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SUSCEPTIBILITY TO EXTREMISM AND CONSPIRACY BELIEF IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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SUSCEPTIBILITY TO EXTREMISM AND CONSPIRACY BELIEF IN COLLEGE
STUDENTS

By

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ABSTRACT

Following the 2016 Presidential Election, there has been an infamous rhetoric in the United States that posits Americans are adopting increasingly extremist political beliefs, resulting in rampant polarization and increased susceptibility to believing in conspiracy. The use of extreme language from politicians, along with using social media platforms as a primary way to consume news have been long since speculated as causes of this phenomena. The nature of receiving information in the age of social media is unprecedented, as people are vulnerable to misinformation and opinions that are often disguised as facts, often referred to as “fake news”. Despite extensive and relatively recent research on these topics, research has yet to be dedicated to examining students in, arguably, their most valuable years of discovery and learning. The goal of this research is to collect data via previous research of college students and young adults to gain insight into whether or not this popular rhetoric is reflected in the beliefs of college-level students, and subsequently conclude what causes determine their political beliefs. This research has found what causes college students to be susceptible to misinformation, and identify common trends among such students, such as their political beliefs, what sources dominate their news intake, and how being a student may impact their inclination to hold extremist views.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	2
ABSTRACT.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	5
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	7
METHODOLOGY.....	11
ANALYSIS/FINDINGS.....	13
DISCUSSION.....	17
CONCLUSION.....	19

INTRODUCTION

The American political landscape is marked by disunity, led by two powerful and striking political parties. The United States has an extensive history of political strife within America. This disunity is not new, and the country was notably warned by President George Washington, the very first president of the nation, about the dangers that came with maintaining political parties, which at the time were the Republicans and Federalists (Stirling). Though his farewell address was first delivered in 1796 (Stirling), his fears that political parties would turn Americans against one another bears a striking resemblance to the sentiments of 21st-century Americans. Washington wrote,

“...the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and the duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it. It serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foment occasionally riot and insurrection. It opens the door to foreign influence and corruption, which find a facilitated access to the government itself through the channels of party passions. Thus, the policy and the will of one country are subjected to the policy and will of another” (*Washington’s Farewell Address to the People of the United States*).

Washington’s words have stood the test of time, and this reality has become more grim as the nature of politics has become characterized by heightened political polarization, particularly amid the rise of social media as a news source (Gaultney). Donald Trump’s win against Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election was unprecedented in nature regarding contemporary

political events, seeing as Clinton was the first woman to secure the presidential nomination of a major political party in the United States. This election was accompanied by discourse surrounding the use of technology, social media, and hate speech in presidential elections. Where voters received information that influenced their understanding of the election, policies, and their candidates, it played a crucial role in partisanship (Gaultney). Voters were absorbing misinformation, thrust into echo chambers, and unknowingly became victims of the ongoing deep-seated battle between political parties (Gaultney). What was observed from the 2016 presidential election is a microcosm of a larger phenomenon. Specifically, a rise in conspiracy beliefs (Bordeleau) and political extremism (Mayer) among Americans. Although this observation is widespread, conspiracy and extremism do not affect everyone equally, and this varies especially among different age groups. Different age groups receive information from different sources (Aubin), and this research seeks to understand how college students and young adults become susceptible to conspiracy beliefs and extremism amid a new age of primarily digital information consumption. Further, if there is increased conspiracy belief and extremism in this population, what are the common patterns that can be observed, which underpin such ideas and behaviors? Understanding this phenomenon at the college age is important because it is a formative time for Americans. Young adults, specifically those in college, are being educated to become America's future opinion leaders, laborers, neighbors, and parents. Young adulthood is a formative time, which serves as an intersection between holding onto the core values one was socialized with, while conversely being molded by the new information, experiences, and choices that come with young adulthood. Further, the effects of extremism and conspiracy beliefs were highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, manifesting in various ways. Political ideologies are no different, and this paper asks what factors make people more susceptible to

