

Understanding Government Public Opinion: How Conspiracy Mentality and Policy Issue Concerns Shape Government Performance Evaluations

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Abstract

Citizens' assessments of government performance are rooted in their judgement on how public policy responds to their concerns, a key element for a sustainable democracy. However, conspiracy mentality, where individuals believe in larger plans orchestrated by powerful entities or the government, may impact such judgement. To examine the antecedents to people's assessment about how well the government responds to salient issues in society, this study examines the connection between citizens' policy concerns, conspiracy mentality, and their assessment of government performance. Analyzing data from an original two-wave panel survey conducted in the United States using cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive causal ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models, the study shows that conspiracy mentality is positively related to policy issue concerns, while policy issue concerns are negatively associated with the perception of government performance. Importantly, policy issues concerns significantly mediated this relationship. Individuals with higher levels of conspiracy mentality are more likely to have issue concerns that ultimately shape their negative views on how well the government addresses important problems in society.

Government political responsiveness and performance assessment are relevant components of the quality and functioning of representative democracy, particularly as both elements shield citizens from authoritarian decision-making (Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017). Responsiveness refers to the alignment between public opinion and public policies, where policy-makers usually act in accordance with public preferences and pursue societal welfare (Maskivker, 2019; Wlezien & Soroka, 2003). Government performance assessment, on the other hand, involves evaluating how well individuals evaluate the government's effectiveness at addressing citizens' concerns and fulfilling its responsibilities (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2001). This process entails analyzing various aspects of government performance, such as responsiveness to citizen needs, policy implementation, and overall impact on societal well-being (e.g., Brettschneider, 1996; Esaiasson & Wlezien, 2017).

Individuals' assessments of government performance hinge on their judgements regarding how well public policies address their demands and expectations about significant societal problems (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2001). The ability of policymakers to respond effectively may vary depending on the issue, time, and the prevailing ideologies of elected officials and governments (Brettschneider, 1996; Manza & Lomax, 2002). For an issue to significantly impact presidential evaluations and party choice, it must first resonate with citizens, who will then

base their assessments of political leadership on how effectively those issues are managed (Edwards, Mitchell, & Welch, 1995). When certain issues gain prominence, voters often prioritize their evaluations of government performance concerning those issues in their electoral decisions (Fournier et al., 2003; Krosnick, 1990). Thus, connecting citizens' policy concerns with the government's responsiveness to them is a foundational steppingstone for a healthy democracy. This study seeks to build on this literature by empirically testing this connection.

The main goal of our study is to explore the antecedents influencing citizens' assessments of *Government Performance* in addressing salient societal issues. Specifically, the theoretical models tested in this study reflect on whether citizens' government performance is evaluated based on the salience of specific concerns expressed by the public such as the extent of crime, unemployment rates, income inequality—the difference between rich and poor, and the cost of living. In this research, we seek to determine if government performance is evaluated based on its responsiveness and accountability related to these salient issues. It is important to clarify that government performance differs from other related concepts like government trust or approval rating. While approval ratings measure the public's sentiment toward a particular leader or government official (and trust denotes beliefs about governmental institutions and their expected roles (Norris, 2017)), we conceptualize

government performance assessment as an evaluative political attitude that measures the overall effectiveness and efficiency of a government (Klingemann, 1999). Thus, we aim to contribute to the literature by answering the question: How are individuals' subjective concerns about policy issues associated with their assessment of government performance?

Policy issue concerns refer to considerations regarding themes affecting a political community, and individuals often reference these issue concerns when making electoral or political judgments (Jennings & Wlezien, 2011). Such concerns usually capture significant attention and generate expectations regarding how the government will address or manage these issues. Citizens' issue concerns can be selective and influenced by various factors, such as economic crises or pandemic emergencies (Schlippak et al., 2022; Szebeni et al., 2021). Building on an irrational post-modern culture, one potential antecedent of policy issue concerns may revolve around people's predisposition to hold a conspiracy mentality, which entails seeing that many seemingly unrelated events form a part of a larger plan arranged by powerful others or the government due to a conspiracy (Goreis & Voracek, 2019; Mari et al., 2022). This mentality could significantly affect people's concerns and behaviors (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), such as reduced political engagement or intensifying preexisting or emerging new concerns based on the perception of personal risks (Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, & Imhoff, 2013). For example, those with a conspiracy mentality will prefer alternatives to biomedical therapies if they perceive these as being promoted by powerful institutions (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018).

Building on this backdrop, our second aim is to shed light over the connection between conspiracy mentality and subjective concerns regarding policy issues. Our expectation is that individuals with a conspiracy mentality will exhibit greater policy issue concerns than those without this mindset. Specifically, we argue that individuals' policy concerns will directly predict their evaluations of the government's political performance. This study contends that the antecedents of this empirical link are influenced by the association between conspiracy mentality and policy concerns. Accordingly, the study also advances a mediating mechanism that clarifies how individuals who hold higher levels of conspiracy mentality are likely to evaluate their government's performance more negatively due to their overall increased concerns about established social policies.

To empirically test these associations, we perform cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive causal OLS regression models relying on data from a two-wave panel survey gathered in the United States. Results showed that conspiracy mentality was positively related to policy issue concerns. While policy issue concerns were found to be negatively associated with government performance assessments. We also identified a significant indirect effect of conspiracy mentality on government performance assessment through increased levels of policy issue concerns. Those who develop a conspiracy mentality tend to express greater concerns about policy issues, which subsequently leads to more negative evaluations on government performance.

