

CONSPIRACY THEORIES: Why we want to believe them



**U3A TIMARU – MONDAY 10 MARCH 2025
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Yahoo! News Presidential Election - October 19, 2020

October 16-18, 2020 - 1,583 U.S. Registered Voters

YouGov

76. Democrats Involved in Sex Trafficking

Do you believe that top Democrats are involved in elite child sex-trafficking rings?

	Total	Gender		Age				Race		
		Male	Female	18-29	30-44	45-64	65+	White	Black	Hispanic
Yes	25%	31%	20%	25%	24%	27%	24%	28%	16%	16%
No	51%	50%	52%	52%	51%	50%	51%	47%	65%	59%
Not sure	24%	20%	27%	22%	25%	23%	25%	25%	20%	25%
Totals	100%	101%	99%	99%	100%	100%	100%	100%	101%	100%
Unweighted N	(1,582)	(733)	(849)	(245)	(229)	(709)	(399)	(1,193)	(161)	(127)

	Total	Party ID			Likely Voters	Vote Intention		2016 Vote	
		Dem	Rep	Ind		Biden	Trump	Clinton	Trump
Yes	25%	5%	50%	25%	25%	5%	50%	6%	47%
No	51%	82%	21%	47%	52%	82%	17%	83%	20%
Not sure	24%	14%	29%	28%	23%	13%	33%	11%	33%
Totals	100%	101%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Unweighted N	(1,582)	(621)	(410)	(453)	(1,468)	(843)	(553)	(631)	(512)

One in four Britons believe in QAnon-linked theories – survey

Significant numbers believe in secret governing elite and that Covid was released on purpose



📷 A 'save our children' rally outside Downing Street this month. Photograph: Hollie Adams/Getty Images

One in four people in Britain agree with conspiracies propagated by **QAnon**, the global movement claiming there is a secret satanic network of child-abusing politicians and celebrities, a survey has found.

The research for Hope Not Hate also found that 17% of people questioned said they believed Covid-19 was intentionally released as part of a “depopulation plan” by the UN or “new world order”.



Wellington Parliament Protest (Feb-March 2022)



“Conspiracy” and “Conspiracy Theory”

“Conspiracy”: A secret plot by two or more people, for nefarious ends

“Conspiracy theory”: A theory about such a conspiracy.

Usually also requires *implausibility*

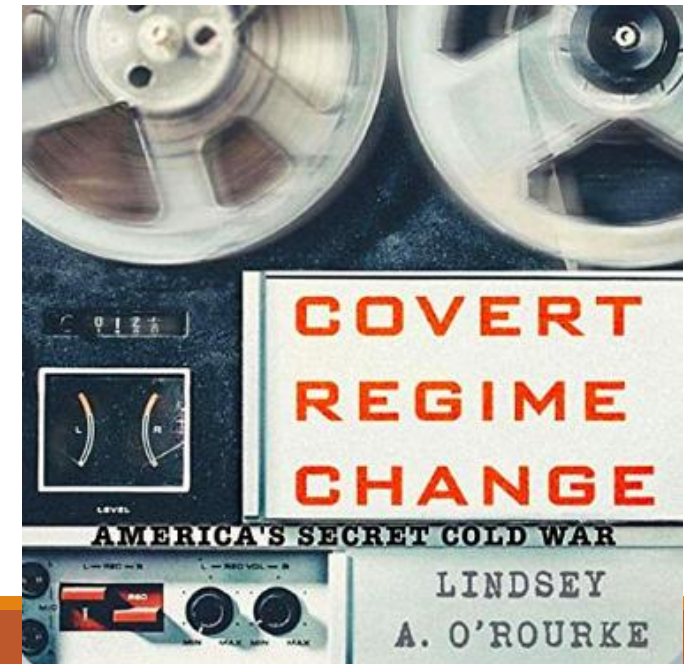
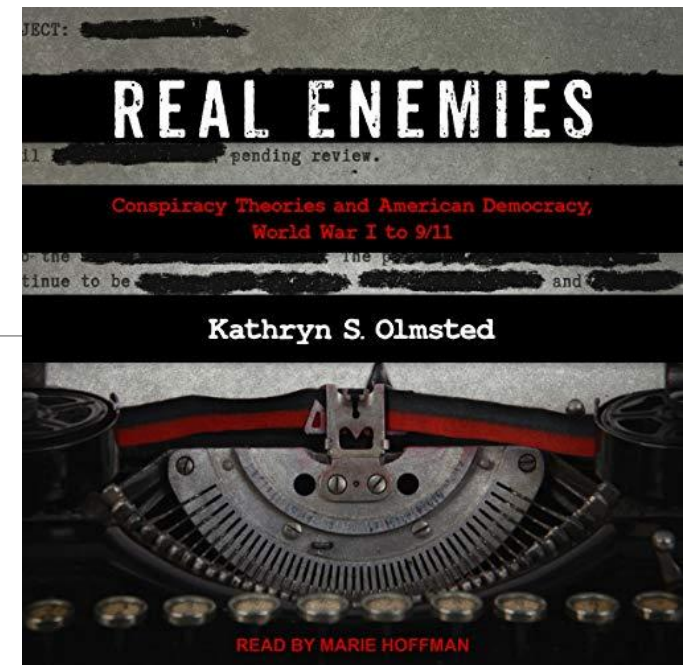
- A conspiracy theory is an “*unverified and relatively implausible* allegation of conspiracy...”

(Robert Brotherton & Christopher French, “Belief in Conspiracy Theories and Susceptibility to the Conjunction Fallacy” [2014], p. 238)