conspiracy beliefs and extremism. How can these variables open doors to how we make a difference in combating susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs and extremism in college students and young adults?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the US saw an influx of widely varying perceptions of not only the virus itself, but how it should be handled by government institutions, how people should behave, or if any of these things should happen at all (Udow-Phillips). The trust in institutions and healthcare was a central factor in shaping whether or not one may receive the COVID-19 vaccine and comply with public health regulations. Public perception widely approved of the government and public health officials in April 2020, towards the beginning of the pandemic (Winter). However, as the pandemic continued, educating the public about the importance of maintaining stay-at-home orders became increasingly difficult. Though it is the US's responsibility to protect Americans, even from themselves, per the Constitution (Winter), what people saw in their everyday lives shaped their opinion, and what they say on the ground in their everyday lives—businesses closing, increased distrust of institutions, mass deaths—increased backlash towards the government. It is important to recognize that individual freedoms are extremely valued in America, and as institutional trust began to deteriorate as the pandemic went on, people resisted public health recommendations. Further, attempting to remedy public trust of health institutions was made extremely difficult “in the face of political attacks on [US] agencies of public health” (Winter). The rapid spread of information that characterized the age of COVID-19 did not stop at politicians' remarks, but soon snowballed into conspiracy theories, which many Americans took part in believing and spreading during the pandemic era. In a study interviewing a set of people in March 2020, and followed up with the

same group in July of that same year, those who had endorsed conspiracies about the COVID-19 pandemic continued to believe such conspiracy theories as the pandemic continued (Romer). Even after health officials recommended public safety measures, such as mask wearing, those who held onto conspiracy beliefs were less likely to engage in such practices (ScienceDirect). The dispositions of people came largely from mainstream TV, particularly conservative media (Romer). Those who watched and relied on mainstream media were more likely to endorse conspiracy theories. Partisan cues played a major role in how Americans viewed threats that the pandemic posed, as well as how they reacted to those threats. The belief in conspiracies, such as “the novel coronavirus was created by the Chinese government as a bioweapon”, and “some in the CDC are exaggerating the seriousness of the virus to undermine the Trump presidency” (Romer), had consequences that went beyond the individual, as this impacts individuals’ inclination to take preventative actions to control the virus, and thus put others in their community at risk. People with conservative ideology were more likely to believe conspiracies about the coronavirus, and were more likely to be associated with the use of conservative media outlets (Romer).

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the surge of conspiracy beliefs, and much of that belief came from conservative media. However, conservative television was not the only media that perpetuated conspiracy beliefs, but social media also played a critical role in the formation of extremist and conspiracy beliefs through echo chambers, in which people online interact mostly with their own beliefs, rarely encountering legitimate news from a polar party (M. Cinelli). In a study published in PNAS titled, *The echo chamber effect on social media*, over 100 million pieces from social media were gathered, from popular media sites such as Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter. The gathered pieces were focused on controversial topics, such as politics,

vaccines, and abortion. Each social media platform studied had a specific algorithm, which monitored users' interactions and surrounded that user with like-minded content. What resulted was a *homophilic interaction*, or the phenomenon of people interacting with other users on the site who were like-minded based on the content they consumed and interacted with. There was a bias in which content was shared, having a significant impact on how information is spread to individuals.

Not all information is shared equally (M. Cinelli). Every post, every account that a user interacts with in even the slightest way, can morph the kind of information one is exposed to. While not all of the social media platforms have the same algorithm, they each are effective in having some sort of substantial information spread bias (M. Cinelli). The result is information intake that already aligns with users' beliefs. What begins as entertainment on social media becomes a flurry of misinformation and confirmation bias. The algorithm cannot act alone, and as a user continues to interact with content they agree with, the algorithm follows this lead. Misinformation took a heavy toll in politics, especially in the 2016 presidential election. While misinformation, or "fake news," is not as prevalent as media may suggest, as just under half of Americans (44%) visited fake news websites preceding the 2016 presidential election (Guess). Of these visits, there was a strong overrepresentation of conservative media, which was salient with misinformation media. Additionally, those who self-identified as Trump supporters were more likely to visit untrustworthy websites that were pro-Trump. Self-identified Clinton supporters showed similar patterns, but with a much weaker correlation. The gateway to untrustworthy news sites was, famously, Facebook (Guess).

