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Paranormalism, Voting Intention, and Other Conspiracy Mentality Predictors in Sweden

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Abstract
This article explores conspiracy mentality occurrence in Sweden as part of a 2020 survey of paranormal beliefs, practices, and experiences. Using the idea of a shared sociocultural milieu of alternative views and practices of knowledge as a departure point, the relationship between conspiracy mentality and paranormalism, viewed as instances of cultic, rejected, and stigmatized knowledge, is tested through multivariate regression. As part of the regression model, the effects of other social predictors (e.g. gender, income, and cultural values) are also assessed. A nonparametric analysis further explores the relationship between conspiracy mentality and voting intention. The results of multivariate regression show that the dependent variables only predict conspiracy mentality to a limited extent. Predictors that significantly contribute to predicting conspiracy mentality are gender (being male), higher levels of paranormalism, lower income, conservation as opposed to openness-to-change values, and self-transcendence as opposed to self-enhancement values. Meanwhile, the nonparametric test pointed to distinctly higher conspiracy mentality levels among sympathizers with the right-wing populist party the Sweden Democrats and those who favoured political parties not represented in parliament.

Keywords*: conspiracy theories, conspiracy mentality, the paranormal*

It is difficult to overstate the growing awareness, popular and academic, of conspiracy theories and their dissemination in the contemporary West, not least in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. Butter and Knight 2023) and the January 6 Capitol insurrection (e.g. Thompson 2023; Thomas et al. 2024; cf. Imhoff et al. 2024). Much attention has also been devoted to the detrimental social consequences of conspiracy theories. These effects include the impediment of political engagement (Jolley and Douglas 2014a; Imhoff

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et al. 2021), the promotion of non-normative and impermissible political actions (Imhoff et al. 2021), including (radical) violent extremism (Rousis et al. 2022; Rottweiler and Gill 2022), less willingness to reduce personal carbon footprints (Jolley and Douglas 2014a), and vaccine hesitancy (e.g. Jolley and Douglas 2014b; cf. Uscinski and Parent 2014). More broadly, some contemporary analyses state that the contemporary world is marked by a post-truth status (e.g. McIntyre 2018) and epistemic instability (Harambam 2020; cf. Valaskivi and Robertson 2022), characterized by the erosion of trust in epistemic institutions.

Although we can infer that new information and media technologies enable the faster transmission and visibility of conspiracy theories, it is less clear if their scope and number of believers have increased (e.g. Uscinski et al. 2018). Indeed, conspiracy theories seem to have been a permanent and integral feature of the modern West's cultural landscape, not least in the US (Olmsted 2018), while Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent (2014, 157) have found evidence that conspiracy beliefs have decreased since the 1960s. Regardless of growth and decline, recent studies point to majorities in the US and in European countries believing in at least one conspiracy theory (e.g. Uscinski and Parent 2014, 36; Drochon 2018; Enders and Smallpage 2018). For example, the once-fringe online phenomenon QAnon now has vocal sympathizers among lawmakers in the US (e.g. Beauchamp 2022), and the image of the self-appointed QAnon shaman as part of the mob storming the US Congress (Thompson 2023) is arguably etched in the minds of many commentators. Indeed, then-future President Donald Trump positioned himself early as a presidential candidate endorsing conspiracy theories such as the birther controversy surrounding President Barack Obama (e.g. Marietta and Barker 2018; Uscinski 2018). Whether or not we agree with David G. Robertson's, Egil Asprem's, and Asbjørn Dyrendal's (2018, 1) assessment of conspiracy theories as 'one of the defining issues of our age', this state of affairs nevertheless serves as a background against which the current article should be read.

As part of a national randomized survey in 2020 of paranormal beliefs, practices, and experiences in contemporary Sweden, I wanted to estimate the extent of conspiracy mentality tendencies in the Swedish adult population and assess its relationships with paranormal involvement. In other words, the article is devoted to conspiracy mentality occurrence, as well as its relationship with another form of contested knowledge claims, namely paranormalism. As part of this analysis, however, it will also be possible to determine the influence of other social predictor variables of conspiracy mentality.

Previous research on conspiracy theory beliefs and conspiracy mentality

The study of conspiracy theories is a burgeoning and rapidly expanding field, involving various social scientific disciplines (e.g. Douglas et al. 2017; Hornsey et al. 2022, 80). Instead of attempting an exhaustive overview of the state of the art, I will briefly recapitulate some findings pertaining first to the psychological and second to the demographic characteristics of conspiracy believers. Third, I will present a snapshot of specifically Swedish research on conspiracy theories, as Sweden is the present study's national context. These three sections are all important for providing a context for the present study, though it will engage mainly with a fourth trajectory of research – namely, the concomitance of conspiracy beliefs and other contested knowledge claims such as beliefs, practices, and experiences related to paranormal phenomena. This fourth section also serves as a bridge to the theoretical part of this article.

