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Is Belief in Conspiracy Theories Stable or Moody? Evidence from Panel Data in Croatia*

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Summary

Research on conspiratorial thinking (CT) has grown in both breadth and scope in recent years, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet a key lacuna remains, as evidence on the temporal stability of CT is still limited. We address this gap using a four-wave panel survey in Croatia conducted between 2022 and 2025 to assess CT stability at the between-person and within-person levels. To place CT on a broader stability spectrum, we benchmark it against core political attitudes, including ideology, political interest, trust in government, and external political efficacy. Results show that CT displays strong rank-order persistence and only modest aggregate change, placing it alongside other trait-like constructs. At the same time, within-person dynamics are not absent, since a meaningful share of the respondents shift their stance across waves, indicating variability beneath high between-person stability. Exploratory profiling further suggests that baseline TikTok use distinguishes respondents who change their CT position over time from those who remain stable. Overall, CT appears highly stable but not immovable, highlighting the need for further research on when and why shifts occur and whether they generalize across contexts.

Keywords: Conspiracism, Conspiracy Theories, Panel Data, Political Attitudes, Attitude Stability

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Introduction

Beliefs in conspiracy theories (CTs) have become a prominent object of research across political science, psychology, communication, and sociology, because these beliefs predict politically and socially significant outcomes – lower institutional trust, reduced willingness to engage in conventional politics, higher levels of polarization, and weaker compliance with public-health recommendations, among others. Conspiracy theories are usually defined as explanations of (significant) events that attribute causality to (secret) coordinated actions of (powerful) actors pursuing (malevolent) goals while concealing the truth from the public (Blanuša, 2024; Coady, 2006; Dentith and Orr, 2017; Douglas *et al*., 2019; Keeley, 1999). An abundance of literature has mapped the correlates of conspiratorial thinking, emphasizing motivational antecedents (epistemic, existential, and social motives), cognitive styles (pattern perception and agency detection), and political-psychological dispositions such as distrust and feelings of powerlessness (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018; van Prooijen and van Vugt, 2018).

However, amid these developments, the field has repeatedly pointed to a crucial open question: to what extent are conspiratorial beliefs stable predispositions, and to what extent are they context-responsive, event-driven opinions? Despite frequent theorizing on both sides, empirical evidence on longitudinal stability, especially evidence that distinguishes population-level stability from within-person change, remains comparatively limited. For example, an overview study shows that only 5.5% of conspiracy theory research uses longitudinal designs (Pilch *et al*., 2023), even though such designs are a prerequisite for assessing stability. Against this backdrop, we conduct a longitudinal study using a four-wave panel survey in Croatia to shed light on this under-researched question.

In doing so, we aim to make several contributions. *Firstly*, this study provides some of the first empirical evidence on the stability of CT over a multi-year period, covering a longer time span than most existing panel work (see Williams *et al*., 2024). By spanning a longer period and avoiding pre–post analyses of single events, we provide more robust evidence on CT stability over time and capture gradual attitudinal change rather than the short-term fluctuations that characterize most existing work (see Mancosu and Vassallo, 2022). *Secondly*, we apply a methodological approach that distinguishes different levels of stability (inter- and intra-individual) and enables intuitive comparison with other political attitudes, thereby offering a more fine-grained assessment and stronger contextualization of the findings (Schimpf, Wuttke and Schoen, 2024). *Thirdly*, in an exploratory part of the analysis, we examine what characterizes respondents who remain consistent in their CT scores versus those who do not, with the aim of providing novel insight into different stability profiles.

The study is structured as follows. We first outline two distinct positions on CT stability and situate our hypothesis between them. We then pose our research question and discuss possible factors that may differentiate stable from unstable CT groups. In the methodological section, we first elaborate on Croatia as a case and describe the panel-data setup. Next, we develop the research strategy, outlining the steps used to separate between-person from within-person stability and to profile stable and unstable respondents. In the final section, we discuss the findings considering the ongoing debates on conspiracy theories, acknowledge the study's limitations, and offer directions for future research.

Conspiratorial Beliefs: Between Predisposition and Situational Response

A central unresolved question in this field of research concerns the temporal nature of conspiratorial thinking: are conspiratorial beliefs stable predispositions or context-sensitive opinions? While the literature has generated extensive knowledge about the psychological, social, and political correlates of conspiracism, it has devoted comparatively little systematic attention to its longitudinal dynamics. Yet the degree of stability of conspiratorial beliefs has far-reaching implications for how scholars interpret their causes and consequences.

One influential perspective conceptualizes conspiratorial beliefs as expressions of a *relatively stable underlying disposition*, often termed conspiracy mentality, conspiracy mindset, or conspiracist ideation (Bruder *et al*., 2013; Imhoff and Bruder, 2014). This dispositional view builds on the observation that belief in one conspiracy theory tends to predict belief in others, suggesting a generalized interpretive framework, i.e., a monological belief system, through which individuals understand political and social reality (Goertzel, 1994; Enders and Uscinski, 2021). In this view, conspiratorial beliefs form a loosely coherent syndrome linked by deep-seated distrust toward authorities and powerful actors (Douglas *et al*., 2017; van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018). Because such orientations are tied to personality traits, worldviews, and long-standing experiences of political alienation, they should exhibit considerable stability over time and function as durable lenses for interpreting new information (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014).

At the same time, a substantial body of research emphasizes the *situational responsiveness* of conspiratorial beliefs. Periods of crisis and uncertainty – terrorist attacks, economic shocks, pandemics, crises, and wars – tend to generate surges in conspiracy narratives and heightened public receptivity to them (Douglas *et al*., 2019; Uscinski *et al*., 2022a). Experimental and observational studies show that conspiratorial beliefs can respond to elite cues, media framing, perceived threats, and changing trust environments (Jolley and Douglas, 2014; Uscinski, 2022). The rapid emergence and diffusion of "viral" conspiracy narratives in digital media en-

vironments also suggest that some conspiracy endorsements may be episodic, expressive, or opportunistic rather than deeply internalized. From this perspective, conspiratorial beliefs may function less as stable predispositions than as interpretive responses to shifting information environments.

Rather than treating these perspectives as mutually exclusive, recent theoretical and empirical work suggests that conspiratorial beliefs may combine stable between-person differences with within-person variability. Longitudinal research increasingly shows that individuals differ in baseline conspiratorial predispositions while also exhibiting meaningful changes in endorsement over time (Liekefett *et al*., 2021; Williams *et al*., 2024). This points to a hybrid temporal structure in which conspiratorial thinking occupies an intermediate position on a broader trait–state continuum. Such a view also helps reconcile a common empirical pattern: conspiratorial beliefs often show robust associations with political attitudes and behaviors in cross-sectional research, yet remain responsive to short-term contextual developments. It also underscores the need to conceptualize stability at two levels: *inter-individual* (rank-order) stability, asking whether individuals who score high on conspiratorial beliefs at one point tend to remain higher than others over time, and *intra-individual* stability, asking whether individuals maintain consistent levels of conspiratorial belief or shift positions across waves. Recognizing these two forms of stability and integrating dispositional and situational perspectives, we adopt a middle-ground view (H1):

> *Conspiratorial thinking should show a mixed temporal pattern, marked by strong between-person persistence alongside meaningful within-person change*.