However, in a study published in *Nature Human Behavior*, although fake news became more prominent, so did fact-checking websites. Despite this, while fact-checking has become

popular journalism, of those who report visiting an untrustworthy website (44%), fewer than half report visiting a verified fact-checking website (Guess). Despite this uptick in fake news traction, especially in conservative media, there was no strong correlation that affected voter choice or voter turnout, but it could not rule out small effects. The effects of fake news were concentrated among a small, highly engaged group, influenced by partisanship and selective exposure. It was concluded, however, that social media aided the spread of misinformation (Guess).

Misinformation shared through social media gains traction the more that people interact (M. Cinelli), which coincides with why a small group of people are concentrated in fake news consumption, yet are deeply connected with its contents.

College students are particularly vulnerable to misinformation, as they have a plethora of information and media at their disposal through their smartphones (Gaultney). In one study from 2022 at Texas State University (Gaultney), college students were found to have poor media literacy, making them susceptible to fake news exposure and misidentifying what news sources are trustworthy versus what are not (Gaultney). To be aware of news, students rely on social media (Gaultney), but this raises concerns, even among college students, about being exposed to fake news and being unable to distinguish real from fake. There is also division between the political aisle, as a large majority of Trump supporters reported that they believe the mainstream media “fabricated” news about Trump, though only 20% of Democrats held the same sentiment about the media making up stories (Gaultney). These sentiments echo the findings during COVID-19, in which conservative news sources were more likely to publish fake news (Romer). An increase in fake news results in an increase in confusion and hesitancy to trust institutions and democracies (Gaultney). This lack of trust is further exacerbated by elite cues, such as those from President Donald Trump, who is the first American president to publicly denounce

vaccination (Stirling). Cues specifically from Trump had a significant effect on the beliefs of Trump voters, but did not have any significant increase or decrease in vaccine support among liberal voters (Stirling).

METHODOLOGY

Since there seemed to be little correlation between conspiracy beliefs and voting outcomes (Guess), this study focuses on patterns among American beliefs, sentiments, and values when it comes specifically to believing in conspiracy theories and holding extremist beliefs. This study utilizes qualitative analysis to investigate Americans and their beliefs. Although many of the studies used in this analysis use survey data, which were often analyzed through quantitative data, this research is focused primarily on patterns within observed data to conclude what commonalities lie in those who believe primarily in political conspiracy theories and hold extremist views.

Given the particular value that college students hold in light of this phenomenon, the data is focused on college students and young adults, which narrows down the pool of usable data. The population would also come from studies that were focused on the United States. Additionally, the research that is used had to relate to belief in conspiracy and extremism in some way. Some key words that were essential to use upon looking for data were *political extremism*, *conspiracy belief*, *college students*, and *young adults*. The research was not aimed at understanding every single pattern that occurred amongst those who held extremist beliefs or believed in political conspiracy. Rather, the goal is to capture a few relevant patterns that occur and determine their role in making one susceptible to believing or behaving in a certain way. The research focused on 1) partisan affiliation, 2) information consumption, and 3) background.

Partisan affiliation means what political party certain individuals identify with, if they are voters, and if they respond to or resonate with elite cues. There is a particular emphasis on individuals who identify more with right-wing politics, as these individuals are more susceptible to misinformation exposure (Romer). Information consumption aims to gather how people gather information, and this goes beyond simply television, but it encompasses social media, news, friends, and family. The social media portion is important, as it encompasses multiple sites, such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Facebook. However, it also includes less mainstream, more intimate social media platforms, such as Discord, Reddit, and Telegram. Finally, research that also identifies background, particularly race, ethnicity, and geography, is also valuable because if background affects one's susceptibility to extremism and conspiracy beliefs, it may leave one population more inherently vulnerable. These three variables are used as a guide to analyze whether they share patterns among those who believe in conspiracies or hold extremist beliefs. Understanding what patterns are relevant aids in concluding what makes college students and young adults susceptible to these.