Much research has sought to explain tendencies to hold conspiracy beliefs with reference to individual differences and situational factors. One such trajectory in previous research is the relationship between conspiracy belief and the 'Big Five' model of personality traits, the results of which have been modest and ambiguous, however (e.g. Swami et al. 2010, 759; Swami and Furnham 2012, 253; Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Goreis and Voracek 2019). Others have noted that conspiracy believers are more prone to engaging with intuitive rather than analytical modes of thinking (Swami et al. 2014, 574), preferring anthropomorphic (Imhoff and Bruder 2014, 35) and teleological interpretations (Wagner-Egger et al. 2018) of events, and seeking meaningful patterns and intentions behind seemingly random occurrences (Douglas et al. 2016, 65, 69; van Prooijen et al. 2017, 332). Furthermore, a growing number of studies has tested the relationships between conspiracy beliefs and various pathological states of mind such as personality disorders, albeit mostly within the general sub-clinical population (e.g. Darwin et al. 2011; Barron et al. 2014; Brotherton and Eser 2015; Cichoka et al. 2016; Imhoff and Lamberty 2018; Wood and Douglas 2018; Furnham and Grover 2021). Conspiracy believers have recurrently been shown to exhibit lower levels of interpersonal trust, as well as trust in institutions (e.g. Goertzel 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Barkun 2016, 115; Lantian et al. 2016; Wood and Douglas 2018), and they are more prone to experiences of powerlessness and anomie (e.g. Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Leman and Cinnirella 2013, 4; Imhoff and Bruder 2014, 35). A key finding concerning the characteristics of conspiracy believers, however, is that belief in one conspiracy theory often entails acceptance of others (e.g. Goertzel 1994; Uscinski et al. 2018; Imhoff

et al. 2024), including even contradictory (Wood et al. 2012) and fictional conspiracy theories (Swami et al. 2011). This inclination to accept conspiracy theories in general has been conceptualized differently as conspiracy mentality (e.g. Bruder et al. 2013; Imhoff and Bruder 2014), a conspiratorial mindset (Dagnall et al. 2015), conspiracist ideation (Brotherton et al. 2013), and conspiratorial thought (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 35), for example. How conspiracy mentality, which I will henceforth use as shorthand for a predisposition to belief in conspiracy theories, ought best be understood, and what factors precede it, remains subject to debate (e.g. Nera 2024, 47; Trella et al. 2024; Strömbäck et al. 2024).

A multitude of demographic patterns has been noted among conspiracy believers. Analyses of characteristics such as race and ethnicity point to ambiguous results, though Uscinski and Parent (2014, 84) argue that small minority groups (e.g. Native Americans and Americans of Middle Eastern heritage) may be especially susceptible to conspiracy beliefs. Evidence further suggests lower socioeconomic strata as more prone to conspiracy beliefs (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 157), while education remains one of the main negative predictors of conspiracy mentality (e.g. Douglas et al. 2016; van Prooijen 2016). Despite the popular tropes of conspiracy believers as angry middle-aged men, conspiracy beliefs seem nearly equally common among men and women (e.g. Uscinski and Parent 2014, 83). The results are ambiguous concerning religion (e.g. Jasinskaja-Lahti and Jetten 2019, 940), though there is evidence of a positive relationship between religiosity and conspiracy belief and mentality respectively, which Marius Frenken et al. (2023, 144, 150–152) have argued may be moderated by political orientation (e.g. Frenken et al. 2023, 144). Hugo Drochon (2018, 344) has argued that religiosity covaries positively or negatively with conspiracy beliefs, depending on whether religion is a distinct part of the cultural mainstream in the respective national contexts: if you belong to a religious minority, the odds increase that you will also have a proclivity for conspiracy theories. Scholars have further scrutinized political affiliation and sympathy as predictors of particular conspiracy ideas. Roland Imhoff et al. (2022, 392–393) have argued that the relationship between conspiracy mentality and politics is curvilinear, insofar as both extreme ends of the political spectrum are more prone to conspiracy theory ideation. Nevertheless, based on data from 26 countries, conspiracy mentality was especially prominent among sympathizers with 'traditional, nationalistic and authoritarian parties' (Imhoff et al. 2022, 400; cf. Frenken et al. 2023, 141). Some (e.g. Atkinson and DeWitt 2018; Drochon 2018) have observed that sympathizers with political parties currently not

in power are more prone to conspiracy beliefs in the US and Europe. In this sense, the statement that 'conspiracy theories are for losers' (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 131; cf. Atkinson and DeWitt 2018) seems warranted.

