

# The impact of partisanship and religiosity on conspiracy-theory beliefs in Turkey

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## Abstract

Why do people believe in conspiracy theories? This paper responds to this ever-significant question by scrutinizing people's belief in conspiracy theories in Turkey. Building on Max Weber's theory of rationalization, it proposes that value-laden and instrumentally rational predispositions, namely religiosity and partisanship, predict people's beliefs in conspiracy theories. This current study tests this hypothesis by analyzing two nationwide surveys conducted during a period of significant changes in modern Turkish politics: January and July 2013. The findings confirm the hypothesis that people interpret conspiracy theories in line with their instrumental, rational interests and values.

## KEYWORDS

conspiracy theories, Max Weber, partisanship, religiosity, Turkey

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

According to Keeley (1999: 116), conspiracy theories are explanations of “events in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret”. They can make an enormous impact worldwide. For examples: Nazi ideology was based on anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (Cohn, 2005); believing conspiracy theories about the spread of the COVID-19 virus predicts people's resistance to preventive measures and future vaccination (Romer & Jamieson, 2020), which could lead to dire consequences for public health worldwide (Stoica & Umbres, 2021); and exposure to conspiracy rhetoric about election rigging leads Americans to unsettled emotional reactions and decreases their likelihood of respecting election results (Albertson & Guiler, 2020). Furthermore, ruling populist political parties' use of conspiracy theories could help them consolidate their support bases.

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The academic literature on conspiracy theories has two general tendencies, based on whether a study emphasizes the value-laden characteristics of conspiracy theories or their instrumental rationality. On the one hand, a line of research posits that conspiracy theories are irrational value systems that fail to explain the nature of events and distract people from reality. They tend to portray beliefs in conspiracy theories as a political pathology of marginal groups and associate them with extremist ideologies and values (Goertzel, 1994; Hofstadter, 1965; Pipes, 1997; Robins & Post, 1997). Byford (2011) warned that conspiracy theories should be avoided because they lead to a “dead end”, away from genuine solutions to social problems. On the other hand, an increasing number of studies have explained conspiracy theories as people’s rational and natural attempts to understand social reality and as alternative explanations of social reality (Birchall, 2006; Bratich, 2008; Brotherton, 2015; Gray, 2010).

There are three important gaps in the academic literature on conspiracy theories: (1) As Fenster (1999) noted, there is a theoretical need to transcend the scholarly division between focusing either on the value-laden or instrumentally rational characteristics of conspiracy theories, because neither approach provides holistic perspectives. While one negates conspiracy accounts as “political paranoia”, the other does not always emphasize their harmful consequences; (2) The academic literature does not sufficiently investigate and document changes in the direction of beliefs in conspiracy theories over time. It does not adequately illustrate when or why one group of people stops or starts believing in a conspiracy theory; and (3) The scholarship focuses predominantly on the Western world (Nyhan & Zietzoff, 2018). Therefore, the academic literature needs to analyze other contexts in which conspiracy theories could be very influential.

This research examines the belief in conspiracy theories in Turkey by drawing on two nationwide surveys conducted in January and July 2013. Relying on Max Weber’s theory, it argues that value-laden and instrumentally rational predispositions predict people’s beliefs in conspiracy theories. In so doing, this study takes into account both the value-laden and rational aspects of conspiracy theories and therefore transcends the scholarship’s theoretical fragmentation. Moreover, by relying on a comparative analysis of two surveys, this study explores the changes in the direction of beliefs in conspiracy theories over time and addresses the second gap. This constitutes a noteworthy and substantial contribution to the scholarship, as the current literature inadequately examines the evolution of beliefs in conspiracy theories. By presenting comprehensive nationwide data, this paper offers compelling evidence of a profound and rapid transformation in conspiratorial beliefs within a span of less than a year. Furthermore, the research’s focus on influential conspiracy theories in modern Turkish political history expands the geographical scope of the scholarship beyond the Western world that contributes to filling the third scholarly lacuna. This paper first develops its theoretical approach and describes the research context. Subsequently, it presents the findings and discusses their implications in a brief conclusion.

## 2 | PEOPLE AS MERCHANTS OF CONSPIRACY THEORIES

This paper builds its theoretical perspective through the relevant literature on rationalization. To begin, Max Weber distinguishes four types of rationality: formal, theoretical, practical, and substantive. Formal rationality involves means-to-an-end calculations through universally applicable rules, laws, and regulations, such as those observed in bureaucratic administration. Weber refers to formal rationality in economy and law. Economic activity is formally rational “according to the degree in which, the provision for needs...is capable of being expressed in numerical, calculable terms, and is so expressed” (Weber, 1978 (1922): 85), and formal rationality of legal thought includes uniformity, consistency, and methodical law-making (Weber, 1978 (1922)). Theoretical rationality, also called intellectual rationality (Kalberg, 1980), is the quest to obtain a coherent comprehension of reality through abstract cognitive processes. Weber (2009) argued that intellectuals attempting to give meaning to the cosmos through theoretical rationality create religious ethics. Weber’s theoretical and formal rationalities do not have a direct influence on people’s everyday social actions and decisions (Kalberg, 1980), such as their beliefs or disbeliefs in conspiracy theories. People rely more directly on practical and substantive rationalities when making everyday decisions.