Conspiracy theories later proved true

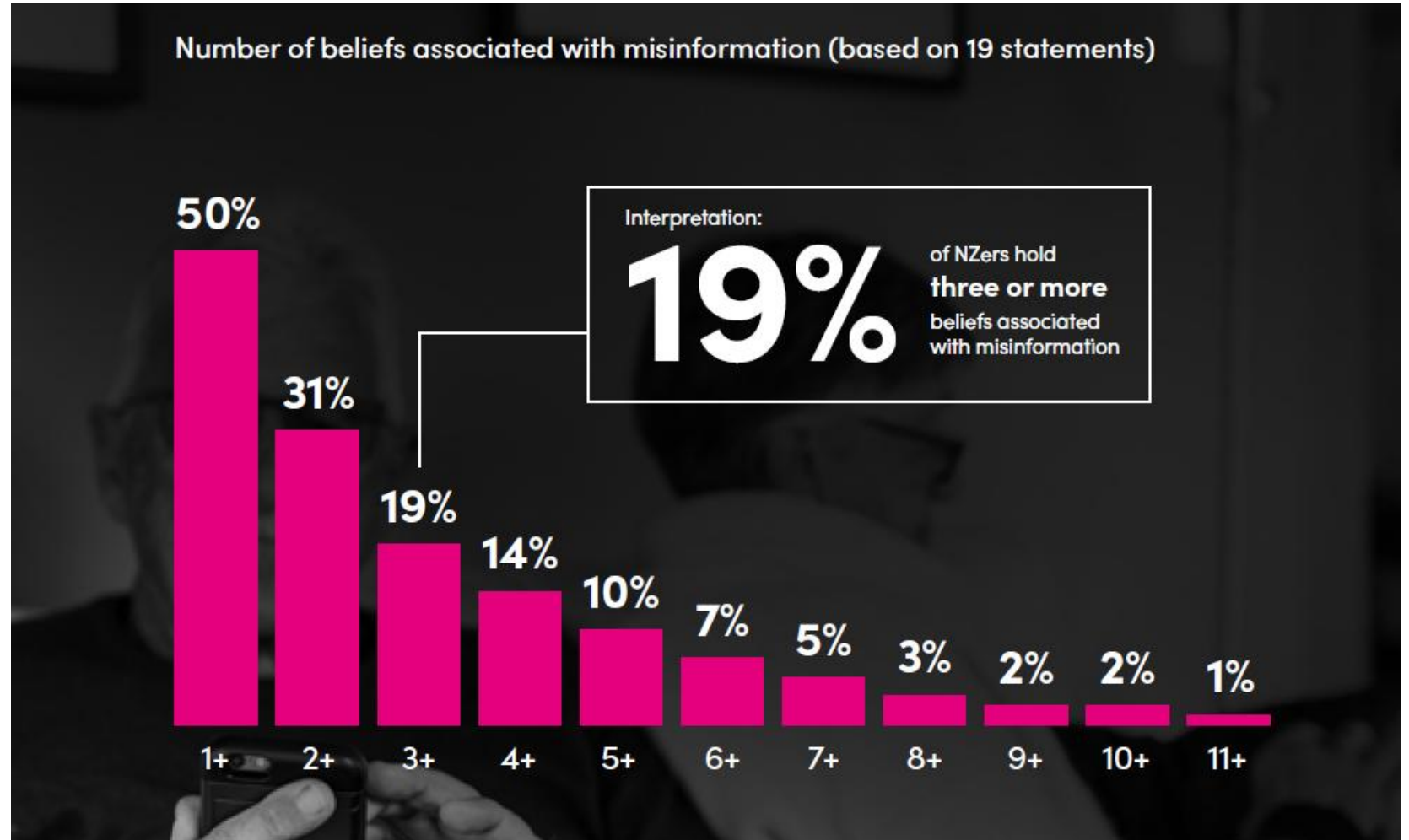


- Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (2009)
 - E.g. Nixon and Watergate
- Lindsey A. O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change* (2019)
 - 64 US-backed regime changes from 1946 to 1990



50% of Americans endorse at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver and Wood, "Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style(s) of mass opinion", 2014)

Te Mana Whakaatu /
Classification Office,
*The Edge of the
Infodemic* (June 2021)



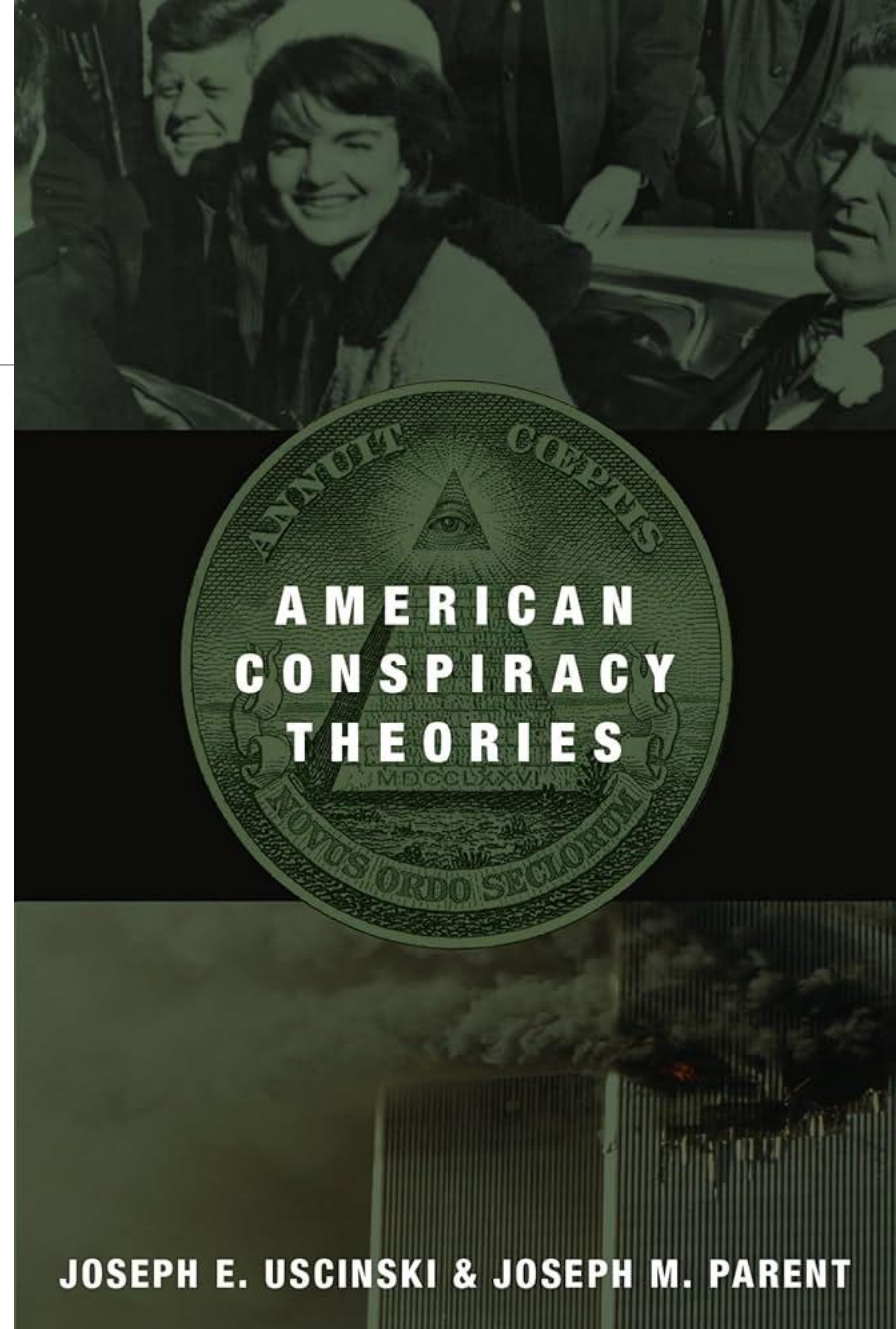
Are Conspiracy Theories more popular than ever?