Data from Sweden, generally known for its high degree of interpersonal trust and trust in public institutions and the authorities (e.g. Ortiz-Ospina and Roser 2016; Astapova et al. 2021, 6–7, 30), are scarcer. By comparing samples from six European countries, Hugo Drochon (2018, 343) found that Swedes were the national population least prone to affirm belief in conspiracy theories (cf. Smallpage et al. 2020). In the Swedish context Andre Krouwel et al. (2017) have demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs attract constituents from both extremes of the political spectrum, while Mattias Ekman (2022, 1130) has argued that the great replacement conspiracy theory (i.e. 'white Europeans are […] being replaced by immigrants from non-European countries through the actions of politicians and power elites') are moving from the right-wing margins into the Swedish political mainstream. Following the Covid-19 pandemic the SOM Institute[1] conducted a survey explicitly targeting Covid-related conspiracies, namely that the virus was manufactured as a biological weapon, with which 13 per cent of Swedes agreed (Ekengren Oscarsson and Strömbäck 2020, 3). Using Swedish and British samples, Julia Aspernäs, Arvid Erlandsson, and Arthur Nilsson (2023) have demonstrated that respondents with subjectivist tendencies vis-à-vis knowledge making exhibit higher conspiracy belief levels. Jesper Strömbäck et al. (2023) have tested whether social media and political alternative media use predicts higher conspiratorial predisposition levels. People on the radical political right, especially when consuming political alternative media, were found to be more prone to conspiracy theory thinking (Strömbäck et al. 2023, 266). A 2021 survey shed some light on the popularity of specific conspiracy theories in Sweden. More than one in four survey respondents agreed with the statement that the real cause of the sinking of the MS Estonia (Wikipedia, n.d.) was the subject of a government cover-up, while roughly one in five agreed that the Covid-19 virus was created in a laboratory. Several other conspiracy theories (e.g. research results are unreliable because commercial interests govern them, Covid-19 was deliberately spread, and the world is governed by a small and secret group) garnered the support of at most one in ten Swedes. For example, belief in chemtrails, that 9/11 was an inside job, that the 1969 moon landing was faked, and a set of antisemitic conspiracies only gathered support from a few per cent (Vetenskap och folkbildning 2021, 50). Except for chemtrails,

1 Acronym for Society, Opinion, and Media (University of Gothenburg, n.d.).

men were more prone to affirm belief in all conspiracy statements (ibid., 52), as were sympathizers with the populist Sweden Democrats (ibid., 56).

Several studies have noted an affinity between correlations of conspiracy theory beliefs and other contested knowledge claims such as belief in paranormal phenomena (e.g. Darwin et al. 2011; Swami et al. 2011; Lobato et al. 2014; Oliver and Wood 2014). A suggested explanation of this positive relationship is that knowledge claims of conspiracies and paranormal and supernatural phenomena are effectively unfalsifiable (e.g. Goode 2000). Others suggest that the kinship between conspiracy and paranormal and supernaturalist beliefs is united not only by substantive content but by their psychological and social functions (e.g. Wood and Douglas 2018; Frenken et al. 2023, 140). For example, David G. Robertson and Asbjørn Dyrendal (2018, 416) have argued that conspiracy theories, much like religious myths, fulfil the role of theodicies, as they help explain 'why bad things happen to good people' by referring to conspiring agents with sinister agendas. Other explanations, to which I will return in the next section, turn not to substantive or functional aspects but to the social status of conspiracy and paranormal claims in society at large. As conspiracy and paranormal beliefs are equally rejected by epistemic authorities and institutions, they come to inhabit a shared social space through which they are both disseminated. This suggestion is directly explored throughout this article.

As stated then, the study of conspiracy theories and conspiracy mentality is a growing field of research involving a range of social scientific disciplines. However, within the purview of this article studies and theorizations pointing to an affinity between various forms of alternative and contested knowledge claims are the most central, the subject to which I next turn.

Theorizing alternative forms of knowledge and developing hypotheses

Before introducing theorizations of a social affinity between paranormalism, conspiracy theories, and conspiracy mentality respectively, these concepts warrant brief comment and clarification. The paranormal may be defined as purported phenomena that 'fall outside of the boundaries of current scientific explanation' (Tidelius 2024, 42). These phenomena are frequently dismissed by established religious institutions, resulting in paranormal involvement as largely 'dually rejected' (Bader et al. 2011, 24) by both religion and science as epistemic institutions. David G. Robertson (2014, 60) argues that common referents include phenomena such as 'telepathy and clairvoyance, and alleged anomalous physical phenomena such as ghosts, crop circles, UFOs,

and reincarnation'. Renowned and legendary creatures such as Big Foot and the Loch Ness Monster – so-called cryptids – may be added to the list, and sometimes various alternative and complementary forms of medicine (ibid.). For the sake of brevity beliefs, practices, and experiences related to paranormal phenomena will henceforth be denoted as paranormalism. Admittedly, this understanding of paranormal phenomena and the term 'paranormal' itself is derived from a distinctly Western setting. Conspiracy theories may in turn tentatively be defined 'as attempts to explain the ultimate causes of events as secret plots by powerful forces rather than as overt activities or accidents' (Jolley and Douglas 2014a), while conspiracy mentality denotes 'the general tendency to adopt such beliefs' (Bruder et al. 2013, 2).