According to Weber (2001 (1905): 38), practical rationality comprises instrumental and pragmatic analysis to deal with the problems of everyday life: "...the type of attitude which sees and judges the world consciously in terms of the worldly interests of the individual ego". It often motivates instrumental social actions. While Weber (2009) attributed theoretical rationality to intellectual classes, he viewed merchants and artisans as likely daily practitioners of practical rationality. Substantive or value rationality refers to people's comprehension that is informed by value-postulates, such as norms, aesthetics, and ethics, which vary in different social and cultural contexts. Weber (2009) underlined that the formal rationality of modern state bureaucracy, such as its impersonal nature, contradicts the substantive rationality of the antecedent patriarchal rule that relied on personal obligations of piety. In parallel, Weber (2009: 331) described that the formal rationality of the capitalist economy contradicted the value rationality of the ethics of brotherliness by introducing an impersonal and abstract system of monetary exchanges:

It was possible to regulate ethically the personal relations between master and slave precisely because they were personal relations. But it is not possible to regulate—at least not in the same sense or with the same success—the relations between the shifting holders of mortgages and the shifting debtors of the banks.

Various scholars have expanded on and interpreted the Weberian theoretical framework on rationality. As an aside, the notion of multiple forms of rationality similar to Weber's typology seems to be gaining traction in other fields, too, most notably in economics—a field which traditionally emphasized only instrumental rationality (Williams, 2023). In the concept of belief-based utility, beliefs themselves, however incongruent with facts, may affect people's preferences. Hence, people seek the best rationalizations for their subjective beliefs in a wider "marketplace for rationalizations" (Williams, 2023). Belief-based utility in economics is similar to Weber's substantive rationality. Returning to sociology, Boudon's (2003, 2008) cognitivist theory of action highlights the importance of values along with instrumental rationality in human decision-making. Boudon (2003) stated that people are not only motivated by instrumental rationality, and social action needs to be value-rationally meaningful to the actor, not contradicting the values that s/he holds. One example Boudon provides is from an experiment that described a scenario in which a hardware store increased the prices of snow shovels after a heavy snowstorm. The experiment's respondents were asked about their opinions on the price rise, and the majority found it unfair. Boudon (2008) argued that the respondents would accept the price rise in normal conditions but reject it for its unjustified value costs: unfairness. In parallel, Woods (2001) described the dynamic confluence of Weber's practical and substantial rationality. Woods (2001: 694) calls it values-intuitive rational action and states that it is "determined by an awareness which constitutes a compound of instrumental rationality and action-oriented to a values-intuitive impulse". In other words, people are capable of creating a moral and ethical comprehension of the world that may then be reinforced, confronted, and/or enhanced by instrumental rationality. Furthermore, Erving Goffman's (1956: 162) perception of social action delineates a dynamic interplay between instrumental and value-oriented thinking:

Our activity... is largely concerned with moral matters, but as performers, we do not have a moral concern in these moral matters. As performers we are merchants of morality...the very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light, of being a socialized character, forces us to be the sort of person who is practiced in the ways of the stage.

This paper builds mainly on the Weberian perspective and suggests that we can explain belief in conspiracy theories thoroughly by accounting for both value-based and instrumental rationality. Relying on instrumental rational thinking, people can agree pragmatically with conspiracy theories that coincide with their interests. For example, if a conspiracy theory is accusatory of someone's political opponent, s/he could choose to support the theory, even without necessarily believing in it. Relying on value rationality, people can be convinced by conspiracy theories due to their values. If someone believes in the existence of certain evil groups targeting her/his community members, s/he

might be more inclined toward any conspiracy theories that are accusatory of specific groups. Accordingly, this study proposes that both value-laden and instrumentally rational predispositions can predict people's beliefs in conspiracy theories, as hypothesized below.

