorizing. During periods of high perceived foreign threat, external necessity presses and coordination issues begin to compete with domestic distributional concerns. The hypothesis that follows from this is that, as external threats increase, conspiracy talk about international foes crowds out conspiracy talk demonizing domestic opponents. In both cases, balancing against power is at the core of the conspiracy theorizing.

These claims interact with rival approaches. Although conspiracy theorists self-servingly simplify reality, the underlying problem is less cognitive than political. And although many cultures display conspiracy theories and cultural explanations comprehend in-group dynamics well, culture

⁸ People belonging to an out-group will view themselves as lacking voice, as unable to make themselves felt, as unable attain goals, and as unable to change anything through their efforts (Neumann 1957:290; Edelman 1985; Inglehart 1987). This leads to feelings of insecurity, frustration, powerlessness, alienation, and of being disadvantaged (Volkan 1988; Hofstadter 1965:39; Robins and Post 1997). In short, when people view themselves as being “ruled,” they will cast conspiracy theories at their “rulers” as solace (Heins 2007:790; Robins and Post 1997:15).

does a poor job explaining the changing belief levels of conspiracy theories within and between cultures. By our logic, all groups are likely to engage in conspiracy theorizing when they suffer defeats (or toil at the bottom of a perceived asymmetry), and the more defeats they suffer (or the more toiling they do) the more popular and stubborn conspiracy beliefs are. Doubtless, conspiracy theorizing is quite complicated, and the argument sketched here is only meant to be a first cut that connects perspectives preliminarily. But we attempt to advance the literature by parsimoniously detailing the environmental conditions that foster particular kinds of conspiracy talk.

DATA COLLECTION

There are few options to measure U.S. conspiracy talk systematically over time. Some survey instruments tapping conspiratorial beliefs have been repeated, however, these have asked only about belief in specific conspiracy theories. Survey instruments that have asked about conspiratorial attitudes more broadly have not been sufficiently repeated. Content analysis of Internet blogs and webpages may provide some promise, yet given that the Internet has only been widely used since the late 1990s this data source affords only a small window. Given this, there is only one record of public discourse that spans a significant period of time: published letters to the editor of newspapers (Perrin and Vaisey 2008).

U.S. newspapers have carried letters to the editor sections for nearly three hundred years (Bleyer 1927; Schudson 1995). Although mediated, these letters form a public sphere in which citizens communicate on the issues of the day (Hart 2001; Page 1996; Perrin and Vaisey 2008). Letters to the editor are powerful sources of information because news outlets must represent the views of their community to maximize circulation (Uscinski 2009). Whatever newspaper editors' private predilections, they must sedulously monitor the pulse of their audience and cater to it.

Letters to the editor therefore offer leverage on public opinion in general, and on conspiracy talk specifically.

While the best among flawed measures, readers should be aware of two potential selection biases inherent in such data: who writes letters and who gets published. First, authors of letters to the editor may not be representative of the population. Writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper requires motive, means, and opportunity, so letter writers as a whole are unusual in terms of education, knowledge, political interest, leisure time, and other demographics (Hart 2001; Cooper, Knotts, and Haspel 2009). Nevertheless, there is good logic and evidence for not overdrawing this concern. Letter writers as a group may share uncommon traits, but newspaper editors are under serious pressure to publish letters that resonate with public opinion. Empirically, prior research suggests that if differences exist between letter writers and the population, those differences are minor (Buell 1975; Verba et al. 1967).⁹

Second, the editorial staff chooses which letters to print and which to discard; this hurdle could skew our sample in several ways. One way this could happen is by an editorial preference for running letters from elites. Of course, elites are devotees of conspiracy talk too (e.g. Davis 1969; Hofstadter 1964), but they may do so more or less than other social strata. Yet survey research shows that educational level and occupational category are not significant predictors of belief in particular conspiracy theories (Goertzel 1994) and studies of local elites show that their conspiratorial beliefs differ little from the local masses they serve (Simmons and Parsons 2005). To err on the safe side, in our data collection we denote letters from elites and letters from non-elites.

⁹ In the past, some scholars were concerned that letter writers were eccentrics, thus not representative of the population as a whole. Subsequent studies found that letter writers were not eccentrics, and that the letters column was a forum for serious political talk (Buell 1975; Volgy et al. 1977).

Thus, we control for the bias newspapers may have towards printing letters from elites, and this allows finer-grained analysis of mass versus elite conspiracy talk.

Another way editorial bias could creep in is the weeding out of letters that appear to be written by cranks. Again, if crackpot opinions are fairly common among a readership, editors have a financial stake in giving them a platform. Research finds that many editors consider excluding uncivil voices a violation of open deliberation (Wahl-Jorgenson 2004). For example, Thomas Feyer (2003), letters editor of the *New York Times*, stated that people who write to the *Times* “write about what gets them worked up, or what moves them. And no subject is off limits, within the bounds of good taste.” Our sample includes many outlandish letters that bear Feyer out.¹⁰

Still another potential avenue for editorial bias is the newsworthiness of a letter. Editors may focus on certain topics because they are highlighted in the news sections. Prior evidence shows this is not the case. Comparison between published and unpublished letters suggests that the two groups are not significantly different (Foster and Friedrich 1937). Letters section editors generally acknowledge that the letters column is a place of open debate, and not just a place to discuss items in the newspaper (Perrin and Vaisey 2008:787).

Finally, editors may show political bias in choosing which letters to print. However, several studies suggest that the viewpoints in published letters are not substantially different than the viewpoints expressed in non-published letters (Renfro 1979), and a recent field experiment suggests that editors use their gatekeeping powers to allow dissenting opinions to be heard, regardless of the paper’s official editorial positions (Butler and Schofield 2010). Studies have found strong correlation between the opinions expressed in published letters and survey measures of public opinion

¹⁰ For example, one writer claimed to have personal relationships with leaders from other planets, another professed belief in the satanic power of the number 13, and other letters engaged in debate about the racial demographics of alien abductees.

(Sigelman and Walkosz 1992; Hill 1981). All told, conspiracy theories pose a policy problem that needs to be dealt with, and there are compelling reasons for using letters to the editor, *faute de mieux*, as a measure of them.

We assume that those leveling conspiracy accusations are not indicting themselves. For example, if one accuses George Bush of being the ringleader in a big business plot, it is safe to say that person is likely not a Republican or Bush supporter. This assumption is buttressed by previous studies showing that opposing sides of the political spectrum throw conspiratorial allegations at each other, and much less so at themselves (Nyhan 2009; McClosky and Chong 1985). Some Republicans surely believe Bush was a stooge of Wall Street swindlers, but their numbers are low.

The source of our data is the *New York Times*. We choose this paper for obvious substantive reasons: it is considered by many to be the American paper of record, it has been in existence since 1851, and it boasts one of the largest circulations both historically and currently. We sampled letters to the editor through *The New York Times Historical Index* database. To obviate the concern that letters to the *New York Times* are biased, we constructed a validating sample from the equally old *Chicago Tribune*. Where the *Times* is caricatured as a liberal, elitist, coastal newspaper, the *Tribune* is caricatured as a more conservative, blue-collar, heartland newspaper. We will address this validating sample in a later appendix, but for now, readers should note that the sample from the *Tribune* mirrored the sample from *Times* indicating that the trends demonstrated in this paper hold across distance and news outlets.

We aimed for a sample of 1,000 letters for each year stratified by month to ensure that each year was evenly sampled throughout.¹¹ Some years in the database, especially in the 1800s, did not contain 1,000 letters, but we sought to approximate that number as closely as possible. A

¹¹ We note that some of the letters we retrieved were simply unreadable and could not be coded. There is no reason to suspect these letters would bias the results in any way.

randomized counting process was used within each month to choose letters. Altogether we coded a total of 101,620 letters over a period of 114 years.¹² A team of research assistants manually read every letter, with many letters being read multiple times.

The coding scheme asked the coders to read every letter and code it on two basic dimensions. The first was whether the letter writer was an “elite” or not.¹³ Elites were easy to identify given that the vast majority of these people signed the letter with their title. Those that did not sign with their title included it in the body of the letter. The number of elite letters ranged from 6 (1902) to 217 (1951) per year with an average of 77 per year representing 8.6% of the total letters. Non-elite letters ranged from 323 (1951) to 2,423 (2007) per year with an average of 809 and a median of 787.

The second dimension asked coders to identify letters that engaged in conspiracy talk. These letters either proffered or discounted a conspiracy theory. For a letter to fall into the former category, the letter had to include four elements: (1) a group who (2) acted in secret to (3) alter institutions, usurp power, hide truth, or gain utility at (4) the expense of the common good. This definition excludes: criminal conspiracies, harms done in broad daylight, and secret plots for benevolent purposes. For a letter to discount a conspiracy theory, the letter had to recite the alleged plot, but then argue that the accusations were false.

We analyze these two types of letters together as a check on editorial bias. For instance, if the *New York Times* editorial staff were to show a left-leaning bias, then we would expect them to favor letters that discounted conspiratorial allegations made at actors on the left as opposed to letters alleging conspiratorial actions by actors on the left. A recent content analysis of news

¹² This provides a mean of 891 letters per year, a median of 874.5, and a range of 368 (1931) to 2477 (2007).

¹³ We defined elites as much previous literature does, as any person who (1) currently or in the past held an elected position in government, (2) served as an executive or spokesperson for a large corporation, union, interest group, or other institution, (3) was a member of the news or entertainment media, (4) was a member of a foreign government.

coverage of the birther conspiracy bears this out.¹⁴ In addition, we combine the letters proffering and discounting conspiracies together because the letters discounting conspiracy theories, while not indicating that the letter writer specifically adheres to the conspiracy theory, indicate that there is a belief widespread enough to merit publishing a letter to discount it.¹⁵ Thus, we take the discount letters as indication of strength of belief in the conspiracy theory in the population.