This article is organized into several sections. The first section differentiates conspiracy mentality from related concepts such as conspiracy beliefs or conspiracy theories and explores how the subjective salience of policy issues might be theoretically linked to a psychological mindset. The second

theoretical section focuses on the significance of policy issue concerns, and how they can influence the evaluation of government performance. The third section addresses how prior literature explains the mediated role of subjective issue salience in understanding the relationship between conspiracy mentality and government performance. In the methods section, we detail the data, the measurement of variables, and the analytic procedures used in the analysis. Following that, we delve into the statistical analysis and present the main results. The article concludes with a summary of key findings and a discussion of the main limitations.

Conspiracy Mentality and Concerns Over Policy Issues

The prevalence of a conspiracy mindset is increasingly observed in Western democracies, albeit to varying degrees across different cultures and societies (Imhoff et al., 2022). This trend differs from the rise of specific conspiracy theories, which are based on cross-sectional polls that lack the capacity to assess change or provide conclusive evidence of increased belief over time (Uscinski et al., 2022). Given the varying prevalence and conceptual nuances, in this section, we first present a conceptual overview of conspiracy mentality, identifying it as a generalized political attitude and distinguishing it from related concepts such as conspiracy theories and conspiracy beliefs. Following this, we review the main analyses in which conspiracy mentality has been used as an explanatory variable for citizens' attitudes and behaviors, specifically regarding the perception of the significance and quantity of some societal problems, which supports our first hypothesis.

Conspiracy mentality describes a general inclination to subscribe to beliefs in general conspiracies, understood as a system of thought (Bruder et al., 2013). It is distinct from conspiracy theory beliefs, which refer to the "acceptance that a specific conspiracy theory is (likely) true." (Uscinski et al., 2022, p. 3), or "an allegation of conspiracy that may or may not be true" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4). Some scholars argued that individuals prone to interpreting events through a conspiratorial lens are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories in general (Uscinski & Enders, 2023). Others maintain that people with conspiratorial predispositions are more susceptible to believing in specific conspiracy theories (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014).

Imhoff et al. (2022) emphasize a seminal distinction between broad perspectives inclined towards suspecting conspiracies, referred to as conspiracy mentality, and specific convictions regarding the presence of a particular conspiracy known as conspiracy theory belief. Conspiracy mentality constitutes a generalized, broad political attitude, or predisposition that is enduring and latent as a system of thought, leading individuals to interpret the world and all kinds of events with a particular, paranoid, and distrustful mindset. A unique conspiracy predisposition towards perceiving conspiracies could explain why numerous individuals embrace conspiracy theories that may even logically contradict each other (Uscinski et al., 2016). As a generalized political attitude (Frenken & Imhoff, 2023) or predisposition (Enders et al., 2023), the influence on political perceptions and political actions may differ from those linked to specific beliefs, even though Marinthe (2020) showed that a conspiracy mentality can generate belief in conspiratorial explanations for specific events. In short, while there are different dimensions of

a larger conspiracy construct, having a conspiracy mentality will surely correlate with holding conspiracy beliefs (Bruder et al., 2013).

The theoretical nuanced distinctions, however, are important to this study. A more constant political attitude or predisposition toward viewing the world from a “conspiratorial lens” should more generally influence what the important issues are to be concerned about in our society, and how strongly one may be concerned about those issues. Conversely, having some specific conspiracy beliefs tend to limit concerns to narrowly defined issues that solely relate to the specific conspiracy an individual may believe in. Therefore, we measure concerns about a mix of issues (extent of crime; extent of unemployment; the difference between rich and poor; and the cost of living), and not solely concern about one specific issue. We measure conspiracy mentality as a construct of a global understanding that there are secrets and powerful forces controlling events behind the scenes, and seemingly unrelated events that form part of a larger plan, orchestrated by powerful others (Jedinger, 2021).

A line of inquiry focuses more on the consequences of a conspiratorial mindset on political attitudes and behaviors (Martini et al., 2022). Conspiratorial mindset was found to be associated with psychological traits such as the need for certainty and security, the tendency to judge other people, or political officials as untrustworthy, or the belief that the world has more problems and is more dangerous than it is (Moulding et al., 2016). This perspective suggests that the subjective salience of some policy issues could be explained by the psychological underpinnings behind a conspiracy mindset. One example is economic issues, such as foreign trade, which are often complex for citizens to understand, and citizens may seek an easy and simple explanation (Jedinger, 2021), whereas conspiracy theories can provide a straightforward narrative that appeals to those seeking simple answers. Other examples include suspicions about global warming and epidemics (van der Linden et al., 2021), or the tendency to overestimate the proportion of the immigrant population living in their own country (Martini et al., 2022). Therefore, those with a conspiracy mentality may perceive that the quantity or relevance of some problems is greater than it actually is. Individuals who believe that everything can be influenced by hidden or interested forces may tend to believe that there are more problems as part of that hidden plan. Zhao (2023) has also confirmed that during stressful events, individuals with a conspiracy mentality show a higher perception of risks or threats. Whichever the case, our study seeks to advance this line of research by shedding light on how conspiracy mentality could affect people’s overall level of policy issue concerns. Hence, we predict that:

H1: Conspiracy mentality is positively associated with higher levels of concerns with policy issues.

The Relevance of Issues

The significance of diverse political issues in public opinion and how these may be connected to the way citizens evaluate elected governments constitute the second main component of this study. This section provides a detailed description of the issues’ relevance to the functioning of the political system.

It also describes how specialized literature has used different paradigms to explore both the psychological and behavioral aspects of issue salience, including their personal or national significance, as well as their objective and subjective measurement. Finally, we explain the rationale behind the connection between the level of concern about these issues and the assessment of government performance, allowing us to include a theoretical expectation regarding this relationship (see H2).