No! Survey of all published letters to the editor, in *the Chicago Tribune* and *New York Times*, from 1890 to 2010

- Total: 104,803 contain conspiracy theories
- **No historical trend upwards**

Updated for 2012-2021: Joseph Uscinski, et al., “Have Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Increased Over Time?” (2022)

No increase

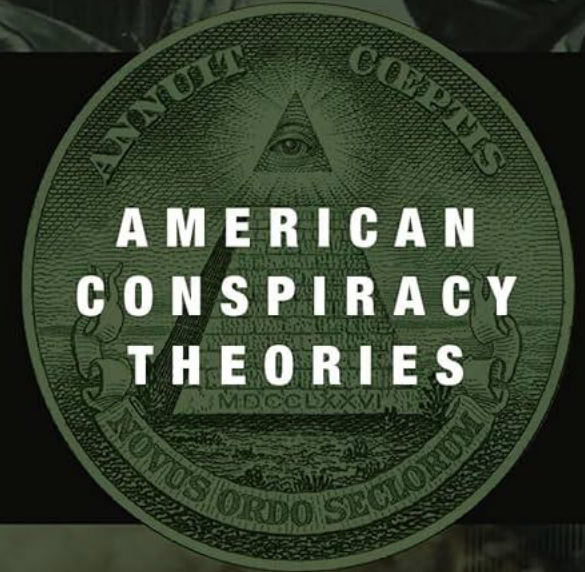


JOSEPH E. USCINSKI & JOSEPH M. PARENT

Are Conspiracy Theories more popular than ever?

Other changes:

1. Type of conspiracy theories: more complex, more dangerous
2. The amount of time believers spend on conspiracy theories



JOSEPH E. USCINSKI & JOSEPH M. PARENT



What causes belief in Conspiracy Theories?

1. Psychological reasons
2. Perception of Loss
(economic, social, cultural, etc)
3. The Function of Demonization,
including in Superconspiracies

1. Psychological reasons

Personality traits associated with belief in conspiracy theories:

1. High levels of interpersonal distrust
2. Narcissism
3. Very low self-esteem
4. High anxiety, including neuroticism
5. Attraction to eccentric ideas, paranormal beliefs, experience of visions

1. Psychological reasons

Universal flaws in our thinking processes

E.g. Our understanding of cause & effect



“Illusory
pattern
detection”

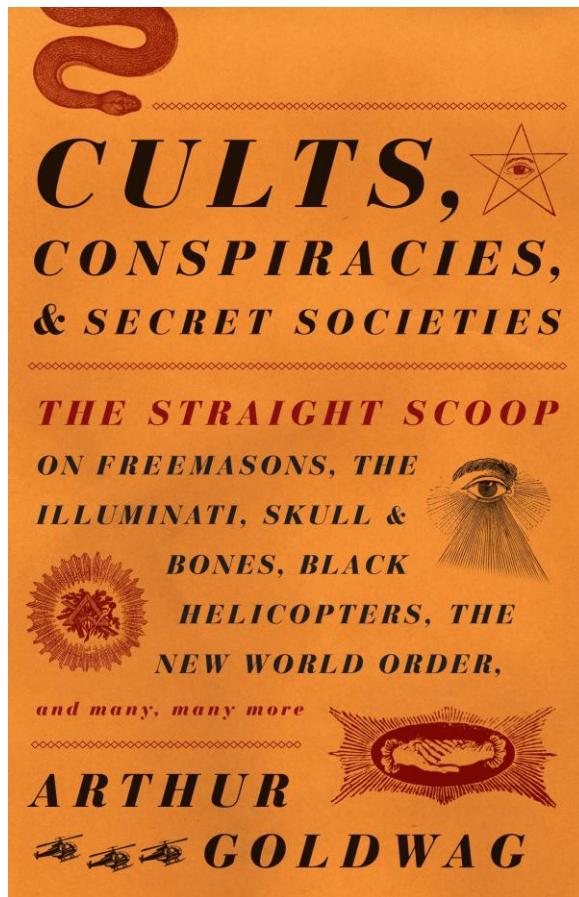
Pattern detection & lack of control

Brian Tamaki links Cyclone Gabrielle devastation with porn use



- Apostle-Bishop Brian Tamaki:
 - (2011) The Christchurch earthquakes were the result of the earth's disgust for same-sex marriage
 - (2021) The Kermedec earthquake was the result of media criticism of Tamaki
 - (2023) Cyclone Gabrielle was the result of people in Gisborne watching pornography, esp. gay porn

Pattern detection & lack of control

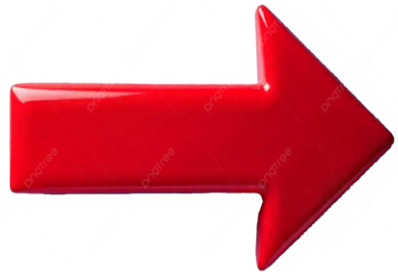


“If an earthquake is the result of tectonic plates shifting along inscrutably, there is not much that can be done about it. If instead the earthquake was caused by human agents, however powerful, perhaps they can be stopped somehow.”
(Arthur Goldwag, *Cults, Conspiracies, and Secret Societies*, 2009)

2. Loss of control

Imagined benefits of conspiracy theory belief

1. A neat explanation
2. A sense of purpose
3. A chance of salvation



Symbolic compensation for perceived loss

Economic, sociopolitical disadvantage

Alienation from the political system:

e.g. Martin Bruder et al., "Measuring individual differences" (2013)

Low-status groups:

e.g. Uscinski & Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (2014)

Minority groups:

e.g. Jennifer Crocker, et al., "Belief in US government conspiracies against Blacks" (1999)



“Conspiracies are for Losers”

Uscinski & Parent,
American Conspiracy Theories (2014)