A corollary of this expectation is that temporal dynamics should be heterogeneous across respondents, with some individuals remaining stable and others changing across waves. To sum up, understanding where conspiratorial beliefs fall on this disposition–mood nexus is crucial for both theory and empirical inference. If conspiratorial beliefs are highly stable, they can plausibly function as causal drivers shaping political behavior and information processing. If they are highly volatile, they may primarily reflect contextual reactions rather than independent explanatory factors. If they are moderately stable but heterogeneous across individuals, then their causal relevance may depend on who holds stable beliefs and who does not.

Are There Patterns? Situating a Research Question

Beyond estimating the two elements of stability, we also examine whether stability *itself* is socially and politically patterned. Given the scarcity of prior research and mixed findings, we treat this as an exploratory problem and ask whether respond-

ents who remain anchored in their conspiratorial thinking differ in their social and political background characteristics and orientations from those who change over time. Thus, we formulate the following research question (RQ1):

> *Which background characteristics distinguish respondents who remain stable in CT from those who change over the duration of the panel?*

Answering this points us in two directions. Firstly, classic accounts of attitude research emphasize that political preferences are not developed and held independently. At least to some extent, highly symbolic orientations map and constrain other attitudes that are part of a person's belief system. In politics, key anchors are partisan identity and ideology, which serve as heuristics for interpreting information and relating specific issues to broader worldviews, with pronounced constraining potential via motivated reasoning (Turner-Zwinkels and Brandt, 2023). Applied to conspiratorial thinking, this suggests that those with partisan attachments may be more likely to "hold the fort", keeping their attitudes aligned with their political camp (and identity) and thereby exhibiting greater stability over time. Along with this, ideological extremism may further reinforce stability: more radical positions tend to be held with greater endurance and stronger conviction (Zwicker, van Prooijen and Krouwel, 2020), potentially making other attitudes in the belief system resistant to change. If political extremism and conspiracism coalesce as a way of making sense of complexity and providing simple, intentional explanations (van Prooijen, Krouwel and Pollet, 2015), this constellation may plausibly appear as a stable feature. Alongside these traits, recent research has argued that authoritarianism and conspiracy theory endorsement may be ingrained as a convergent disposition, demonstrating that their link is stable across contexts (Capraro *et al*., 2026). Importantly, the same research shows in their Study 6 that within-person changes in authoritarianism and conspiracism do not lead to subsequent updating in their respective counterparts, pointing to a rather fixed relationship. Moreover, authoritarian predispositions have been linked to perceived attitude stability more generally (Xu *et al*., 2020). Taken together, baseline partisan identification, ideological extremity, and authoritarianism are plausible correlates of CT stability.

Secondly, factors related to information processing and exposure may relate to (in)stability. Political knowledge can cut both ways (Vegetti and Mancosu, 2020). On the one hand, it may reduce conspiracism by equipping citizens to evaluate the validity of claims (Jardina and Traugott, 2019). In the context of COVID-19 conspiracies, topic-specific knowledge has been linked to lower belief in COVID-19 conspiratorial claims (Heiss *et al*., 2021). On the other hand, political knowledge can also support motivated reasoning, enabling the defense of identity-consistent beliefs and strengthening the endorsement of congenial conspiracy theories (Miller, Saunders and Farhart, 2016). Finally, social media is widely recognized as "a

key player in the dissemination of conspiracy theories" (Enders *et al*., 2023, p. 1) and may contribute to the dynamization of conspiratorial thinking (Romer and Jamieson, 2021; Zulianello and Guasti, 2025). Of all the platforms, TikTok is especially relevant because it is rapidly expanding in Croatia (Newman *et al*., 2025) and it plausibly shapes exposure differently than classic social networks (Gerbaudo, 2024). Unlike platforms organized around interpersonal ties, TikTok is driven primarily by algorithmic, content-first recommendations, and its engagement incentives privilege affectively engaging narratives that can platform conspiratorial and misleading content (Bösch and Divon, 2024; Grandinetti and Bruinsma, 2023), while also serving as a venue for corrective or debunking content (Bhargava *et al*., 2023). On the latter point, experimental evidence suggests expert videos disseminated via TikTok can combat COVID-19 misinformation (Li, Li and Yang, 2025). Together, these considerations suggest that stability in conspiratorial thinking may differ for groups with different levels of political knowledge and TikTok usage.

Methods

This section describes the data and measurement choices behind our analysis of CT stability and change in Croatia. We first present the case selection, panel design, sample characteristics, and attrition checks. We then introduce the CT scale and its psychometric validation, including longitudinal measurement invariance. Finally, we outline our analytical strategy for assessing inter-individual stability and intra-individual change and motivate the benchmark attitudes used to situate CT on a broader trait–state continuum.

Case Selection and Sample

Assessing the stability–volatility nexus of political attitudes is most informative in contexts where the relevant objects are salient and politically activated, that is, in environments where citizens are exposed to cues and stimuli that can reasonably be expected to elicit change (see Zaller and Feldman, 1992). Otherwise, analyses risk understating dynamics because the external conditions that render attitudes prominent (and therefore potentially variable) are weak or absent (Kustov, Laaker and Reeler, 2021). We therefore deploy from a case that provides a meaningful stress test for both between-person stability and within-person change in conspiratorial thinking.

In that light, Croatia constitutes a particularly informative setting. As a relatively low-trust society (Bovan and Baketa, 2022), Croatia belongs to a broader family of cases in which conspiracism is a visible and normalized feature of political discourse and imagination, rooted both historically and in contemporary public debate (Blanuša *et al*., 2025, p. 17; Brautović, 2024). At the same time, conspira-

cism is not so pervasive as to render Croatia an extreme outlier (Hinšt, 2020), which would raise concerns about the stimuli being unusually skewed and the inferential leverage being limited. Indeed, comparative evidence suggests that general levels of conspiratorial inclination in Croatia are broadly in line with the European average (Imhoff *et al*., 2022). Moreover, Croatia's recent political developments plausibly amplify attitudinal activation and variation. In particular, the right-wing populist Homeland Movement (Rooduijn *et al*., 2024; Zaslove, Huber and Meijers, 2025) entered the governing coalition following the 2024 parliamentary election, campaigning, among other issues, on conspiracist elements, including references to the "Great Replacement" (Šupe, 2024). Additionally, the COVID-19 and post-pandemic period broadened the conspiratorial repertoire in Croatia, as elsewhere, with some actors questioning the governance model and the dominant healthcare narrative, strengthening the nexus between anti-establishment politics and conspiratorial thinking among citizens (Ančić and Cepić, 2021; Henjak and Vuksan-Ćusa, 2024). Thus, Croatia combines a demand-side constituency in which conspiracism is politically resonant with supply-side elite cues that can activate conspiratorial narratives. This makes it well suited to our aims: conspiratorial beliefs are neither exceptionally high nor unusually low, yet the political context provides salient cues that plausibly stimulate both stability and change.