Leeper and Robison (2020) mention, “Issue publics form the backbone of democratic politics” (p. 240). Issues contribute to understanding the feedback mechanism of representation and increase the constituents’ trust in political institutions, enhancing positive views on government performance (Newcomer, 2007). Thus, the opinion of citizens on certain political issues has captured the attention of social science researchers from three different perspectives. First, some have focused on the “salience” of the issues (Miller, Krosnick, & Fabrigar, 2017; Niemi & Bartels, 1985), including psychological elements that highlight how important an individual believes that issue is, and the salience of an issue in behavioral terms, such as the weight of an issue when making electoral decisions (Dennison, 2019). Burstein (2003) finds a link between opinion and policy, suggesting that specific policy preferences are conditioned by issue salience. Consequently, governments tend to respond to issues that are salient to the public to maintain legitimacy and meet voter demands (Traber et al., 2021).

On the other hand, citizens who are highly concerned about political issues will be more aware of the news regarding these issues, as well as political decisions and public policies implemented by governments. As people who are concerned and well-informed about “their issues” (Iyengar, 1990), they become more critical and are more likely to expect more responsiveness and political accountability (Converse, 1964). Therefore, governments pay more attention to public opinion on an issue when it is salient (Jones, 1994). We argue that salience must be connected to the effects of issues concern on government performance. The high salience of policy issues tends to generate public pressure and stress, thereby increasing government accountability.

Second, scholars differentiate between “Issue Salience” and “Most Important Problem,” as well as “Most Important Issue” (Welzien, 2005). Issues and problems are distinct constructs, while the latter deals more with contextual political values, the former refers to specific political strategies or public policies. An issue becomes a problem if the citizens are not receiving the policy they desire (Welzien, 2005). Therefore, an important political issue refers to something that many people think the government should care about (Jennings & Wlezien, 2011). It pertains to the key policies that citizens or voters prioritize when evaluating government performance. Our research seeks to advance this line of research by testing how the salience of citizens’ policy issues is connected to the perception of government performing appropriate public policies to address them.

Third, studies have emphasized the importance of separately measuring public issues facing the nation from personal and private issues (Johns, 2010). Personal issues are those closest and most dire to public opinion respondents, capturing individual subjective concerns (Boninger, Krosnick, Berent, & Fabrigar, 1995), and personal important issues are more easily remembered and more likely to influence evaluations (Lavine, Sullivan, Borgida, & Thomsen, 1996).

Individuals who subjectively feel that an issue is a salience give more weight to their evaluations of the government on that issue (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2001). Consequently, the government's performance on issues perceived as important affects incumbent support more strongly than its performance on issues perceived to be unimportant (Fournier et al., 2003, p. 63).

Personal issues' concern plays a relevant role in the political representation process (Dennison, 2019), in the individual decision-making process, or in voters' decision calculus to identify candidates' issue positions (Krosnick, 1990; Rabinowitz et al., 1982; Wlezien, 2005). Hence, we examine subjects' level of concern to purposefully capture that theoretical salience of issues to explain government performance assessment by capturing citizens' levels of concern with the extent of crime in society, the extent of unemployment, the difference between rich and poor, and the overall cost of living. If citizens have high subjective levels of concern about different policy issues, it stands to reason they will not perceive government responsiveness or accountability to their demands, and therefore, they will negatively assess its performance. Accordingly, we propose that:

H2: High levels of concern with policy issues will be associated with negative assessments of government performance.

The Mediating Role of Policy Issue Concerns

As argued earlier, there are a wide range of antecedents of government performance assessment related to individual judgements on how public policies respond to citizens' demands and expectations (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2001). Nowadays, the belief in hidden plans that manipulate policies is gaining relevance as an explanation for such assessment (Martini et al., 2022). Conspiracy-minded individuals base their evaluations on distrust or suspicion regarding the intervention of powerful organizations and institutions; their mindset is rooted in suspicion. Building on this premise, we shift our focus to the mediating function of subjective issue salience concern to better understand the relationship between conspiracy mentality and government performance. We expect that this assessment is mediated by the salience that citizens attach to the different issues. In other words, the influence of people's conspiracy mentality on how they evaluate the government on important societal issues will be mediated through their level of concern with these very issues. We theorize that developing a conspiracy mentality will lead people to pay more attention and be more concerned with a diverse set of policy issues, as they may perceive elitists, self-interested groups playing a role here; in turn, this policy concern will lead to a more negative assessment of how the government is addressing these problems.

In fact, several scholars have previously supported the mediating role of issues and issue salience regarding citizens' political attitudes. Krosnick (1990) and Fournier et al. (2003) maintained the mediating role of issue importance in individuals' political behaviors or in evaluating candidates, and Edwards et al. (1995) also supported the mediating role in the impact of issues on presidential approval. Li, Brossard, Scheufele, & Wilson, (2018) found a mediating role of issue concern in the perceptions of science-driven policy, and Miller

(2007) similarly argued that personal issue salience mediates the impact of media exposure on national issue importance assessments. Based on this background, we suggest that the individual's level of conspiracy mentality influences their perception of government performance indirectly through their heightened concern about policy issues. Our expectation is that when a conspiracy mentality is present, people's concerns about policy issues increase, leading to less optimistic evaluations of government performance. Thus, we propose that:

H3: Policy issue concern will mediate the relationship between conspiracy mentality and perception of government performance.

Method

Sample

The data used in this study were collected from a representative panel survey conducted as part of a large research project on the attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of using new and traditional media (Wave 1: June 2019; Wave 2: October 2019). At the time of data collection, our study was classified as "standard" by the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) ethics committee at our institution, The University of Vienna. This classification as "standard" did not require further IRB evaluation; therefore, we do not provide an IRB approval number. The survey was conducted in the United States, and the last author's Research Unit at Viena University contracted IPSOS Austria to provide the survey subjects. We focus on U.S. data because there is a vast literature that has indicated the "paranoid style" of American people and political culture (Koller, Thompson, & Cannon, 2023; Oliver & Wood, 2014). To ensure generalizable inferences for the U.S. population, Ipsos Group S.A. (IPSOS) curated an opt-in panel of hundreds of thousands of U.S. individuals. The lead investigator employed the official University Qualtrics account to administer and distribute the survey.

