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They are Everywhere

A Representative Survey
on Conspiracy Theories

Jochen Roose



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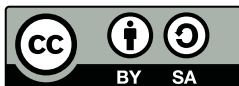
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At a Glance

In the context of demonstrations against the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 crisis, the spread of conspiracy theories has also been regarded with concern. It seems like conspiracy theories are everywhere.

In a representative study, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung surveyed the extent to which three factual statements as well as global control by secret powers (i. e. a conspiracy theory) are considered true or false.

Acceptance of Established Facts

A large majority considers the findings established by the scientific community or the police for three surveyed statements to be certainly or likely true. However, a minority holds a different view:

- › 6 percent of the population believe it is likely false that climate change is exacerbated by human impact. 2 percent consider it to be certainly false. Overall, 8 percent express a view that contradicts scientific findings.
- › 15 percent of the population consider it to be likely false and a further 4 percent certainly false that the Russian secret service kills people in other countries. Thus, 19 percent reject the findings of police investigations concerning murders in Germany and the United Kingdom.
- › 9 percent of the population believe it is likely true that the measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself. A further 6 percent consider this to be certainly true. Altogether, 15 percent therefore disagree with medical findings.
- › 11 percent of the respondents contradict the facts established by the scientific community or the police for at least one of the statements and are certain about their position.

Who Mistrusts Proven Facts?

- › Older people, people with lower formal qualifications, and people with a migration background tend to be more frequently represented among those who are certain about rejecting the position established by the scientific community or the police for at least one of the three statements.
- › Supporters of the right-populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) are the most frequent to have doubts regarding the human influence on climate change.
- › Supporters of the left-wing party Die Linke are the most frequent to express doubts about killings conducted by the Russian secret service abroad.
- › Supporters of the AfD and CDU/CSU are the most frequent to believe the measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself.
- › Those who contradict the findings established by the scientific community or the police for at least one of the three statements and are certain of their position tend to use fewer sources for political information and more frequently hold the view that public service media are not credible.

Belief in Conspiracy Theories

Nearly two thirds of the population consider the claim that the world is controlled by secret powers to be likely false or certainly false. Conversely, 30 percent of the population believe conspiracy theories are likely or certainly true. 11 percent claim this statement is certainly true and are therefore staunch conspiracy theorists.

Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories?

- › Older people aged 65 years and above have stronger convictions about this question than younger generations. 14 percent of the respondents aged 65 and above consider the statement regarding secret powers controlling the world to be certainly true (for all age groups: 11 percent), and 40 percent of the respondents aged 65 and above regard this statement to be certainly false (for all age groups: 35 percent).
- › People with higher formal qualifications are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories than people with lower formal qualifications.
- › People with a migration background hold the view that the world is controlled by secret powers more frequently than people without a migration background.

The Study

The results are based on a representative survey conducted by telephone (40 percent via mobile telephony and 60 percent via the landline network) among the population eligible to vote in Germany. The survey was carried out by Infratest dimap between October 2019 and February 2020. In total, 3,250 people were surveyed.

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Conspiracy Theories as Explanatory Models

The demonstrations against contact restrictions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic are not only directing attention to opposition against the balance struck by the government between disease protection and other values, such as civil liberties or economic activity. With their doubts regarding the existence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and their belief in conspiracy theories, the arguments of some of the critics and protestors are also cause for concern. There is the impression of a completely new, mass spread of conspiracy theories on a scale previously unseen.

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung conducted a survey in the months prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis in which – among other questions – the respondents were asked whether they consider a range of statements to be true or false and how convinced they are of their view. The responses can now be used to gauge how widespread convictions that contradict broadly published and largely established findings already were before the COVID-19 crisis, and how many people believe in conspiracy theories.

Doubt is not just normal human behaviour; indeed, it is expected in some situations and particular groups. Scientific insight arises from constant doubt regarding ostensibly established or apparent knowledge. Democratic attitudes also encompass a critical, doubtful view of arguments and measures. Controls – i. e. doubts – are established in many areas of our lives. However, conspiracy theories are fundamentally different from these kinds of doubts. “Conspiracy theories claim that groups operating in secret – namely conspirators – attempt to control or destroy an institution, a country or even the whole world for ulterior motives” (Butter 2018: 21, original in German; see also Giry/Tika 2020: 113 ff). Therefore, conspiracy theories concern firmly held convictions rather than doubts.

Conspiracy theories are characterised by intentionality and secrecy (Butter 2018: 22–23). They reject coincidence or unintended consequences of action and instead take advantages (or alleged advantages) identifiable in retrospect as proof of an initial, “actual” intention executed in secret. Conspirators planning and acting in secret are not individual actors, but operate as part of a collective. And they are always evil.

According to a conspiracy theory, the conspirators work together to flawlessly implement a complex, long-term plan, while nevertheless continuously leaving behind clues that can only be deciphered by the conspiracy theorists themselves, with the vast majority of people remaining ignorant of these assumed developments. The conspiracies have typically been in progress for a very long time, and the planned takeover of control or destruction is always imminent (Butter 2018: 26).

Ultimately, conspiracy theories are distinguished by the fact that they are fundamentally wrong (Butter 2018: 37). They rule out coincidence and chaos and instead assert the patently unrealistic assumption that a large number of people agree on a perfect plan and pursue this plan over a very long period of time – sometimes over several generations – without those involved exposing the conspiracy. Besides this unrealistic assumption, a logical error is made. Even though the plan and its long-term execution are perfect, and all influences and obstacles can be controlled and are subject to no chance whatsoever, small mistakes are still constantly made, which provide the conspiracy theorists with evidence for their theory.¹

Milder forms of conspiracy theory are conspiracy rumours. While conspiracy theories are incredibly complex concepts, conspiracy rumours are based on indications. They spread doubt without specifying how events actually unfolded. This protects them even better from criticism and can still disseminate blame onto the alleged conspirators (Butter 2018: 140).

Nowadays, the dominant conspiracy theories suppose a conspiracy among the powerful – i. e. conspiracies “from above”. These stand in contrast to conspiracies “from below”, where a certain segment of the population is accused of the conspiracy (Butter 2018: 30 ff). A particularly prominent example of this is accusations against the Jews (also Blume 2019).

In the case of theories alleging a conspiracy “from above”, there is a systematic proximity to extremist views and populism (see Frieß/Neu 2018: 26 ff; Butter 2018: 170 ff). Populism likewise constructs a contrast between the allegedly corrupt or evil political elite and the truthful, innocent people (Müller 2017). However, belief in conspiracy theories is by no means limited to the political peripheries (Drochon 2019: 338).

Conspiracy theories must be differentiated from doubts regarding individual statements considered true by prevailing opinion. Doubts concerning individual statements are always conceivable without necessarily assuming a conspiracy. People may misremember or they may have seen claims somewhere which they deemed credible. In the case of well substantiated and widely discussed statements, however, this explanation tends to be less likely, and it raises the question of why the prevailing opinion is mistaken if the supposed truth is so obvious. The falsification of this purportedly obvious truth by interested actors – i. e. a conspiracy – is one explanation. Thus, there is not necessarily a logical relationship between the conviction that a statement is false (or true) despite prevailing opinion and the belief in a conspiracy theory, but there is a certain proximity.