Although not paranormal per se (though some *may* be), conspiracy theories have been identified as positively associated with alternative spiritual and paranormal ideas and practices (Swami et al. 2011; Lobato et al. 2014; Lantian et al. 2016; Wood and Douglas 2018). This confluence of alternative spirituality and conspiracy theories has recently been approached by the term conspirituality (Ward and Voas 2011). There are good reasons, however, to question the novelty of this underlying relationship, as conspiracy theories are interlinked with the history of Western esotericism (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015). Regardless, the affinity between alternative spirituality, paranormal beliefs, and practices on the one hand and conspiracy theories on the other was the central presupposition behind the inclusion of an item measuring conspiracy mentality in the *Paranormal Sweden* survey, constructed by the author. Although the kinship between these phenomena has been differently theorized, I will restrict this exploration to theorization revolving around the suggestion that alternative spirituality, the paranormal, and conspiracy theories exhibit an affinity, as they at least partly share a social and cultural space through which they converge and cross-pollinate.

Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal (2015) have argued that alternative religion (e.g. New Age spirituality) and conspiracy theories are both encompassed by the notion of the cultic milieu. Initially coined by Colin Campbell (1972, 122), the cultic milieu denotes a social and cultural space encompassing 'heterodox or deviant items in relation to the dominant cultural orthodoxies' such as phenomena associated with alternative religion and spirituality, occultism, the paranormal, and pseudo-science. A parallel classification suggested around the same time was historian James Webb's (1974) rejected knowledge, referring to those social phenomena that stand in opposition to the rationality and secularity associated with the Enlightenment and Modernity, together creating a cultural underground (though they

may at times be in vogue) of largely rejected, discarded, and countercultural ideas and practices. Almost 30 years later, Michael Barkun (2013, 28) argued that the cultic milieu and rejected knowledge might be encompassed by a new category – namely, stigmatized knowledge claims, or 'claims that have not been validated by mainstream institutions', which together form a 'cultural dumping ground of the heretical, the scandalous, the unfashionable, and the dangerous' (Barkun 2013, 39). Although extended to the paranormal and the occult, Barkun had contemporary conspiracy theories especially in mind. A more recent and broader categorization of a sociocultural space of alternative religious and paranormal ideas and practices is Christopher Partridge's (2004, 187) occulture, more generally denoting an 'environment/reservoir/library of beliefs, ideas, meanings and values'. While Campbell (1972, 122) envisioned the cultic milieu as a 'single entity' or a distinct social environment, occulture, by contrast, is more nebulous and less marked by tension with societal institutions. Indeed, *popular* occulture captures the dissemination of occultural ideas and practices in the media and popular culture, implying an increased acceptance or mainstreaming of their content (Partridge 2014).

However, the relationship between the above concepts (and their empirical referents) is unclear. Asprem and Dyrendal (2015) have argued for an 'interplay between the cultic milieu and popular culture [...] leading to the ordinariness of occulture'. An alternative interpretation is that the cultic milieu comprises a smaller unit of practitioners encompassed within the broader category of occulture. However, another question is whether the cultic milieu understood as a single social entity is perhaps obsolete and replaced by a wider occulture. Regardless of how these issues are settled, the two concepts refer to a general culture consisting of alternative views and practices of knowledge, largely rejected by the main epistemic institutions. This general culture and its referent's status as epistemically rejected therefore explain how paranormalism, conspiracy theories, and conspiracy mentality are interrelated, as they in part share a social and cultural space and means of dissemination. I believe that occulture comes with fewer strings attached in terms of expected social cohesion than the cultic milieu and rejected and stigmatized knowledge, so I will settle for its use.

In the *Paranormal Sweden* survey I suggest two operationalizations of occulture. First, occulture is indicated by paranormalism or an affinity with paranormal beliefs, practices, and experiences. Second, occulture is indicated by recent social contact points with representations of paranormal and unexplained phenomena, a variable to which I will henceforth refer as

occultural contact points. These operationalizations will be introduced more fully in the survey in the next section.

A deductive approach to the assumed positive relationship between conspiracy theory mentality and occulture can be distilled into the following two hypotheses on occulture, which will be tested in the analysis that follows.

H1. Occulture, indicated by paranormalism, positively predicts conspiracy mentality.

H2. Occulture, also indicated by occultural contact points, positively predicts conspiracy mentality.

Moreover, following the preceding section on previous research, another pair of hypotheses may be formulated:

H3. Voting intention for political parties currently not in power positively predicts conspiracy mentality.

H4. Belonging to lower income and educational groups positively predicts conspiracy mentality.

The survey itself requires an introduction before these hypotheses are tested.

Data and method

The *Paranormal Sweden* survey was distributed in 2020 to respondents collected by *The Swedish Citizen Panel* at the University of Gothenburg (GU, n.d). The sample consisted exclusively of randomly recruited respondents. The response rate was 59 per cent. The results were weighted according to gender, age, and education. The weighted dataset included 1,101 respondents. Despite randomization and weighting, the sample deviates from the general population in some respects, most notably in terms of foreign-born participants.[2] In this section I account for the predictor variables included in the survey. First, however, the dependent variable of conspiracy mentality is introduced, as it is the article's focus.