In analysis, we rely on a recent online panel dataset fielded in Croatia from 2022 to 2025 (Wave 1: May 2022; Wave 2: January 2024; Wave 3: June 2024; Wave 4: March 2025) as part of the PRO-FACT (Wave 1) and ADMO (Waves 2-4) projects. The dataset is based on a national quota probabilistic sample of Croatian internet users, 18-65 years old, selected via a two-stage stratified procedure. Further details on sampling and panel composition are provided in Blanuša *et al*. (2025). Data collection was conducted by *Ipsos*, a reputable polling agency, and attention checks were implemented in every wave on multiple instances. For the analyses reported here, we restrict the sample to respondents who participated in all four waves and provided valid scores on all variables used in the models (N = 579, all legal age). Balanced sample characteristics are reported in the Appendix (part A). To assess whether panel attrition and self-selection might bias our findings, we compare "stayers" (respondents observed through Wave 4) with those who dropped out over the panel waves. As shown in the Appendix (part B), the two groups do not differ systematically on the main substantive variables (conspiratorial beliefs) or on other key constructs used in the analysis, nor do they differ meaningfully on the standard indicators of political engagement (e.g., political interest/knowledge). The only consistent difference concerns age: respondents who remain in the panel are, on average, older ($p = 0.001$), a common pattern in online panel retention (Partheymüller, Kritzinger and Wagner, 2025; Pannico *et al*., 2025). However, this compositional shift would, if anything, bias results modestly toward greater stability rather than

artificially inflate volatility. Overall, we find no evidence of selective attrition that would plausibly undermine the robustness of our conclusions.

Finally, panel data is essential for our substantive goal because they allow us to separate between-person differences (who is generally more conspiratorial) from within-person dynamics (who changes over time). This is particularly valuable in a period in which the Croatian party system further dimensionalized and incorporated actors and issues that plausibly supplied conspiracy-related cues. In other words, the panel design lets us track individual-level change under heightened salience, going beyond aggregate trends and compositional shifts, and reducing concerns that results are driven by time-invariant differences between respondents.

Dependent Variable

To measure inclination toward conspiracy theories, we rely on an eight-item scale that largely captures it as globalist conspiracist ideation (see Blanuša and Kulenović, 2018; Milošević Đorđević, Žeželj and Đurić, 2021). The items are as follows, measured on a 1-5 scale (answers ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

1. *Large pharmaceutical companies deliberately spread various diseases to increase the sales of their drugs*,
2. *The global elite seeks to control the population growth on Earth through GMO that shortens human life*,
3. *Jews control the most important global events*,
4. *Masons and illuminati have long been significantly influencing the decisions of governments in many countries*,
5. *There is a secret organization in the world whose goal is to destroy states and impose a "New World Order"*,
6. *G. Soros, through organizations he finances, only spies on, and undermines the countries in which he operates*,
7. *The destruction of the WTC buildings in New York on 9/11/2001, was plotted by the secret services of the USA*,
8. *Regardless of who is officially in charge of governments, media, and corporations, there is a secret group of powerful individuals who control world events, such as wars and economic crises*.

Substantively, most items tap into malevolent global conspiracies (Brotherton, French and Pickering, 2013): the core idea that social and political events are orchestrated by secret plots of a small group of powerful actors (Douglas *et al*., 2019). The scale also includes items related to personal well-being, especially health/pharmaceutical conspiracies, which became particularly salient during and after the

COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, several items capture government malfeasance and more event- or person-based cues, including well-known conspiracist tropes relating to 9/11 (Guinjoan and Galais, 2023) and George Soros (Plenta, 2020), both of which have long been present in European public discourse. Altogether, the scale intentionally combines multiple facets of conspiratorial thinking, spanning higher vs. lower levels of abstraction and combining diffuse conspiracism with recognizable contemporary cues.

At the measurement level, the items form a unidimensional factor structure (loading on a 0.65 to 0.87 range, see Appendix, part C), show high internal consistency ($0.92<\alpha<0.93$), and the measurement model fits the data well across waves (CFI=0.97, TLI=0.97; RMSEA=0.04; SRMR=0,04).[1] Crucially, we also tested longitudinal measurement invariance, i.e., whether the same latent construct is psychometrically equivalent across panel waves. This is a prerequisite for a meaningful comparison, as we cannot assume that the scale yields consistent measurement across waves (Putnick and Bornstein, 2016). As reported in the Appendix (part D), we establish scalar invariance across waves, implying that both factor loadings and item intercepts are sufficiently stable over time to place the latent construct on a common scale (Liu *et al*., 2017, p. 3). Central to our research strategy, this enables meaningful comparisons of latent means across waves and supports the interpretation of over-time patterns in between-person stability and within-person change using a consistent metric.

Research Strategy

We configure our analytical strategy following the recent work by Schimpf, Wuttke and Schoen (2024), who examine the temporal stability of a conceptually related construct, populist attitudes. We begin by assessing inter-individual stability.

Firstly, we graph distributions and test the mean-level change in conspiracy thinking (CT) across the four panel waves to gauge aggregate change from 2022 to 2025. By doing this, we simply assess whether the sample shifts upward or downward in CT over time. *Secondly*, we compute test–retest correlations between wave 1 and each subsequent wave. We interpret the time-lag pattern of these correlations as a descriptive heuristic for situating CT on a trait–state continuum, rather than as a fully specified latent-variable decomposition (see Steyer, Geiser and Fiege, 2012). Specifically, we treat the minimum wave-1-to-wave-k correlation as a lower bound

[1] External validity assessments are reported in the Appendix (part E). Specifically, we examine whether CT is associated with well-established correlates and similar constructs such as conspiracy mentality, anti-elitism, and national narcissism (Uscinski *et al*., 2022b; Sternisko *et al*., 2023). The results show consistently positive and statistically significant associations across waves, broadly in line with prior research.

of time-invariant rank-order stability (*trait-like*), differences across lags as indicating persistence with updating (*autoregressive carry-over*), and the gap between the maximum correlation and 1 as reflecting wave-specific variability including measurement noise (*state-like*) (Kenny and Zautra, 1995, pp. 53–54; 2001). Operationally, we summarize these quantities as: trait-like stability = min_{r1k}, autoregressive component $max_{r1k} = min_{r1k}$, and state-like component = $1 - max_{r1k}$, where r_{1k} denotes the correlation between wave 1 and wave k.

However, as these procedures are centered on variables rather than within-person trajectories, focusing only on them would omit intra-individual variation. For example, if all respondents increase their CT scores by a similar amount between waves, rank-order correlations can remain high even though substantial within-person change occurs. Conversely, if some respondents increase while others decrease, rank-order correlations can be low because relative positions are reshuffled, even when most individual changes are modest.

To address this, we test intra-individual CT stability and change using two additional approaches. *Thirdly*, we depict within-individual change by classifying respondents according to whether they change their substantive positioning on the CT scale. To do so, we define three categories based on respondents' CT scores: CT-disagreeing respondents (below 3), neutral or undecisive respondents (3-4), and CT-agreeing respondents (4+). These thresholds correspond to disagreement / ambivalence / agreement zones on the Likert scale and follow previous attitude-stability research using opinion-band classification. Then, based on whether respondents cross these groupings across the four waves, we classify them as stable (if they remain in one category throughout) and unstable (if they move across categories at least once), effectively splitting respondents into those who remain in their opinion camp and those who cross opinion boundaries (Hill and Kriesi, 2001). In this way, we model change as shifting between qualitative categories rather than focusing on within-boundary intensity. *Fourthly*, to complement this, we estimate absolute differences and within-person standard deviations for each respondent across pairs of subsequent waves and across the panel (average within-person movement). Adjacent-wave absolute differences capture successive movement, while within-person SD captures overall dispersion across waves. These descriptive statistics gauge person-level dynamic characteristics (Shryock, Condon and Weston, 2025), illustrating the magnitude of intra-individual change and movement heterogeneity.