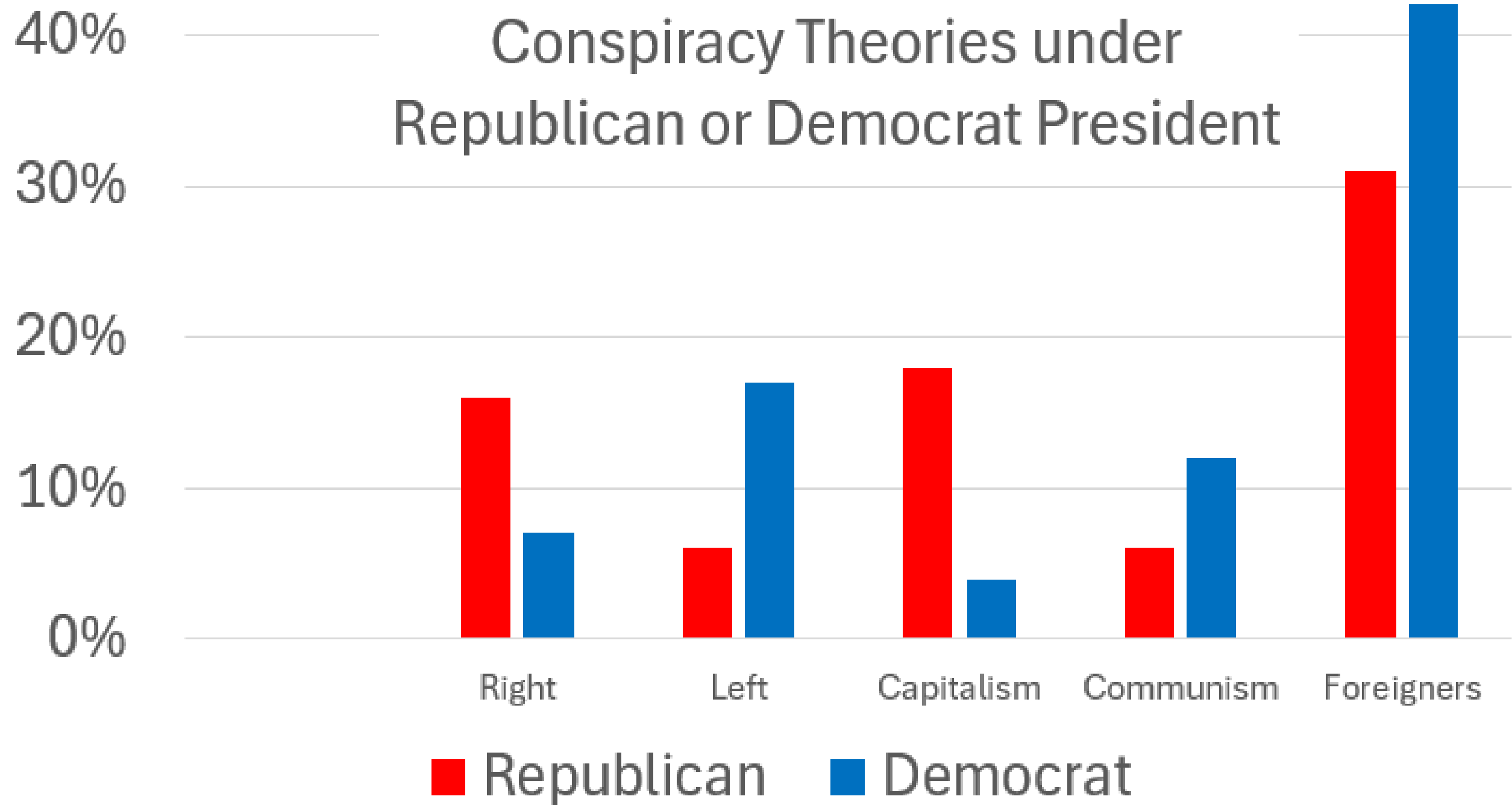


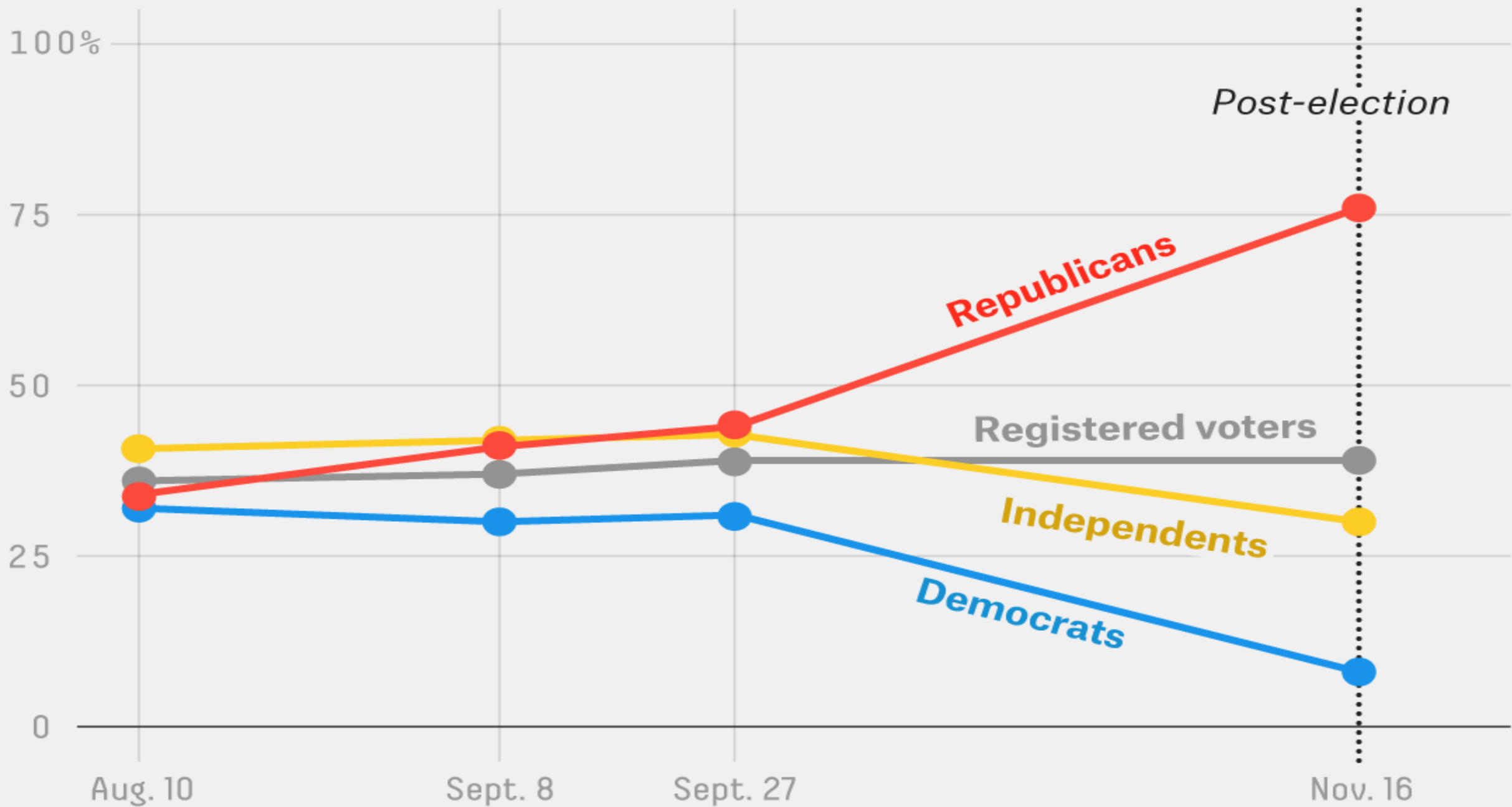
CTs are more prevalent in groups suffering from economic disadvantage, disunity, or decline