As cost efficacy was of critical concern, I opted to use an item measuring tendencies to conspiracy mentality rather than discrete conspiracy theories and beliefs. Anthony Lantian, Dominique Muller, Cécile Nurra, and Karen M. Douglas (2016) have developed a single-item measurement of conspiracy mentality, correlated with lengthier scales of conspiracy belief and producing good validity and reliability, which I intended to adopt. As input from a pilot study and the research team at *The Swedish Citizen Panel* indicated

2 Six per cent were foreign-born in *Paranormal Sweden* compared to 19.6 per cent in the Swedish population at the time of distribution (SCB, 2020).

the original item was tricky to interpret, revisions were made, however. Accordingly, I do not claim to reuse Lantian et al.'s (2016) instrument but instead introduce one of my own, albeit heavily influenced by the former. The following vignette preceded the question: 'Some political and social events are debated (e.g. the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001, the death of Princess Diana, and the murders of John F. Kennedy or Olof Palme). Some have suggested that official accounts of these events may be an attempt to conceal the truth from the public. This official version, they suggest, would mask the fact that these events are planned in secret by hidden and powerful individuals and groups.' The question that followed was: 'How true or false an image of reality do you yourself think that official accounts most often give?'[3] The scale ranged from 1, a completely false picture, to 9, an entirely true picture. Lower values, or distrust regarding official versions of contested events, are assumed to indicate a tendency to a conspiracy mentality, while higher values, or trust, are counter-indicative of this. This stems from the oft-observed and robust relationship between distrust and conspiracy mentality (e.g. Astapova et al. 2021, 101; Imhoff et al. 2021). Although the item does not explicitly use the term conspiracy theory, it can nevertheless be argued that at least some respondents, aware that conspiracy beliefs are often viewed pejoratively as false and possibly harmful (e.g. Dentith 2018), may underreport their degree of distrust because it lacks social desirability.

The survey's main focus was the 22 items measuring paranormal beliefs[4] (e.g. belief statements pertaining to ancient lost civilizations like Atlantis, supernatural predictions, hauntings, and UFOs), corresponding practices, and experiences (e.g. felt the presence of some form of spirit, witnessed UFO phenomena, visited or lived in a place that was haunted),[5] as well as active searches for information regarding paranormal topics[6] (e.g. mediums, fortune tellers, and seers; parapsychology). Rather than using these items as separate independent variables, I used them in aggregated form. Individual items were ordered into new constructs following principal component

3 Lantian et al.'s (2016) original phrasing was 'I think that the official version of the events given by the authorities very often hides the truth'.

4 These were ten items encompassed by the overarching survey question 'How likely do you find the following statements?', answerable with a 5-grade ordinal scale.

5 These were twelve items encompassed by the overarching survey question 'Have you ever done or experienced any of the following?', answerable with a 4-point ordinal scale.

6 These were seven items encompassed by the overarching survey question 'Have you ever actively searched for information about any of the following topics?', followed by the statement 'For example, by reading a book or visiting a website', answerable with a 4-point ordinal scale.

analysis (e.g. Pallant 2011, 181–201) and included in an additional index. Each affirmed item increased the respondent values in the new measurement by one. This new index, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, is henceforth called paranormalism.

Alongside paranormalism, *Paranormal Sweden* included measures of recent social contact points with representations of paranormal phenomena in conversations among peers or as depicted in media and popular culture, for example. I have argued elsewhere (Tidelius 2024, 101) that these social contact points may be viewed as indicators of occulture. An additive index, henceforth referred to as occultural contact points, was created based on a survey question that asked respondents how often they had encountered representations of the paranormal or the unexplained in a range of social settings (e.g. in the family, on TV, in the internet) in the last six months. Each item was answerable with a five-point scale, from *not at all* to *every day*. The responses for each item were recoded as binary, and each affirmative response increased the score in the index by one.

As part of the regression model, I wanted to evaluate the contribution and effects of other predictor variables. *The Swedish Citizen Panel* included various background variables suitable for the task, such as gender, education, and age. A variable measuring religion was added to the survey. Respondents were asked whether they belonged to any church or congregation, namely the Church of Sweden (i.e. the former state church), another Christian church/congregation, a Muslim congregation/association, or a religious congregation/association that was neither Christian nor Muslim, followed by a free text amendment. The response alternatives were *Yes, and I have attended services/meetings in the last 12 months*, *Yes, but I have not attended services/meetings in the last 12 months*, and *No*. In the analysis that follows religion was recorded as a binary variable that distinguished between those who belonged to a religious community and those who did not.