Initially, IPSOS selected a stratified subsample of 3,000 individuals from this pool, matching key demographic elements from the U.S. census. Strictly speaking, the sample design is non-probabilistic as it is based on an opt-in online panel. Accordingly, this study made every effort to mitigate known problems associated with this type of data, such as low recruitment rates (Hays, Liu, & Kapteyn, 2015). It is essential to observe marginal disparities between participating in a probability sample and opting into a convenience online panel. Our online panel survey strategy does not significantly impact the representativeness of both Wave 1 and Wave 2 samples, compared to other probabilistic samples such as the General Social Survey (GSS) for a similar period. The breakdown of demographics in comparison to both GSS and the U.S. census is presented in Table 1.

To enhance the reliability of the data and reduce potential response bias, real-time filters and attention checks were also employed to ensure the quality and accuracy of the gathered data (Jones, House, & Gao, 2015). The final sample included 1,338 valid cases in Wave 1, with a cooperation rate of 45.5%, and 511 valid cases in Wave 2, with a cooperation rate of 40.9%. The percentage of missing data varied from 0.07% to 7.17% in Wave 1, and from 2.15% to 17.4% in Wave 2. We checked both internal consistency and intraclass correlation reliability of main constructs measures across waves (Bartko, 1966) to ensure that the data was not affected by attrition within

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Study Survey, Other Comparable US Survey, and the U.S. Census

	Study Survey (Wave 1) June, 2019	Study Survey (Wave 2) October, 2019	General Social Survey (GSS), 2018	U.S. Census Bureau (Estimates, 2019)
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Gender				
Female	53.2	56.2	55.2	51.5
Male	46.8	37.9	44.8	48.5
Race/Ethnicity:				
White	75.2	73.8	71.2	77.5
Black or African American	10.1	6.4	16.4	13.0
Hispanic or Latino	6.5	4.7	5.4	14.6
Asian	5.6	5.8	3.1	6.1
Age				
18–35 years	32.3	18.5	5.5	30.6
36–55 years	39.7	42.4	33.2	36.7
Older than 55 years	28.0	39.2	38.2	32.7
Education				
High school or less	35.2	25.8	61.3	38.9
Some college	25.0	27.2	8.3	27.8
Bachelor's degree or more	39.8	41.1	30.3	33.3
Household income				
Less than \$15,000	11.6	8.7	21.2	9.1
\$15,000 to \$24,999	9.8	7.5	12.7	8.0
\$25,000 to \$49,999	21.1	20.9	30.8	20
\$50,000 to \$99,999	33.3	34.9	24.0	28.8
\$100,000 to \$149,999	15.9	14.9	3.3	15.5
\$150,000 to \$199,999	4.8	4.3	7.9	8.3
\$200,000 or more	3.5	2.8	0.0	10.3

Note. Percentages are calculated for the population 18 years old and over. In the second column, “Race” (block #2) was measured by respondents’ first mention, “Some college” (block #4) includes those who reported ‘Junior College’ as their highest degree in the GSS, and Household Income (block #5) was measured in inflation-adjusted constant dollars (See GSS Methodological Reports). The third column (blocks #1–4) shows official estimates of the resident population by single year for the United States (2019). For education attainment, Census figures also refer to the population age 18 years and older, and “some college” also includes those with an associate’s degree. Household-level income data (block #5) in the third column is based on information from the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplements (CPS ASEC). Source (third column): U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division.

waves (Conspiracy Mentality: intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) = 0.76, 95% confidence interval (CI) [0.715, 0.802], $p < .001$; Policy Issue Concern: ICC = 0.75, 95% CI [0.698, 0.790], $p < .001$; and Government Performance: ICC = 0.69, 95% CI [.623, .737], $p < .001$). The intraclass correlation coefficients indicate acceptable reliability (Koo & Li, 2016). The survey also included certain data quality safeguards to ensure generalizability, representation, and individual attention. To ensure the absence of possible bots, we discarded all responses that were either too fast or too slow. We calculated the median response time and all responses that fell within two standard deviations above or below were discarded. We also examined QQ plots for response patterns to discard those respondents that signaled odd response patterns and distributions.

Measures

Criterion Variable

Government performance.

We use self-reported measurements of government evaluations adapted from previous studies (Sagarzazu & Klüver,

2017). Government performance is evaluated based on its responsiveness and accountability related to four issues: (1) the extent of crime; (2) the extent of unemployment; (3) the difference between rich and poor; and (4) the cost of living. Respondents rated the government’s performance on a scale ranging from 1 = *very poor* to 10 = *excellent* (W^1 : $M = 4.72$; standard deviation (SD) = 2.23; W^1 Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.89$; W^2 : $M = 4.72$; $SD = 2.22$; W^2 Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.88$).

Independent Variables

Conspiracy mentality.

This construct measures individuals’ beliefs that there are secrets and powerful forces that the government and the authorities are controlling behind the scenes (Goreis & Voracek, 2019; Mari et al., 2022). Respondents indicated their level of agreement on the following items (1 = *strongly disagree* to 10 = *strongly agree*): (1) When one looks at the bigger picture, it is easy to see that many seemingly unrelated events form part of a larger plan, orchestrated by powerful others; (2) Many significant world events have occurred as a result of a conspiracy; and (3) Despite what the authorities

say, government routinely engages in sinister, secret activities in the name of profit ($W^1: M = 5.55; SD = 2.14, W^1$ Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80; W^2: M = 5.57; SD = 2.19; W^2$ Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$).