The questions that underpin the research are: 1) What are the patterns among those who hold conspiracy beliefs and political extremes? And 2) What commonalities made them susceptible to these observations? To study these, the specific underlying causes had to be found. Explanations that hold conclusions such as "America is more divided," or there is an "increase in polarization", which are popular among contemporary media (Mayer), are not satisfactory. These conclusions, while they may be true, are not sufficient for understanding where the phenomena's roots originate. The exposure to the three variables above which are used to identify key patterns are also important because this study is reliant on relevant exposure, or exposure to the variables that have a pattern which is in alignment to salience among college students and young adults, as

well as within the boundaries of political extremism and conspiracy belief, all which fall under the large umbrella of general extremism and its purported rise.

ANALYSIS/FINDINGS

Conspiracy and extremism are shared through messaging, and one of the most prominent forms of messaging for adults ages 20-30 is acquired through social media (Rozado). In the Department of Psychology at Trinity College in Connecticut, 198 young, or “emerging adults” (Rozado), were surveyed to assess their beliefs in the COVID-19 vaccine. During COVID-19, those younger in age demonstrated more willingness to be vaccinated once the vaccine became available, but younger people also had a higher likelihood of endorsing conspiracy theories related to COVID-19.

In this study, the emerging adults were more likely to believe vaccine conspiracy beliefs compared to the middle-aged counterparts that were also surveyed for the study, despite the two groups having almost identical vaccine uptake scores (Rozado). This study speculates that personal motivations for emerging adults, such as protecting the health and safety of others, outweigh conspiracy beliefs despite emerging adults having higher rates of conspiracy belief, yet remaining almost identical to middle-aged adults in vaccine uptake. Notably, individuals who relied on predominantly conservative media outlets for COVID-19 information were more likely to endorse conspiracy theories related to COVID-19. Those who held conservative beliefs were more likely to have greater vaccine hesitancy and belief COVID-19 conspiracies.

Additionally, lower income and education were related to less willingness to receive the vaccine. This population is also more likely to have lower mistrust of science research and medical information (Rozado). The increase in distrust is partially due to the developments of prominent politicians’ willingness to allude to approval or endorsement of political conspiracies,

also in conjunction with the media not producing satisfactory content, which disproves such theories (Rea). The rise of alternative news sources and increased media bias also contribute to inserting political agendas into news, which increases polarized electorates and increases digital extremism (Rea). Discrepancies in education, economic status, and social inequality are all associated with greater conspiracy belief, as conspiracies are one outlet that people use to make sense of the world (Bordeleau). Young adults, aside from vaccination uptake, are also more politically active in non-traditional ways, such as through protests and activism, yet they remain the lowest age group for voter turnout in elections.

Age alone is the strongest predictor of conspiracy belief, as reported in Jean-Nicolas Bordeleau and Daniel Stockemer's study, *On the relationship between age and conspiracy beliefs* (2024). Overall, they reported a general negative association between conspiracy belief and age. Age, however, does not function alone, as total political participation, a lack of self-esteem, and higher levels of dissatisfaction are also indicators that contribute to determining one's susceptibility to conspiracy belief. The observation that younger people are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories is not exhaustive of all conspiracy theories. Rather, some conspiracies are more attractive to each set of generations.