CTs function essentially as “coping mechanisms”

The *bigger* the threat or feeling of loss, the *stronger* the belief in conspiracy theories: Patrick Leman & Marco Cinnirella, “Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories” (2013)

Conspiracy Theories under Republican or Democrat President





3. Demonization & Superconspiracy

Conspiracy Theories enhance your own reputation, but demonize your opponents

Before the Twentieth Century, those demonized were outsiders: Jews, Catholics, Freemasons, etc

From the early Twentieth Century, socialism and social welfare reforms caused demonization of their own Government



3. Demonization & Superconspiracy

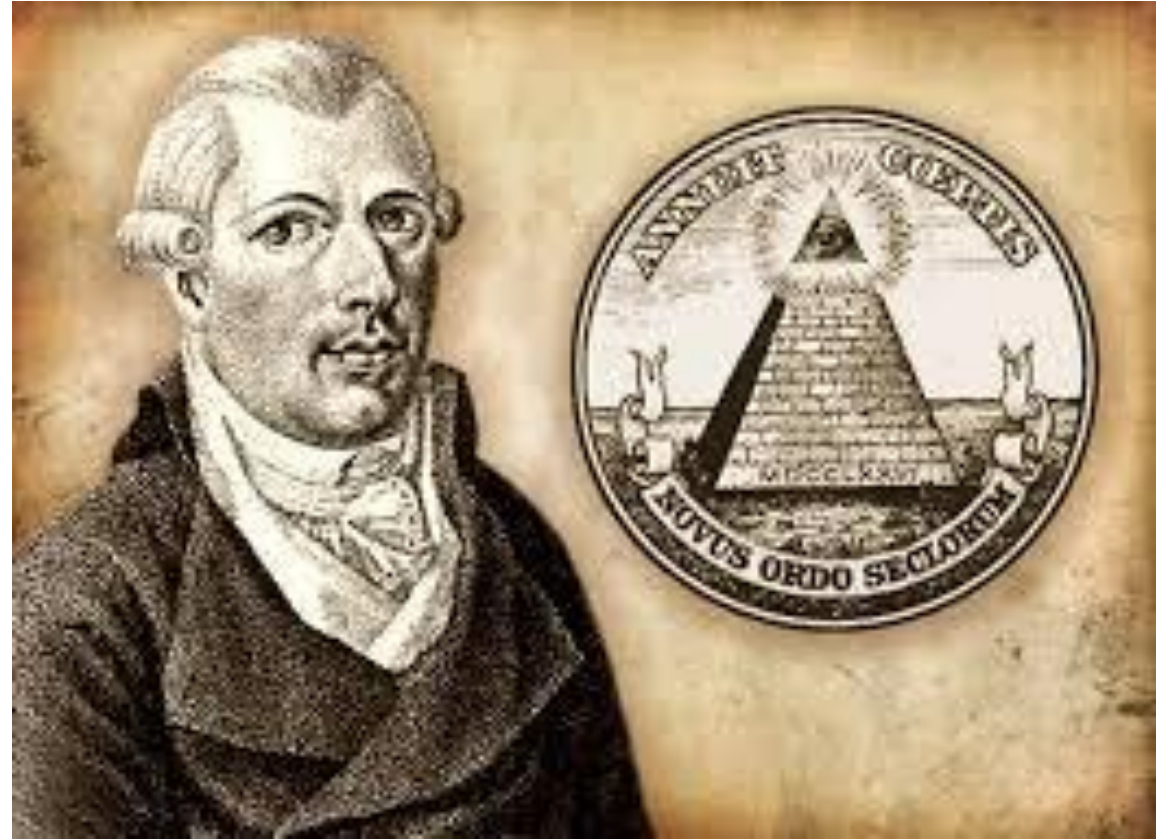
John Birch Society (Robert Welch), 1958



3. Demonization & Superconspiracy

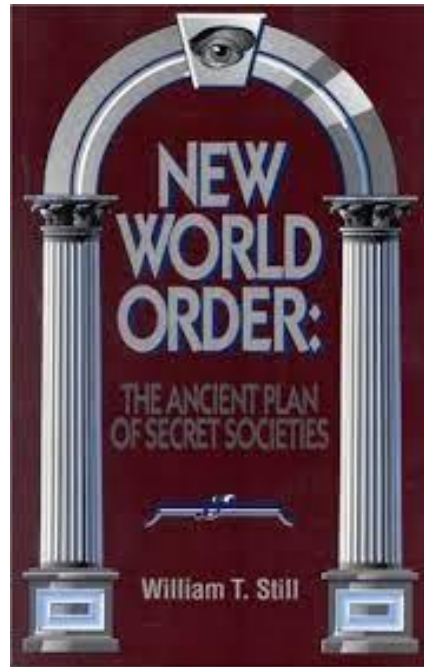
Illuminati
(1776 – 1887)

Founded by Adam Weishaupt



3. Demonization & Superconspiracy

New World Order,
Deep State



“A superconspiracy sweeps up all the other types of conspiracies...
into one meta-narrative” (Michael Barkun)





A (Very) New Zealand Conspiracy Theory

Conspiracy theorists: Group of about 2000 Māori in central North Island

Main representative: Monica Matāmua




Claims:

- Descendants of White Hotu people, arrived here in 200s BC
- Covered up by archaeologists, universities, the government, and Māori iwi



The Moriori Myth

NZ school-children taught until 1970s that before Maori, darker-skinned Melanesians lived here, the Moriori. Māori attacked them, drove them out, and they were forced to settle in Rēkohu (Chatham Island).