1 It is undoubtedly the case that some actual conspiracies do exist. However, they are far more scattered and the conspirators are of course unable to prevent all mistakes, coincidences or obstacles, which is why they have a high chance of failing.



The Investigation of Conspiracy Theories

Research on the spread of conspiracy theories is relatively new, even though the phenomenon is old and significant (see Butter 2018; Butter/Knight 2020; Douglas et al 2019). Above all, the topic is important since the groups of people accused by the conspiracy theory may be exposed to a considerable amount of danger (Butter 2018: 229 ff). Time and again, attacks are committed by perpetrators incited by conspiracy theories – such as Anders Behring Breivik in Norway (Schulte 2011), the terrorist of Christchurch (Bertolaso 2019) or the shooter of Halle (Schwarz/Gensing 2019). Indeed, the Holocaust itself was ideologically supported by a conspiracy theory scapegoating the Jews, one that continues to have an effect to this day (also Blume 2019).

On the other hand, of course, not everyone who believes in conspiracy theories becomes a murderer. This would be a deadly state of affairs, since belief in conspiracy theories by no means appears to be limited to fringe groups. To the contrary, it seems to be widespread (Butter/Knight 2020: 1; Rees/Lamberty 2019: 203 ff). However, reliable, representative studies on the spread of belief in conspiracy theories are scarcely available – either because the type of survey does not enable a clear conclusion regarding belief in conspiracy theories or because the type of survey is not representative.²

This gap in empirical research is also due to the difficulty in empirically determining belief in conspiracy theories (Bartoscheck 2015). Agreement with individual statements relating to a conspiracy theory only measures agreement with a specific conspiracy theory. Perhaps even this conclusion cannot be taken for granted, because certain statements may be accepted (or rejected) without assuming a complex, underlying conspiracy. For instance, there might be good arguments to question individual expert opinions, or an individual may have only heard of a single opinion that deviates from the consensus by chance.



Conversely, a standardised question aimed directly at a conspiracy is likewise subject to its own problems. A short and succinctly formulated question needs to differentiate a conspiracy involving the complex control of global events from agreements made behind closed doors, which are perhaps not always the case but are certainly possible in individual cases and therefore do not meet the definition of a conspiracy theory. Abstract logic, such as market logic or the human pursuit of fame, may also be described as “powers” without being associated with belief in a conspiracy theory.

To the best of our knowledge, no research has yet been conducted on a comparison with belief in statements that sound like a conspiracy but are actually true. This would reveal the extent to which people trust the responsible actors – in this case, police investigative authorities – to uncover actual conspiracies.

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- 2 For instance, in an Emnid survey from 2011, 40 percent of Germans agreed with the statement that “there is some kind of secret world government” (Seidler 2016: 16). This question, for which there is no information available whatsoever regarding gender, age, education or political persuasion beyond the mere number of responses, comes very close to a conspiracy theory. Rees and Lamberty (2019: 214 f.) report agreement with the following statements: “There are secret organisations that have a large influence on political decisions” (24 percent completely agree) and “Politicians and other leaders are only puppets in the service of greater powers” (16 percent completely agree).



Study by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung on Belief in Conspiracy Theories

In a representative survey among the German population eligible to vote, the respondents were asked to consider three statements and state whether they believe the statements are true or false.³ One of these statements concerned human impact on climate change, which is well established by the scientific community (see IPCC 2013 and the sources listed therein). The second statement related to the danger of the measles vaccine compared to the disease itself. The measles vaccine is widely used around the world and can lead to complications in very rare cases. But this is far more rarely the case than for the disease itself (Robert Koch Institute 2010 with further sources listed). The third statement referred to killings by the Russian secret service outside Russia. The background to the statement is the attempted killing of Sergei Skripal in the English city of Salisbury by the Russian secret service GRU (Dobbert/Klormann 2018) as well as the killing of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin, for which the Russian secret service is likewise held responsible (Thumann 2020).⁴ A well substantiated position by the scientific community or the police is therefore available and well-known due to media coverage for all three statements. Doubt concerning the human influence on climate change, the killing of people by the Russian secret service abroad or the measles vaccine having a lower risk than the disease itself thus clearly contradicts reliably proven, established facts.⁵

At the end, in the same format, the following statement was posed: “There are secret powers that control the world.” This claim has most of the key elements of a conspiracy theory, albeit without reference to “evil” powers. In order to determine the acceptance of a conspiracy, respondents who considered this claim to be certainly or likely true were also asked to state what powers these are.

For all four statements – the three factual statements and the claim of a global conspiracy – the respondents were asked to indicate whether the statement is certainly true, likely true, likely false or certainly false. The option to grade answers in this way allows doubtful respondents to be distinguished from those who are staunchly convinced of conspiracy theories.

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- 3 The telephone survey was conducted from October 2019 to February 2020 using a dual frame approach (40 percent via mobile telephony and 60 percent via the landline network) by Infratest dimap.
 - 4 A less recent example is the killing of the former KGB officer Alexander Litvinenko, who was murdered in London in 2006 by two former KGB staff according to the findings of a British investigative commission (Beck 2018).
 - 5 The three statements were presented to the respondents in a randomly rotating order.



Acceptance of Established Facts

A large majority of Germans follow the views held by the scientific community or the police, often also with complete conviction. Around two thirds of Germans are very sure that climate change exists and is influenced by human activity. Only a minority of 8 percent consider human-influenced climate change to be likely false or certainly false. At 1 percent, there are also only very few people who are unable or unwilling to take a position on this statement.⁶ Doubt regarding the human influence on climate change only exists among 8 percent of the population, while a majority of more than 90 percent consider this influence to be likely or certainly true.

Figure 1: Assessment of Claims According to Truthfulness

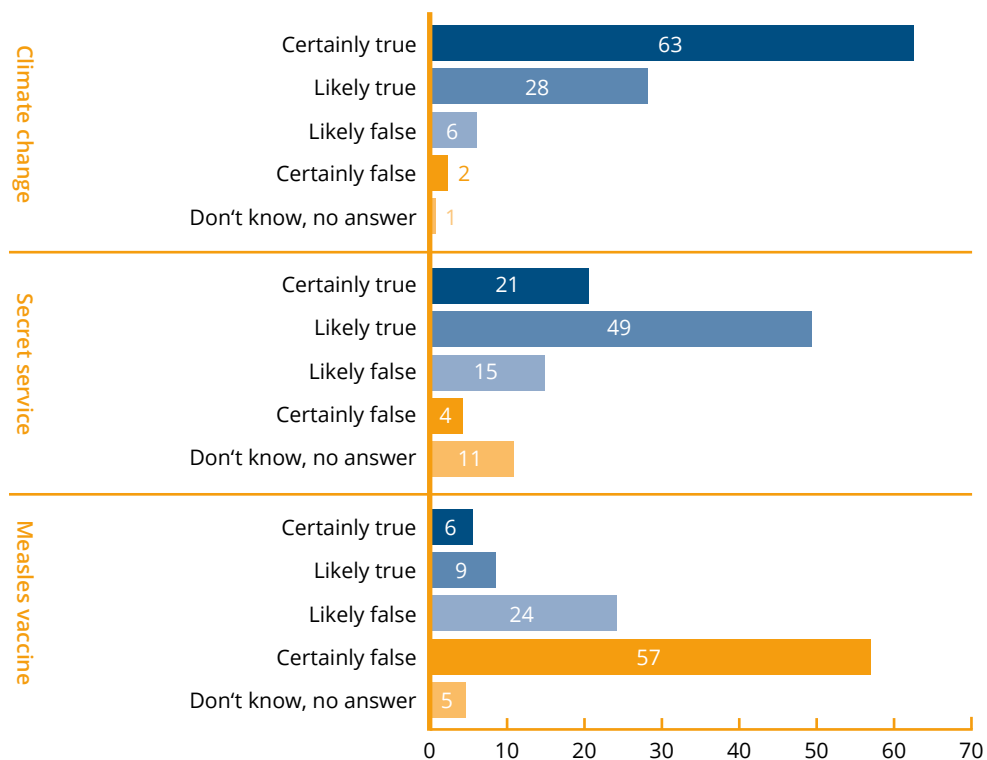
Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true.