As studies point to a shift in the cultural values of Western populations (e.g. Inglehart 1977; 1990) as conducive to the rise of alternative religion and spirituality (e.g. Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Lassander 2014), I wanted to include items indicative of such values. I opted for Marjaana Lindeman's and Markku Verksalao's (2005) Short Schwartz Value Survey, an instrument inspired by Shalom Schwartz's theory (e.g. 2006) of cultural values. Through the combination of ten cultural values (power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformism, and security), two opposed higher-order value dimensions –namely, conservation versus openness to change and self-transcendence versus self-

enhancement – were calculated according to Lindeman's and Verkasalo's (2005, 173) instructions. High values in the conservation vs openness-to-change variable imply that respondents lean towards conservation-type values, favouring the status quo; low values denote openness to social change in various forms. High values in self-transcendence vs self-enhancement imply the favouring of cultural values related to self-sacrifice and submission; low values measure self-enhancement values such as hedonism and stimulation.

The independent variable of political sympathy, measured as voting intention in the next parliamentary election, included all parliamentary parties (i.e. the Left Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Green Party, the Centre Party, the Liberal Party, the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats) with the addition of those opting for another party outside parliament. Although this categorical variable was not included in the regression model, a separate nonparametric analysis was conducted.

A standard multiple regression analysis (e.g. Pallant 2011, 149) was performed on the conspiracy mentality item. The underlying research question for this technique can be posed as follows: how well do the independent variables (IVs) predict the outcome of the scores on conspiracy mentality, and which IVs are the best predictors? Alternatively, which background factors affect the likelihood, positively or negatively, of persons either doubting or trusting official versions of contested events? The multiple regression analysis attempts to assess which predictors affect the dependent variable (DV) through a linear model in which the contribution of each IV becomes clear.

The effect of the predictor of political sympathy was assessed by a chi-square test of independence (e.g. Pallant 2011, 217–221). Due to the small number of cases within specific values of the conspiracy mentality variable, the latter was recorded as a binary value, measuring those who viewed official versions of contested events as mostly false on the one hand, indicating conspiracy mentality, and those viewing them as neither more accurate nor false, and more true than false on the other.

Before presenting the multivariate regression results, I will introduce the distribution of conspiracy mentality in the sample at large.

Results and analyses

The distribution of the conspiracy mentality item was positively skewed towards trust in official versions of contested events and trust in the authorities and institutions. Figure 1 illustrates the general distribution of respondents on conspiracy mentality.

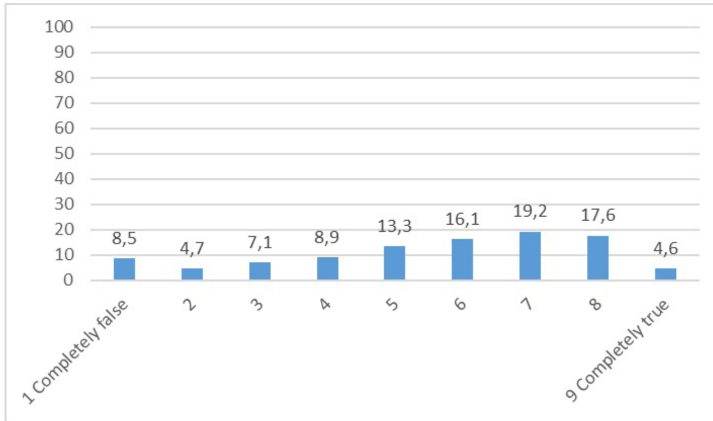

Figure 1. Conspiracy mentality per distrust/trust regarding official versions of contested events in valid percentages (*n* 1,067).

However, if we use five as an intermediate or neutral middle-ground category and add those scoring below it, we reach a proportion of 29.2 respondents. That is, between one in every four and one in every three persons in the adult population view official versions of contested events as more false than true. Figure 2 presents the distribution as recoded in three main groups, the other two being the majority viewing official versions of contested events as more accurate than false, comprising 57.5 per cent, and those who are intermediate, uncertain, or neutral, with 13.3 per cent of respondents.

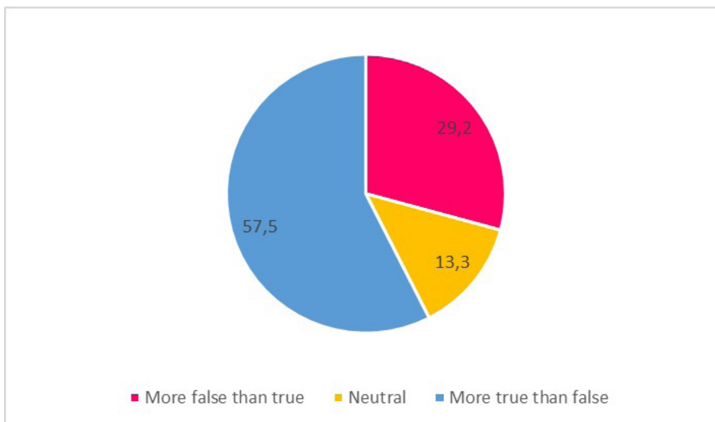

Figure 2. Conspiracy mentality in valid percentages.