While conspiracy beliefs remain in the confines of one's mind, political extremism occurs when these cognitive beliefs manifest into behavior. One of the most salient ways that political extremism is exemplified and reported on is in political violence. Violent events have been historically dominated by the political right (Kleinfeld), but in recent years, the political left and partisan leftists, or those who affiliate strongly with left-wing political movements, especially in the wake of the events occurring in 2020 (resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, COVID-19 Pandemic, incumbent President Donald Trump losing the 2020 presidential election,

etc.), there has been an increase in extremism from political leftists. In December 2021, survey data revealed that “21% of Democrats (and 16% of Republicans) thought punching members of the other party was justified, while 13% of Democrats (and 9% of Republicans) justified killing at least some members of the other party.” (Kleinfeld). Although this data does not correlate to actual incidents, it is indicative of the path along which political extremism is gaining traction in political parties that have been historically less violence-prone than their counterparts. Events which exemplify political extremism, such as the January 6th insurrection, target groups of extremists through promoting mainstream conservative causes to local audiences. Large groups, such as the Proud Boys, “a European chauvinist group known for politically violent protest” (Kleinfeld), hold rallies that go undetected by national news, and use less mainstream social media apps, such as Telegram, to message other extremist organizations and recruit people to carry out political agendas, such as refusing to wear a mask amid COVID-19 mask mandates, or discussing anti-critical race theory. United, violent organizations have begun to unite under umbrella issues rather than niche sub-foci to better combat alternative movements. Conservative movements capitalize on mainstream concerns and subsequently expand the pool of those who can, and do, join in their extremism. Political extremism has also become increasingly partisan, less divided by individual issues, and more focused on one party versus another. Those who are young political extremists tend to age out of violence, typically already being “violent criminals” (Kleinfeld) before resorting to political violence. Overall, political violence is likely to become more common. However, individuals and attacks aligned with left-wing causes tend to have a lower likelihood of violence (K. Jasko).

Although extremism is contributed to via increased political conspiracy beliefs, biased media, and elite cues, simply fact-checking conspiracies and extremism is “ineffective” (Rea)

against digital extremism. While generally findings have concluded that those who are less educated are more susceptible to conspiracy belief (Rozado), there is robust conspiracy belief among college students, especially among “graduate-degree-holding white men” (Roscigno). More extreme beliefs, such as conspiracy theories relating to anti-government sentiments and Jewish people, are paradoxically positively associated with high levels of trust in government. Conspiracy belief is also not equally distributed, as it relies on who is exposed to conspiratorial information. Encountering conspiracies is “relatively unintentional” (Roscigno), such as hearing it from a friend or coworker, but some actors may intentionally seek out conspiracies and extremist groups. The types of conspiracies individuals hear and retain from these groups also differ, as conspiracies are usually linked to how one attempts to make sense of the world or extreme circumstances. Highly educated White men are particularly more likely to hold “Relatively unpopular and perhaps taboo conspiracy beliefs” (Roscigno). Conspiracy among the educated is not new, but a “longer-term cultural attribute” (Mayer) of the United States, which has acted as a precursor for the recent extremism and political violence in schools and local communities. Social media and general internet usage make students more vulnerable to extremist beliefs, especially violent ones. These are exacerbated by parents who also share extreme ideologies. Social media also makes it easier and more accessible for students to join extremist groups through media such as encrypted chat rooms. Students are especially vulnerable because they spend their free time roaming the internet and social media, and through personal connections with extremist groups, they are able to build personal relationships and be part of a group. Despite personal characteristics, namely community, at play in the intersectionality between students and extremist or conspiracy beliefs, personal attributes, such as anger and

narcissism, are not associated with politically right-leaning individuals, although political violence is dominated by the political right (Kleinfeld).

DISCUSSION

Susceptibility to conspiracy belief and extremism in young adults, specifically college students, is affected by a variety of variables. The findings identify that conspiracy beliefs and extremism in young adults and college students are a result of a conjunction of age, partisan affiliation, and, more importantly than purported, the type of media they are exposed to and the influence of these platforms. The research demonstrates that of the primary factors which were examined to determine the likelihood of conspiracy belief and extremism in college students and young adults, 1) partisan affiliation, 2) information consumption, and 3) background, the most salient in increasing susceptibility is information consumption. Young adults are particularly reliant on social media as a source of information (Rozado).