With regards to the significance of instrumental rationality, the scholarship on conspiracy theories highlights political party partisanship as an important factor (Douglas et al., 2019). Various recent studies empirically demonstrate that political partisanship is an important predictor of beliefs in conspiracy theories (Albertson & Guiler, 2020; Enders et al., 2020, 2022; Enders & Smallpage, 2019; Miller et al., 2016; Nefes, 2014, 2017; Pasek et al., 2015; Saunders, 2017; Siddiqui, 2020; Smallpage et al., 2017; Uscinski et al., 2016; van der Linden et al., 2021). While there is limited academic literature on conspiracy theories in non-Western contexts, the scholarship on Turkey has already noted the significance of partisanship. De Medeiros (2018) claimed that the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi-AKP*) pragmatically used conspiracy theories against its opponents to justify its policies. Furthermore, Aytaç et al. (2021) demonstrate the susceptibility of the general public in Turkey to the elite's populist messages of the ruling AKP. Accordingly, this research project expected to find a statistically significant relationship between partisanship (an instrumentally rational predisposition) and belief in conspiracy theories in Turkey.

**H1.** The tendency to believe in a conspiracy theory will be higher if the conspiracy theory is congruent with one's political party's interests and lower if the conspiracy theory challenges one's political party's interests.

The academic literature also presents evidence on the role of value rationality in conspiracy theory beliefs. Mancosu et al. (2017) found that widespread belief in conspiracy theories in Italy is positively associated with higher levels of religiosity. Nyhan and Zeitzoff (2018) showed that conspiracy theories are prevalent in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region; there, belief in conspiracy theories is strongly associated with holding anti-Western and anti-Jewish values. Moreover, some studies present evidence on the impacts of value-rational thinking on believing conspiracy theories in tandem with partisanship, such as a strong distrust of officialdom (van der Linden et al., 2021) and holding anti-black attitudes (Pasek et al., 2015). The scholarship on Turkey also underlines the importance of value-rationality. For example, there is a prevalent value system of mistrusting foreign powers and minorities; it is called the "Sèvres Syndrome". This is anxiety about the alleged threat of the dismemberment of the Republic of Turkey by foreign powers and their internal collaborators. The syndrome's name comes from the Treaty of Sevres, signed between the Ottoman Empire and allied countries at the end of the First World War. Various conspiracy theories in modern Turkey echo this political anxiety about being dismembered by foreign powers (Guida, 2008; Gürpınar, 2019; Nefes, 2012, 2013, 2015). To test the significance of value-rational thinking on conspiracy-theory beliefs, this paper also looks at the level of religiosity (a value-rational predisposition) because it is an important indicator of values in Turkish society and has been an important political indicator in recent decades.

**H2.** The tendency to believe in a conspiracy theory will be higher if the conspiracy theory is congruent with values associated with religious beliefs.

H2 also implies that the tendency to believe in a conspiracy theory will be lower if the conspiracy theory is dissonant with the values associated with religious beliefs.

If the hypotheses about partisanship and religiosity are confirmed, the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories would shift significantly if the context of material interest and value positions dramatically change. The data were collected in January and July 2013. Between these months, the most significant political mobilization in modern Turkish history happened. In May and June 2013, 2.5 million people in 79 out of 81 cities in Turkey participated in the Gezi Park protests (Amnesty International, 2013); this drastically transformed the nature of the relationship between the government and its opposition. Until that time, the AKP government was a subject of conspiracy theories accusing it of serving the interests of foreign powers, especially the Western imperialists, and helping them to dismember Turkey (Gürpınar, 2013). The protests turned the tables and saw the AKP, very openly and in a unified manner, using

conspiracy theories to accuse the protesters and the opposition, which became a trend that they followed afterward. Accordingly, this study expected to detect changes in people's beliefs in these datasets.

**H3.** People's beliefs in conspiracy theories change when the circumstances shift, so that the associations of religious beliefs and political affiliations with conspiracy beliefs may reverse.

Below, we describe the context leading to H3 and the predicted nature of the reversal of the link between religious beliefs and political affiliations on the one hand, and beliefs in conspiracy theories on the other.

### 3 | RESEARCH CONTEXT

Turkish politics not only presents an ideal context for a study on conspiracy theories because of their prevalence; the Gezi Park protest period in 2013 also affords a perfect opportunity to examine a drastically shifting political context. Corresponding to the 11th year of Turkey's AKP government, this period witnessed the beginning of a significant qualitative transformation in the AKP's politics, which culminated during the transition from a parliamentary to a presidential system in 2017. The Gezi Park protests were an initial sign of this change in the AKP's politics and societal dynamics (Verney et al., 2019); therefore, this provides a great opportunity to scrutinize people's attitudes toward conspiracy theories in a context that generates inverse conditions for their political party interests. Besides, one cannot deny that at times activities of social movements and conspiracy supporters have shared elements (Bertuzzi, 2021). The main political actors of the period were the governing AKP, which defined itself as conservative-liberal and was generally seen as a center-right party, the social democratic and center-left party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), the Turkish nationalist and right-wing party, the National Action Party (MHP), as well as the pro-Kurdish movement left-wing Peace and Democracy Party (BDP).