What do you think of the following claims?

Climate change: Human impact is exacerbating climate change.

Secret service: The Russian secret service carries out killings abroad.

Measles vaccine: The measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself.



Source: 2020-05 survey by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

The sum of percentages may deviate from 100 due to rounding. 3,250 respondents.

The assessment regarding the statement on killings carried out by the Russian secret service abroad relates to an actual clandestine activity. However, this does not concern a global conspiracy but individual offences investigated by police.

The share of people who are unable or unwilling to take a position on this statement is higher, at 11 percent, than for the statement on climate change. Nonetheless, a large majority of Germans consider this statement to be true. 21 percent believe the statement is certainly true, and a further 49 percent consider it to be likely true. By contrast, 15 percent are of the view that the statement is likely false and 4 percent are certain the statement is false. Thus, a total of 19 percent of the respondents have doubts regarding the police investigations, while 70 percent consider the statement to be likely true or certainly true.

In the case of the measles vaccine, the assessment of respondents is again more consistent. A majority consider the statement that the measles vaccine is more dangerous than the actual disease to be certainly false. Around a quarter of respondents believe the statement is likely false. At 81 percent of the population, the vast majority therefore holds the view that the measles vaccine is likely or certainly less dangerous than the disease itself, following the view of medical experts. However, a minority of 14 percent believe that the statement is likely or certainly true and thus reject the scientific findings.

A majority of 55 percent consider the answer backed by the scientific community or the police to be likely or certainly true for all three statements.⁷ Only 0.1 percent of the respondents are certain in their rejection of the expert view for all three questions. However, 11 percent of the respondents are sure that for at least one of the statements, the answer backed by the scientific community or the police is not true. It should be noted that these respondents did not just have doubts regarding the official and generally accepted answers, they were certain and had no doubts about their own assessment. For at least one of the three statements, they were absolutely convinced that the generally accepted answer backed by the scientific community or the police does not correspond with the actual facts. This firm conviction against established facts is considered more closely in the following as a propensity for conspiracy theories.

Among these 11 percent of respondents with a propensity for conspiracy theories, half are sure that the measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself. Two out of five of these respondents are sure that the Russian secret service does not kill people abroad, and one fifth of these respondents are certain that people have no influence on the climate.

6 Reese and Lamberty (2019: 214 f.) report that 4 percent of the population completely agree with the statement: "Studies proving climate change are usually fake."

7 For the statement on the measles vaccine, the answer categories "likely false" and "certainly false" are the answers supportive of the officially backed knowledge.

5

Who Mistrusts Proven Facts?

In the overall population, 11 percent have a propensity to believe conspiracy theories. Men and women are just as likely to hold a conviction contradicting the established findings backed by the scientific community or the police. The differences between age groups are not very large. Older people tend to hold such convictions more frequently than younger people. For instance, 6 percent of those aged between 18 and 34 years are certain that the truth does not correspond with the prevailing view for one of the three statements. For respondents aged 65 years or above, the figure is 14 percent. The 35 to 64-year-olds lie between these values, at 11 percent. This age group exactly reflects the overall average in the population.

According to education qualifications, a varying propensity to reject the established statements can be observed.⁸ Among the school leavers after the ninth grade, 31 percent of those without an apprenticeship and 15 percent of those with an apprenticeship are convinced of the answer that contradicts the established facts for at least one of the three statements. Among the respondents with a sixth form qualification (“Abitur”), with or without university studies, this proportion is substantially lower at 6 percent. However, even in this educational group, a noteworthy share of people is convinced of a view that stands in opposition to the findings backed by the scientific community or the police.

People with a migration background are more likely to hold a view that contradicts the established facts.⁹ For at least one of the three statements, 16 percent of the respondents with a migration background are convinced of the position that rejects scientific or police findings, while this proportion is 10 percent among respondents without a migration background. The difference is particularly striking for the statement concerning killings carried out by the Russian secret service abroad. Of the respondents without a migration background, 4 percent believe the statement is certainly false, contrary to police investigations, while this figure is 8 percent for the respondents with a migration background.¹⁰

Lastly, there is a difference between east and west in the propensity to hold a conviction that rejects the generally accepted facts.¹¹ 16 percent of eastern Germans – compared to 10 percent of western Germans – are certain that the generally held view is not true for at least one of the statements. While no east/west difference can be observed for the assessment regarding the measles vaccine, eastern Germans are somewhat more likely to believe that the human influence on climate change is certainly false (east: 4 percent, west: 2 percent) and also more likely to believe that the Russian secret service does not conduct killings abroad (east: 7 percent, west: 4 percent).

Figure 2: Tendency towards Conspiracy Theory According to Education

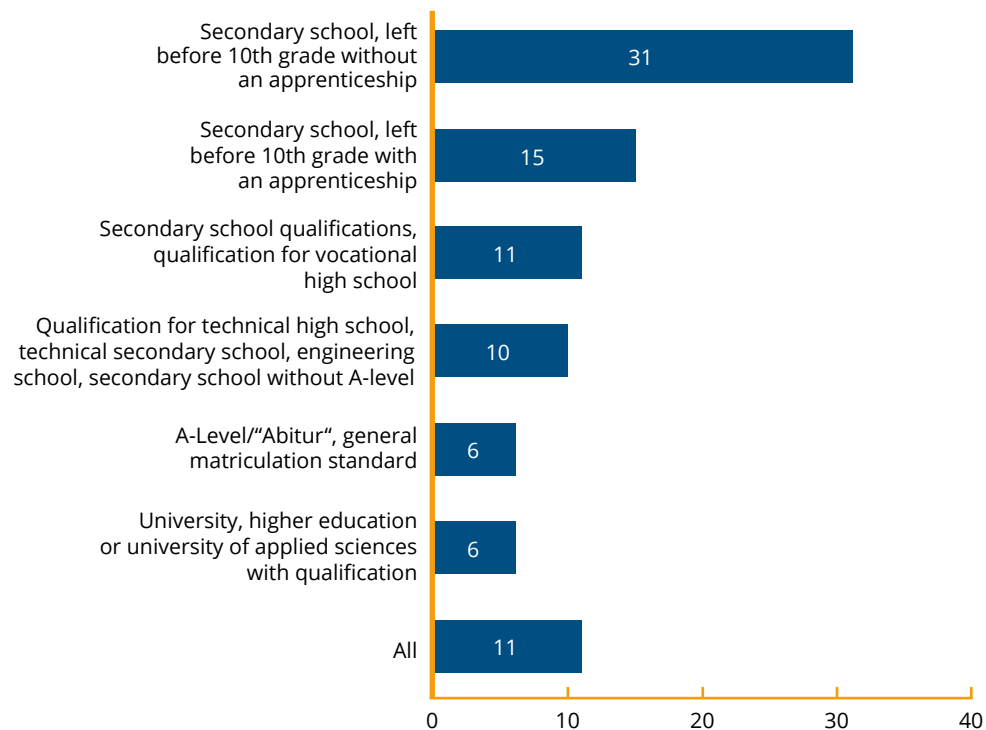
*Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true.
What do you think of the following claims?*