Per the Institute for Internet & the Just Society, social media runs on algorithms, which are a “technical means of sorting posts based on relevancy instead of publish time, in order to prioritize which content a user sees first according to the likelihood that they will actually engage with such content.” (Mayer). These algorithms produce echo chambers (Bordeleau), which trap young people in falling deeper into extremist organizations that rally on media platforms (Rosigno), effectively reaching a large audience. Further, they convince young people that they have strength in numbers (Rosigno), giving students a sense of belonging. On less deregulated platforms, such as Telegram, a popular messaging app, deeper radicalization can occur. Social media forms a reality for each user, each student, which is not representative of the greater population. Conspiracy theory exposure and its subsequent extremist ideologies are not sought out by individuals, but rather, they are exposed through those they surround themselves with

(Roscigno). Since college students and young adults spend free time browsing social media and using it as their main source of news, they are exposed to conspiracy theories and extremism on a broader scale than generations before, ultimately making them more susceptible to these theories. The research found contradicting findings, though Rozado identified that “higher levels of education foster analytical thinking and deliberation, which, in turn, reduce individual adherence to conspiratorial explanations” (Rozado). Those with lower levels of education are more likely to use conspiracy theories because they seek simple explanations to explain and understand circumstances, such as unequal socioeconomic status.

Unexpectedly, Roscigno, in research titled *The Status Foundations of Conspiracy Beliefs*, found that highly educated, degree-holding individuals are more likely to harbor conspiracy beliefs (Roscigno). They theorize that this may be more reliant on sociological factors, as opposed to primarily political belief or exposure to media. Additionally, Rachel Kleinfeld in her research, from *The Rise in Political Violence in the United States and Damage to Our Democracy*, identified that while social media does expose individuals to conspiracy theories and extremist groups, mainstream social media platforms are not where extremist ideologies or conspiracy beliefs are formed. Rather, it is forged on less regulated platforms, such as Telegram, where students find community and like-minded individuals. However, the role that social media plays cannot be understated, as it makes susceptibility to extremism and conspiracy more likely for students because through social media students have more exposure to these elements thanks to social media algorithms mimicking the mindset of users based on their interactions (Mayer) and producing echo chambers (Bordeleau) which traps students in a “corner” of the internet, which curates what they see from the world.

Despite the extensive research on general conspiracy theory belief and political extremism, there were challenges in finding applicable research that could be used for such a narrow study. The most significant aspect that narrowed the research was the age range that was being examined. Additionally, the student was limited to research among participants within the United States to maintain an equal measure when discussing partisan affiliation. Some studies, such as (Rozado) included the age range that this study sought as well as other ages. In these cases, the findings applicable to this research were limited to the age range that aligned with college students and young adults. Further, some limitations of this research are that, in some instances, it was unclear what kind of media studies were referred to. Studies that were more recent were found to differentiate between news from TV and news from social media, while older studies sometimes grouped the platforms together. This is important because for young adults, their main source of news comes from social media (Rosigno), rather than TV, which differs from popular news consumption among older people (Aubin). Despite the relatively new niche of this study, there was a wide variety of research on conspiracy belief and extremism, especially when it came to college students and their unique position as growing up in the “digital age” (Biscontini).

CONCLUSION

College students are the future of America: the future workforce, opinion leaders, parents, and neighbors. Therefore, the information that young adults are not only exposed to but also consume is extremely important as it shapes the way they perceive the world. This research allows students, educators, and parents to understand where the gaps are in political messaging, or the path that one takes from absorbing information to becoming a conspiracist or extremist. This research reveals where messages are most misconstrued and damaged due to factors outside

of one's upbringing or education. Future efforts to combat extremism in conspiracy beliefs can utilize this research for creating college classes to educate students on how to be smart consumers of information, specifically on social media, or even to educate parents on how to educate children so they are prepared when they are of college age. Moreover, understanding how young adults are susceptible to conspiracy theories and extremism aids in understanding the overall political climate in America and the most effective messaging for young adults and voters in the future. When examining political violence, this research can be crucial for finding the root of organized political violence and its origins. The landscape of politics is completely shifting, and college students and young adults are at the center of this revolution. Understanding how they consume information and shift to extremist politics will aid in disciplining and bettering a more informed America.

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