However, if we treated CT on a trait–state continuum by itself, we would be limited to absolute stability estimates, lacking relative comparisons and a clear sense of how our findings are situated. Therefore, we also include other political attitudes as benchmark constructs. We selected these benchmarks based on two criteria: they represent field-standard constructs in public opinion research, and they

plausibly span a range from more stable to less stable orientations. The underlying logic is that this provides a more intuitive and substantively grounded assessment of CT stability, as the selected benchmarks are well-established and span different positions along the trait–state nexus.

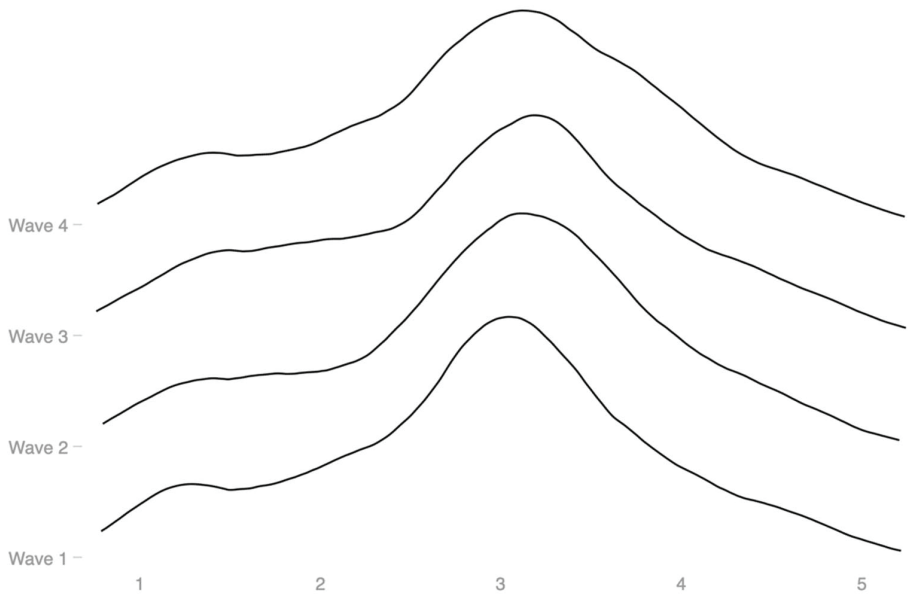
Concretely, we benchmark CT against political ideology, political interest, trust in government, and external political efficacy. We include political ideology as a symbolic orientation (Krosnick, 1991), thus serving as a benchmark for a comparatively stable construct (Reeskens *et al*., 2021). We expect this to be especially pronounced in Croatia, where left–right positioning functions as an overarching cue structuring dominant political cleavages and sorting (Henjak, 2005; Raos, 2024). We further include political interest (Prior, 2010; Larsen, 2022) and trust in government (Devine and Valgarðsson, 2024) as intermediate reference points: the cited literature suggests that both contain a stable baseline yet remain open to contextual updating, even if their degree of stability remains contested. This should be particularly pronounced for trust in government, which centers on evaluations of governmental competence and intentions and is therefore especially susceptible to short-term contextual influences and updating (Kritzinger *et al*., 2021). As a final benchmark, we include an external political efficacy indicator, assuming it is among the most volatile attitudes in our set. Namely, external political efficacy is strongly perception-based, capturing feelings about the responsiveness of political processes and institutions (Geurkink *et al*., 2019). Although distinct from government satisfaction, it follows a similar logic and is positioned toward the more state-like end of comparable benchmark setups (Theuwis, 2025). Wordings, operationalizations and descriptive statistics of the constructs used for comparison are detailed in part F of the Appendix.

For this exploratory endeavor, we estimate a baseline logistic regression model to examine which characteristics are associated with subsequent stability versus change in conspiracy thinking. We regress an indicator of opinion-boundary crossing on political attitudes theorized to relate to stability (partisan identification, ideological extremism, and authoritarian predispositions) as well as on factors expected to relate to instability (political knowledge and TikTok use). We control for baseline CT level because boundary crossing is mechanically related to the starting position on the CT scale. We additionally include baseline distance to the nearest cutpoint to adjust for the unequal reclassification opportunity inherent in threshold coding. Finally, we include standard sociodemographic controls (age, gender, settlement size, and education). All covariates are measured at wave 1, so the model should be read as describing baseline correlates of later boundary crossing, with the aim of profiling stable and unstable groups rather than identifying causal effects. The Appendix (part G) reports operationalization details.

Results

On the inter-individual part, we start by showing the distribution of conspiracy thinking across waves. Figure 1 below presents ridgeline density plots by wave. As is evident, conspiratorial attitudes are unimodal, centered at the scale midpoint of 3 ($2.90<\bar{x}<2.99$), and approximately normally distributed over the 2022–2025 period. This indicates meaningful heterogeneity across the full-scale range in all waves, ensuring sufficient variance for assessing both stability and change over time. This also implies how CT inclination is broadly balanced, with most respondents occupying the middle ground. Crucially, the overlap of the wave-specific densities is substantial, suggesting that the overall distribution remains largely stable at the aggregate level across the panel period. At the same time, Figure 1 shows that, relative to Wave 1, later waves are slightly denser in the 3 to 4 range and display a somewhat more pronounced right tail. This pattern is consistent with a gradual increase in CT, as also indicated by the pooled OLS specification regressing CT on wave indicators (Appendix, part H). Substantively, however, the shift is small (around 1/12 of a standard deviation) and is best characterized as a marginal aggregate-level uptick rather than a pronounced change.

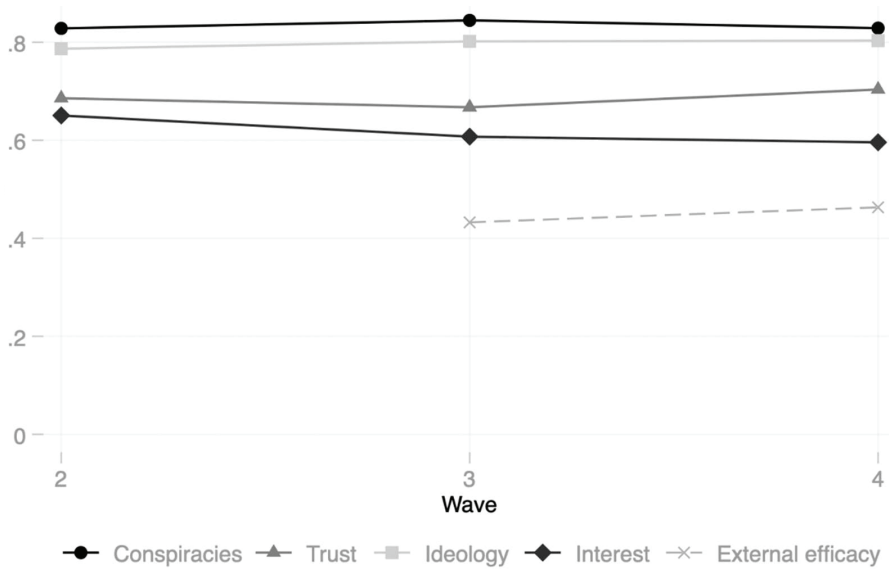
Figure 1. Density Plot of Dependent Variable Across Waves