Climate change: Human impact is exacerbating climate change.

Secret service: The Russian secret service carries out killings abroad.

Measles vaccine: The measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself.

Here: for at least one of the statements, an answer contradicting the facts is considered "certain".



Source: 2020-05 survey by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent. 3,250 respondents. Missing percentages out of 100%: still in school education, without school qualifications, other education qualifications, and no answer.

- 8 This trend can also be seen in surveys in other countries (Douglas et al 2019: 10).
- 9 A migration background is deemed to exist if the respondent has immigrated or had a different nationality at birth or if this is the case for a parent.
- 10 No data was collected about the country from which the respondents or parents of respondents immigrated. However, fewer than average Muslims are convinced that the Russian secret service does not kill any people abroad (2 percent compared to 4 percent for all respondents).
- 11 Berlin is considered separately in the comparison between eastern and western Germany. Due to the high mobility within the city between districts that formerly belonged to the eastern or western part of Germany, as well as due to the inflow of migration from other parts of Germany, differentiating between the east and west in Berlin is not reasonably possible.



Political Orientation and Distrust of Facts

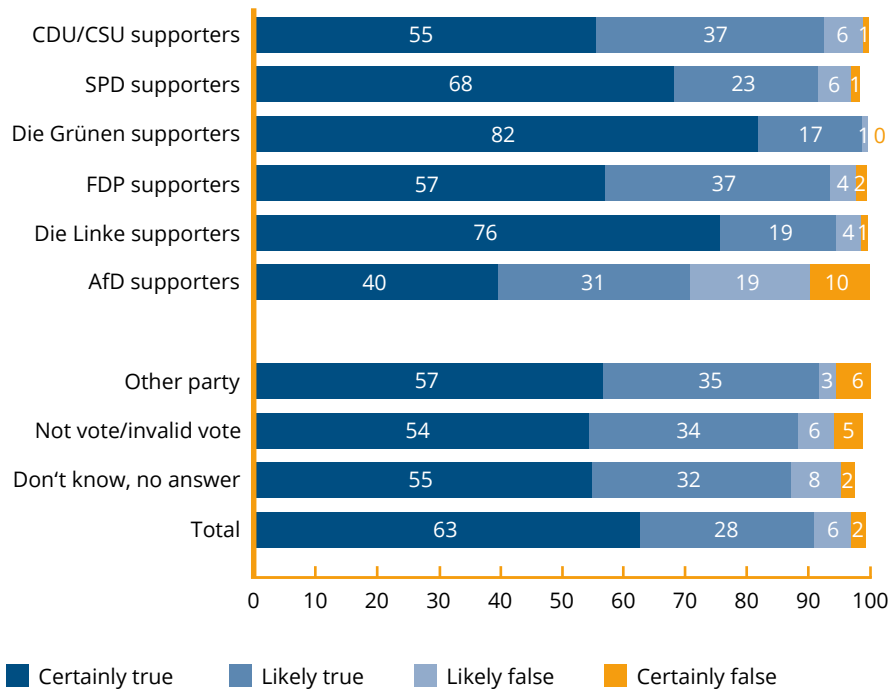
Supporters of different parties¹² are convinced of claims contrary to the facts to very different degrees. In the case of climate change, the majority of supporters of every party are certain that humans have an exacerbating effect. However, supporters of one particular party stand out from the others: the AfD. Nonetheless, 40 percent of AfD supporters are likewise very certain that people are making climate change worse, and another 31 percent consider this to be likely true. Thus, at 71 percent, a clear majority of AfD supporters believe this statement is likely or certainly true. For all other parties, far more respondents – at over 90 percent – hold this statement to be certainly or likely true.

Among those who did not choose a party, either because they do not want to vote or are unable to decide, the vast majority is of the view that it is certainly or likely true that people are intensifying climate change.

In total, only 2 percent of the respondents consider the statement that people are making climate change worse to be certainly false. However, for those who are unwilling to vote at an upcoming federal election and for AfD supporters, there is a notable minority who reject the scientifically proven statement, at 5 percent and 10 percent respectively.

Figure 3: Climate Change is Influenced by Human Activity
Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true.
What do you think of the following claims?

Human impact is exacerbating climate change.



Source: 2020-05 survey by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.
The sum of percentages may deviate from 100 due to rounding. 3,250 respondents.
Missing percentages out of 100%: no answer.

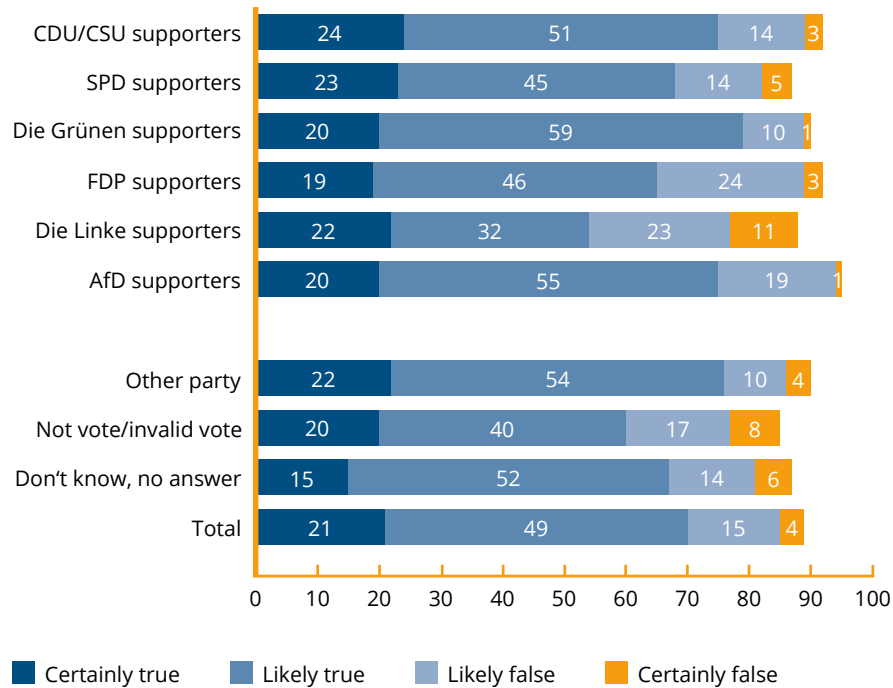
The answers for the statement concerning the Russian secret service are distributed somewhat differently. Among all party supporters, fewer people are certain of their assessment. Nevertheless, consistent with police investigations, a majority of respondents consider the statement to be true – and this holds for the supporters of all parties. In this case, it is the supporters of Die Linke who are more hesitant in their assessment. While 65 percent or more of the supporters believe this statement is likely or certainly true for all other parties, this figure is only just over half for the supporters of Die Linke (at 55 percent). Instead, 11 percent of Die Linke supporters consider this statement to be certainly false. This constitutes a small minority of Die Linke supporters, but compared to the other parties Die Linke supporters are the most frequent to firmly reject this statement by a clear margin.