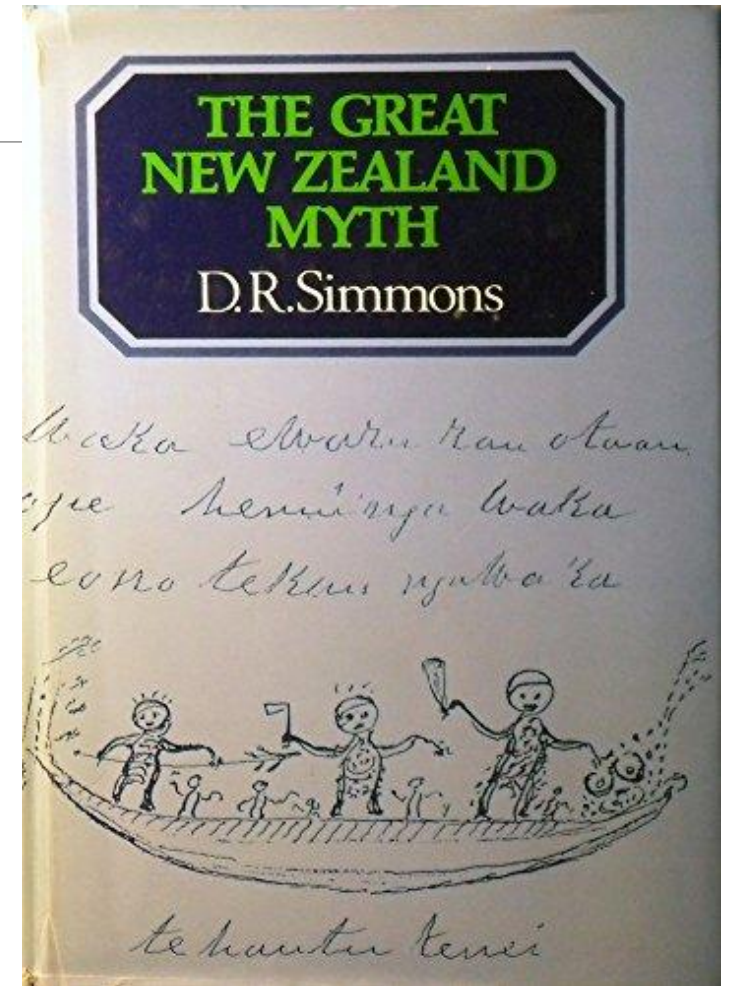
-  Moriori are *not* Melanesian, but Polynesian
-  Moriori were *not* forced to Chatham Island, but settled there from the Pacific
-  Māori did *not* replace Moriori in the mainland



The Moriori Myth

“The reason [the Moriori Myth] became so powerfully ingrained in the psyche of New Zealanders is because, if Māori could push Moriori out of NZ, then later European migrants could push Māori off their land. It suited the narrative, and it was a justification of European colonisation of Māori land.”

- Moriori trustee Maui Solomon





A (Very) New Zealand Conspiracy Theory

Why would a group *of Māori* argue that a White group were here before Māori?

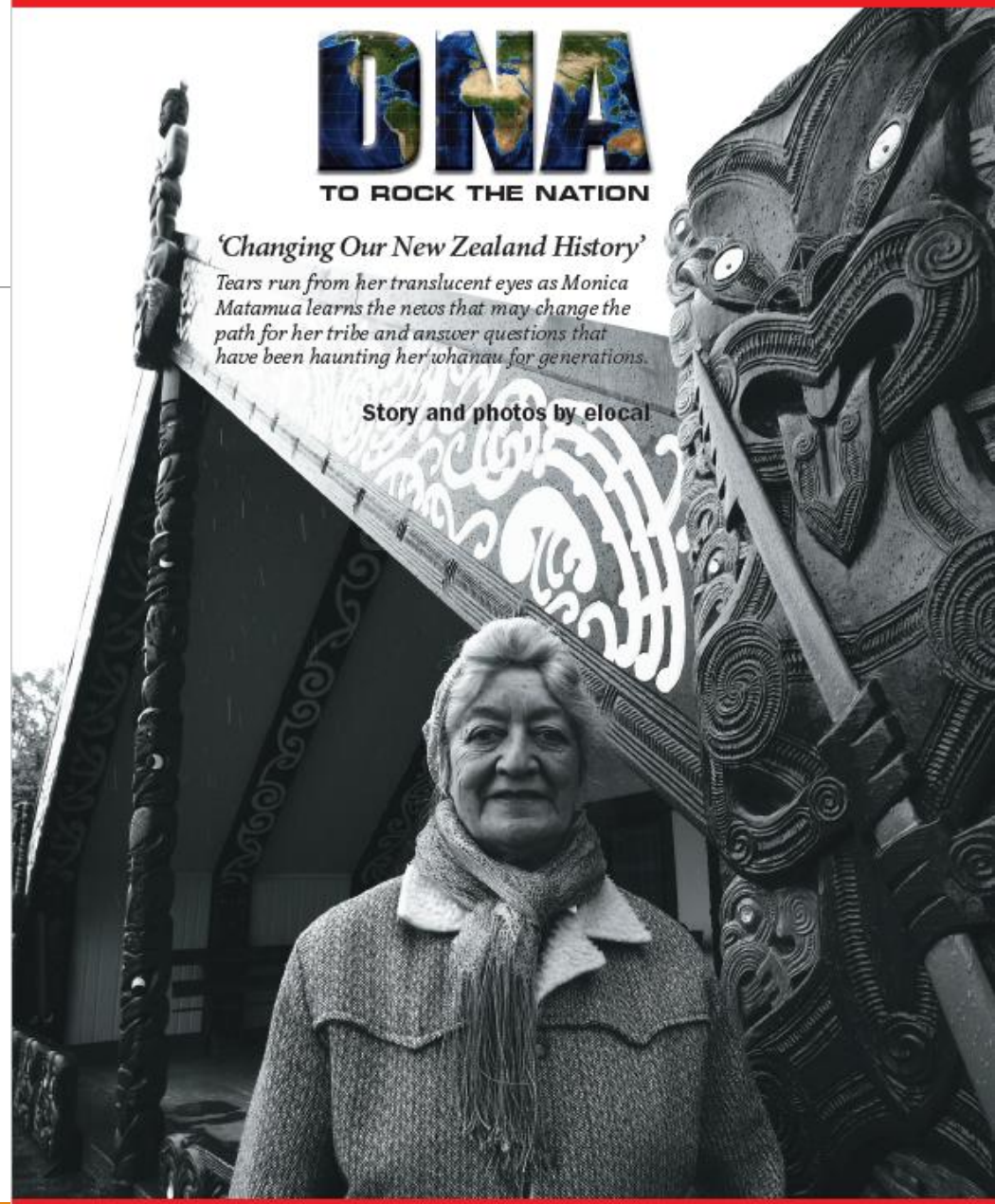


Episode 1 Redheads

NEW ZEALAND



Skeletons in the Cupboard



DNA

TO ROCK THE NATION

'Changing Our New Zealand History'