The multiple regression model included the binary variables of gender, accommodation type, urban-rural residence, country of origin, and religion, and the continuous variables occultural contact points, conservation vs openness to change, self-transcendence vs self-enhancement, monthly income, age group, education level, and paranormalism. Most dependent variables within *Paranormal Sweden* gravitated towards a non-normal distribution, and conspiracy mentality was no exception. Initial diagnostics showed signs of homoscedasticity towards the opposing end, while assumptions of linearity fared better. However, no signs of multicollinearity or outliers affected the outcome to any greater extent.[7] The regression model was significant ($P<0.05$), albeit only explaining about 7.5 per cent of the variance within the variable conspiracy mentality, indicating that other predictors not included in the model or random variation were at play.

The effect of the predictors gender, conservation vs openness to change, self-transcendence vs self-enhancement, monthly income, and paranormalism was singled out as making a statistically significant contribution to the model. Beta coefficients, which represent the change in the dependent variable per unit increase in the predictor variables, are found in the second column of Table 1 (preceding the error terms, SE B). In contrast, standardized coefficients (β) are included in the fourth column, followed by P-values. Being female as opposed to male slightly increases the general trust in official versions of contested events, with a beta coefficient of 0.34. Gravitating towards conservation as opposed to openness to change decreases the level of trust by a beta coefficient of -0.38. Gravitating towards self-transcendence as opposed to self-enhancement also decreases the level of trust in official versions, with a beta coefficient of -0.21. Monthly income covaries positively with trust in official versions of contested events, with each higher income group increasing the latter by 0.07. Each score for paranormalism decreases trust in official versions of contested events by -0.04. Although the contribution of the predictors was minor, being female, more prone to affirm openness to change and self-enhancement values, and having a higher monthly income increased the likelihood of a person affirming a greater trust in official versions of contested events. Conversely, being male, being more prone to affirm conservation and self-transcendence, and scoring higher on paranormalism decreased the level of trust in official versions of contested events – in other words, a greater conspiracy mentality. As the regression model only accounts for about 7.5 per cent of the variance within conspiracy

7 Other diagnostics included acceptable Cook's distance, Tolerance, and VIF (e.g. Pallant 2011, 148–167).

mentality, we may suspect that other forces are at play. One such predictor may be excluded from the regression model – namely, the nominal and categorical variable of voting intention, to which I turn next.

Table 1. Multiple regression model on conspiracy mentality.

	b	SE B	β	P
Constant	5.671	0.416		
Gender (female)	0.34	0.16	0.08	0.03**
Residence (other)	0.15	0.44	0.01	0.73
Urban-rural (rural)	-0.20	0.15	-0.04	0.20
Country of birth (outside Sweden)	-0.49	0.31	-0.05	0.11
Occultural contact points	-0.06	0.04	-0.05	0.17
Conservation vs openness to change	-0.38	0.08	-0.16	<0.001**
Self-transcendence vs self-enhancement	-0.21	0.20	-0.08	0.03*
Monthly income	0.07	0.02	0.11	0.003**
Age group	-0.08	0.05	-0.06	0.11
Religion	-0.18	0.15	-0.04	0.22
Education	0.02	0.07	0.01	0.72
Paranormalism	-0.04	0.02	-0.09	0.015*

R2 = 0.075
Confidence intervals in parentheses.
* = Significant at the 0.05 level or lower.
** = Significant at the 0.01 level or lower.

Turning to the chi-square test of independence between political sympathy and the binary version of the conspiracy item, the test in itself proved significant: $\chi 2$ (8, n = 766) = 50.48, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's V 0.26. Sympathizers with the Left Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Liberal Party, the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Green Party all exceeded expected cell counts among respondents who were either neutral to or viewed official versions of contested events as more true than false. The Sweden Democrats, a right-wing populist party that entered parliament in 2010 (e.g. Mudde 2007; Ekman 2022) and, to a lesser extent, those opting for a party outside parliament, by contrast, clearly exceeded expected cell counts among those who viewed official versions of contested events as more false than true. In other words, respondents sympathetic to

the Sweden Democrats and parties outside parliament were less trusting of official versions of contested events and therefore showed higher conspiracy mentality levels. Figure 3 illustrates the proportions among sympathizers with the respective parties on the binary conspiracy mentality item. As becomes salient, the proportions of respondents who view the official versions of contested events as more false than true are nearly as large as those who view these versions neutrally or more true than false among sympathizers with the Sweden Democrats, in stark contrast to those favouring other parliamentary parties.