The drastic political change in 2013 was also related to Islamic religious values and symbols. The AKP's supporters and politicians linked the Gezi Park protests to the opposition via the relaxation of Turkey's headscarf ban. This ban began in the 1980s and became stricter following the postmodern coup of 28 February 1997. Women were forbidden from wearing headscarves in public institutions, such as universities and public or military offices. The AKP actively campaigned against the ban and gradually lifted it for university students in 2010, public employees in 2013, and military officers in 2017 (Aksoy & Gambetta, 2021; BBC, 2017). The political tension between secularism and Islamists was also central to the discussion about the Gezi Park protests, especially after an assault claim: A woman wearing a headscarf reported that she and her baby had been insulted and attacked by the Gezi Park protesters, including half-naked men wearing leather. The alleged attack was brought to the general public's attention by the prime minister at that time; he used this sentimental tone: "They dragged my covered sister on the streets near my office and attacked her and her child" (Orucoglu, 2015). In this regard, the Gezi Park protests period was momentous not solely in terms of political party interests and partisanship but also with regards to the religious values of the Sunni majority in Turkey. Accordingly, this study expected to detect significant changes in the belief in conspiracy theories before and after protests among religious people.

### 4 | METHODS

#### 4.1 | Data

This paper uses two datasets collected by KONDA Research and Consultancy (KONDA, 2013, 2014). The first is based on a survey conducted in January 2013, titled "Belief in science and unscientific beliefs". The second is the "Konda July 2013 Barometer", which was conducted in July 2013. Both surveys' samples are representative of Turkey

and were obtained with a stratified approach. The January 2013 survey focuses explicitly on scientific and unscientific beliefs and includes a series of questions that explicitly measure conspiracy-related beliefs. The July 2013 survey was conducted immediately after the Gezi protests and included two questions asking respondents' opinions on items that related the protests to a conspiracy about foreign-power influences. Both surveys included questions on demographics, religiosity, and partisanship, among other things. They had similar sample sizes: The January and July surveys had a sample of 2,612 and 2,629, respectively.

Public opinion surveys, which often present nationwide information on people's attitudes, have substantial merits for studying beliefs in conspiracy theories (Douglas et al., 2019). In this regard, the KONDA datasets afford invaluable large-scale evidence on the belief in conspiracy theories in Turkey. However, surveys also have limitations in the study of conspiracy theories. Most notably, they could record beliefs in conspiracy theories that the respondents had not thought about before the survey (Douglas et al., 2019). The KONDA datasets might be bereft of this potential bias for containing already popular conspiracy-theory themes about foreign powers that are prevalent in Turkish society and politics.

## 4.2 | Variables

In the January survey, the *conspiracy beliefs* theme was measured by three items: (1) Foreigners who buy land and property in Turkey do so to divide the country (i.e., the Sevres Syndrome); (2) Some countries interfere in electing Turkey's rulers; and (3) The USA had a hand in the 1999 Golcuk and 2011 Van earthquakes. The items had five Likert scale answer categories, which the study normalized to the 0–1 range: 0 = "absolutely incorrect", 0.25 = incorrect, 0.5 = neither correct nor incorrect, 0.75 = correct, and 1 = "absolutely correct". In the July survey, the *conspiracy beliefs* theme was measured by two items. The first was that "[Gezi] protests are organized by foreign powers which envy Turkey's development"; it had the same answer categories as above, normalized to the 0–1 range. The second item was "Who best describes the profile of the people who attend the [Gezi] protests?" The item was coded 1 if the respondent answered with "foreign powers" or "traitors" and 0 with any other category. The 0 category also included groups that may be consistent with a conspiracy theory belief; this group included minorities, opponents of the AKP, members of marginal organizations, environmentalists, opposition parties, those who fight for their rights, and 20-year-old people. So, strictly speaking, this binary measure did not clearly measure a belief in conspiracies, as other Likert scale items do. With this caveat in mind, the study nevertheless included this variable in the analyzes because, along with the other items, it directly measures a very common and influential conspiracy-theory theme in Turkey: foreign powers shaping politics and controlling important events.

*Partisanship* was measured in both surveys by an item asking which party the respondent voted for in the 2011 parliamentary elections. The answer categories were: the ruling AKP party, center-left CHP, nationalist MHP, pro-Kurdish BDP, and others. *Religiosity* was measured in both surveys by the following items: a binary variable indicating whether the respondent or his wife veils (1 = yes, 0 = no), the respondent's denomination (1 = Sunni, 0 = other), and a Likert scale self-reported religiosity item (scaled as 0 = nonreligious, 0.33 = religious, 0.66 = very religious, 1 = devout). As control variables, the study used gender (male/female), age in years, ethnicity (Turkish vs. any other), household income per capita, education (six levels ranging from illiterate to graduate degree), urbanicity (rural, urban, or metropolis), and employment status (14 categories, which included civil servant, farmer, unemployed, student, etc.).