Figure 4: Russian Secret Service Kills People Abroad

Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true.
What do you think of the following claims?

The Russian secret service carries out killings abroad.



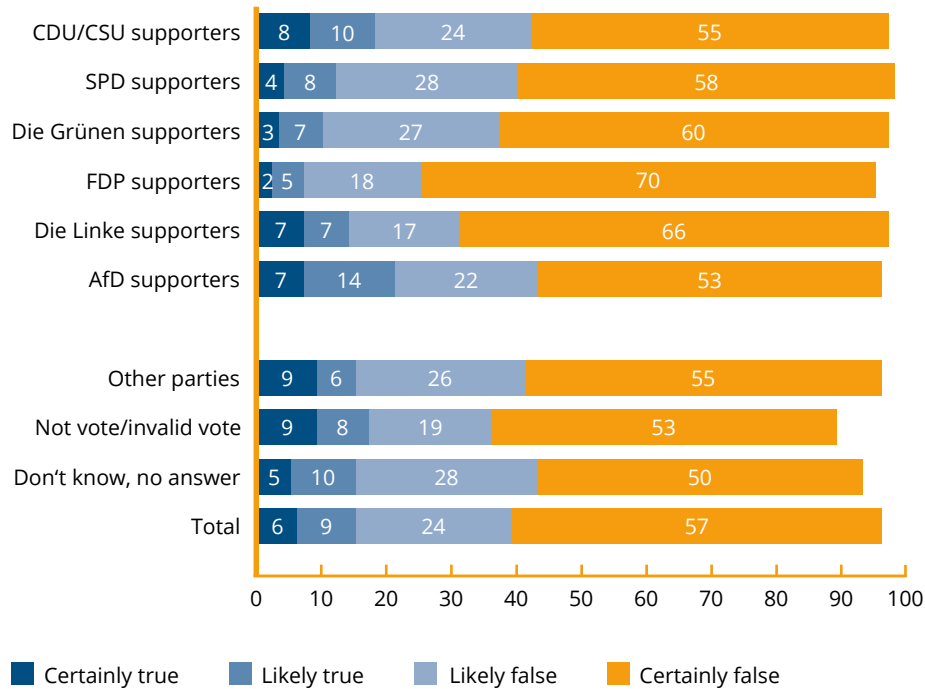
Source: 2020-05 survey by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.
3,250 respondents. Missing percentages out of 100%: no answer.

For the assessment of the measles vaccine, the majority of the supporters of each party likewise share the view backed by the scientific community. A majority of the supporters of each party view the claim that the measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself as certainly false. Among supporters of the AfD, CDU/CSU, and those who do not wish to vote, however, the share is the lowest, at just over 50 percent. On the other hand, 21 percent of AfD supporters believe the statement that the measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself to be likely or certainly true. This is the highest share that tends to reject the scientific findings among the supporters of any party. In the case of CDU/CSU supporters and those who do not want to vote, this share is likewise rather high, at 18 and 17 percent respectively.

Figure 5: Danger of the Measles Vaccine

*Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true.
What do you think of the following claims?*

The measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself.



*Source: 2020-05 survey by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.
3,250 respondents. Missing percentages out of 100%: no answer.*

Nonetheless, the view backed by the scientific community or the police dominates in each case for the supporters of the political parties. Apart from that, there are differences that depend on the topic. In the case of climate change, supporters of Die Grünen are most convinced that humans have an impact. Compared to other party supporters, the statement concerning killings by the Russian secret service is most frequently considered to be certainly true by CDU/CSU supporters. Supporters of the FDP are the most frequent to state with certainty that the measles vaccine is not more dangerous than the disease itself.

AfD supporters are particularly sceptical. They are the most frequent to doubt human impact on climate change and the safety of the measles vaccine compared to other supporters. They are likewise sceptical about killings by the Russian secret service, but not as sceptical as supporters of Die Linke and the FDP.

12 Here, supporters of a party are respondents who stated they would wish to vote for the respective party if next Sunday were a federal election.



Acceptance of Facts and Media Use

For the three topics surveyed, the findings backed by the scientific community or the police are circulated in the media. It therefore comes as little surprise that different information behaviour is observed depending on the assessment given for the three statements. Those who assess the established facts to be certainly true more frequently consume newspapers as well as public service radio and television. However, lower use of these media is not reflected in the opposite conviction, namely that the established findings are false. Instead, less informed respondents and users of private radio and television are less certain in their assessment.

A clear difference between those who staunchly reject the established findings and others can primarily be seen in the credibility attached to public service media. Among those who consider the political news in public service media to be generally credible, 68 percent believe human impact on climate change is certainly true and only 1 percent believe it is certainly false. For those who deem the public service media to be generally not credible, only 44 percent think human impact on climate change is certainly true and 8 percent certainly false. A similar picture can be seen for the statement regarding killings conducted by the Russian secret service. Among those who consider public service broadcasting to be credible, 22 percent assess the statement on killings by the Russian secret service as certainly true and 3 percent as certainly false. In the case of those who indicate that public service broadcasting is not credible, 18 percent are convinced that the statement is correct, and 10 percent are convinced it is false. The same pattern can again be observed in relation to the claim about the measles vaccine.

The respondents who are convinced that the findings backed by the scientific community or the police are false tend to use fewer information sources and also tend to consider public service media to be not credible.

Table 1: Credibility of Public Service Media and the Assessed Truth of Statements

Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true.

What do you think of the following claims?

Climate change: Human impact is exacerbating climate change.

Secret service: The Russian secret service carries out killings abroad.

Measles vaccine: The measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself.

Do you generally consider political news in public service media like ARD and ZDF to be rather credible or rather not credible?

	Rather credible	Rather not credible	Total
Climate change exacerbated by human impact			
Certainly true	68	44	63
Likely true	27	33	28
Likely false	4	14	6
Certainly false	1	8	2
Russian secret service kills people abroad			
Certainly true	22	18	21
Likely true	52	41	49
Likely false	14	20	15
Certainly false	3	10	4
Measles vaccine more dangerous than disease			
Certainly true	5	9	6
Likely true	7	15	9
Likely false	25	24	24
Certainly false	60	44	57

Source: 2020-05 survey by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent. 3,250 respondents. Missing values out of 100%: don't know/no answer for one of the questions.