For the years 1897 to 2010, our coders identified 800 letters engaging in conspiracy talk. Of these, 242 emanated from elites, 558 did not. We identified the alleged villains in each letter and then coded them into eight categories:¹⁶ political actors on the right, political actors on the left, capitalists, communists, government institutions, media, foreign actors, and other. Sometimes letters included multiple villains working in concert (e.g. Democrats working with foreign powers). In those instances, individual letters could have multiple villains and therefore have more than one category. Thirty-six letters addressed multiple villains, providing a total of 836 accused actors, though each individual villain fell into only one category. Actors on the right included domestic right-wing political parties (e.g. Republican Party) and members of those parties (e.g. George W. Bush), and right-wing groups (e.g. the Christian Coalition). Actors on the left included domestic left-wing political parties (e.g. Democratic Party) and members of those parties (e.g. Franklin Roosevelt), and left-wing groups (e.g. labor leaders).

The capitalist category includes domestic villains such as large corporations and industries (e.g. banks, railroads, steel and power companies) and the wealthy. The communist category

¹⁴ Analysis of Pew data of cable networks shows that of the cable networks, MSNBC, the liberal outlet, gave significantly more attention than either CNN (the moderate outlet) or Fox News (the conservative outlet) to the recent birther conspiracy theory (Moos 2011). The vast majority of this attention was to deny the conspiracy. On this logic, and should editorial ideological bias manifest, we would then expect the *New York Times* to publish fewer letters proffering the birther conspiracy and more denying it.

¹⁵ We analyzed letters proffering conspiracy theories without those discounting conspiracy theories to see if that affected the main results of this paper. It did not. Data available upon request.

¹⁶ We define villains as an actor(s) who was/were orchestrating the conspiracy for their intended purposes. Thus, we made a distinction between villains and pawns. So, for instance, if the communists were manipulating the media for their own purposes, then the communists would be the villain and the media the pawn.

includes domestic communists (e.g. The Communist Party and those who espouse communist beliefs) and socialists (e.g. The Socialist Party and those who espouse socialist beliefs). Government institutions includes institutions at all levels of government that are not affiliated, or accused to be acting on the behest of an actor on the left or the right.¹⁷ In our sample, this includes institutions such as the CIA, the FBI, the police, the Post Office, and the military. The media category includes media institutions (e.g. newspapers, television, and radio stations).¹⁸ The foreign category refers to states and foreign actors (e.g. Stalin, the United Nations). Finally, the other category refers to groups that do not fit into the previous seven categories such as non-political religious groups, non-political/economic groups, and cults. Appendix B includes further information on the coding procedures and intercoder reliability statistics.

In addition to the data from the *New York Times*, we have collected four predictor variables. The first two are the party affiliation of the president and the Congressional majorities over time. These measures permit a rough estimate of the domestic distribution of power at any point. We employ these to predict the balance of accusations aimed at domestic actors. The third and fourth measure the amount of external threat as indicated by participation in a great power war and the duration of the Cold War, respectively. Certainly there are countless international dangers, but none are as lethal as great power conflict.

For control variables, we constructed a series of variables tracking changes in the *New York Times* ownership, circulation, editorship, circulation, and local competition. In addition, we include variables measuring unemployment, inequality, and economic growth.

¹⁷ For example, if the FBI was conspiring at the behest of President George W. Bush for partisan aims, then this would be coded as an actor on the Right. Were the FBI conspiring for its own ends, without partisan aims, and not at the behest of another actor, then this would be coded as GOVERNMENT.

¹⁸ As with the GOVERNMENT category, if the media were accused of having a political agenda and was in cahoots with actors on the right or left, then they would be coded RIGHT or LEFT. If the media were involved in a non-ideological scheme, then it they would be coded as MEDIA.

HYPOTHESES

The alternative approaches of philosophy, psychology, and sociology suggest causal mechanisms that vary little over time, and consequently they see conspiracy talk as generally changing incrementally and not dramatically. Thus, the null hypothesis is:

H₀: Conspiracy talk aimed at will be relatively constant across time and not vary with shifts in domestic or international power.

Support for this hypothesis will show that the content of conspiracy theories remains stable over time. Rejection of this hypothesis would show that conspiracy talk varies significantly over time in a way inconsistent with the consistent patterns of philosophical, psychological, and sociological explanations.

H₁: Conspiracies aimed at the RIGHT and BUSINESS will increase in years when a Republican is president and decrease when a Democrat is president. Conversely, we expect conspiracies aimed at the LEFT and COMMUNISTS to increase when a Republican is president and decrease when a Democrat is president.

H₂: Conspiracies aimed at the RIGHT and BUSINESS will increase in years when the Republicans control Congress and decrease when the Democrats control the Congress. Conversely, we expect

conspiracies aimed at the LEFT and COMMUNISTS to increase when the Republicans control the Congress and decrease when the Democrats control the Congress.

We combine RIGHT and BUSINESS and LEFT and COMMUNISTS respectively because prior research shows that the right is fearful liberals and communists, while the left is suspicious of capitalists, big business, and conservatives (McClosky and Chong 1985; Campbell et al. 1966:261). So, for example, when the Democrats are in power, we expect right-wing groups to throw accusations at either the actors on the left or scheming communists.¹⁹ When the Republicans are in power, we expect left-wing groups to throw accusations at big business or Republican leaders and groups. We expect that the party of the president to predict the direction of conspiracy theorizing because the president is perceived not only as having the majority of power in the government, but also as being the leader of the nation. Thus, the party of the president reveals much about the domestic balance of power.

In addition, we also expect the party controlling Congress to affect the balance on conspiracy talk. This is because Congress is viewed as a powerful and meaningful policy-making institution. However, given that presidents are generally perceived as more powerful, and our theory speaks to power asymmetries, we might expect that the substantive effect of Congress on conspiracy talk to be slightly attenuated in comparison to the effect of changing power in the White House. If conspiracy talk did not vary according to changes of power in the White House and Congress, then we would reject these hypotheses.

¹⁹ These accusations have been used interchangeably in the past. For example, fears of communist plots have been used to attack liberal causes (Schattschneider 1960:71).

H₃: Conspiracies accusing FOREIGN actors will increase in years the country faces high great power threat; accusations against domestic actors will follow the reverse pattern.

To operationalize foreign threat, we look to periods when the United States faced major threats from great power rivals. While the U.S. is at war for much of its existence, not all of those conflicts are equally menacing or rise to the Correlates of War (COW) technical definition of war (i.e. 1,000 battle deaths per year).²⁰ To distinguish more threatening wars from less threatening wars and grave threats that go to war from grave threats that do not, we focus on two types of militarized conflicts. First, there are hot wars that were serious enough to warrant declaration of war. During our time frame these include the Spanish–American War, World War I, and World War II.²¹ Second, there is the Cold War (1946 - 1991, from Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech to the collapse of the USSR), which did not warrant a declaration of war but ominously overshadowed nearly half of the last century. We expect these high-profile great power conflicts will increase the proportion of FOREIGN conspiracies and displace domestic-centered conspiracy theories.

ANALYSIS

The 800 letters identified in the sample made 836 accusations of conspiracy (thirty-six of the letters identified two groups as conspiring together). Table 1 provides an illustrative list of those accused of conspiracy. Many of these actors shown in Table 1 were mentioned more than once; also in the interests of space, we exclude some villains from this list because they are anachronisms.

²⁰ While we do not expect non-great power wars or militarized disputes to increase conspiracy theories leveled at foreign actors, to be inclusive we test these anyway. A dummy measuring U.S. major combat operations and the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) dataset’s highest hostility level are both insignificant predictors.

²¹ For WWI and WWII, we include the full span of the war, not just the years of American military intervention. This is because, with the balance of power up for grabs, U.S. interests were severely affected and American foreign policy, though formally neutral, was significantly involved soon after hostilities commenced.

A cursory examination of Table 1 shows that conspiracy theories are cosmopolitan and democratic: nearly everyone plays the antagonist at some point. Domestic villains include or come from nearly every religion, political party/ideology, level and department of government. Foreign villains come from all over the globe.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The following analysis will not address the relative amount of conspiracy talk expressed in the letters to the editor per year, but rather the direction of the conspiracy talk as a portion of the total conspiratorial allegations per year. In other words, our concern focuses on who is accused and by proxy who does the accusing, rather than on the total or relative amount of total conspiracy talk each year. There are two reasons for this. First, our hypotheses address the direction rather than the total or relative amount of conspiracy talk. Second, a different set of theories, explanatory variables, and empirical claims speak to the amount of conspiracy theorizing over time. These theories go beyond the scope of this study, but are the subject of concurrent work.

We find that that the distribution of villains is similar between letters written by elites and those written by non-elites. Therefore, the body of this paper will address these two groups as a whole. For those interested in finer-grained analysis, Appendix C parses elites and non-elites separately and provides comparisons. Even with the smaller sample sizes, the results are substantively similar—this is in line with previous surveys and historical research suggesting that elites and non-elites share parallel conspiratorial belief patterns (Tackett 2000; Simmons and Parsons 2005; Davis 1969).