## 5 | RESULTS

Table 1 below displays descriptive statistics of the variables used in the analysis. The items on conspiracy beliefs show that more people agreed than disagreed that foreign powers were behind the Gezi Park protests, bought property to

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for the July (N = 2612) and January (N = 2629) surveys.

	July 2013		January 2013	
	Mean/%	SD	Mean/%	SD
<b>Conspiracy beliefs</b>				
Foreign powers behind Gezi protests (Likert)	0.597	0.312		
Foreign powers/traitors behind Gezi protests (binary)	0.180			
Foreign powers buy land to divide (Likert)			0.566	0.257
Foreign powers interfere in rulers' elections (Likert)			0.665	0.231
The USA had a hand in earthquakes (Likert)			0.212	0.238
<b>Partisanship</b>				
AKP	0.445		0.454	
CHP	0.218		0.184	
MHP	0.096		0.091	
BDP	0.049		0.040	
Other	0.191		0.230	
<b>Religiosity</b>				
Veiled (or not)	0.620		0.684	
Religiosity (Likert)	0.592	0.206	0.600	0.214
Sunni (vs. not)	0.912		0.935	
<b>Control variables</b>				
Male (or female)	0.537		0.499	
Age	39.409	14.554	39.684	14.507
Turkish (or other)	0.803	0.398	0.825	0.380
Income (1000 TL)	0.489	0.554	0.470	0.496
<b>Education</b>				
Illiterate	0.044		0.056	
Literate	0.017		0.019	
Primary school	0.343		0.377	
Middle school	0.140		0.153	
High school	0.310		0.261	
University or higher	0.135		0.134	
<b>Urbanicity</b>				
Rural	0.215		0.221	
Urban	0.279		0.275	
Metropol	0.506		0.504	
<b>Occupation</b>				
Civil servant	0.048		0.063	
Private sector	0.065		0.049	
Manual worker	0.110		0.119	
Shop owner	0.075		0.062	
... (categories omitted for brevity)				

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	July 2013		January 2013	
	Mean/%	SD	Mean/%	SD
Housewife	0.286		0.340	
Student	0.102		0.084	
Any other	0.069		0.065	

Note: Conspiracy beliefs' Likert scale: 0 = "absolutely incorrect", 0.25 = "incorrect", 0.5 = "neither correct nor incorrect", 0.75 = "correct", and 1 = "absolutely correct".

divide Turkey, and interfered in the selecting of rulers. The average value for all these items was above the midpoint of the Likert scale of 0.5. A minority of respondents agreed with the most outrageous conspiracy theory: the USA had a hand in two earthquakes in Turkey (the mean was 0.2, so roughly 80% did not believe in this conspiracy theory).

The binary conspiracy-theory measure of the July survey showed that 18% of respondents thought that foreign powers or traitors described the protesters the best as opposed to another category (i.e., minorities, AKP opponents, members of marginal organizations, environmentalists, opposition parties, those who fight for their rights, and 20-year-old people). Table 1 also shows that the samples from the January and July surveys are comparable with respect to partisanship, religiosity, and demographics. For example, in both samples, 45% of the respondents reported that they voted for the AKP, over 60% of the respondents (or their spouses) veiled, although the proportion of the veiled was slightly lower in July than in January, and over 90% are Sunni. While this study controlled for all those variables in the analysis, the two samples' comparability was useful.

There is a moderate correlation between beliefs in different conspiracy theories. For example, the Cronbach's alpha for the three conspiracy theory items in the January survey is 0.45. Likewise, the correlation between the binary and Likert conspiracy theory items in the July survey is 0.35. This shows, perhaps unsurprisingly, that if one believes in one form of conspiracy theory, s/he tends to believe in another conspiracy theory.

To test the hypotheses, linear regression models that predicted each of the five conspiracy theory items were fitted. Partisanship and religiosity items were used as independent variables. In all models, all variables shown in Table 1 were controlled. There was a moderate level of missing data (around 20%) due to items-nonresponse. To address the missing data, the models were fitted with Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML). Full Information Maximum Likelihood has been proven to produce unbiased estimates under the assumption of missing at random (MAR) (i.e., missingness depends only on observed variables) and multivariate normality, while the results are largely robust to violations of multivariate normality (Enders & Bandalos, 2001). The assumption of MAR cannot be tested; however, because the researcher controlled for many covariates, this assumption should not be too implausible in this case. Moreover, results with listwise deletion of missings produced very similar estimates, albeit with larger standard errors, which further supports the use of FIML.