Policy issue concern.

Based on previous literature (Finkel & Opp, 1991; Mueller, 1989), this construct measures individual concern about policy issues. Respondents indicated their level of concern (1 = *not at all concerned* to 10 = *extremely concerned*) regarding the following policy issues: (1) extent of crime; (2) extent of unemployment; (3) the difference between rich and poor; and (4) the cost of living ($W^1: M = 6.83; SD = 2.03, W^1$ Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78; W^2: M = 6.87; SD = 2.02; W^2$ Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.79$). To select these four policy issues, we considered Gallup's Main Problems Historical Trends and the Views of the Major Problems facing the country by Pew Research Center. These four issues (crime, unemployment, income inequality, and cost of living) are consistently identified as major problems by these public opinion research centers. While original polls captured a broader range of significant problems facing the United States, our construct focused on the most pressing issues rather than all of them, which could potentially introduce some measurement errors. However, previous research has underscored the validity of this methodological approach, particularly when aiming for maximum utility in variable construction, as compared to fully developed measurement instruments (i.e., Maloney, Grawitch, & Barber, 2011), lending support to the methodological choice made in this study. Each of these variables represents the key domains of societal well-being—crime addresses safety and social order, unemployment relates to labor market health, inequality reflects structural economic divisions, and cost of living captures economic pressure on households. At the same time, these areas represent different theoretical perspectives on what the role of government should be in providing such policies (Esping-Andersen, 1990). So, their interaction may strongly influence public perceptions of government performance in managing those issues (Pierson, 1996).

Control Variables

Feelings about Donald Trump and Mike Pence.

Participants were asked about their feelings toward certain political figures on a scale from 0 (*very unfavorable*) to 10 (*very favorable*), including Donald Trump and Mike Pence. The items were combined into a unique construct after examining their reliability ($W^1: M = 5.22, SD = 3.52; Spearman's \rho = 0.80$).

Political interest.

Subjects' overall interest in politics and current affairs (Lupia & Philpot, 2005) was assessed (1 = *not at all* to 10 = *a great deal*) by the following two questions (1) How *interested* you are in information about what is going on in politics and public affairs? and (2) How *closely you pay attention* to information about what's going on in politics and public affairs? ($W^1: M = 6.13; SD = 2.72; W^1$ Spearman-Brown $\rho = 0.90$).

Ideology strength.

Respondents were asked to answer the following two questions (Bartels, 2002): (1) On political issues, where would you place yourself on a scale of 0–10, where 10 = *strong conservative* and 0 = *strong liberal*? and (2) on economic issues,

where would you place yourself on a scale of 0–10, where 10 = *Strong conservative* and 0 = *Strong liberal*? ($W^1: M = 6.44; SD = 2.80; W^1$ Spearman-Brown $\rho = 0.85$). To compute the variable for ideology strength, we recoded the responses to the above two items and folded the scores to capture the overall strength of individuals' ideologies, regardless of their specific ideology. Thus, the variable reflects individuals' overall ideological strength (Turner-Zwinkels & Brandt, 2023) ($W^1: M = 2.29; SD = 1.75$).

Partisanship strength.

Participants were asked to indicate how they generally think of themselves as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or something else (0 = *strong Democrat*, 5 = *independent*, 10 = *strong Republican*) ($W^1: M = 6.04; SD = 3.00$). To capture individuals' overall strength of partisanship, a recoding strategy similar to the one used for ideology strength was employed ($W^1: M = 2.30; SD = 1.91$).

Political knowledge.

An adapted scale was used to assess respondents' awareness of current political issues (Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Respondents were asked to answer eight questions to indicate their political knowledge (0 = *incorrect or don't know*; 1 = *correct*) such as "For how many years is a United States Senator elected—that is, how many years are there in one full term of office for a U.S. Senator?" ($W^1: M = 2.77; SD = 2.03; W^1$ Guttman's $\lambda-2 = 0.73$).

Government trust.

Adapted from a previous scale (Mari et al., 2022), respondents were asked to rate their feelings or trust toward the following people and organizations (1 = *not at all*; 10 = *a great deal*): (1) government and (2) political system in the US ($W^1: M = 6.14; SD = 2.53; W^1$ Spearman-Brown = 0.76).

Traditional media news.

Respondents were asked to indicate how often (1 = *never* to 10 = *all the time*) in the past month they obtained news from media sources such as network TV news (e.g., ABC, CBS, NBC), local newspapers (e.g., *Oregonian*, *Houston Chronicle*, *The Miami Herald*) and radio news (e.g., NPR, talk shows) (eight items, $W^1: M = 4.50; SD = 1.91; W^1$ Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$).

Social media news.

Adapted scales were used to measure social media news consumption (Gil de Zúñiga, Barnidge, & Diehl, 2018). Respondents were asked to indicate how often in the past month they obtained news from sources (1 = *never* to 10 = *all the time*) such as "local news on social media," "national news on social media," "Facebook" and "Twitter." All 11 items were combined into an index after examining their construct reliability ($W^1: M = 3.60, SD = 2.07; W^1$ Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$).

Demographics.

The following demographic variables were also controlled in the present study: Age (36–55 years: 39.7%; 23–35 years: 25.2%; 56 years or older: 28%; and 18–22 years: 7.1), gender (53.2 % female), education (high school: 31.6%; some college: 25%; Master's degree: 15.5%; Bachelor's degree: 11.8%; some graduate education 6.7%; professional certificate: 4%;

less than high school: 3.6%; and Doctoral degree: 1.9%), and ethnicity or race (75.2% majority—white).