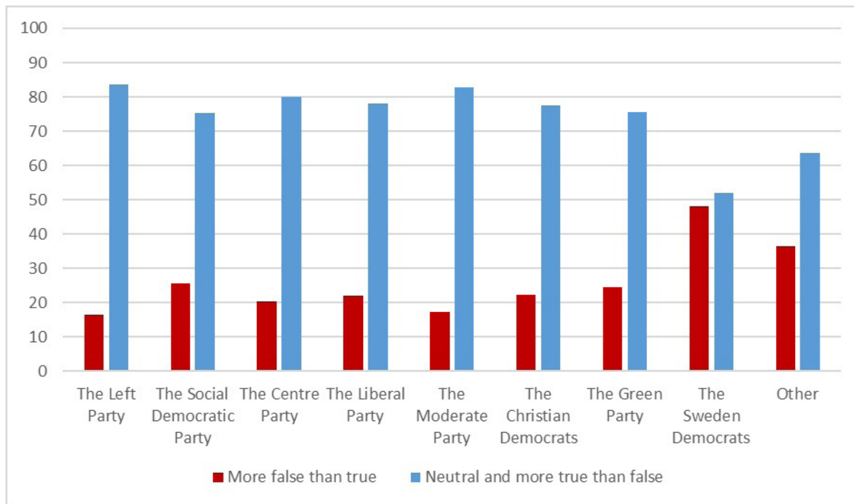

Figure 3. Conspiracy mentality per voting intention in valid percentages.

Discussion and conclusion

Returning to the four hypotheses, only H1 is unambiguously corroborated, as paranormalism was associated with conspiracy mentality, while occultural contact points (H2) were not. The corroboration of H1 indicates that the idea of a sociocultural environment engaging with and reproducing different forms of cultic, rejected, and stigmatized knowledge gains some support. H3, predicting greater conspiracy mentality among sympathizers with political parties currently not in power, was only corroborated for those favouring the Sweden Democrats and parties outside parliament. This aligns with previous findings that place conspiracy mentality to a greater extent within the radical populist right (e.g. Imhoff et al. 2022, 400). As the Sweden

Democrats are now a collaborating party with the government due to the Tidö Agreement (Government Offices of Sweden 2022), a follow-up study is warranted, especially if the party ever participates in government, for previous research (e.g. Atkinson and DeWitt 2018; Drochon 2018) indicates that sympathizers with parties currently not in power are more prone to conspiracy beliefs. H4, pointing to those with lower income and education as more prone to conspiracy mentality, was only partly corroborated due to the positive association between higher income and trust in official versions of contested events. A recurring and strong negative predictor in previous research – namely, education (e.g. van Prooijen 2016) – was therefore found to be nonsignificant in this Swedish 2020 sample. Another pattern presented in the section on previous research – religion – also proved nonsignificant. It cannot be ruled out, however, that a more fine-grained measurement of religiosity would yield significant results. The present measure only roughly captured religious belonging and behaviour, excluding belief. The study further suggests a slight male overrepresentation among respondents prone to conspiracy mentality, in contrast with studies (e.g. Uscinski and Parent 2014) suggesting balanced gender distributions, yet in line with those that point to a male predominance (e.g. Vetenskap och Folkbildning 2021). Follow-up studies are encouraged to ascertain if Swedish men are indeed more prone to distrust and conspiracy mentality, as well as to test if other gendered patterns emerge when measuring discrete conspiracy beliefs as opposed to conspiracy mentality.

Although the sample exclusively consisted of randomly recruited respondents, it nevertheless deviates from the general population in variables such as foreign-born citizens. Follow-up studies carefully designed to cater to foreign-born respondents – for example, through stratification – are warranted, especially to test suggestions that minorities may be especially prone to conspiracy beliefs (e.g. Uscinski and Parent 2014, 84).

Naturally, the measurement of conspiracy mentality can be problematized. One may object to the assumption that distrust in official versions of contested events per se indicates a conspiracy mentality. However, previous research has demonstrated a strong connection between the two as poignant (e.g. Astapova et al. 2021). It cannot be ruled out that at least some respondents will vent their frustration with the authorities through such an instrument while remaining sceptical of conspiracy narratives. We may also suspect that social desirability may mitigate the levels of distrust in official versions of contested events in the dataset. After all, the term conspiracy theory is often used pejoratively (e.g. Dentith 2018), and respondents may

well be aware of this. Furthermore, as *Paranormal Sweden* was distributed in the autumn of 2020, during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, period effects cannot be ruled out, though it is unclear if this suggests heightened or mitigated levels of distrust and conspiracy mentality. This serves as another reason to carefully monitor conspiracy mentality and conspiracy belief levels in general in future studies.

To summarize, the suggestion that conspiracy mentality covaries with paranormalism because both share a social space (e.g. occulture) through which they are disseminated gained some but not unequivocal support. Meanwhile, the relationship between conspiracy mentality and political orientation was only significant among sympathizers with the populist right-wing Sweden Democrats, suggesting significant limitations to the idea that those favouring parties currently not in power were more prone to conspiracy beliefs. The same results, however, strongly suggest an affinity between conspiracy mentality and the far right, as indicated by several previous findings (e.g. Imhoff et al. 2022; Frenken et al. 2023; Strömbäck et al. 2023). Some other recurring predictors of conspiracy mentality, most notably education, failed to manifest any significant effects in *Paranormal Sweden*.

* * *

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