Figure 1 below shows the coefficients of the key independent variables in the models that predict the different conspiracy theory beliefs. Table A1 in the appendix includes the full set of estimates. The coefficients displayed in Figure 1 support *H1*. Firstly, voting for an opposition party was significantly associated with a *reduced* tendency to believe in the conspiracy theory that foreign powers were behind the anti-governmental and anti-AKP Gezi Park protests (July 13). On the contrary, voting for an opposition party was associated with an *increased* belief in conspiracy theories that foreign powers interfered in Turkish politics in the forms of affecting who rules the country by buying property and causing earthquakes (January 13).

This study also found support for *H2*. Being more religious (e.g. veiling, reporting a higher religiosity, or being Sunni vs. Alevi or of another denomination) was associated with an *increased* tendency to believe in the conspiracy theory that foreign powers were behind the anti-governmental and anti-AKP Gezi protests (July 13). On the contrary, a higher religiosity in most cases was associated with a *reduced* belief in conspiracy theories that foreign powers interfered in Turkish politics in the forms of affecting who rules the country by buying property and causing earthquakes



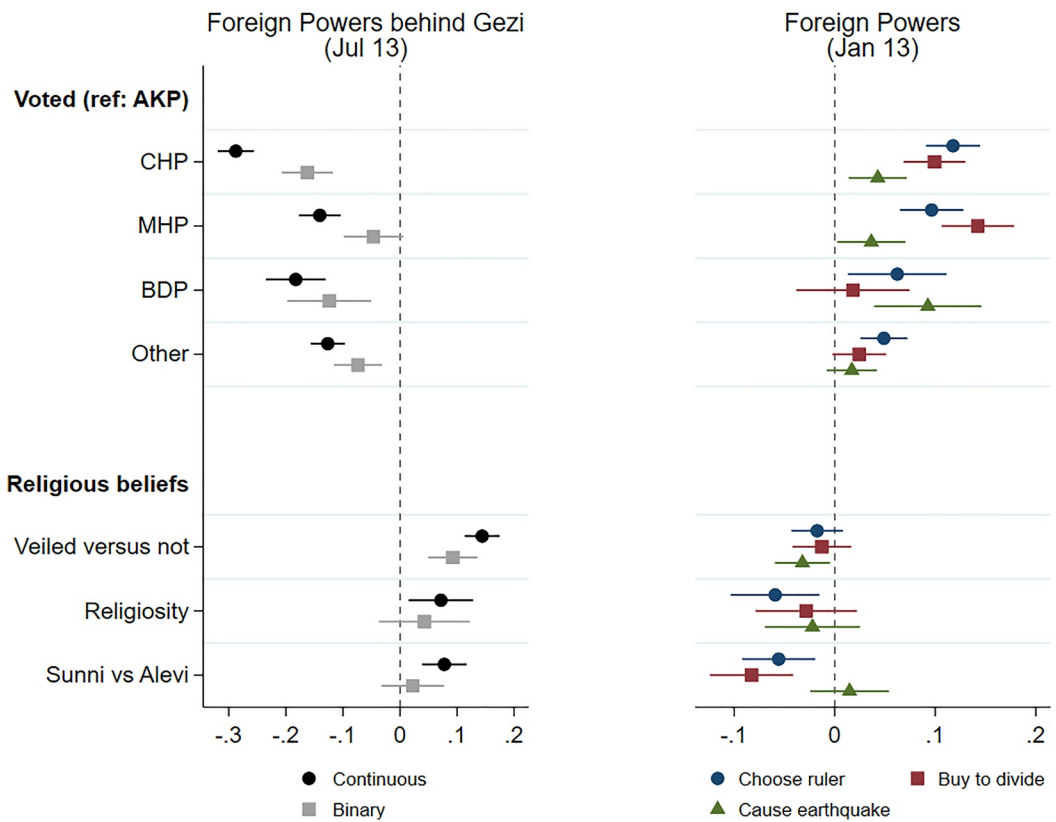


FIGURE 1 Linear regression coefficients predicting various conspiracies ( $N = 2612$  (July);  $2629$  (January)), estimated with FIML; all coefficients were adjusted for other variables in the Figure, plus gender, age, ethnicity, income, education, urbanicity, and occupation.

(January 13). Changes in the signs of the coefficients from January 2013 to July 2013 support the expectation (H3) that beliefs in conspiracy theories are, at least partially, driven by value-rational and instrumental-rational predispositions, and when the congruence between the conspiracy and the predispositions shifts, so do the beliefs in the conspiracy theories.