Figure one shows distribution of alleged villains among the eight categories. The largest category is FOREIGN with 37% of named villains belonging to the category. Non-partisan institutions, government and media, make up 15% of the villains. Domestic political actors show

close symmetry: villains on the RIGHT make up 11% while villains on the LEFT make up 10% and, BUSINESS villains make up 11% while COMMUNISTS make up 9%. Both sides of the political spectrum are accused of conspiracies, and about equally so. This suggests that neither side is especially prone to conspiracy talk.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics by year, including mean percentage as well as the minimum and maximum percentages of each. The by-year averages bear out the numbers in Figure 1; RIGHT and LEFT as well as BUSINESS and COMMUNIST have near symmetry in terms of the proportion of total conspiratorial allegations each occupy each year. Also, this table indicates that there is a great deal of variation over time in terms of who absorbs the breadth of conspiratorial allegations. For example, RIGHT, LEFT, and FOREIGN all range between 0% of the accusations in a given year and 100% of the allegations in a given year.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Figures 2-5 demonstrate the time trends mentioned in Table 2. Figure 2 shows a time-series of RIGHT vs. LEFT and Figure 3 shows BUSINESS vs. COMMUNISTS. To the naked eye, there does not exist a clear pattern, except that in many instances, as one increases the other decreases. For example, in Figure 2, accusations against the RIGHT are very high during the 1920s and early 1930s while at the same time, accusations against the LEFT are of a far smaller percentage. This reverses drastically in the 1930s and sustains that reversal for almost thirty years.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 3 shows more evidence of flip-flopping, this time between BUSINESS and COMMUNISTS. From 1890 through 1915, BUSINESS received high percentages of allegations, with this relationship reversing several times from 1915 through 1930 and again from 1965 through

the 1980s when communists were no longer viable as a phantom menace (for example, see Page and Shapiro 1992:86, 88). Figure 4 shows the percentage of allegations aimed at MEDIA and GOVERNMENT each year. Having further analyzed this data (see Appendix D) we conclude, as expected, that while both of these ebb and flow over time, there does not seem to be a pattern. We argue that government and media, as consistently powerful institutions, do not follow an ebb and flow of power. Because of this lack of variance, we will not focus on the MEDIA and GOVERNMENT categories.

[INSERT FIGURES 3-4 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 5 shows the percentage of FOREIGN allegations each year. FOREIGN conspiracies show significant ebb and flow across time, with elevated regions between WWII and 1970, beginning again with the arms race of the late 1970s and 1980s and the September 11th attacks. Figure 5 confirms prior research showing that Americans are persistently suspicious of foreign actors (e.g. Brewer 2004). The high proportion of FOREIGN conspiracy theories over time makes sense because remote actors help unite states, are unlikely to share one's interests, and are easy to impute malign motives to given their distance (Henderson 2009).

[INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Hypotheses 1 contends that conspiracies aimed at the right will increase in years when a Republican is president and decrease when a Democrat is president and vice-versa. To test this, we compare the conspiracy theorizing occurring during the 64 years that a Republican is in the White House to the 50 years that a Democrat is in the White House. The top of Table 6 shows all the years in the sample. As discussed earlier, conspiracy theories targeting the RIGHT, LEFT, BUSINESS, and COMMUNISTS show roughly equal amounts. The middle figure shows the breakdown of categories from only the years when a Republican is in the White House. In

opposition to the top of Figure 6, conspiracy theories about the RIGHT and BUSINESS increase to 16% and 18% respectively while conspiracy theories about the LEFT and COMMUNISTS decrease to 6% each. During years when a Democrat is in the White House, *mutatis mutandis*, RIGHT and BUSINESS decrease to 5% and 4%, respectively, while conspiracy theories about the LEFT and COMMUNISTS increase to 15% and 12%, respectively.²²

[INSERT FIGURE AND TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

To make this point more clear, Figure 7 combines RIGHT conspiracy theories with BUSINESS conspiracy theories and LEFT conspiracy theories with COMMUNIST conspiracy theories. The top of Figure 7 shows that during Democratic administrations RIGHT/BUSINESS conspiracy theories average 9%, but more than triple to an average of 34% during Republican administrations. So, too, for LEFT/COMMUNIST conspiracy theories—these average only 11% during Republican administrations, but then almost triple to 27% during Democratic administrations.

[INSERT FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

These comparisons are telling, but we strengthen them with a statistical model, which tests the effect of changing national power on the direction of conspiracy talk. Table 3 shows the results of two time-series regression models.²³ To test Hypothesis 1, the first predictor variable is PARTY OF PRESIDENT; this is coded 1=Republican president and 0=Democratic president. To test Hypothesis 2, the second predictor variable is PARTY OF CONGRESSIONAL MAJORITY; again

²² The correlation between RIGHT/BUSINESS and LEFT/COMMUNIST is -0.35; this negative relationship again indicates that as accusations against RIGHT/BUSINESS increase, accusations against LEFT/COMMUNISTS decrease (and vice-versa).

²³ We employ Prais-Winston regression. We acknowledge that since the dependent variables are percentages, and therefore bounded between 0 and 1, that ols estimation is inappropriate. However, we report these due to ease of interpretation. We have also run a glm model, and the findings are substantively similar.

coded 1=Republican control of Congress and 0=Democratic control of Congress.²⁴ Included in these models are a series of control variables, omitted for space, including measures of changes in (1) the *New York Times* ownership, editorship, circulation, and local competition and (2) domestic unemployment, income inequality, economic growth, and war. Please note that none of these controls are significant predictors in these models.

[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

In both models, we see that PARTY OF PRESIDENT significantly predicts the percentage of RIGHT/BUSINESS and LEFT/COMMUNIST conspiracy theories per year. The sign is positive in the first model, indicating that when a Republican is president, RIGHT/BUSINESS conspiracy theories will be more prevalent than when a Democrat is president. The magnitude of the effect is substantive, at more than half a standard deviation. In the second model, the sign is negative indicating that when a Democrat is president, LEFT/COMMUNIST conspiracy theories will be more prevalent than when a Republican is president. This effect is also substantive, at half a standard deviation. Thus, Hypothesis 1 receives strong confirmation.

PARTY OF CONGRESSIONAL MAJORITY is significant and substantive in the first model, indicating support for Hypotheses 2. When Republicans control the Congress, more conspiracies address RIGHT/BUSINESS actors than when Democrats control Congress. However, in explaining the percentage of LEFT/COMMUNIST conspiracies per year, the coefficient is insignificant, though in the expected direction. Thus, we have mixed support for Hypotheses 2. This may be for several reasons: people may associate national power more with the

²⁴ In some years, different parties control the Senate and House. For these, we code Congress as the party that is opposite of the president. Thus, if the House was Republican, the Senate was Democrat, and the President is a Democrat, then this variable would be coded as Republican. We do this because the Republicans would then have a proverbial “seat at the table” and would be able to negotiate policy in a way that shows them exerting power. By having this power, they should then become more frequently mentioned as villains.

presidency than the Congress; the presidency may be more powerful than Congress; or the presidency may be able to act more swiftly or arbitrarily than Congress.

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

To test Hypothesis 3, that foreign threat leads to more FOREIGN conspiracy theories, along with a crowding out of domestic conspiracy theories, we begin with a time-series regression model in Table 4. Our dependent variable is the FOREIGN conspiracy theories each year as a proportion of the total conspiracy theories each year. We include as a control, the party affiliation of the president, given that the presidency is the domestic institution that is primarily responsible for foreign affairs, and our data suggests that FOREIGN conspiracy theories are slightly more prevalent when a Democrat is president rather than when a Republican is president. This control is insignificant in the model. The coefficient for COLD WAR, 0.19, is significant and positive as predicted. The coefficient for GREAT POWER WAR, 0.25, is also significant and positive as predicted. The effects are substantive as well; given the standard deviation of the dependent variable is .27. This solidly supports Hypothesis 3. Please note however, that the r^2 is only .11. This indicates that these two models do not explain a majority of the variance in conspiracy theorizing about foreign actors. So, while threat appears a potent predictor, it is not the end of the story.

[INSERT FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE]

To address the second portion of Hypothesis 3, that FOREIGN conspiracy theories will crowd out domestic villains, Figure 8 shows an overtime comparison between FOREIGN and the summation of RIGHT, LEFT, BUSINESS, and COMMUNIST villains. We see, as expected, that FOREIGN and domestic actors peak and fall opposite each other. This zero-sum element comes as little surprise because the measures involved are percentages and must come at each other's expense. Still, the relationship is stark: a correlation coefficient of -.71. And, it seems manifest that

FOREIGN conspiracies are not associated with conspiracy theorizing from either side of the partisan divide.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to add value to the literature by providing the first systematic longitudinal dataset on conspiracy theories in the United States, and by developing a political explanation of conspiracy theorizing. Conspiracy theories tend to resonate in the face of perceived domestic and international power asymmetries because popular conspiracy theories have a strategic logic that helps groups check losses and recover their previous position. As Georg Simmel notes (1950:34), “All mass actions avoid detours. Successful or not, they attack their aims by the shortest route. They always are dominated by one idea, and by as simple an idea as possible.” Conspiracy theories, like rivers, appear to take a circuitous course when in fact their path is relentlessly expeditious.

Our main findings are twofold. First, shifts in the domestic balance of power cause changes in conspiracy talk. When Democrats are in power, the right will vilify the left with conspiracy theories, and when Republicans are in power, the left will demonize the right in reciprocal fashion. Second, foreign threat crowds out domestic faction conspiracy theories. External dangers tame internal faction, and powerful foreigners are more attractive targets for conspiracy theorizing than homegrown mountebanks. In brief, elections and wars fuel conspiracy theories.

Although we caution that the systematic study of conspiracy theories is still in its infancy, we venture some provisional policy recommendations. If conspiracy theories are based on power asymmetries then the implications for policy are pessimistic. Still, simply because something is inevitable does not make it untreatable. If nothing else, the present study suggests that several

previously proposed options for dealing with the ills of conspiracy theories are probably not efficient palliatives for the problem. Conspiracy theories should rarely be thought of as pathological and attempts to infiltrate conspiracy theorists with authoritative information are likely to be counterproductive.

More positively, our policy recommendations are modest but seek to amplify the virtues of liberal democratic governance. Greater governmental transparency will not quell the power asymmetries that feed conspiracy theories. Some people will always be unreachable. But if knowledge is power, increased transparency blunts some of the advantages of power asymmetries and takes some of the wind out of conspiracy theorists' sails. Of course, there are countervailing dangers to more transparency, but a marginal decrease in conspiracy theorizing is at least worth weighing against those risks. If conspiracy theories are a product of vulnerability, then the unswerving protection of individual rights is critical to dampen the excesses of conspiracy theories. Our model also predicts who is likely to be the target of conspiracy-inspired violence and when, so protection can be allocated efficiently.