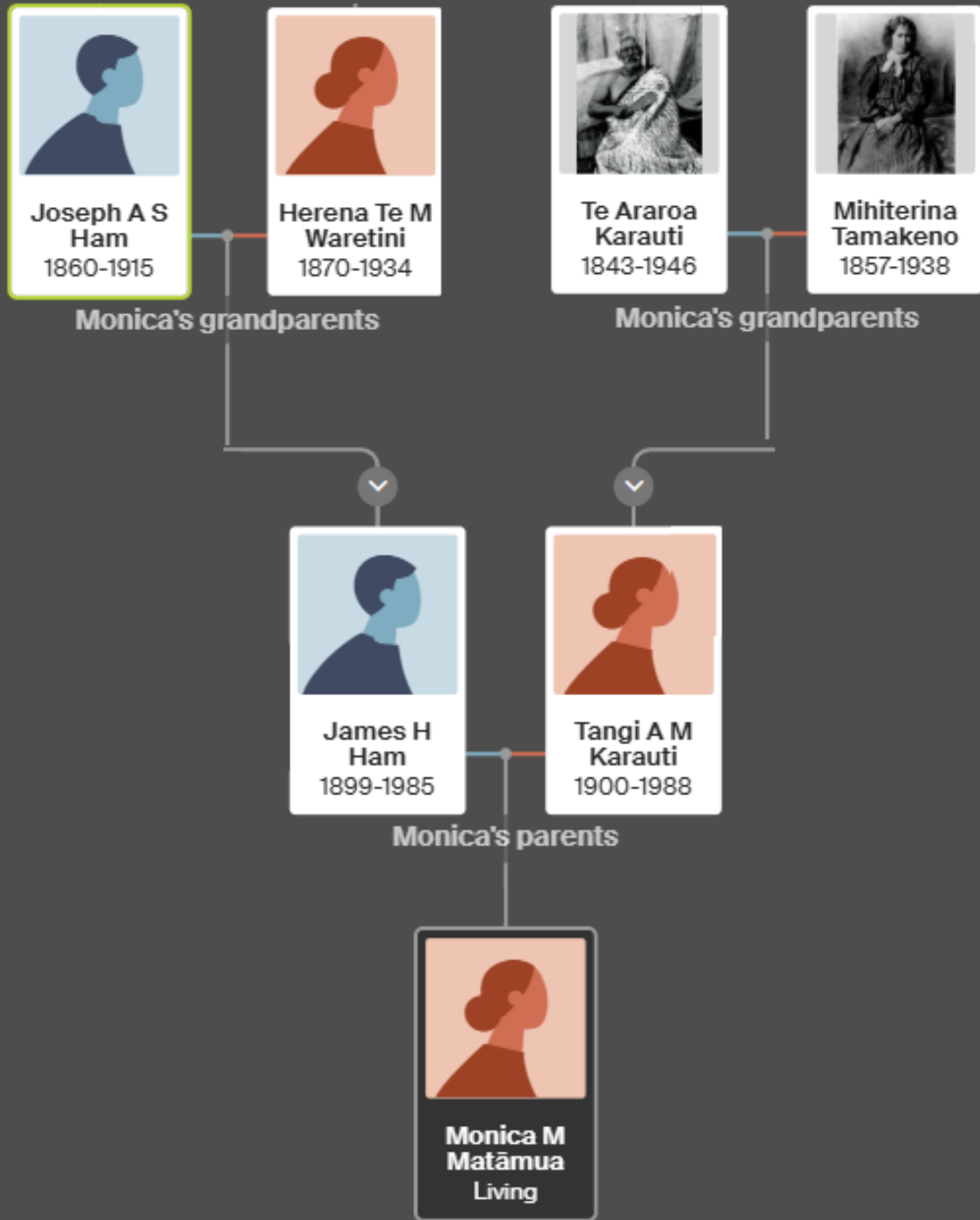
Tears run from her translucent eyes as Monica Matamua learns the news that may change the path for her tribe and answer questions that have been haunting her whānau for generations.

Story and photos by elocal

National
Geographic's
Genographic
Project Geno 2.0
DNA test

European
DNA: 24%








A (Very) New Zealand Conspiracy Theory

- Fighting for 250-acre land in Te Rena, with \$40,000+ in legal fees
- In her 50s, she lived in a tent for some years, frequently evicted by local Maori
- She now lives, at age 90, out the back of her shop, after her house had burnt down
- Wider decline of Taumarunui area