8

Belief in a Global Conspiracy

Judging a fact to be true or false is itself not a conspiracy theory. Therefore, the respondents were asked to assess the correctness of a final claim to capture the essence of a conspiracy theory. The respondents were asked whether there are secret powers that control the world.

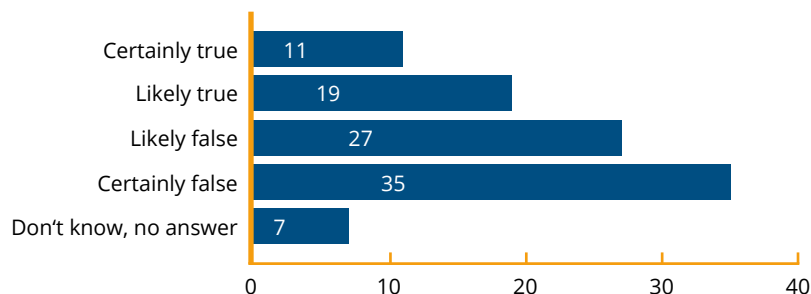
In order to make it sufficiently easy for the respondents over the telephone and to keep the influence of social desirability as low as possible¹³, the question did not directly ask about a conspiracy involving people or organisations who are taking over or have already taken over global control with ulterior motives. Instead, the question was worded more openly. However, this might cause more respondents to agree than those who actually believe in a conspiracy in the sense intended here. For this reason, a follow-up question was posed to all respondents who said they believe in global control by secret powers, asking them to state what powers they have in mind. This open follow-up question makes it possible to identify misunderstandings while also exploring which conspiracies are thought to exist. Based on these answers, any responses that involved a transcendent power (such as “God” or “fate”) or an abstract logic (such as “pursuit of money” or “pursuit of power”) were eliminated. The aim was to rule out answers that do not relate to a conspiracy of people or organisations, but only to the influence of abstract or transcendent powers.¹⁴

Figure 6: Belief in Conspiracy Theories

Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true.

What do you think of the following claims?

There are secret powers that control the world.



Source: 2020-05 survey by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent.

The sum of percentages may deviate from 100 due to rounding. 3,250 respondents.

The result of the survey is astonishing. 11 percent of the respondents are certain this statement is correct. Another 19 percent claim the statement is likely true. Thus, 30 percent of the respondents tend to believe in the existence of a global conspiracy.¹⁵ More people are sure that secret powers control the world than that climate change is not influenced by humans, that the Russian secret service does not carry out killings abroad or that the measles vaccine is more dangerous than the disease itself.

The concrete claims that contradict the facts established by the scientific community or the police meet with less firm agreement than the general claim of a global conspiracy. On the one hand, this may seem comprehensible, as a global conspiracy could relate to a wide range of circumstances and may mean vaccine opposition for some and a “climate hoax” or conspiracy against Russia for others. A more general and open claim may receive more agreement than a precise, specific statement.

On the other hand, the supposition of a global conspiracy is by no means open. It makes many completely unrealistic assumptions about the controllability of societies at a global scale and the possibility of maintaining secrecy. While misconceptions about individual facts are generally possible and occur in individual cases, the possibility of controlling the globe is impossible in principle. Therefore, the agreement with the claim that the world is controlled by secret powers is highly surprising.

When asked to specify which secret powers control the world, respondents name a wide range of actors.¹⁶ 13 percent of respondents who assume global control by secret powers imagine the secret powers to be private companies, banks or “financial capital”. 12 percent name secret services, in particular the secret services of the USA (NSA, CIA), Russia (typically known by the former abbreviation KGB) or Israel (Mossad). 11 percent either abstractly mention “rich people” or “rich families” or name specific families such as the Rothschilds or Rockefellers. Moreover, individual countries or individual politicians are also widely indicated – most frequently the USA or Donald Trump with 12 percent, Russia or Vladimir Putin with 9 percent, or China with 6 percent.

Overall, the responses indicate a wide range of conspirators. 5 percent of the respondents think of the Mafia or other criminal organisations, 4 percent think of lobbyists and special interest groups, and another 4 percent mention secret societies like the Illuminati, lodges or the Freemasons. 1 percent think of international forums or organisations such as the G20 or the European Central Bank, another 1 percent thinks of the Bilderberg Conference, and just as many respondents name the Jews.¹⁷ Even extra-terrestrials are among those mentioned.



- 13 Social desirability is a bias or distortion of survey results in the sense that people do not answer according to their own beliefs but rather give answers which they think are socially accepted. Thalmann (2019) shows how conspiracy theories have been increasingly stigmatised since the 1970s in the USA to become an illegitimate form of knowledge. A similar process can be expected to have occurred in Germany.
- 14 Ambiguous cases inevitably arise when open answers are categorised in this way. Is “capital” according to respondents a group of people or an abstract market logic? In cases of doubt, *no* conspiracy theory was generally assumed in order to prevent the measurement process from inflating the measured distribution of belief in conspiracy theories. No review is possible for respondents who provided no answer to the follow-up question.
- 15 The proportion of people measured here who believe in a conspiracy is lower than the proportion (40 per cent) reported by Seidler (2011). We consider the measurement reported here to be more realistic, because the statement was not only assessed with “true” or “false” (or “yes” or “no”), but the option of “likely true” was also possible. The high number of respondents for a telephone survey likewise increase the credibility of the result.
- 16 Only respondents who stated that the world is certainly or likely controlled by secret powers were asked which powers they think of.
- 17 Antisemitic attitudes may also underlie some of the other answers regarding secret powers that do not explicitly mention Jews. For instance, this is the case for Mossad or the Jewish Rothschild family, but also for other names assumed falsely or without evidence of being Jewish. Precise quantification is therefore not possible.



Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories?

In the previous chapters, we determined that the rejection of established facts is somewhat more common among older people, people with lower formal qualifications, people with a migration background, and eastern Germans. The belief in conspiracy theories is distributed somewhat differently.

The difference between genders is rather small for belief in conspiracy theories. 10 percent of men and 12 percent of women are certain that the world is controlled by secret powers. The statement is considered likely true by 20 percent of men and 19 percent of women. By contrast, a difference can be found in the willingness to answer this question. 5 percent of men, but 10 percent of women are unwilling to answer the question.

Among those aged 65 years and above, somewhat more hold the view – at 14 percent – that the world is controlled by secret powers than for other age groups. Among 18 to 34-year-olds, this figure is 8 percent, while it is 12 percent for 35 to 49-year-olds and 10 percent for 50 to 64-year-olds. However, the respondents aged 65 years and above by no means assume global control by secret powers more frequently overall. At 15 percent, far fewer people aged 65 years and above choose the answer that the statement is likely true, while 23 percent of 18 to 34-year-olds and 22 percent of 35 to 49-year-olds consider the statement to be likely true. Those aged 65 years and above are more decisive in their response, since they are also more frequently of the view that the statement is certainly false than the other age groups. 40 percent of the respondents aged 65 years and above say that the statement on global control by secret powers is certainly false, while this position is held by 29 percent of younger respondents aged between 18 and 34 years.