Paradoxically then, democracy is both a source and a remedy for conspiracy theories. Groups across the political spectrum have leveled conspiracy accusations at others and been subject to the same accusations themselves because the regular vicissitudes of power in a democracy mean that sooner or later everyone plays the loser. Although conspiracy theories have anti-democratic aspects, in this respect they are highly egalitarian, and alternating conspiracy theories may aid and indicate the functioning of democracy. To paraphrase a well-worn saying, variously attributed, the price of liberty is eternal paranoia.

REFERENCES

- Aaronovitch, David. 2010. *Voodoo Histories: The Role of Conspiracy Theory in Shaping Modern History*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Abalakina-Paap, Marina, Walter G. Stephan, Traci Craig, and W. Larry Gregory. 1999. "Beliefs in Conspiracies." *Political Psychology* 20 (3):637-47.
- Adorno, Theodor W., Else Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford. 1950. *The Authoritarian Personality*. New York: Harper.
- Altemeyer, Robert. 1996. *The Authoritarian Specter*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Babcock, Linda, and George Loewenstein. 2000. "Explaining Bargaining Impasse: The Role of Self-Serving Biases." In *Behavioral Law and Economics*, ed. C. Sunstein. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Berinsky, Adam. 2011. *Poll Shows False Obama Beliefs a Function of Partisanship*. Huffington Post 2010 [cited August 21, 2011]. Available from <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/adam-berinsky/poll-shows-false-obama-beliefs-a-function-of-partisanship/poll-shows-false-obama-beliefs-a-function-of-partisanship-714503.html>.
- Bleyer, Willard Grosvenor. 1927. *Main Currents in the History of American Journalism*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Boudry, Maarten, and Johan Braeckman. 2011. "Immunizing Strategies and Epistemic Mechanisms." *Philosophia* 39:145-61.
- Brewer, Paul R. 2004. "Public Trust in (or Cynicism about) Other Nations across Time." *Political Behavior* 26 (4):317-41.
- Briggs, Charles L. 2004. "Theorizing Modernity Conspiratorially: Science, Scale, and the Political Economy of Public Discourse in Explanations of a Cholera Epidemic." *American Ethnologist* 31 (2):164-87.
- Brown, Roger. 1965. *Social Psychology*. New York: Free Press.
- Buell, Emmett H. 1975. "Eccentrics or Gladiators? People Who Write about Politics in Letters-to-the-Editor." *Social Science Quarterly* 56:440-9.
- Buenting, Joel, and Jason Taylor. 2010. "Conspiracy Theories and Fortuitous Data." *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 40 (4):567-78.
- Bullock, John G., Alan Gerber, and Gregory Huber. 2010. "Partisan Bias in Responses to Factual Questions." *SSRN eLibrary*.
- Butler, Daniel M., and Emily Schofield. 2010. "Were Newspapers More Interested in Pro-Obama Letters to the Editor in 2008? Evidence From a Field Experiment." *American Politics Research* 38 (2):356-71.

- Butler, Lisa D., Cheryl Koopman, and Philip G. Zimbardo. 1995. "The Psychological Impact of Viewing the Film JFK: Emotions, Beliefs, and Political Behavioral Intentions " *Political Psychology* 16 (2):237-57.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1966. *Elections and the Political Order*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- CBS. 2009. "CBS Poll: JFK Conspiracy Lives." In *CBSNews.com*: CBS News.
- Chait, Jonathan. 2007. *The Big Con: The True Story of How Washington Got Hoodwinked and Hijacked by Crackpot Economics*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Chanley, Virginia. 2002. "Trust in Government in the Aftermath of 9/11: Determinants and Consequences." *Political Psychology* 23 (3):469-83.
- Chong, Dennis, Herbert McClosky, and John Zaller. 1983. "Patterns of Support for Democratic and Capitalist Values in the United States." *British Journal of Political Science* 13 (4):401-40.
- Coady, David. 2006. *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Cooper, Christopher A., H.Gibbs Knotts, and Mashe Haspel. 2009. "The Content of Political Participation: Letters to the Editor and the People Who Write Them." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42:131-7.
- Coser, Lewis. 1956. *The Functions of Social Conflict*. New York: Free Press.
- Davis, Brion David. 1969. *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press.
- Edelman, M. 1985. *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. Urbana, Il: University of Illinois Press.
- Erikson, Emily, and Joseph Parent. 2007. "Central Authority and Order." *Sociological Theory* 25 (3):245-67.
- Fayer, Thomas. 2003. "To the Reader." *New York Times Book Review* September 14.
- Fenster, Mark. 1999. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foster, H. Schuyler, and Carl J. Friedrich. 1937. "Letters to the Editor as a Means of Measuring the Effectiveness of Propaganda." *The American Political Science Review* 31 (1):71-9.
- Goertzel, Ted. 1994. "Belief in Conspiracy Theories." *Political Psychology* 15:733-44.
- Goldberg, Robert Alan. 2001. *Enemies Within: The Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gould, Lewis L. 1981. *Presidency of William McKinley*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas.

- Groh, Dieter. 1987. "The Temptation of Conspiracy Theory, Or: Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? ." In *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, ed. C. F. Graumann and S. Moscovici. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Hargrove, Thomas. 2006. "Third of Americans Suspect 9/11 Government Conspiracy." In *Scripps News*: Scripps Howard News Service.
- Hart, Stephen. 2001. *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of Engagement among Grassroots Activists*. Vol. Ch. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Heins, Volker. 2007. "Critical Theory and the Traps of Conspiracy Thinking." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 33 (7):787-801.
- Hellinger, Daniel. 2003. "Paranoia, Conspiracy, and Hegemony in American Politics." In *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*, ed. H. G. West and T. Sanders. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Henderson, Marlene. 2009. "Psychological Distance and Group Judgments: The Effect of Physical Distance on Beliefs about Common Goals." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35 (10):1330-41.
- Hetherington, Marc J., and Jonathan D. Weiler. 2009. *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hill, David B. 1981. "Letter Opinion on ERA: A Test of the Newspaper Bias Hypothesis." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 45:384-92.
- Hofman, Amos. 1993. "Opinion, Illusion, and the Illusion of Opinion: Barruel's Theory of Conspiracy." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27 (1):27-60.
- Hofstadter, Richard. 1963. *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. New York: Vintage.
- . 1964. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- . 1965. *The Paranoid Style of American Politics and Other Essays*. New York: Knopf.
- Hurley, Patrick T., and Peter A. Walker. 2004. "Whose Vision? Conspiracy Theory and Land-use Planning in Nevada County, California." *Environment and Planning* 36:1529-47.
- Inglehart, Ronald. 1987. "Extremist Political Positions and Perceptions of Conspiracy: Even Paranooids Have Real Enemies." In *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, ed. C. F. Graumann and S. Moscovici. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Johnson, George. 1983. *Architects of Fear: Conspiracy Theories of Paranoia in American Politics*. Boston: Houghton: Mifflin.
- Johnson, Kirk. 2011. "Evidence Aside, State Lawmakers Debate 'Birther' Bills." In *Nytimes.com*. New York City: New York Times.

- Keeley, Brian. 1999. "Of Conspiracy Theories." *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (3):109-26.
- . 2003. "Nobody Expects the Spanish Inquisition! More Thoughts on Conspiracy Theory." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 34 (1):104-10.
- Latner, Richard. 2006. "Here Are No Newters!: Witchcraft and Religious Discord in Salem Village and Andover." *New England Quarterly* 79 (1):92-122.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin, and Earl Raab. 1978. *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America 1790-1977*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Locke, Simon. 2009. "Conspiracy Culture, Blame Culture, and Rationalization." *The Sociological Review* 57 (4):567-85.
- Martin, Cathie Jo, and Duane Swank. 2008. "The Political Origins of Coordinated Capitalism: Business Organizations, Party Systems, and State Structure in the Age of Innocence " *The American Political Science Review* 102 (2):181-98.
- McCauley, Clark, and Susan Jacques. 1979. "The Popularity of Conapiracy Theories of Presidential Assassination: A Bayesian Analysis." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37 (5):637-44.
- McClosky, Herbert, and Dennis Chong. 1985. "Similarities and Differences between Left-Wing and Right-Wing Radicals." *British Journal of Political Science* 15 (3):329-63.
- McHoskey, John W. 1995. "Case Closed? On the John F. Kennedy Assassination: Biased Assimilation of Evidence and Attitude Polarization." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 17 (3):1995.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2011. *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Melley, Timothy. 2000. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Moos, Julie. 2011. "Factchecking Obama: Birther Controversy was 4% of Newshole, Not 'Dominant' Story." In *Poynter*. <http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/129708/factchecking-obama-birther-controversy-was-3-4-of-newshole-economy-was-39/>.
- Neumann, Franz L. 1957. "Anxiety and Politics." In *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State: Essays in Political and Legal Theory*, ed. H. Marcuse. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Nyhan, Brendan. 2009. "9/11 and Birther Misperceptions Compared." In *Brendan-nyhan.com/blog*.
- . 2010. "Why the "Death Panel" Myth Wouldn't Die: Misinformation in the Health Care Reform Debate." *The Forum* 8 (1):Article 5.
- . 2011. "Why Conspiracy Theories Die Hard." In *CNN.com*: CNN.