## 6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article reports three major findings. First, partisanship predicts beliefs in conspiracy theories. People are likelier to believe in conspiracy theories that are in line with their political parties' interests and less likely to believe those that challenge these interests. In January 2013, supporters of the opposition political parties in Turkey tended to believe in conspiracy theories, pointing at the plots of foreign powers to meddle in Turkey's internal affairs. After the government explained the Gezi Park protests as a conspiracy of foreign powers, compared with the supporters of the governing party, the opposition's supporters were less likely to believe in a conspiracy theory about foreign powers having a hand in the protests in July 2013. This finding not only supports the scholarship linking partisanship with beliefs in conspiracy theories (e.g., Albertson & Guiler, 2020; Enders et al., 2020; van der Linden et al., 2021); it is also in line with Uscinski and Parent's (2014) argument that opposition supporters are likelier to be convinced by conspiracy theories for being placed at the losing end of the power asymmetry, as they did in Turkey until the arrival of a conspiracy theory from the government to explain the Gezi protests.

Second, religiosity is a significant predictor of beliefs in conspiracy theories. People tend to believe in a conspiracy theory when it is in congruence with the values associated with their religious beliefs. While the January 2013 survey showed that people with higher levels of religiosity were less likely to be convinced by conspiracy theories about foreign powers, the July 2013 survey showed that they were likelier to believe in the conspiracy theory about foreign influence in the Gezi Park protests. This could be explained by the fact that the conspiracy theory about the protests framed the social movement as a danger to the religious freedoms that the governing AKP achieved in Turkey, particularly those associated with debates about the headscarf ban. This underlines the importance of value-rational thinking alongside instrumental thinking in people's tendency to believe in conspiracy theories.

Third and most importantly, beliefs in conspiracy theories change in shifting contexts that present contrary conditions for religious values and instrumental political interests. The political context in Turkey was drastically altered with the Gezi Park protests in June 2013. The data clearly illustrate the drastic changes between January and July 2013 in the beliefs in conspiracy theories among people supporting different political parties and those with different levels of religiosity. In other words, when the circumstances inverted, suspicion of foreign powers' plots tended to convince the opposite sides of political partisanship and religiosity. This is in line with the scholarship that describes conspiracy theories as people's rational attempts to comprehend social reality (Birchall, 2006; Bratich, 2008; Brotherton, 2015; Knight, 2000). People rationally and subjectively interpret conspiracy theories rather than believing in one conspiracy theory, which inclines them to believe in the other conspiracy theories (Goertzel, 1994). Nevertheless, this research also found that once people believed in one type of foreign-power conspiracy theory, they were likely to believe in other conspiracy theories about foreign powers. It could be argued that once in line with their instrumental interests and values, people are likely to believe in more than one conspiracy theory of the same theme.

Overall, the findings confirm the value of the Weberian theoretical perspective on rationality in explaining beliefs in conspiracy theories. According to this approach, both value-laden and instrumentally rational predispositions influence people's stances concerning conspiracy theories. In simple terms, this paper concludes that people interpret conspiracy theories in line with their instrumental interests and values. In the Turkish context, people believe in conspiracy theories in congruence with their manifest, political interests and religious values. Indeed, the persistent dissemination and influence of conspiracy theories in Turkish politics following the Gezi Park protests could also be viewed as further evidence to the importance of political interests and values in believing in those accounts. For example, during the May 2023 general elections, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the leader of the AKP and President of Turkey, made claims suggesting conspiratorial connections between the separatist terrorist organization Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the main opposition coalition of six parties. During a rally, Erdoğan presented a manipulated video, combining footage from a campaign video of the main opposition with unrelated PKK images from another source. When questioned about the video's authenticity during a television interview, Erdoğan dismissed its veracity and emphasized the accuracy of its conspiratorial implications (Ünker & Sparrow, 2023). In response, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the main opposition's presidential candidate, attributed the use of video montages and fabricated content in the AKP's election campaign to a Russian conspiracy (BBC, 2023). This recent debate exemplifies how conspiracy theories in Turkish politics are shaped by partisanship and political values, such as nationalism and suspicion of certain foreign powers.

Weber's sociological framework offers valuable insights into the social factors underlying beliefs in conspiracy theories within Turkish politics, while also possessing applicability to diverse contexts and topics. One such area where this framework could be effectively employed is the examination of conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19. Research conducted in various countries demonstrates that belief in these theories is associated with social factors linked to instrumental and value rationality. These factors include instrumental considerations regarding the credibility of authorities and scientific institutions (Achimescu et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021) and the adherence to specific ideological values (Koon et al., 2021; Stoler et al., 2022). Consequently, a comprehensive analysis of conspiracy theories could greatly benefit from the exploration of both value-laden and instrumental reasoning. Further, future studies could go beyond this perspective by scrutinizing the interplay between instrumental and value-laden rationality in the belief in conspiracy theories, as we do not know which type of rationality is more influential in

leading people to endorse conspiracy theories. Explaining thoroughly the social and political significance of conspiracy theories can potentially help us to alleviate or prevent the intergroup hostilities that conspiracy theories often trigger and enflame.