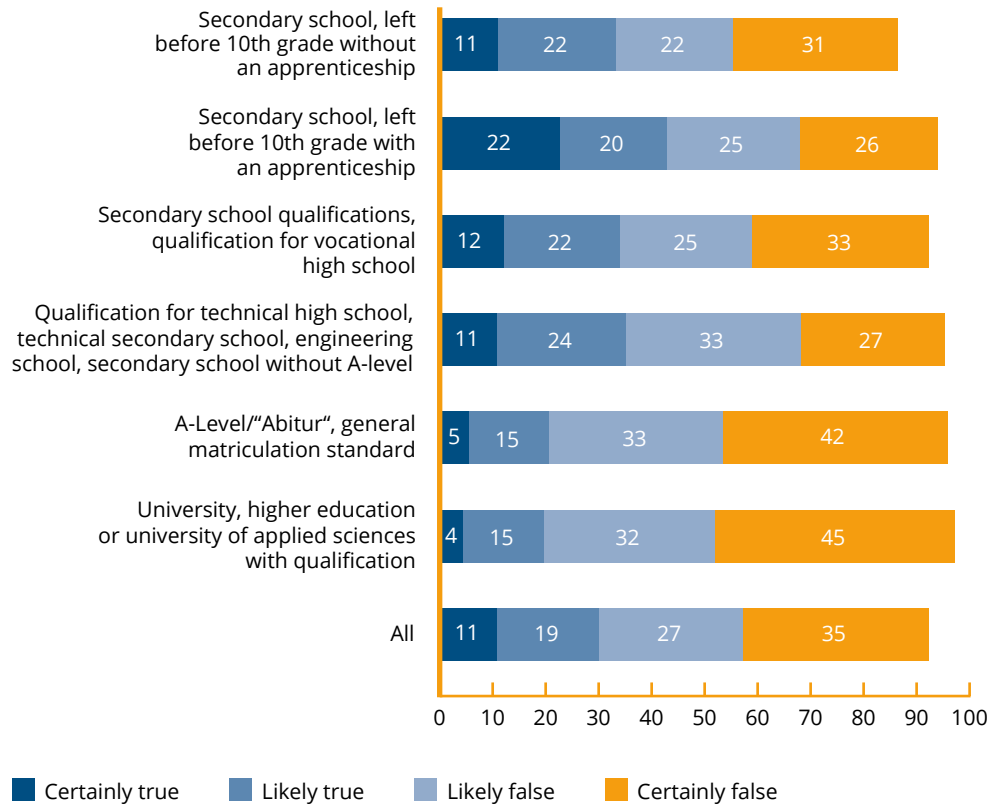
Education can clearly be observed to have an effect on belief in conspiracy theories. But this in no way means that only people with lower formal qualifications believe in conspiracy theories. Among the respondents with fewer than 10 years of school and a completed apprenticeship, 22 percent are certain that the world is controlled by secret powers; a further 20 percent considers this to be likely true. In the case of respondents with fewer than 10 years of school and no apprenticeship, a similar number consider this statement to be likely true (22 percent), but far fewer consider it to be certainly true (11 percent). The conviction that the world is controlled by secret powers is substantially less prevalent among respondents with higher formal qualifications. 4 percent of people with a university qualification and 5 percent with a sixth form qualification (Abitur) but no university qualification consider this statement to be certainly true. But another 15 percent in each case are still of the view that the statement is likely true. Thus, one in five of respondents with higher formal qualifications also believes that the world is certainly or likely controlled by secret powers.



Figure 7: Belief that Secret Powers Control the World according to Education

*Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true.
What do you think of the following claims?*

There are secret powers that control the world.



Source: 2020-05 survey by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent. 3,250 respondents. Missing percentages out of 100%: still in school education, without school qualifications, other education qualifications, and no answer.

People with a migration background more frequently agree with the statement that secret powers control the world than people with no migration background. However, the difference is not very large. 18 percent of the respondents with a migration background and 10 percent of people without a migration background are certain of global control by secret powers. 21 percent of people with a migration background and 19 percent of those without a migration background state that this is likely true. Since conspiracy theories are rather stigmatised in western Europe, while this is not the case for other parts of the world (Butter 2018: 157), the difference can be considered rather small.

No difference between east and west exists for agreement with the statement on global control by secret powers.¹⁸ 13 percent of eastern Germans (excluding Berlin) assess the statement as certainly true and so do almost as many respondents in western Germany, at 11 percent. In Berlin, 14 percent find the statement certainly true. Conversely, 42 percent of respondents in Berlin consider the statement to be certainly false. This figure is lower in both western Germany, at 35 percent, and eastern Germany, at 32 percent.

18 Berlin is not classified as belonging to either the eastern or western part of the country.

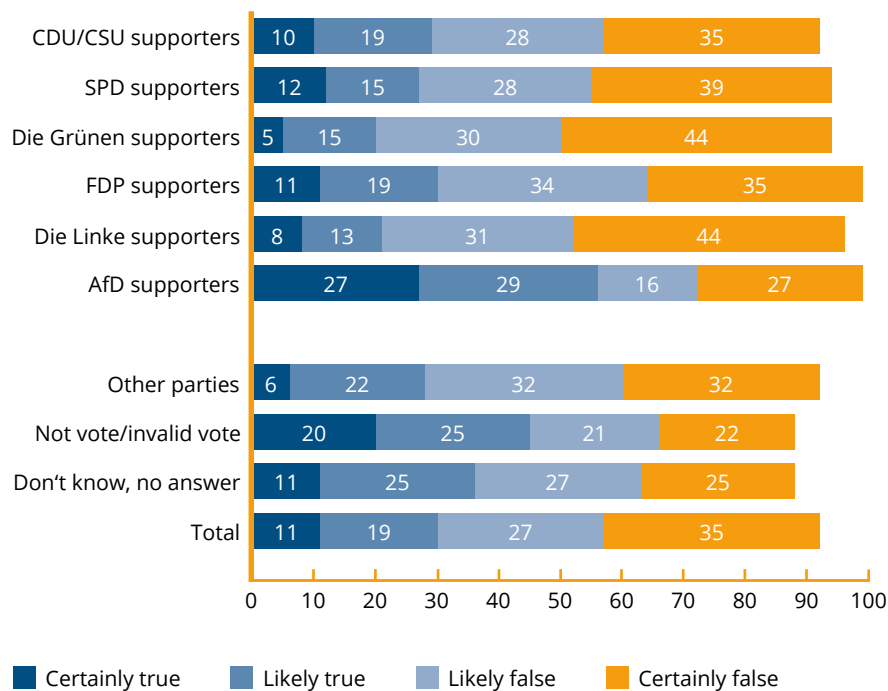
10

Belief in Conspiracies and Party Affiliation

The supporters of political parties vary substantially in terms of belief in conspiracy theories. In each case, supporters of the CDU/CSU, SPD, and FDP lie close to the overall average. Between 10 and 12 percent of the supporters of these three parties are certain that secret powers control the world. These figures are close to the respective proportion of the overall population of 11 percent. For these three parties, 15 percent (SPD) to 19 percent (FDP, CDU/CSU) consider the statement to be likely true. These values likewise correspond with the share of the total population (19 percent).