- Nyhan, Brendan, and Jason Reifler. 2009. "The Effects of Semantics and Social Desirability in Correcting the Obama Muslim Myth."
- O'Reilly, Bill. 2006. "O'Reilly Takes on 9/11 Conspiracy Theorist!" USA: FOX News.
- Olmsted, Kathryn S. 2009. *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*. New York Oxford University Press.
- Oppel, Richard A. Jr. 2011. "Mysterious Blight Destroys Afghan Poppy Harvest." In *New York Times*. New York.
- Osher, Christopher N. 2010. "Bike Agenda Spins Cities Toward U.N. Control, Maes Warns." In *Denverpost.com*. Denver, CO.
- Page, Benjamin I. 1996. *Who Deliberates? Mass Media in Modern Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Page, Benjamin I., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1992. *The Rational Public: Fifty years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Perrin, Andrew , and Stephen Vaisey. 2008. "Parallel Public Spheres: Distance and Discourse in Letters to the Editor." *American Journal of Sociology* 114 (3):781-810.
- Pigden, Charles. 1995. "Popper Revisited, or What is Wrong with Conspiracy Theories?" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 25 (1):3-34.
- Pipes, Daniel. 1997. *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From*. New York: Touchstone.
- Popper, Sir Karl R. 1966. *The Open Society and Its Enemies, vol. 2: The High Tide of Profecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*. 5th ed. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Raikka, Juha. 2009. "On Political Conspiracy Theories." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17 (2):185-201.
- Renfro, Paula Cozort. 1979. "Bias in Selection of Letters to the Editor." *Journalism Quarterly* 56:822-6.
- Richardson, James T., and Massimo Introvigne. 2001. "'Brainwashing' Theories in European Parliamentary and Administrative Reports on "Cults" and "Sects"." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40 (2):143-68.
- Robins, Robert S., and Jerrold M. Post. 1997. *Political Paranoia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Schattschneider, Elmer Eric 1960. *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.
- Schudson, Michael. 1995. "Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper." In *The Power of News*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Shermer, Michael. 2011. *The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies: How We Construct Belief Systems and Reinforce Them as Truths*. New York: Times Books.
- Shils, Edward. 1954. "Authoritarianism: "Right" and "Left"." In *Studies in the Scope and Method of the Authoritarian Personality*, ed. R. Christie and M. Jahoda. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Sigelman, Lee, and Barbara J. Walkosz. 1992. "Letters to the Editor as a Public Opinion Thermometer: The Martin Luther King Holiday Vote in Arizona." *Social Science Quarterly* 73:938-46.
- Silverstein, Paul A. 2002. "An Excess Of Truth: Violence, Conspiracy Theorizing and the Algerian Civil War." *Anthropological Quarterly* 75 (4):643-74.
- Simmel, Georg. 1950. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Translated by K. H. Wolff. New York: Free Press.
- . 1964. *Conflict and the Web of Group-Affiliations*. Translated by K. Wolff. New York Free Press.
- Simmons, William Paul, and Sharon Parsons. 2005. "Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Among African Americans: A Comparison of Elites and Masses." *Social Science Quarterly* 86 (3):582-98.
- Simon, Herbert. 1997. *Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organizations*. New York: Free Press.
- Stein, Arthur A. 1976. "Conflict and Cohesion: A Review of the Literature." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 20 (1):143-72.
- Sunstein, Cass, and Adrian Vermeule. 2008. "Conspiracy Theories." *Social Science Research Network*.
- Tackett, Timothy. 2000. "Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792." *American Historical Review* 105 (3):691-713.
- Tajfel, Henri. 1981. *Human Groups and Social Categories*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Taleb, Nassim. 2008. *Foiled by Randomness: The Hidden Role of Chance in Life and in the Markets*. 2nd Updated ed. New York: Random House.
- Tesler, Michael, and David O. Sears. 2010. *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Thaler, Richard. 1994. *Quasi-Rational Economics*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Turner, John C. 1987. *Rediscovering the Social Groups: Self-Categorization Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Uscinski, Joseph. 2009. "When Does the Public's Issue Agenda Affect the Media's Issue Agenda (and Vice-Versa)?" *Social Science Quarterly* 90 (4):796-815.
- Verba, Sidney, Richard A. Brody, Edwin B. Parker, Norman H. Nie, Nelson W. Polsby, Paul Ekman, and Gordon S. Black. 1967. "Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam." *American Political Science Review* 61:317-33.

- Volgy, Thomas J., Margaret Krigbaum, Mary Kay Langan, and Vicky Mosher. 1977. "Some of My Best Friends Are Letter Writers: Eccentrics and Gladiators Revisited." *Social Science Quarterly* 58 (2):321-7.
- Volkan, Vamik. 1988. *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Wahl-Jorgenson, Karin. 2004. "A 'Letiginate Beef' or 'Raw Meat'? Civility, Multiculturalism, and Letters to the Editor." *Communication Review* 7:89-105.
- Waters, Anita M. 1997. "Conspiracy Theories as Ethnosociologies: Explanations and Intention in African American Political Culture " *Journal of Black Studies* 28 (1):112-25.
- Wedel, Janine. 2009. *Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market*. New York Basic Books.
- Wood, Gordon S. 1982. "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century " *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (3):402-41.
- Wulff, Erich. 1988. "Paranoiac Conspiracy Delusion " In *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy*, ed. C. F. Graumann and S. Moscovici. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Zonis, Marvin, and Craig Joseph. 1994. "Conspiracy Thinking in the Middle East." *Political Psychology* 15 (2):443-59.

Table 1a. Alphabetical List of Conspirators in Sample of NYT Letters to the Editor, 1897-2010

Adolf Hitler	Cigar Manufacturers	General Electric
African National Congress	City Employees	General Motors
Agricultural Adjustment Administration	Clinton Administration	Gerald Ford
Allies	Colleges	Germany
American Psychiatric Association	Colonel Charles Lindbergh	Gandhi
American Scientists	Columbia	Global Conspirators
Amusement Parks	Conservationists	Great Britain/England
Anti-Communists	Construction Workers	Greece
Anti-Islamics	Croatian Extremists	Guatemala
Anti-Saccharin Men	Cuba	Harry Truman
Anti-Saloon League	Czechoslovakia	Health Industry
Anti-War movement	Dairy Producers	Herbert Hoover
Arab Countries	Defense Contractors	Hollywood
Argentina	Democrats	Ice Companies
Austria	Domestic Anarchists	Immigration Naturalization Service
Banks	Domestic Communists	India
Beef Companies	Domestic Germans	Indonesia
Belgium	Domestic Hungarians	Institute of Pacific Relations
Belligerents	Domestic Nazis	International Bourgeoisie
Big Wealthy Corporations	Dow Chemicals	International Labor Defense
Black Panthers	Drug Enforcement Administration	Iran
Boers	East Germany	Iraqi Government
Bootleggers	Egypt	Ireland
Bosnian Government	Ethiopia	Isolationists
Boston Federal Reserve Bank	Europe	Israel
Brazilian Political Parties	Evangelicals	Italy
Bulgarian Government	Evil Hands	Japanese
Bulgarian Revolutionaries	Extreme Right	Jews/Zionists
Bush Jr Administration	Farm Board	Judiciary
Bush Sr Administration	Fascists	KGB
Canadian Miners	FBI	KKK
Capitol Physician	FDIC	Labor Leaders
Catholic Benevolent Legion	Fifth Columns	Landlords
Catholics for Christian Political Action	Finland	Latvian Consul
Cereal Industry	Firefighters	Lawyers
Child Care Industry	Foreign Anarchists	Leon Trotsky
Chile	Foreign Communists	Liberal Media
China	Fox News	Liberia
Christian Coalition	France	Life Insurance Companies
Christian Scientists	Franklin Roosevelt	Lithuanians
Christian Terrorists	Freemasons	Local Government
Christians	Fruit Suppliers	Lord's Day Alliance
CIA	Gangs	Lutheran Newspapers

Table 1 cont. Alphabetical List of Conspirators in Sample of NYT Letters to the Editor, 1897-2010

Macedonia	Politicians	Steel Industry
Magyar Press	Populists	Subversive Agents
Male Publishers	Post Office	Sudanese Officials
Media	Potato Companies	Suffragists
Medicare	Power Brokers	Sugar Growers
Methodists	Power Companies	Sweden
Mexico	President Carter	Tammany Hall
Military Juntas	President McKinley	Teachers
Milk Committee	President of Egypt	Terrorists
Money Interests	President T. Roosevelt	Textbook Publishers
Mormon Church	Prime Minister of Hungary	Tunisia
Muslim Rebels	Prime Minister of Malta	Turks
Muslims	Pro-Life Supporters	Ukraine
Mussolini	Protectionists	Unions
Napoleon	Puerto Rico	United Nations
National Rifle Association	Radicals	United Parents Association
National Security Agency	Railroad Companies	United Service Organization
Nazis	Reagan Administration	Unknown Assassins
Neo-Nazi Groups	Republicans	US Congress
Neville Chamberlain	Rich People	US Dept of Agriculture
New Deal Programs	Roman Catholics	US Dept of Education
Nicaraguan Dictatorship	Romania	US Dept of Health
Nihilists	ROTC	US Dept of Justice
Nixon Administration	Rubber Merchants	US Dept of State
Non-Nazi Germans	Russia	US Forest Service
NY Times	San Francisco	US Government
Obama Administration	Saudi Arabia	US Military
Oil Companies	Savings and Loan Industry	US Supreme Court
Otto Von Bismarck	School Board	USSR
Pacifica Foundation	Secret Groups	Wall Street Gamblers
Pakistan	Secretary Garfield	Walt Disney Company
Palestine	Secretary of War	Washington Bureaucrats
Pacifists	Senate Printing Office	Weapon Makers
Pentagon	Serbia	West Germany
Persian Ministers	Shipping Companies	Wilson Administration
Peru	Silver Interests	Wolfgang A. Mozart
Philippino Friars	Socialists	World Health Organization
Phone Companies	South Africa	Writers
Plumbers	Spain	Young Americans for Freedom
Poland	Special Interest Groups	Yugoslavia
Police	Stalin	Zionist Villagers
Political Agitators		