Analytic Procedure

Pearson's correlations were conducted to explore the associations between the variables of interest (see [Supplementary Table S1](#)). A series of regression analyses were conducted to test our hypotheses. First, we examined the relationships between our independent variables and the criterion variable using a cross-sectional OLS regression model. Second, to rigorously test the influence of policy issue concern and conspiracy mentality on perceptions of government performance, we conducted lagged and autoregressive OLS regression models. The lagged regression model enabled us to investigate how the independent variable at Time 1 impacts the dependent variable at Time 2 (Finkel, 1995). Meanwhile, the autoregressive regression model allowed us to control for previous levels of the dependent variable at Time 1 and assess the impact of the independent variable at time 1 on the dependent variable at Time 2, thereby enhancing our ability to infer causality (Maxwell, Cole, & Mitchell, 2011). In addition, PROCESS model 4 (Hayes, 2017) was used to test whether the relationship between conspiracy mentality and perception of government performance was mediated through policy issue concern. Specifically, conspiracy mentality was entered as an independent variable while the perception of government performance was entered as a dependent variable and policy issue concern was entered as a mediator in PROCESS model 4. Additionally, we explored alternative models varying the order of relationships between public policy concern, conspiracy mentality, and perceptions of government performance (detailed in [Supplementary Figure 1](#)).

Results

H1 proposed that conspiracy mentality would be positively associated with policy issue concerns. First, the zero-order Pearson's correlations showed that conspiracy mentality was positively correlated with policy issue concern ($\beta = 0.259$, $p < .01$) (see [Supplementary Table S1](#)). Regression analysis showed that conspiracy mentality was positively related to policy issue concern across cross-sectional ($\beta = 0.200$, $p < .001$), lagged ($\beta = 0.237$, $p < .001$), and autoregressive regression model ($\beta = 0.105$, $p < .05$) (see [Table 2](#)). H1 was supported.

H2 proposed that concern with policy issues would be negatively associated with perceptions of government performance. Results showed that policy issue concern was negatively associated with the perception of government performance across cross-sectional regression model, but this association was not significant ($\beta = -0.039$, $p > .05$). However, the results showed that policy issue concern was negatively associated with perception of government performance across lagged ($\beta = -0.112$, $p < .05$) and autoregressive regression model ($\beta = -.094$, $p < .05$) significantly (see [Table 3](#)). H2 was supported.

H3 proposed that concerns of policy issues would mediate the relationship between conspiracy mentality and perception of government performance. The PROCESS Model 4 results (see [Figure 1](#)) showed that policy issue concern did not mediate the relationship between conspiracy mentality and perception of government performance in the cross-sectional

model ($\beta = -0.008$, 95% CI [-0.021, 0.006]). However, policy issue concern significantly mediated the relationship between conspiracy mentality and perception of government performance across lagged ($\beta = -0.024$, 95% CI [-0.050, -0.002]) and autoregressive regression model ($\beta = -0.020$, 95% CI [-0.045, -0.0001]). Specifically, the higher level of conspiracy mentality that people hold would increase their level of policy issue concern (lagged: $\beta = 0.211$, $p < .001$; autoregressive: $\beta = 0.218$, $p < .001$) which in turn made people think the government performed worse (lagged: $\beta = -0.113$, $p < .05$; autoregressive: $\beta = -0.094$, $p < .05$).

Discussion

People's perceptions of government performance are essential in building political legitimacy. A deeper understanding of the specific variables influencing these perceptions could help identify weaknesses within democratic systems. This article contributes to the literature by presenting new data that highlights the importance of recognizing discrepancies between public opinion and public policies, revealing potential shortcomings in representative democracy. Moreover, voters may alter their voting preferences based on their perceptions of how well policies align with public concerns. This article may inform government officials and policymakers to reassess their approach when addressing public evaluations, especially in environments where beliefs in conspiracy theories are prevalent. A predisposition toward conspiracy thinking can influence individuals' concerns and behaviors. In this study, we focus on two relatively unexplored variables to explain high or low levels of government performance assessment: conspiracy mentality and policy issue concern. In short, we found that individuals with a conspiratorial mindset expressed greater concerns about policy issues and subsequently tend to perceive governmental performance more negatively.

First, as conspiracy thinking becomes progressively prevalent across diverse cultures and societies (Imhoff et al., 2022), it is theoretically important to understand the implications of conspiracy mentality on democracy. Our findings resonate with irrational post-modern culture, which questions expert knowledge and scientific authority (Newman, 2023). We find that conspiracy mentality functions as a system of thought, predisposing individuals to interpret political events and democratic processes through a particular lens, ultimately shaping their perceptions of societal concerns. Those with a stronger conspiracy mentality tend to express broader unease about policy issues. As highlighted by Martini et al. (2022), biased perceptions of social and political facts may pose significant threats to democracy. This threat stems from a specific cognitive processing system that views public issues as part of a larger, hidden agenda, potentially undermining society, and restricting democratic freedoms. Concurrently, it poses a threat to democracy because individuals prone to conspiracy could cast doubt on governmental policy decisions and actions. Therefore, future studies should continue to explore the evolution of the level of conspiracy mentality in societies, as this system of thought may exacerbate that biased view and serve as an indicator of risks to democratic functioning.

Our results also reveal the connection between citizen demands and concerns and the corresponding public policies implemented by governments addressing those very issues. For those with higher levels of concern, the evaluation of government performance on these policy issues will be undervalued.