## 7 | NOTES

1. The January 2013 survey includes an item “some people listen to all phone calls in Turkey”, which is discarded, as it does not relate directly to a conspiracy theory or a belief in foreign interference which all other items do. It is important to note that the wording of the statement does not necessarily exclude the possibility that the suspected listeners may be internal entities or organizations. Consequently, individuals may interpret the subject matter of the conspiracy theory as pertaining to the government and respond accordingly. Furthermore, it is conceivable to view the question from a perspective that extends beyond conspiracy theories, wherein the recording of phone calls may serve alternative purposes, such as ensuring technical quality. The statement itself does not explicitly indicate a conspiracy, thus leaving room for varying interpretations.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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## APPENDIX A: ESTIMATES IN THE MODELS THAT PREDICT BELIEFS IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Table A1 below shows the coefficients obtained in models that predict beliefs in conspiracy theories. In the table the following items are the dependent variables: (1) foreign powers behind the Gezi protests (Likert), (2) foreign powers/ traitors behind Gezi protests (binary), (3) foreign powers interfere in selecting rulers (Likert), (4) foreign powers buy to divide (Likert), (5) USA had a hand in earthquakes (Likert). All models are linear regressions fitted with FIML to address item nonresponse.

TABLE A1 Standard errors in parentheses; + $p < 0.10$ , \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

	(1) Jul13 cont.	(2) Jul13 bin.	(3) Jan13 ruler	(4) Jan 13 buy	(5) Jan13 quake
Partisanship (ref: AKP)					
CHP	-0.288** (0.016)	-0.162** (0.023)	0.118** (0.014)	0.099** (0.016)	0.043** (0.015)
MHP	-0.140** (0.019)	-0.046+ (0.027)	0.096** (0.016)	0.142** (0.018)	0.036* (0.017)
BDP	-0.183** (0.027)	-0.124** (0.038)	0.062* (0.025)	0.018 (0.029)	0.093** (0.027)
Other	-0.126** (0.015)	-0.073** (0.022)	0.049** (0.012)	0.024+ (0.014)	0.017 (0.013)
Veiled (vs. not)	0.144** (0.016)	0.093** (0.022)	-0.017 (0.013)	-0.013 (0.015)	-0.032* (0.014)
Religiosity	0.072* (0.029)	0.043 (0.041)	-0.059** (0.023)	-0.028 (0.026)	-0.022 (0.024)
Sunni (vs. not)	0.078** (0.020)	0.023 (0.028)	-0.056** (0.019)	-0.083** (0.021)	0.015 (0.020)
Male (vs. female)	0.049** (0.015)	0.040+ (0.021)	0.013 (0.013)	-0.027+ (0.015)	-0.033* (0.014)
Age (years)	0.000 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.001 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)
Turk (vs. other)	0.051** (0.015)	0.009 (0.021)	-0.019 (0.013)	-0.016 (0.015)	-0.019 (0.014)
Income per capita	-0.013 (0.010)	-0.014 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.011)	-0.040** (0.012)	0.016 (0.011)
Education (ref: illiterate)					
Literate	0.006 (0.047)	-0.139* (0.064)	-0.011 (0.037)	0.034 (0.042)	0.025 (0.040)
Primary	0.067** (0.026)	-0.004 (0.035)	0.027 (0.021)	-0.027 (0.024)	-0.020 (0.022)
Middle	0.083** (0.029)	0.028 (0.039)	0.034 (0.024)	-0.043 (0.027)	-0.052* (0.025)
High	0.089** (0.028)	0.025 (0.038)	0.042+ (0.024)	-0.070** (0.027)	-0.049+ (0.025)

TABLE A1 (Continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Jul13 cont.	Jul13 bin.	Jan13 ruler	Jan 13 buy	Jan13 quake
Uni/higher	-0.050+ (0.030)	0.010 (0.042)	0.070* (0.027)	-0.071* (0.031)	-0.060* (0.029)
Urbanicity (ref: rural)					
Urban	0.027+ (0.016)	-0.021 (0.022)	-0.005 (0.013)	-0.003 (0.015)	-0.011 (0.014)
Metropolis	-0.005 (0.015)	-0.028 (0.021)	0.026* (0.012)	0.018 (0.014)	0.039** (0.013)
Occupation (ref: civil servant)					
Private sector	-0.023 (0.030)	-0.035 (0.044)	-0.062* (0.026)	-0.009 (0.030)	0.009 (0.028)
... coefficients for 13 occupation categories suppressed for brevity					...
Intercept	0.384** (0.052)	0.144+ (0.074)	0.714** (0.045)	0.740** (0.051)	0.267** (0.048)
N	2629	2629	2612	2612	2612