Figure 1. Distribution of Accused Villain by Category

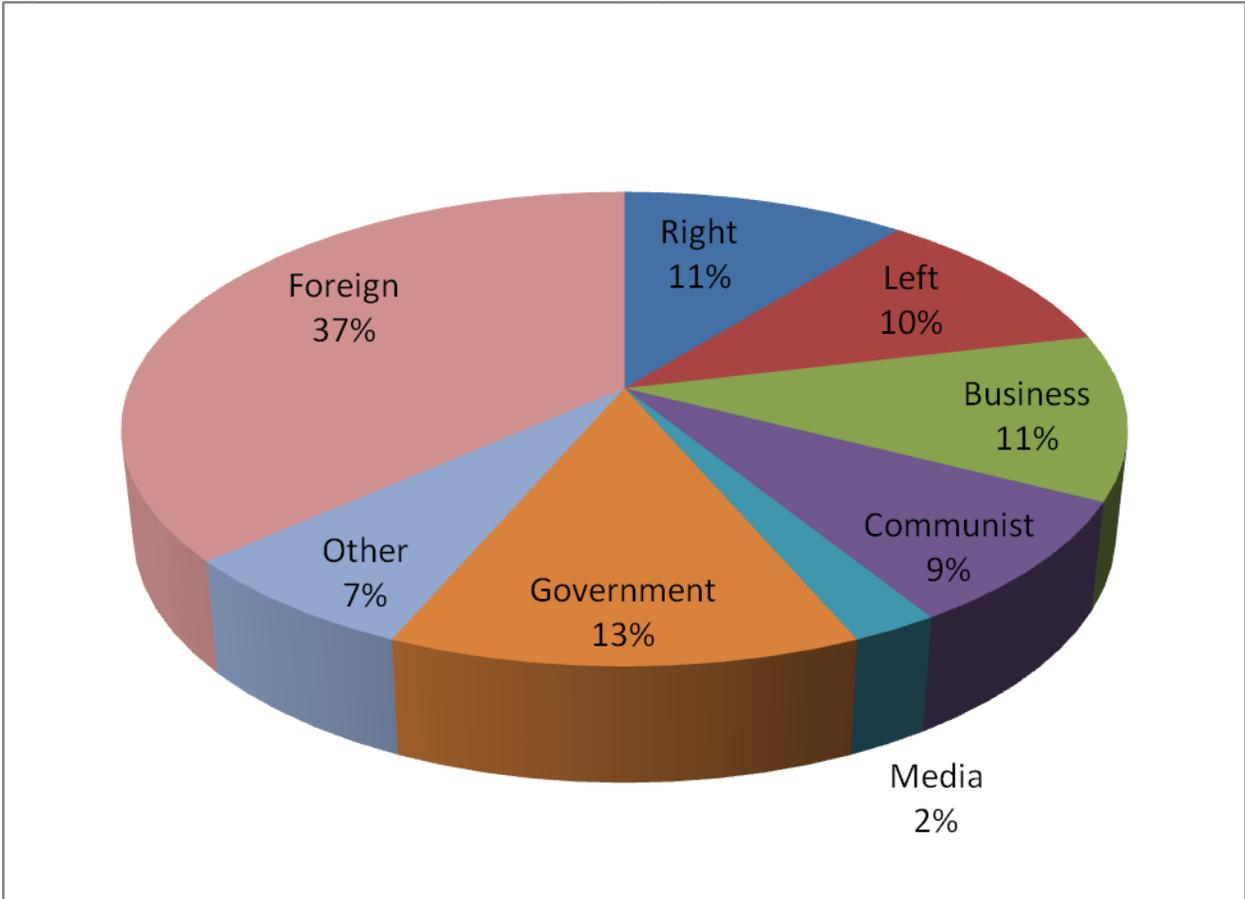


Table 2. Descriptive Statistics by Year for the Eight Categories of Villains, 1987-2010

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Range</u>
RIGHT	14%	0-100%
LEFT	11%	0-100%
BUSINESS	11%	0-60%
COMMUNISTS	6%	0-50%
GOVERNMENT	13%	0-55%
MEDIA	2%	0-50%
FOREIGN	36%	0-100%
OTHER	7%	0-50%