Source: PRO-FACT and ADMO survey results

In the second between-individual assessment, we examine rank-order stability by correlating respondents' scores at the first measurement point (May 2022) with each subsequent wave (January 2024, June 2024, March 2025) for CT and the benchmark constructs. Figure 2 plots these Wave-1-to-Wave-*t* correlations. The most immediate pattern is that conspiracy thinking (denoted with black circles) exhibits the highest correlations across all lags, indicating that respondents who score relatively high (or low) on CT in 2022 tend to remain relatively high (or low) compared to others in later waves – more so than is the case for any other construct. Ideology follows closely, whereas trust in government and political interest display lower rank-order stability, albeit still residing on the more stable side. External political efficacy stands out as the least stable benchmark, with correlations below .50.

Figure 2. Correlations Between Constructs (First Panel Wave – Subsequent Waves)



Source: PRO-FACT and ADMO survey results

To further contextualize, we summarize these patterns into a simple trait–state heuristic in Table 1. For CT, even the lowest Wave-1 correlation is very high (≈.83), and correlations differ only marginally across lags (≈.02), suggesting strong baseline stability with little drift. The remaining distance to 1 (≈.15) captures wave-specific influences and measurement noise, that is, a situational or unstable component. By comparison, ideology shows a similarly strong, stable component (≈.79), while trust in government (≈.67) and political interest (≈.60) occupy a middle position:

these constructs are more trait-like overall but display substantial room for reordering over time. External political efficacy stands out as the most situational benchmark, with the state-like portion (≈.54) exceeding its stable component (≈.43).

Table 1. Descriptive Heuristic Decomposition of Selected Constructs

Construct	Trait-like	State-like	Autoregressive
Conspiracy theories	0.828	0.155	0.016
Ideology	0.787	0.197	0.017
Trust in government	0.667	0.296	0.036
Political interest	0.596	0.349	0.055
External political efficacy	0.433	0.537	0.031

Source: PRO-FACT and ADMO survey results

While the analyses so far show that belief in CTs is stable between people, rank-order stability speaks only to relative standing. It cannot tell us whether individuals' absolute levels of belief in CTs change over time. We therefore next turn to within-individual analyses, shifting the focus from whether people keep their place in the distribution to whether (and how often) their scores move across waves, and, if so, to what extent.

On that note, we present the percentage of respondents who cross an opinion boundary on conspiracy thinking and how often they do so in Table 2. What we observe is that about 6 in 10 respondents remain in the same opinion band they occupied at the start of the panel, suggesting no substantive attitudinal reconfiguration across waves. At the same time, Table 2 makes clear that stability is only part of the picture. Roughly 4 in 10 respondents cross at least one opinion boundary during the panel period, introducing within-person heterogeneity that is easy to miss when focusing only on rank-order persistence. Within this mover's group, roughly similar proportions shift at least once (18.83%) versus at least twice (17.27%), while only a very small fraction of 3.63% crosses boundaries in every wave-to-wave transition. This implies that a substantive portion of the sample does move across qualitatively different CT ranges, even if the aggregate ordering of respondents remains robust.

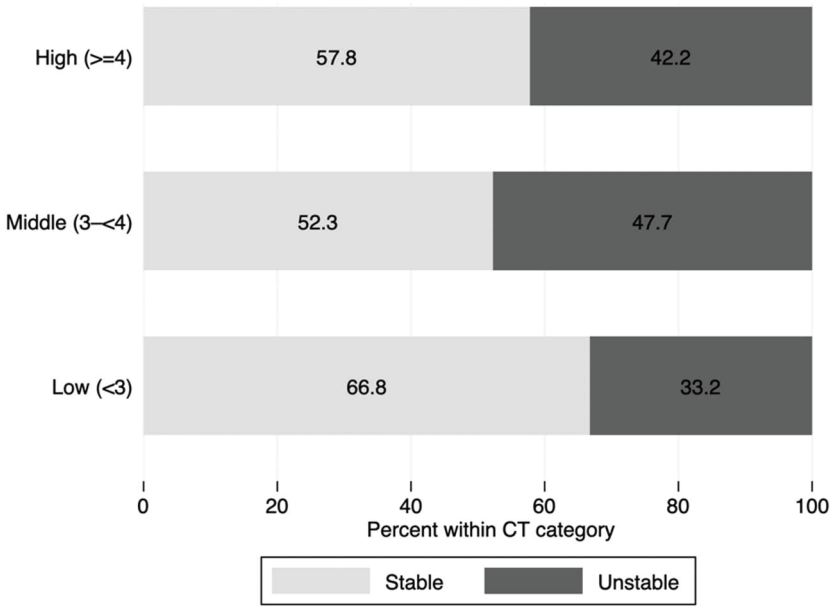
Table 2. Number of Times Respondent Crossed an Opinion Boundary (CT)

N	0	1	2	3
Percentage of respondents	60.28	18.83	17.27	3.63

Source: PRO-FACT and ADMO survey results

A logical next step, stemming directly from this mix of stability and boundary crossing, is to ask whether movement is equally likely among respondents at the low versus the high end of the CT scale. We illustrate this in Figure 3 below, which shows how stable and unstable groups distribute across low, middle, and high CT scorers. Zooming in, stability and crossing are not equally present across categories (χ^2=11.259, p=.004). Among those who begin in the low CT category, about 67% remain stable, whereas the corresponding share among high CT scorers is somewhat lower, around 58%. By the same token, the composition of movers reverses the pattern: boundary crossing is more common among those starting high. About 42% of the high-CT group comprises crossers, compared to 33% of the low-CT camp. The upshot is that those scoring low are more anchored in their opinion, while those scoring high are less set in their ways. Furthermore, the middle category stands out as the most mixed group. Respondents who start in the 3 to 4 range are split almost evenly between stable (about 52%) and unstable (about 48%) trajectories, indicating the greatest susceptibility to crossing.