231 TRP SUIT YOURSELF THE FAMILY

TOYOTA AUSTRALIA
TOW





TAUMARUNUI RACING
PIGEON CLUB

SPORTS CLUB OF
TAUMARUNUI



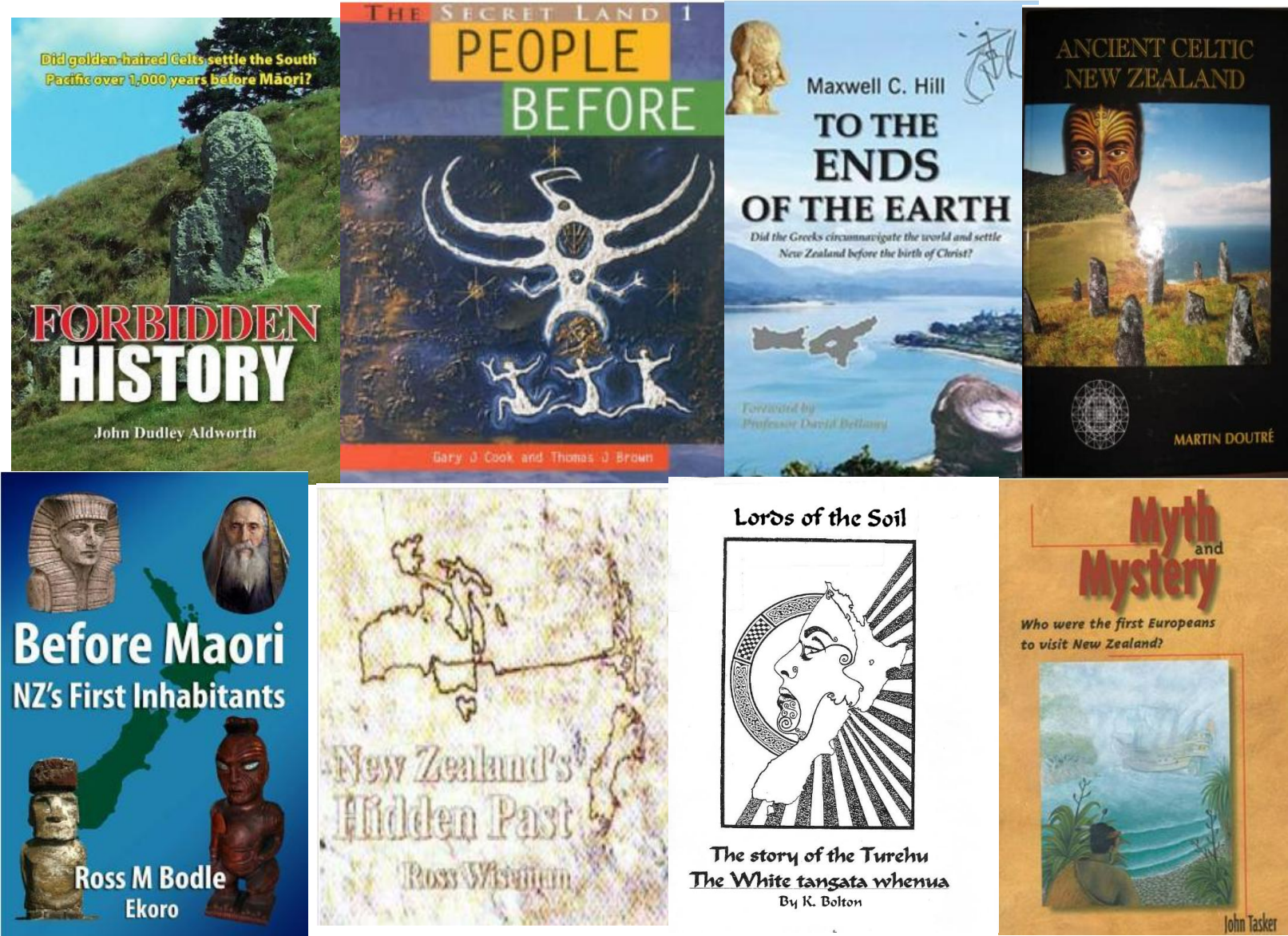
A (Very) New Zealand Conspiracy Theory

Why does she believe?

- Symbolic compensation for loss
- Demonization of other Māori

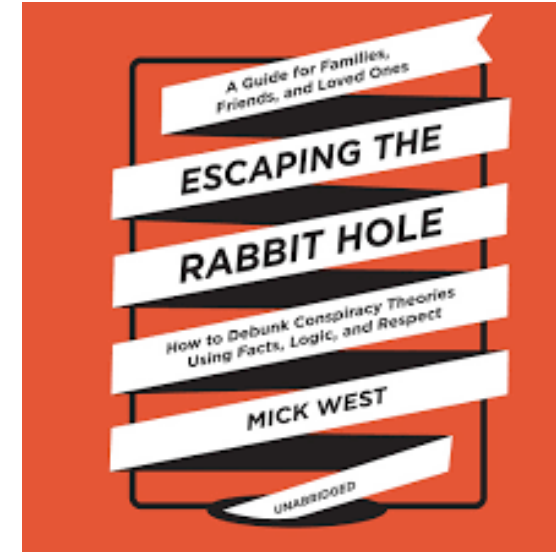
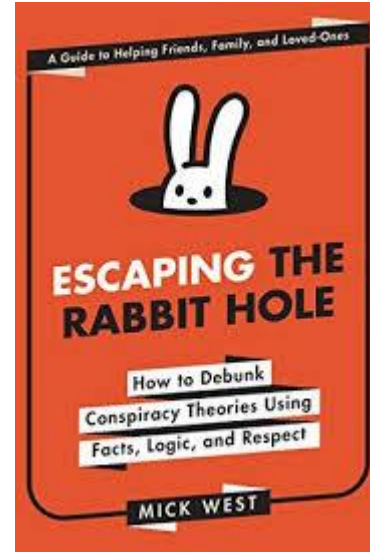
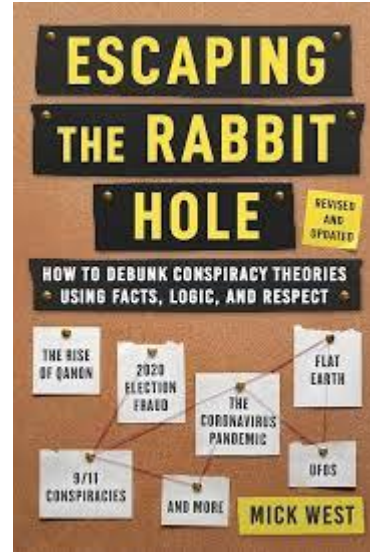
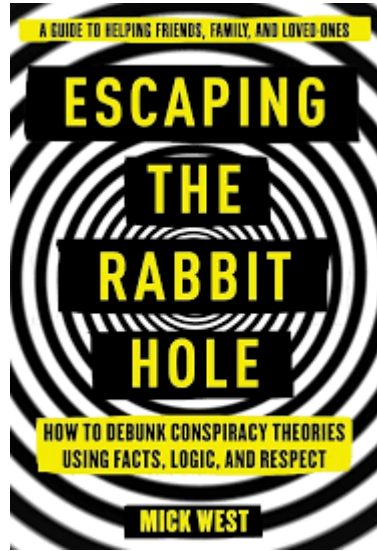
Provides sense of superiority, rights, justice, emboldening

Conspiracy theorist books on White Pre-Polynesian Myth



For a counter, see:
Deane Galbraith,
“Indigenous Identity
Appropriation in
Aotearoa New
Zealand” *Genealogy*
(2024) and
“Ngāti Hotu in
Paradise” *Journal of
the Bible and Its
Reception* (April 2025)

Recommended reading:



***"Escaping the Rabbit Hole:
How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories Using Facts, Logic, and Respect"***
by Mick West (2018)