Figure 2. Percentage of Right and Left Villains, 1897-2010

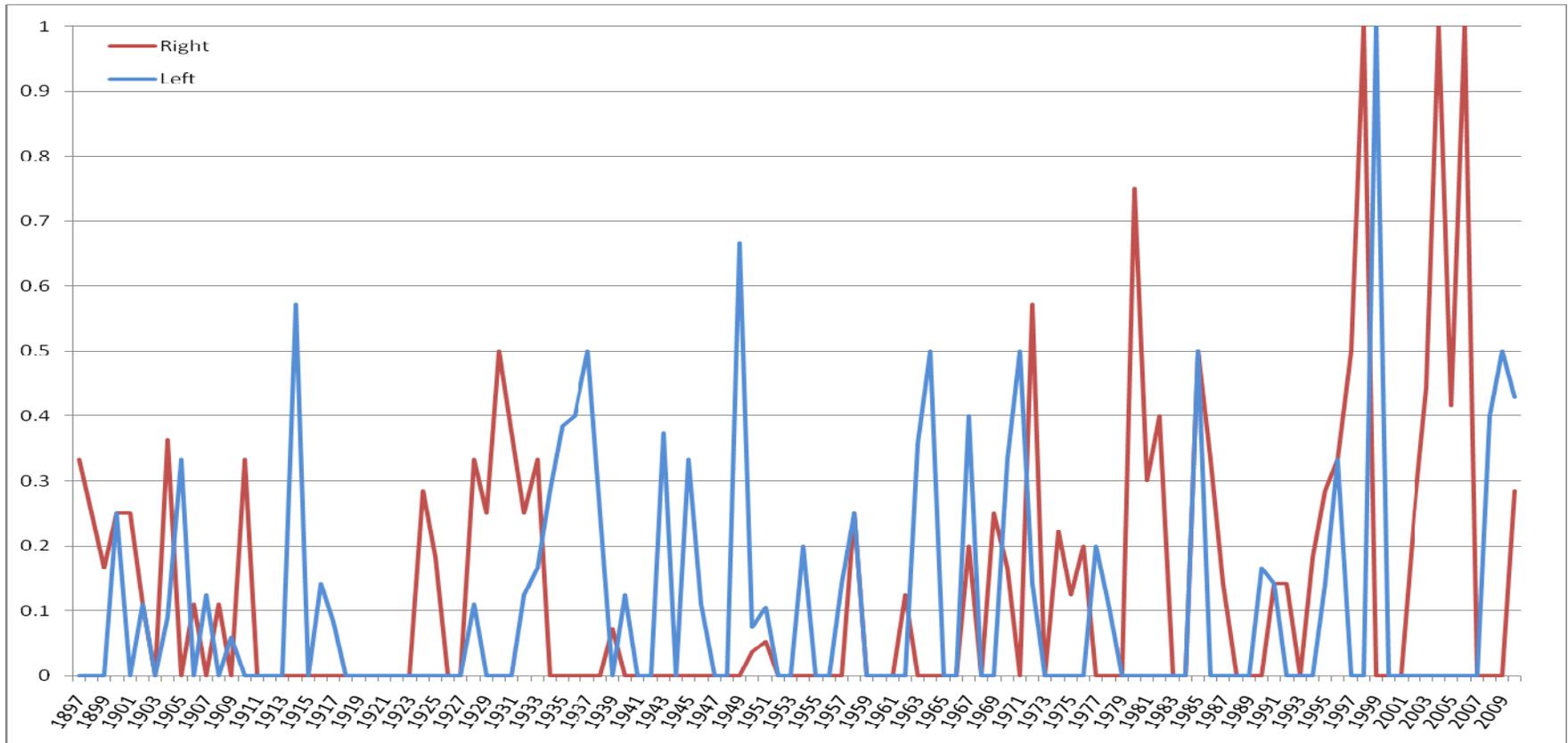


Figure 3. Percentage of Business and Communist Villains, 1987-2010

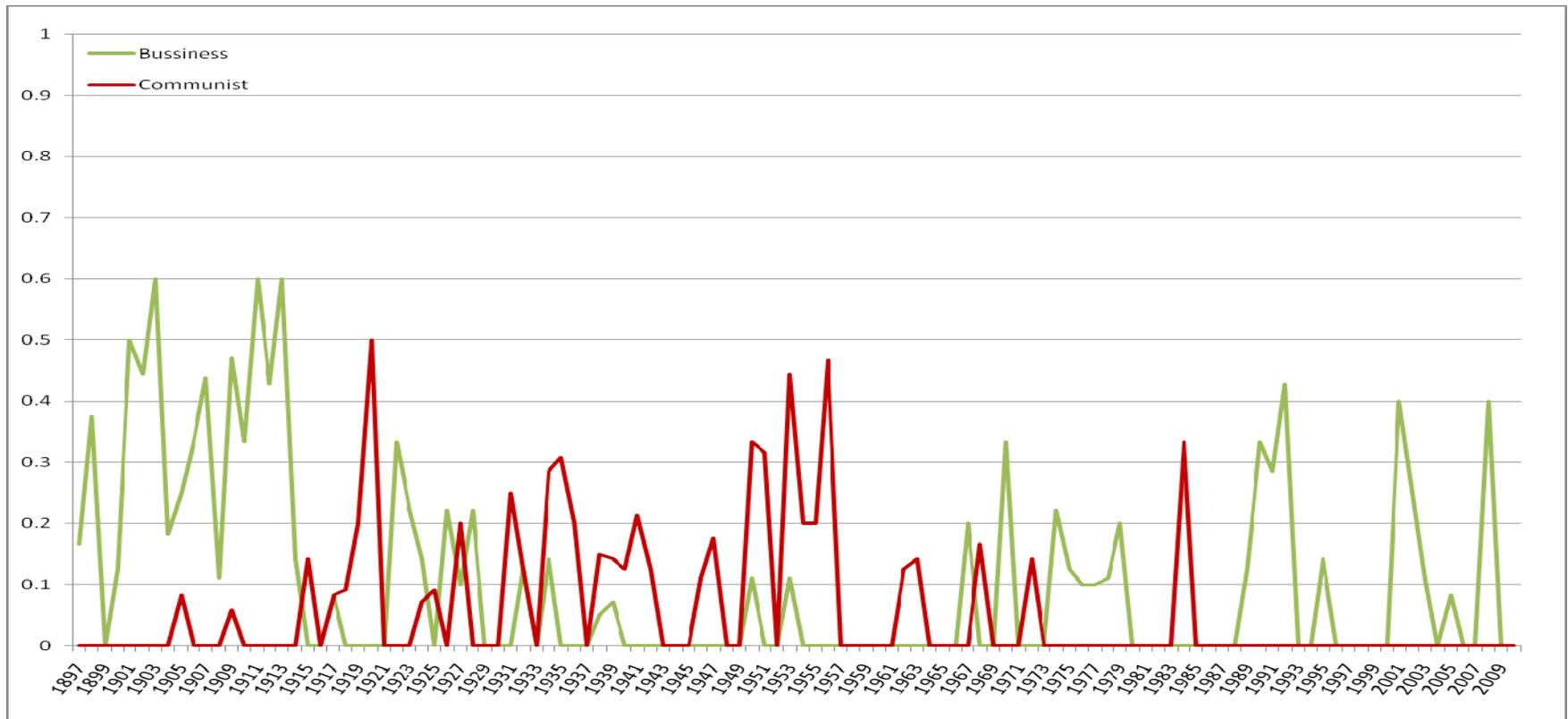


Figure 4. Percentage of Media and Government Villains, 1987-2010

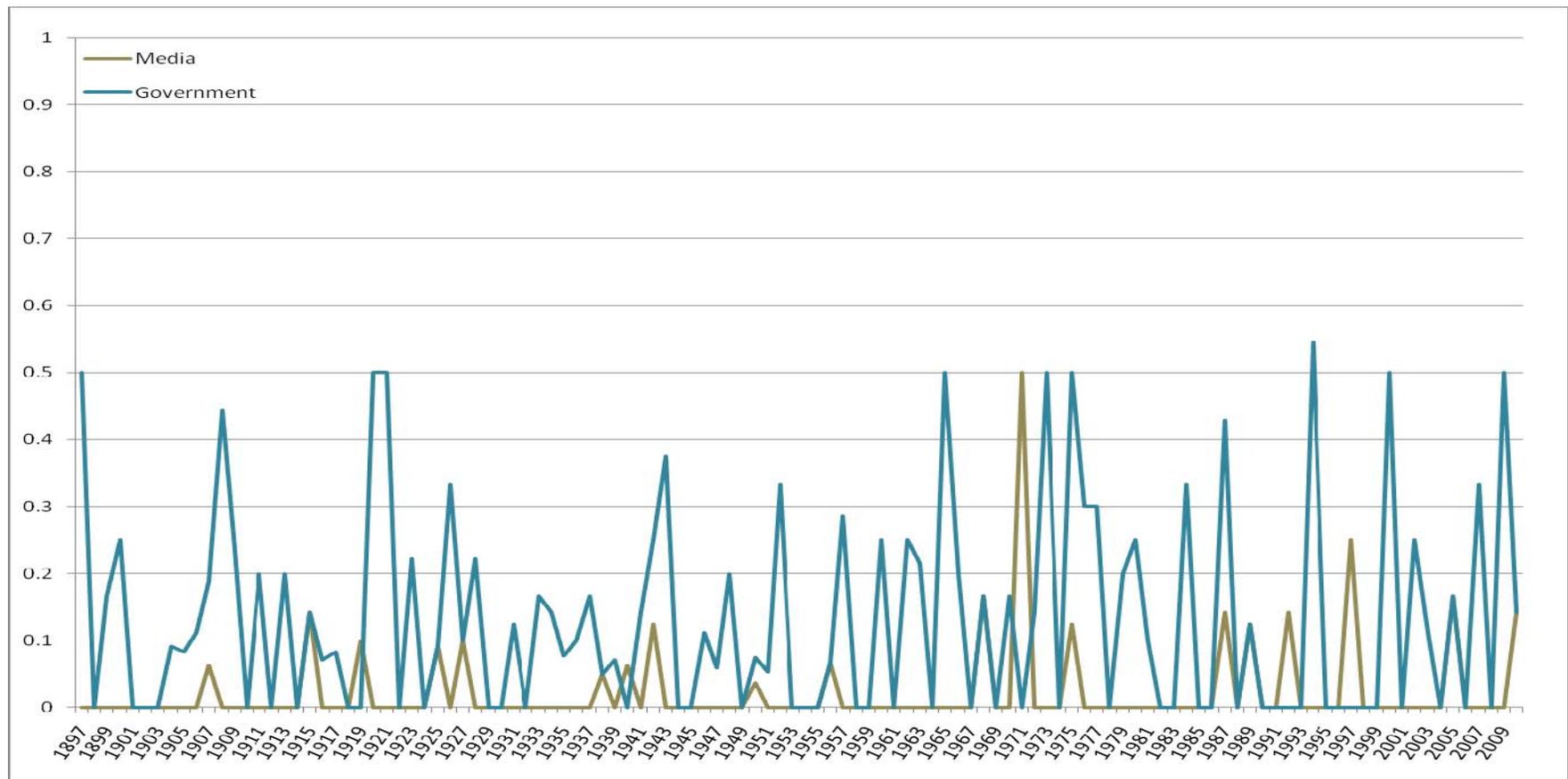


Figure 5. Percentage of Foreign Villains, 1897-2010

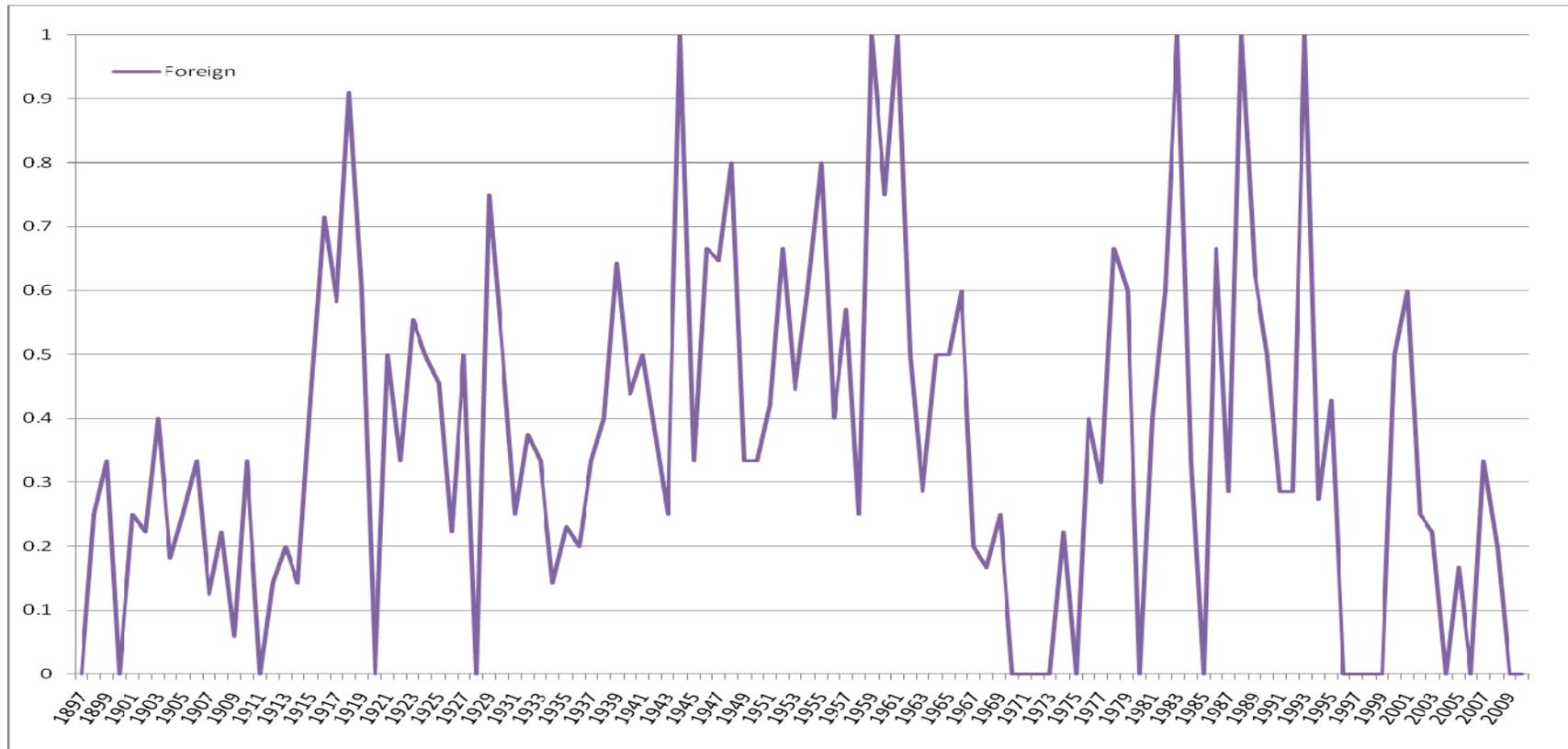


Figure 6. Comparison of Villains by Category, 1897-2010
Figure 6a. All Years

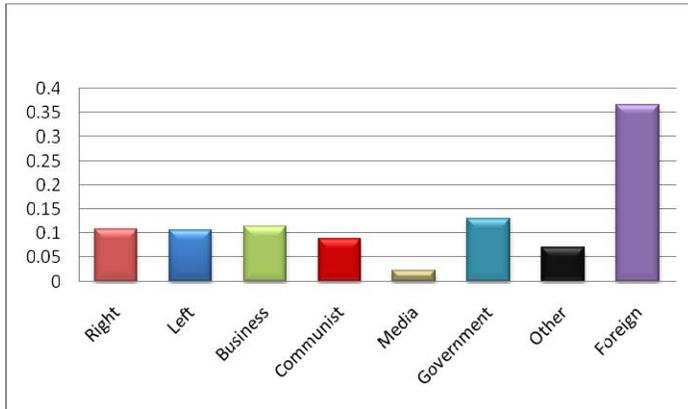


Figure 6b. Years with Republican President

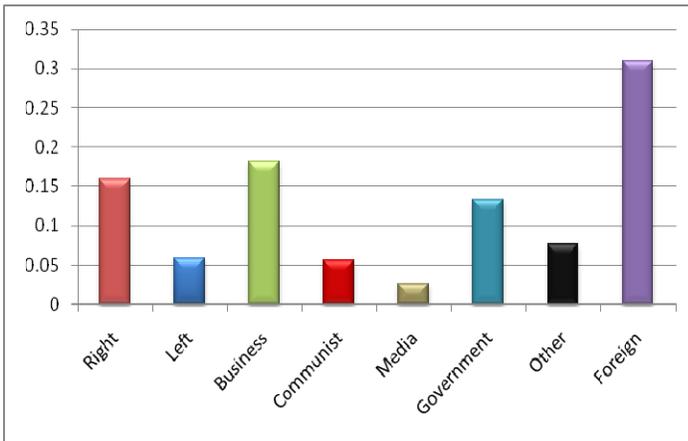
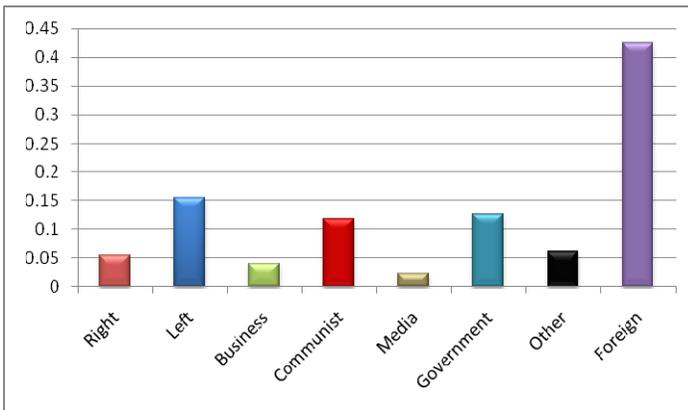


Figure 6c. Years with Democratic President



Figures 7a,b. Comparison of Right/Business and Left/Communists by Party of President

Figure 7a. Years when President is Republican

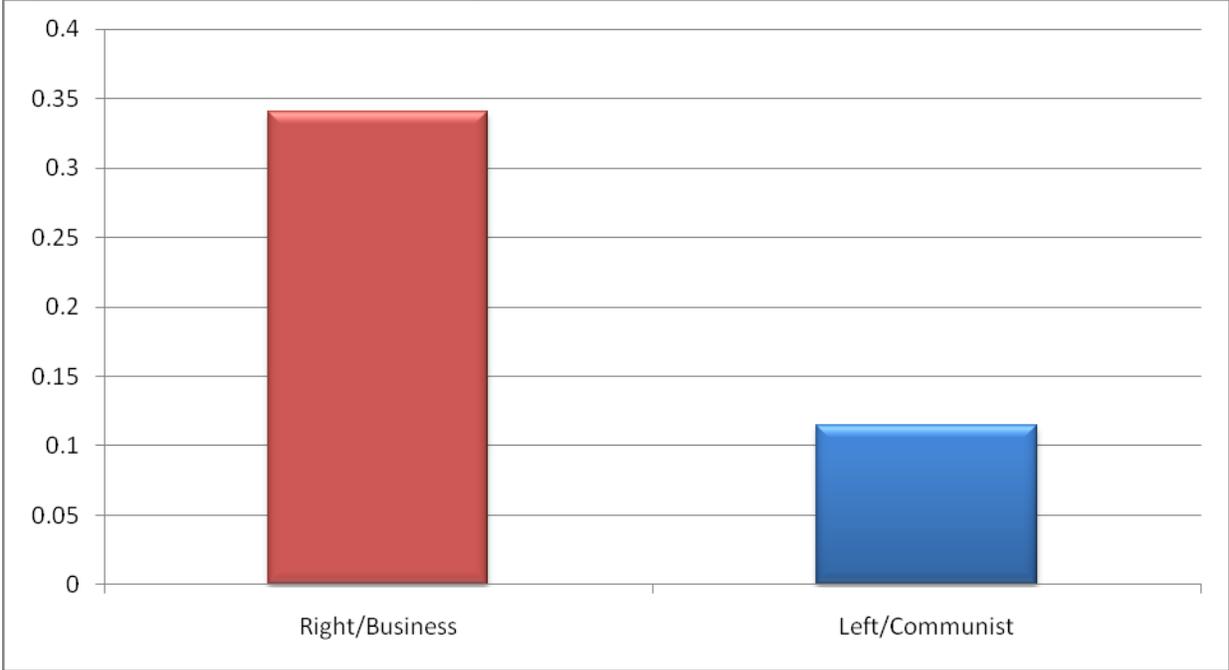


Figure 7b. Years when President is Democrat

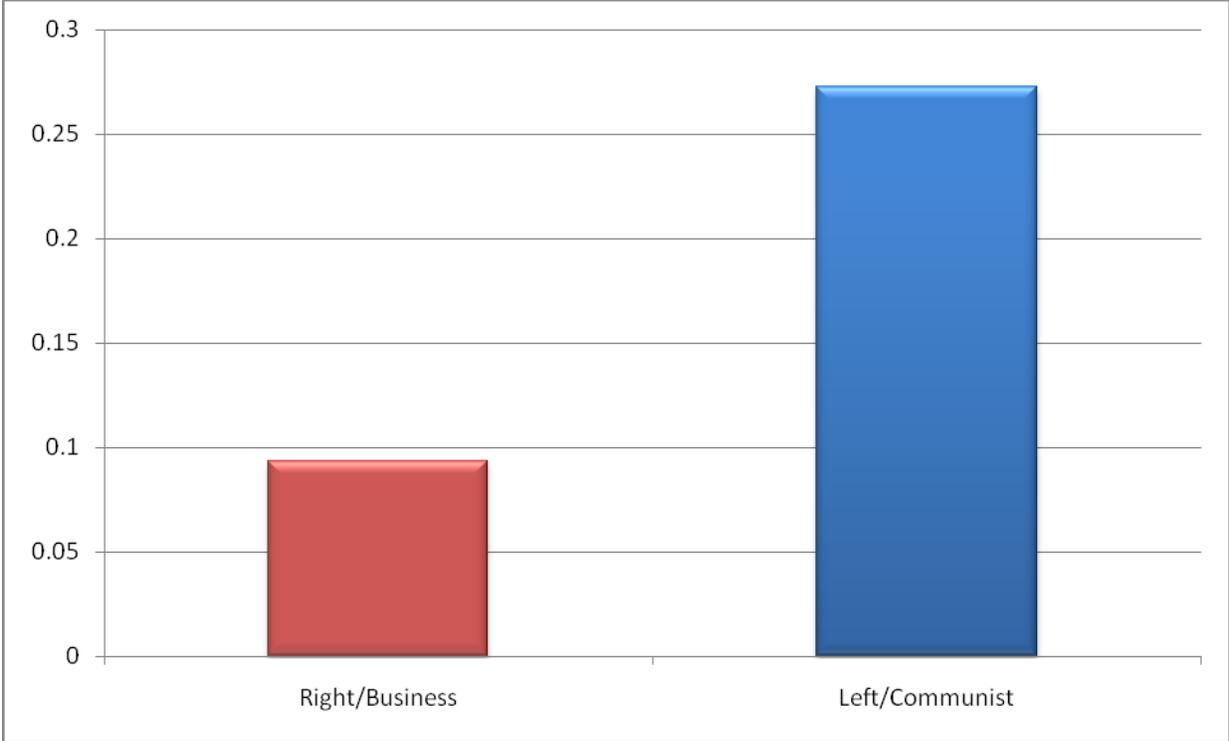


Table 3. Regression Model Predicting Domestic Conspiratorial Villains

	<u>RIGHT/BUSINESS</u>	<u>LEFT/COMMUNISTS</u>
VARIABLE	COEFFICIENT (SE)	COEFFICIENT (SE)