Figure 8: Belief that Secret Powers Control the World according to Party Affiliation
Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true.
What do you think of the following claims?

There are secret powers that control the world.



Source: Survey by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 3,250 respondents.
 Missing percentages out of 100%: no answer.

Belief in conspiracy theories is somewhat less prevalent among supporters of Die Linke and even rarer among supporters of Die Grünen. Among the supporters of Die Linke, 8 percent are certain that the world is controlled by secret powers, while just 5 percent are certain of this among Die Grünen supporters. 13 percent of Die Linke supporters and 15 percent of Die Grünen supporters consider the statement to be likely true. Overall, around 20 percent of the supporters of each of the two parties therefore believe that the world is likely or certainly controlled by secret powers. In the overall population, this value is 30 percent.

Among AfD supporters, however, belief in conspiracy theories is much more prevalent. As observed above for human impact on climate change and the danger of the measles vaccine, AfD supporters have the strongest propensity to believe in conspiracy theories compared to other party supporters. This propensity is most evident for the statement on secret powers controlling the world. A majority of 56 percent of AfD supporters judge the statement to be certainly or likely true. 27 percent of the supporters are certain that the world is controlled by secret powers.

Belief in a conspiracy theory is also widespread among those who are unwilling to vote and among respondents who would not choose to support a party if next Sunday were a federal election. Among all respondents who do not wish to indicate a party for their vote at an upcoming federal election, 11 percent are certain and another 25 percent consider it likely that secret powers control the world. For those who are unwilling to vote, 20 percent are certain and another 25 percent believe that the statement is likely true. Therefore, the propensity to believe in conspiracy theories is not as widespread in these groups as it is for the supporters of the AfD, but it is still far more prevalent than on average for the total population.

11

Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Media Use

With respect to belief in claims that contradict well established facts, clear differences in media use were already seen above. This is even more striking when comparing the followers of conspiracy theories against people who reject conspiracy theories. Among the believers of conspiracy theories, newspapers and public service radio or television are used less frequently for political information than by other people. Among those who obtain political information they consider credible from public service television, 9 percent are certain that the world is controlled by secret powers. Among those who do not receive their political information from public service television, however, this figure is 19 percent. In the case of public service radio and television, the differences are somewhat smaller but run in the same direction.

This picture is reversed for the use of private television for political information. For those who obtain their political information from private television, 13 percent are certain and another 24 percent consider it likely that the world is controlled by secret powers. For those who do not use private television for political information, 11 percent are certain and another 18 percent believe it is likely that secret powers control the world. When it comes to political information on general websites or on Facebook, no difference can be seen between those who believe and those who reject conspiracy theories.

Among respondents who consider the political news in public service media (ARD and ZDF) to be generally credible, the believers of conspiracy theories are underrepresented. 8 percent consider the statement regarding secret powers controlling the world to be certainly true and 38 percent consider it to be certainly false. By contrast, among those who do not consider political news in public service media to be credible, 26 percent are certain that secret powers control the world, and 22 percent say this is certainly false.

Table 2: Assessment of Conspiracy Theories and the Credibility of Public Service Media
Sometimes when claims are made you might be unsure if they are true.
What do you think of the following claims?

There are secret powers that control the world.

Do you generally consider political news in public service media like ARD and ZDF to be credible or not credible?

	Credible	Not credible	Total
Certainly true	8	26	11
Likely true	18	27	19
Likely false	30	16	27
Certainly false	38	22	35

Source: 2020-05 survey by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. Values in percent. 3,250 respondents. Missing values out of 100%: don't know/no answer for one of the two questions.



Doubt and Belief in Conspiracy Theories in Society

Doubt is important for open and democratic societies. This includes doubts concerning generally held truths. On the other hand, the ability to agree on what is true – whether normatively or objectively – is crucial for reaching collectively binding decisions, i. e. engaging in politics. This dilemma is unresolvable for democratic societies. Democratic societies need trust, but a critical public should not be all too trusting.

The same dilemma can be seen in the assessment of the truthfulness of specific statements, such as human impact on climate change or the danger of the measles vaccine. Nevertheless, it is hugely important for society to determine how well these kinds of facts are proven and to what extent people accept this proof. After all, combatting the highly dangerous measles disease by vaccination or stopping climate change and its far-reaching consequences for nature and human populations strongly depends on a large majority recognising the danger of the phenomenon and the utility of the protective measures. In order for extensive measures against dangers to be enforceable and successful, the diagnosis needs to be trusted.

The situation is rather different for assessing conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories cannot logically be true since they are intrinsically inconsistent. It makes no sense to assume perfect plannability on the one hand while also constantly uncovering clues and mistakes that provide evidence for the purported conspiracy. Conspiracy theories also cannot be true because they imply the controllability of society and history to the highest degree, which is impossible in practice. At the same time, conspiracy theories can pose a substantial danger for groups of people accused of being conspirators.

As part of a representative survey, the extent to which people accept or reject generally recognised findings was investigated for three statements. First of all, the results show that a large majority of people accept that humans have an influence on climate change, that the measles disease is more dangerous than the vaccine, and that the Russian secret service has been charged of conducting killings abroad. Many people are certain of this assessment, and many others consider it to be likely true. On the whole, people trust the findings backed by the scientific community or the police. Only a minority of people reject these findings and a very small minority is certain that the generally recognised findings are not true.

Conspiracy theories are likewise rejected by a large majority of the population. However, there is a large minority that considers a global conspiracy possible (likely true) or is firmly convinced that one exists. At around a third of the population, this share is striking and appears to be independent of the recent developments concerning the SARS-CoV-2 virus, as the survey was conducted before the pandemic became a hot topic in Germany.

Belief in conspiracy theories and doubt in established facts are not limited to certain demographic groups. These phenomena are observed in the east and west, among the young and old, and among men and women.

Two patterns are worthy of mention. On the one hand, there is a weak tendency to doubt established facts and a stronger tendency to believe in conspiracy theories among supporters of the AfD. On the other hand, the rejection of individual facts and belief in conspiracy theories are correlated with media use. Lower media use in general and an aversion to public service media are associated with a higher likelihood of believing in conspiracy theories.

The study thus emphasizes the importance of media coverage and public service media. The media are important for spreading scientifically substantiated facts. However, their limitations also become clear, as the believers of conspiracy theories avoid these sources of information and seek out their own sources to confirm their beliefs (for further details, see also Frieß/Neu 2018: 26 ff).

At the same time, this study also shows that conspiracy theories are very widespread – or at least the belief that they are conceivable. Many people can perfectly imagine and also consider it likely – if not certain – that the world is controlled by secret actors beyond those who are visible. This was already the case before the COVID-19 crisis. There has long been potential for demonstrations and support for old or new conspiracy theorists.

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In a representative study, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung surveyed the extent to which three factual statements as well as global control by secret powers (i. e. a conspiracy theory) are considered true or false. Human impact on climate change, killings by the Russian secret service, and the danger of the measles vaccine – for these three statements, a majority of people follow the findings backed by the scientific community or the police, while a minority is doubtful or convinced of the opposite. Even more widespread, however, is the belief in conspiracy theories. The study examines which groups of people doubt established facts and which conspiracy theories they tend to believe.