Table 2. Cross-sectional, Lagged, and Autoregressive Regression Models Testing Conspiracy Mentality and Policy Issue Concern

	Policy issue concern ^{W1} (Cross-sectional)	Policy issue concern ^{W2} (Lagged)	Policy issue concern ^{W2} (Autoregressive)
Block 1: Autoregressive term			
Policy issue concern ^{W1}	–	–	0.509***
ΔR ²			37.9%
Block 2: Demographics			
Age	0.155***	0.004	–0.062
Gender (female)	0.117***	0.060	0.019
Education	–0.045	–0.053	–0.023
Income	–0.081*	–0.080	–0.056
Race (white)	–0.021	–0.028	–0.010
ΔR ²	3.5%	4.4%	1.4%
Block 3: Partisanship and affective polarization			
Partisanship (Republican) ^{W1}	0.026	–0.069	–0.080
Partisanship strength ^{W1}	–0.040	–0.038	–0.033
Political ideology ^{W1}	–0.135***	–0.137	–0.061
Ideology strength ^{W1}	–0.040	–0.125*	–0.109*
Feeling about Trump and Pence ^{W1}	–0.146***	–0.079	–0.006
ΔR ²	3.1%	6.9%	2.7%
Block 4: Political attitudes			
Political interest ^{W1}	0.200***	0.194**	0.112*
Political knowledge ^{W1}	–0.058	–0.112	–0.065
Government trust ^{W1}	–0.066	–0.078	–0.019
ΔR ²	7.2%	6.3%	1.3%
Block 5: Media use			
Traditional news use ^{W1}	0.127**	0.122*	0.064
Social media news ^{W1}	0.118**	0.008	–0.040
ΔR ²	4.8%	2.0%	0.2%
Block 6			
Conspiracy mentality ^{W1}	0.200***	0.237***	0.105*
ΔR ²	3.3%	4.7%	0.9%
Total R ²	22.0%	24.3%	44.5%

Note. Number of cases used in regression model = 1,082 (Wave 1), 409 (Wave 2). Cell entries are final-entry standardized Beta (β) coefficients.

* $p < .05$;

** $p < .01$;

*** $p < .001$.

Individuals with significant concerns about policy issues often hold higher expectations for the government's performance in addressing them. When individuals hold a greater concern for issues that are personally relevant to them (Iyengar, 1990), they tend to become more critical and anticipate government responsiveness and improved political accountability (Converse, 1964). This proactive concern and well-informed engagement often result in greater expectations for those in positions of authority to effectively address these policy issue concerns. Consequently, if the government falls short of these expectations, individuals may perceive its performance as inadequate, even if some progress has been achieved.

Interestingly, we found an unexpected positive correlation between conspiracy mentality and the perception of government performance, which differs from prior research that generally associates conspiracy mentality with negative political attitudes and behaviors (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). These results suggest a new pathway connecting concerns about policy issues and the assessment of the government's

ability to address these issues, where government accountability may emerge due to either a misinformed or skeptical view influenced by conspiracy theories. However, this positive relationship did not maintain significance in more stringent causal order statistical tests with lagged and autoregressive models.

To safeguard the relationship between conspiracy mentality and perception of government from potential distortions caused by this linkage, we controlled for affective feelings toward political leaders (President and Vice-president) and for trust in government in the regression models in separate blocks of variables to capture which one explain more variability. This approach allows us to determine which factor explains more variability, while also capturing the theoretical distinction between episodic emotional evaluations and overall cognitive evaluations (Capelos, 2010; Marcus, 2000). Future studies should consider how individuals distinguish between government performance and elected political leaders.

Table 3. Cross-sectional, Lagged, and Autoregressive Regression Models Testing Policy Issue Concern and Government Performance

	Government performance ^{W1} (Cross-sectional)	Government performance ^{W2} (Lagged)	Government performance ^{W2} (Autoregressive)
Block 1: Autoregressive Term			
Government Performance ^{W1}	–	–	0.380***
ΔR ²			30.7%
Block 2: Demographics			
Age	0.010	–0.021	–0.029
Gender (female)	–0.089**	0.034	0.076
Education	0.018	0.040	0.038
Income	–0.002	0.057	0.054
Race (white)	–0.016	–0.073	–0.061
ΔR ²	2.7%	2.1%	2.0%
Block 3: Partisanship and affective polarization			
Partisanship (Republican) ^{W1}	0.024	–0.085	–0.106
Partisanship strength ^{W1}	0.014	0.059	0.035
Political ideology ^{W1}	0.124**	0.189*	0.107
Ideology strength ^{W1}	–0.045	–0.063	–0.028
Feeling about Trump and Pence ^{W1}	0.248***	0.261***	0.191**
ΔR ²	18.8%	18.6%	3.8%
Block 4: Political attitudes			
Political interest ^{W1}	–0.046	–0.082	–0.058
Political knowledge ^{W1}	–0.005	0.009	0.009
Government trust ^{W1}	0.237***	0.255***	0.146**
ΔR ²	7.7%	8.4%	2.6%
Block 5: Media use			
Traditional news use ^{W1}	0.076*	0.131*	0.124*
Social media news ^{W1}	0.091*	0.045	0.016
ΔR ²	1.8%	1.5%	0.9%
Block 6			
Conspiracy mentality ^{W1}	0.109***	.082	0.029
Policy issue concern ^{W1}	–0.039	–0.112*	–0.094*
ΔR ²	1.0%	1.3%	0.7%
Total R ²	32.0%	31.9%	40.8%

Note. Number of cases used in regression model = 1,082 (Wave 1), 409 (Wave 2). Cell entries are final-entry standardized Beta (β) coefficients.