Figure 3. Stable-Unstable Distribution Across CT-Answer Categories



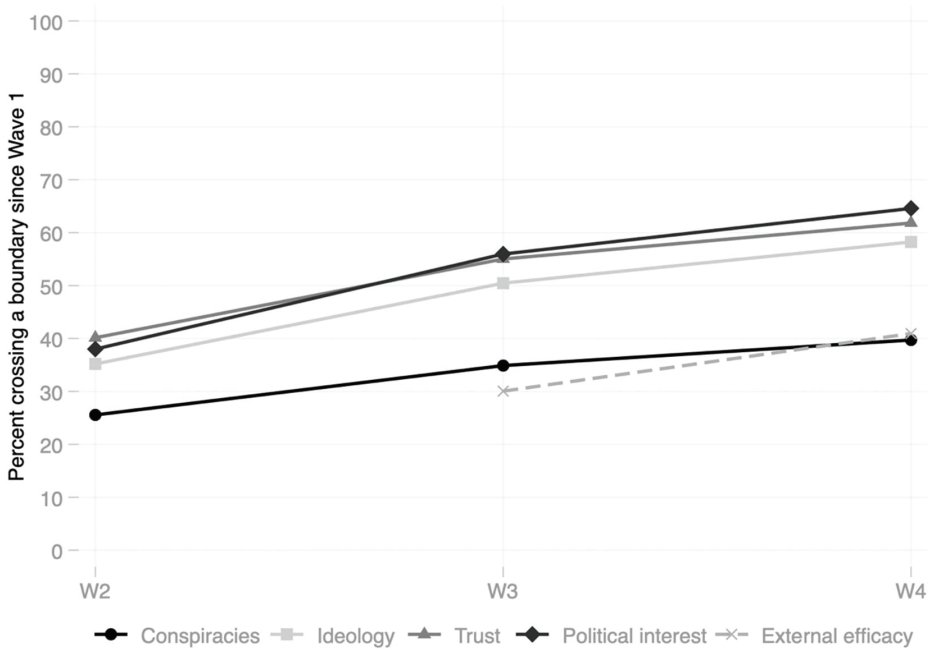
Source: PRO-FACT and ADMO survey results

Furthermore, we benchmark the within-individual stability of belief in CTs against other constructs. To contextualize the previous findings, we compute, for

each construct, the cumulative percentage of respondents who cross at least one opinion boundary as the panel unfolds. Figure 4 plots these shares and shows that boundary crossing accumulates steadily across waves for every construct, underscoring that within-person movement is not negligible even when aggregate differences between respondents remain robust. Even so, CT stands out as one of the more stable constructs, closely tracking external political efficacy: by the final wave, about 40% of respondents have crossed at least one CT boundary, compared to roughly 41% for external efficacy. By contrast, the other attitudes are markedly more volatile on this metric. For ideology, 58% of individuals move out of their initial band at least once, and the corresponding figures rise to 62% for trust in government and 65% for political interest.

At first glance, the similarity between CT and external political efficacy in terms of boundary crossing may appear at odds with their markedly different rank-order stability. However, these indicators capture distinct aspects of temporal dynamics and highlight an important methodological point: different stability metrics capture distinct dimensions of attitudinal change. Rank-order correlations reflect

Figure 4. Share of Respondents with Unstable Attitudes over Time, per Construct



Source: PRO-FACT and ADMO survey results

structural persistence in individuals' relative positioning within the belief distribution, whereas boundary crossing operationalizes qualitative shifts across substantively meaningful thresholds. In our data, conspiratorial thinking exhibits strong structural stability – individuals largely retain their position relative to others – while still allowing limited threshold movement at the margins. External political efficacy, by contrast, shows greater reshuffling in relative standing, even if cumulative threshold crossing appears similar. This distinction suggests that conspiratorial thinking is structurally anchored but not categorically rigid, whereas efficacy perceptions are more susceptible to relative reordering across individuals.

Building on this categorical perspective, we next report the magnitude of within-person change using the mean absolute change between successive waves, with the standard deviation in parentheses (Table 3 below). Consistent with the previous steps, belief in CTs shows the lowest volatility: its absolute change is among the smallest, on par with ideology. Furthermore, CT has the lowest standard deviation of change, indicating that, compared to benchmark constructs, a typical person changes attitude only a little, and that, when it does, changes tend to cluster around incremental movements. On the other side, trust in government, political interest, and external political efficacy are characterized by larger absolute changes, which is in line with the previous analysis on opinion boundaries.

Table 3. Absolute Changes in Attitudes and Across Successive Waves (SD)

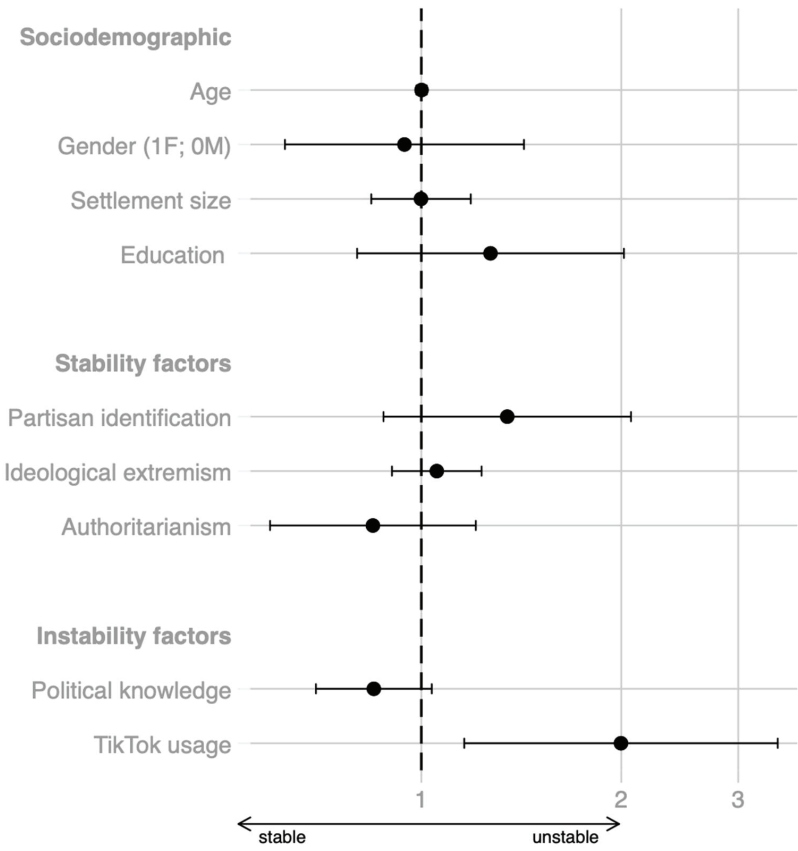
	W1-W2	W2-W3	W3-W4	Total
Conspiracy theories	0.10 (0.09)	0.09 (0.09)	0.09 (0.09)	0.09 (0.06)
Ideology	0.09 (0.12)	0.08 (0.11)	0.09 (0.12)	0.09 (0.10)
Trust in government	0.14 (0.16)	0.13 (0.14)	0.12 (0.13)	0.13 (0.10)
Political interest	0.15 (0.16)	0.15 (0.17)	0.13 (0.15)	0.14 (0.11)
External political efficacy	NA	NA	0.13 (0.16)	0.13 (0.16)

Note: For comparability, all constructs were rescaled to range from 0 to 1.
Source: PRO-FACT and ADMO survey results

Ultimately, to answer RQ1, we profile how stable and unstable groups differ in baseline characteristics using a logistic regression with boundary crossing as the outcome (1=unstable; 0=stable). Figure 5 (below) reports odds ratios. In these ex-

ploratory baseline associations, TikTok use is the only statistically significant correlate (p=.013). Respondents who reported using TikTok at Wave 1 are more often observed among boundary crossers over the panel. The estimated odds ratio is close to 2, meaning that TikTok users have about twice the odds of being classified as unstable rather than stable, conditional on the other covariates. To further corroborate our reasoning on TikTok, we additionally included an indicator capturing the use of other social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube) to assess whether

Figure 5. Odds-Ratios Estimation (Logistic Regression Model, Boundary-Crossing)



Note: Whiskers denote 95% confidence intervals. Estimates whose confidence intervals do not cross 1 on the x-axis are statistically significant. Baseline CT level and distance to cut point were included in the model but are omitted from the plot. Full results are shown in Appendix, part G.
Source: PRO-FACT and ADMO survey results

this pattern reflects social media use more generally. As reported in part G of the Appendix, the "other platforms" indicator is not statistically significant, whereas the TikTok association remains significant. Taken together, TikTok use is the only baseline characteristic that differentiates boundary crossers from stable respondents, while the remaining covariates, including those expected to reinforce stability, do not display systematic group differences in this profiling model. We now move on to the next section where we discuss the full set of findings, returning to H1 and answering RQ1. Furthermore, we also consider the implications and limits of our analysis.