PARTY OF PRESIDENT	0.15*** (0.06)	-0.12** (0.06)
PARTY OF CONGRESSIONAL MAJORITY	0.13** (0.07)	-0.02 (0.81)
CONTROLS	<i>omitted</i>	<i>omitted</i>
Constant	.54 (0.51)	.26 (0.48)
<i>rho</i>	-0.04	-.02
R ²	.48	.30
N	114	114
<i>s.d.</i>	.25	.21
NOTE: Party coded 1 = Republican; 0 = Democrat. RIGHT represents conspiracy theories aimed at actors on the right; LEFT represents allegations aimed at actors on the left. Control variables measure national economy, changes in <i>NYT</i> ownership, editorship, circulation, and competition. * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ (one-tailed)		

Table 4. Regression Model Predicting Foreign Conspiratorial Villains

	<u>FOREIGN</u>
VARIABLE	COEFFICIENT (SE)
PARTY OF PRESIDENT	-0.02 (0.06)
COLD WAR	0.19*** (0.07)
GREAT POWER THREAT	0.25*** (0.09)
Constant	0.27*** (0.05)
<i>rho</i>	.21
R ²	.11
N	114
<i>s.d.</i>	.27
NOTE: Party coded 1 = Republican; 0 = Democrat. * $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ (one-tailed)	

Figure 8. Percentage of Foreign Villains compared to Left, Right, Business, and Communist Villains Combined