* $p < .05$;

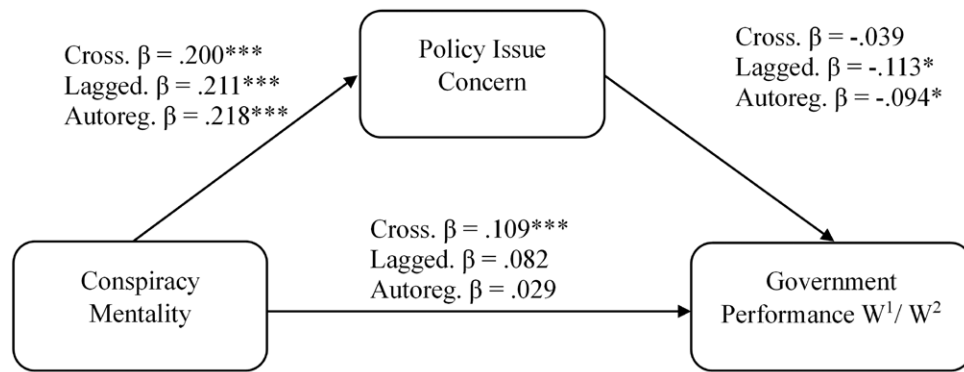
** $p < .01$;

*** $p < .001$.

Furthermore, we observed that conspiracy mentality could have a different effect on the perceptions of government performance, filtered by the people's concerns about policy issues. This substantiates our initial hypothesis, affirming that individuals prone to conspiracy mentality would also have high levels of policy issues concern. Consequently, this heightened policy issues concern would influence their perceptions of government performance. Additionally, our mediation analysis unveiled that policy issue concerns operated as a significant mediator in the relationship between conspiracy mentality and the perception of government performance. Although the indirect effect was not significant in the cross-sectional model, where the direct effect was present instead, it gained significance in both the lagged and autoregressive models. Through more stringent assessments using panel data (Maxwell et al., 2011), our study revealed that the effects of conspiracy mentality on political

attitudes were intertwined with other psychological variables, specifically the intensity of policy issues concern.

As much as the study introduces a much-needed theoretical and empirical examination of the antecedents of government performance, there are several limitations. First, the current study relies on self-reported survey data. While this approach is invaluable for accessing individual perspectives, it is pertinent to recognize that self-reported responses, particularly concerning conspiracy mentality, may be susceptible to the social desirability bias (Nederhof, 1985)—a factor that could influence participants to respond in a manner deemed more socially acceptable rather than wholly reflective of their beliefs. However, other studies have effectively employed surveys to measure individuals' conspiracy mentality, demonstrating the reliability and cross-cultural validity of online survey instruments in assessing this mindset (e.g.,



Note: Sample size = 1,337 (Wave 1); 511 (Wave 2). Path entries are standardized Beta coefficients. The variables in Table 2 were included as control variables in the model. Bootstrap samples for CI: 5000 simulations. The model includes the same controls and predictors as Models in Table 4. The point estimate of the indirect effects are Cross-sectional: $\beta = -.008$, 95% CI = [-.021, .006]; Lagged: $\beta = -.024$, 95% CI = [-.050, -.002]; Autoregressive: $\beta = -.020$, 95% CI = [-.045, -.0001]; CI = confidence interval.

Figure 1. Cross-sectional, lagged, and autoregressive effects of conspiracy mentality on government performance, mediated through policy issue concern.

Bruder et al., 2013; Imhoff et al., 2022). Our online survey effectively mitigated concerns related to social desirability, as participants had the opportunity to complete it in private. Furthermore, individuals possessing a conspiracy mentality often perceive themselves as possessing unique knowledge (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2017), which may lead them to be more inclined to share their perspectives.

Second, our measurement of policy issue concerns centers on prominent societal concerns such as crime, unemployment, economic disparities, and the cost of living. While undoubtedly pivotal topics, it is worth acknowledging that the spectrum of issues deemed significant by individuals is inherently broader (Jennings & Wlezien, 2011). We selected four of the most important issues reported by the public: the extent of crime, the extent of unemployment, the difference between rich and poor, and the cost of living. These issues serve as robust representations of societal problems (Finkel & Opp, 1991; Mueller, 1989). However, personal circumstances and perspectives vary widely, and individuals may prioritize lesser-discussed issues differently. Therefore, future studies could expand this scope by capturing a more comprehensive array of concerns relevant to individuals. By including a wider variety of policy issues, researchers could enhance the explanatory power of the variance in the data, leading to more robust results, and a deeper understanding of citizens' assessment of government performance (Finkel & Opp, 1991; Wlezien, 2005; Wlezien & Soroka, 2003). Another potential improvement in future research is to inquire about "fringe" social media sites such as Parler, Reddit, Truth Social, Telegram, and 8kun. Our research did not include these platforms since our Wave 2 was conducted in October 2019, before there was widespread interest in them. Most of our analysis focused on exploring the effects of fringe social media sites on the United States starting to inquire about them at the end of 2019 and throughout 2020. This period coincided with Trump's electoral campaign and the January 6, 2021, Capitol attack. Parler, for example, was a platform where conspiracy-minded individuals posted about election fraud-related conspiracies during the 2020 presidential election (Norton, Thomas, Kolluri, Kim, & Murthy, 2023).

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to the existing literature on government performance assessments by examining two important yet often underexplored antecedents. As the influence of conspiracy mentality on democratic processes becomes more pervasive, understanding its ramifications on government performance assessments, especially its underlying dynamics, is imperative. This study unpacks the underlying mechanism by which concerns about policy issues serve as a channel through which conspiracy mentality influences people's assessments of government performance. However, since we focus solely on U.S. data, the characteristics and attributes that are specific to this case study and analysis may not be applicable to other cultural, institutional, and democratic contexts. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge that the insights gained from this study may not directly translate to other societies. Conducting comparative research across diverse cultural and institutional backgrounds would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the broader implications and limitations of these findings.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary materials are available at *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* online.

Biographical Notes

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