Discussion

This study set out to examine whether belief in conspiracy theories should be understood primarily as a stable predisposition or as a context-sensitive and volatile orientation. Using four-wave panel data from Croatia (2022–2025) and benchmarking conspiratorial thinking against established political attitudes, we find that long-standing global conspiratorial beliefs display a distinctive temporal profile. Taking stock of the analysis, it seems how CTs are *highly stable in relative terms yet not immovable at the individual level.* Our findings both confirm and refine H1. Conspiracy thinking indeed combines between-person stability with within-person change. However, its rank-order persistence places it closer to symbolic political orientations than the "intermediate" positioning suggested by parts of the literature. Thus, global conspiratorial thinking behaves like symbolic orientation with bounded plasticity.

At the aggregate and between-person levels, belief in long-standing conspiracy theories exhibits strong rank-order persistence across the panel period. Individuals who score high on conspiratorial thinking at the outset remain relatively high compared to others over time, and the distribution of such conspiracy thinking shifts only marginally. In fact, compared to benchmark constructs, conspiracy thinking proves to be among the most stable attitudes examined, closely resembling ideological self-identification, and exceeding the stability of political trust, political interest, and external political efficacy. This finding challenges the widespread assumption that conspiratorial beliefs are primarily reactive to short-term events or informational environments. Even in a context marked by pandemic aftermath, geopolitical tensions, and domestic political change, conspiracy thinking remains remarkably anchored.

At the same time, within-person analyses reveal meaningful movement beneath this strong between-person stability. While roughly six in ten respondents remain in the same conspiratorial orientation throughout the panel, about four in ten cross at least one substantive opinion boundary. However, continuous fluctuation is

rare: only a small minority of 3.63% shifts across categories in every wave transition. Moreover, when changes occur, they tend to be incremental rather than dramatic. Together, these results suggest that conspiratorial thinking is neither a rigid worldview nor a highly volatile response to immediate stimuli. Instead, it combines a stable core with limited but non-negligible capacity for adjustment. In this vein, global conspiratorial beliefs resemble the neighbouring construct of populist attitudes (Schimpf, Wuttke and Schoen, 2024; Theuwis, 2025). To some extent, this is not surprising, as the conceptual core of both is an evaluation of elites as either corrupt or malevolent (Vuksan-Ćusa, 2023). Precisely because "elite" is a broad and flexible referent, these attitudes may remain stable at the level of underlying orientation while varying in their concrete targets and expressions across contexts and time.

These findings contribute to several ongoing debates in the literature. Firstly, they address discussions of the relationship between generalized conspiracy mentality and specific conspiratorial beliefs (Nera, 2024; Sutton, Douglas and Trella, 2024). While some research suggests that only generalized predispositions are stable, with specific beliefs fluctuating alongside events (see Wang and van Prooijen, 2023), our findings indicate that even concrete conspiracy claims can display substantial temporal persistence. This suggests that specific conspiratorial beliefs may be embedded in broader interpretive frameworks more deeply than often assumed. More precisely, our findings suggest that certain widely circulating conspiracy claims may themselves acquire trait-like qualities. Their persistence over multiple years, even amid changing political contexts, indicates that they can function as durable worldview anchors rather than merely episodic responses to misinformation or elite cues. In this sense, conspiratorial beliefs may be better understood as embedded interpretive schemas – cognitive and normative frameworks through which individuals structure political reality. When specific conspiracy narratives become integrated into broader identity-linked belief systems, they may resemble symbolic orientations such as ideology, shaping information processing in a relatively stable manner while still allowing for marginal adjustment. This reconceptualization has implications for both measurement and causal modelling, suggesting that specific conspiracy beliefs should not automatically be treated as volatile, event-driven attitudes.

Secondly, the results qualify crisis-driven accounts of conspiracism. The rapid proliferation of conspiracy narratives during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic has led some scholars to conceptualize conspiratorial beliefs as highly responsive to context. While our findings do not contradict the existence of situational responsiveness (or the effectiveness of experimental, AI-based stimuli; see Costello, Pennycook and Rand, 2024), they indicate that such responsiveness operates within relatively stable individual predispositions. In other words, crises (or experimental

stimuli) may activate or amplify conspiratorial thinking, but they rarely reorder the relative positioning of individuals in the conspiratorial belief distribution. This reinforces the view of conspiracism as a structured and enduring orientation rather than a purely episodic reaction.

Thirdly, the findings have implications for how conspiratorial beliefs relate to political behavior and political attitudes. If conspiratorial thinking exhibits stability comparable to core political orientations, such as ideology, it becomes more plausible to treat it as a meaningful driver of political attitudes and behavior rather than merely a by-product. Stable beliefs are more likely to function as interpretive lenses through which citizens process information and evaluate political actors. This strengthens causal interpretations in research linking conspiracism to institutional distrust, populist support, and, increasingly, to democratic attitudes. Along these lines, recent studies show that CTs are associated with criticism of democracy (Thomas *et al*., 2025a), preferences for alternative democratic forms such as direct democracy (Pantazi, Papaioannou and van Prooijen, 2022), and support for autocracy and authoritarianism (Papaioannou, Pantazi and van Prooijen, 2023). As the relationship between opposition to representative democracy and conspiratorial ideation may run in both directions (Thomas *et al*., 2025b), our findings suggest that examining these dynamics while accounting for differences in the temporal stability of CTs could make a valuable contribution to this emerging line of research.

At the same time, the presence of within-person change among a substantial minority suggests that conspiratorial thinking is not entirely fixed and may remain responsive to communication environments, social contexts, and other cues. This may also help explain why previous research in Croatia failed in reducing CT endorsement by stimulating cognitive engagement (Hromatko *et al*., 2025). One possibility is that the effectiveness of such manipulations depends not only on respondents' current level of CT, but also on the temporal stability of their conspiratorial thinking. If so, experimental treatments may have so far overlooked an important temporal dimension. In that sense, preventing or reversing *going down the rabbit hole* (Sutton and Douglas, 2022) may depend in part on how consistent a person is in conspiratorial ideation over time.

Furthermore, our exploratory profiling analysis offers a first step toward understanding what differentiates stable from unstable conspiracy believers. Hence, to answer our RQ1, among the variables considered, only baseline TikTok use stands out as a consistent correlate of subsequent opinion-boundary crossing. This association is noteworthy because TikTok may dynamize conspiratorial views not simply by increasing exposure to misinformation, but by repeatedly reorganising the salience, affective charge, and perceived plausibility of political claims. Unlike more tie-centred social media, TikTok is structured around a content-first recommender

system in which the "For You" feed infers interests from behavioural traces and rapidly tests adjacent content, thereby transforming publics from social networks into algorithmically assembled interest clusters (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022; Gerbaudo, 2024; Baumann *et al*., 2026). This architecture may matter for conspiratorial thinking in three ways. Firstly, brief engagement with suspicious, anti-elite, or "hidden truth" narratives can feed back into further exposure, potentially reinforcing conspiratorial interpretive frames among some users (Enders *et al*., 2023; Grandinetti and Bruinsma, 2023). Secondly, TikTok's short-video format privileges affectively intense, multimodal, and easily shareable content – combining sound, humour, irony, anger, fear, and visual montage – which may work less by presenting elaborate arguments than by making certain interpretations emotionally available and cognitively fluent (Bösch and Divon, 2024). Thirdly, because virality is not confined to ideologically homogeneous communities, the same platform can also expose users to corrective, debunking, or counter-conspiratorial content (Bhargava *et al*., 2023; Li, Li and Yang, 2025). Thus, in a landscape where one only needs to go viral (Guinaudeau, Munger and Votta, 2022), the average user might also encounter both conspiratorial and counter-conspiratorial narratives. TikTok should therefore not be understood only as a radicalising channel, but as a platform environment that can increase attitudinal movement by alternating reinforcement, curiosity-driven exposure, affective activation, and occasional correction.

In any case, as other platforms increasingly adhere to TikTok-like short-video systems, the story of conspiracy theories and short-form online content likely has more to tell. This makes platform-specific media environments a promising avenue for future research on how political attitudes are shaped and reshaped over time, going beyond the much-touted links between social media usage and CT endorsement. Still, we should not read this result in causal terms, as our evidence provides temporal leverage and baseline profiling rather than causal identification.

Ultimately, our results support a view of conspiracy thinking as *a highly stable yet not immutable orientation*. For many citizens, conspiratorial interpretations appear to function as enduring lenses through which political and social events are understood. For others, however, conspiratorial thinking remains more situationally responsive, adjusting in response to informational or contextual cues and stimuli. Recognizing this heterogeneity is essential for understanding both the persistence and the adaptability of conspiratorial worldviews in contemporary democracies.

Conclusion

This study has examined the stability of belief in conspiracy theories using multiwave panel data from Croatia. By integrating analyses of aggregate trends, rank-order persistence, and within-person change, and by benchmarking conspiracy

thinking against established political attitudes, we provide one of the most comprehensive longitudinal assessments of conspiratorial belief dynamics to date.

Three main conclusions emerge. Firstly, conspiratorial thinking ranks among the most stable attitudes examined and closely resembles ideological self-placement. Its rank-order persistence and limited aggregate change place it in our data even above the symbolic and identitarian orientations, such as ideology, and far above the more volatile evaluations such as trust in government or external political efficacy. Secondly, beneath this stability lies meaningful individual-level heterogeneity. While many respondents remain stable across waves, a substantial minority shifts across substantive belief categories. Thirdly, our exploratory profiling suggests that exposure to certain online environments, most notably TikTok, is associated with greater attitudinal dynamism, highlighting the potential importance of platform-specific information ecologies.

Several limitations of our work should be acknowledged. The analysis focuses on one national context and a particular set of long-standing global conspiracy claims, which may not capture the full diversity of conspiratorial narratives, especially newer, viral, or more locally specific conspiracy theories. Relatedly, our focus on widely circulating conspiracy claims may have enhanced stability. Because these themes have been salient for some time, respondents are likely familiar with them and have had more time to evaluate their content and develop a durable stance. Our results may also be affected by the fact that, in the main analysis, conspiratorial beliefs are the only construct measured with multiple indicators. This, to some extent, can mechanically increase observed stability compared to benchmark constructs measured with single-item indicators (see Ansolabehere, Rodden and Snyder, 2008). These considerations should be kept in mind when interpreting our findings.

Additionally, while our panel covers a longer period than is typical in longitudinal research on CT, longer time horizons could reveal additional dynamics and provide insight into stability across the life course or major life transitions (e.g., from adolescence to early adulthood). Finally, while our exploratory analysis identifies correlates of stability and change, the causal mechanisms remain to be established. Although we control for baseline covariates, we cannot implement more stringent time-varying tests because the survey questionnaire was not constant across waves. Future research should therefore extend this approach by leveraging stronger causal inference, for example, by using panels with (more) consistent repeated measures or by combining panel designs with experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

Despite these limitations, the present study demonstrates that conspiratorial thinking is *structurally stable yet situationally adjustable*. Understanding this dual character is essential for explaining the persistence of conspiratorial worldviews

and for assessing their implications for contemporary democratic societies. Furthermore, the demonstrated level of temporal durability of conspiratorial thinking suggests that it may operate as a structural component of democratic belief systems. Rather than reflecting temporary susceptibility to misinformation, stable conspiracy beliefs may become embedded within identity-linked worldviews that systematically condition how citizens interpret institutional procedures, electoral outcomes, and elite behaviour. From the perspective of democratic resilience, this implies that conspiracism may not dissipate with improved fact-checking or short-term informational interventions. Instead, it may constitute a durable interpretive orientation that shapes patterns of trust, compliance, and support for democratic norms over time.

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Nebojša Blanuša, Bartul Vuksan-Ćusa

JE LI VJEROVANJE U TEORIJE ZAVJERA STABILNO ILI ĆUDLJIVO: DOKAZI PANEL ANKETE U HRVATSKOJ

Sažetak

Istraživanje konspiratornog mišljenja (KM) posljednjih je godina poraslo i u širini i u opsegu, posebno nakon pandemije COVID-19. Ipak, ključna praznina ostaje, jer su dokazi o vremenskoj stabilnosti KM-a još uvijek ograničeni. Ovu prazninu rješavamo korištenjem panel ankete s četiri vala u Hrvatskoj provedene između 2022. i 2025. godine kako bismo procijenili stabilnost KM-a na razinama između osoba i unutar osobe. Kako bismo KM smjestili u širi spektar provjere stabilnosti, uspoređujemo ga s temeljnim političkim stavovima, uključujući ideologiju, politički interes, povjerenje u vladu i vanjsku političku učinkovitost. Rezultati pokazuju da KM pokazuje snažnu postojanost u rangiranju i samo skromnu agregatnu promjenu, što ga smješta uz bok drugim konstruktima sličnih osobina. Istodobno, dinamika unutar osobe nije odsutna, jer značajan udio ispitanika mijenja svoj stav kroz valove, što ukazuje na varijabilnost ispod visoke stabilnosti između osoba. Istraživačko profiliranje nadalje sugerira da osnovno korištenje TikToka razlikuje ispitanike koji s vremenom mijenjaju svoje KM-e od onih koji ostaju stabilni. Sveukupno, KM se čini vrlo stabilnim, ali ne i nepromjenjivim, što naglašava potrebu za daljnjim istraživanjem o tome kada i zašto se događaju promjene i generaliziraju li se u različitim kontekstima.

Ključne riječi: konspiracizam, teorije zavjere, panel podaci, politički stavovi, stabilnost stava

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