ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Conspiracy theories as instruments of power: The case of conspiracy beliefs in the wake of the 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye

Sinan Alper [1] | Onur Varol[2] | Onurcan Yilmaz[3]

[1]Department of Psychology, Yasar University, Izmir, Türkiye

[2]Faculty of Engineering and Natural Sciences, Sabanci University, İstanbul, Türkiye

[3]Department of Psychology, Kadir Has University, İstanbul, Türkiye

Correspondence
Sinan Alper, Department of Psychology, Yasar University, Izmir, Türkiye.
Email: sinan.alper@yasar.edu.tr

Abstract
The prevalent view associates political disempowerment with increased conspiracy beliefs. However, the function of conspiracy theories for those in power to sustain their dominance is less understood, particularly in ecologically valid and non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) settings. Our research examined the emergence of conspiracy theories following the 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye and their relation to voting behavior in the subsequent general election, which occurred three months later. In Study 1, we analyzed the activities of 26,992 users on X (Twitter), identifying a preference among supporters of Erdogan, the incumbent president, for earthquake-related conspiracy theories. In Study 2, face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of 3568 individuals showed a correlation between the endorsement of these theories and increased support for Erdogan and his coalition, independent of other variables. These findings highlighted the significant role conspiracy theories that can play in bolstering authority and shaping electoral outcomes.

KEYWORDS
conspiracy, earthquake, ecologically valid, HAARP, non-WEIRD, voting

INTRODUCTION

For those accustomed to receiving the short end of the stick, conspiracy theories offer useful, albeit often incorrect, explanations for their misfortune. Uscinski and Parent (2014) succinctly captured this sentiment, stating, "conspiracy theories are for losers" and past research indicates that conspiracy beliefs tend to increase among those who feel they have no control over events (e.g., Dow et al., 2022; Imhoff et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022). However, conspiracy theories can also serve

the opposite function, as they might serve to maintain the authority of those in power. To explore this dynamic, our study examines the immediate aftermath of two catastrophic earthquakes that struck on the same day in Türkiye, a non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010) country, in early 2023. We investigate how the endorsement of conspiracy theories concerning these earthquakes correlated with intentions to vote for the incumbent government in the general election held just three months later.

THE CONTEXT

On February 6, 2023, Türkiye was struck by two significant earthquakes with magnitudes of 7.8 and 7.5, resulting in over 50,000 fatalities (Reuters, 2023). The opposition quickly criticized Erdogan and his party, Justice and Development Party (JDP), accusing them of failing to take adequate preventive measures during their 21 years of uninterrupted single-party governance. However, this was not the only narrative. A prominent conspiracy theory began to circulate within Turkish discourse, gaining traction on various social media platforms. This conspiracy theory suggests that Western nations, with some versions specifically accusing Israel, control a sophisticated technology known as HAARP,[1] allegedly capable of triggering earthquakes (Basegmez, 2024). Advocates of this conspiracy claim that the 2023 earthquakes were orchestrated using HAARP, portraying them as deliberate attacks on Türkiye. With general elections scheduled for May 2023, just three months after the earthquakes, the political climate provided a unique opportunity to analyze the spread of this conspiracy theory across different political groups in an ecologically valid setting. It also allowed for an investigation into how belief in such theories could be associated with voting behavior. Our preregistered hypothesis posited that endorsing this conspiracy would correlate with increased electoral support for Erdogan and JDP.

CONSPIRACY BELIEFS AND POLITICAL CONTROL

Although evidence is mixed regarding whether a lack of personal control correlates with conspiracy beliefs (Hart & Graether, 2018; Stojanov et al., 2020; Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020), a lack of political control emerged as a significant predictor of intensified conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff et al., 2022). Individuals who feel disenfranchised or powerless often attribute substantial influence to their political adversaries. This heightened perception of their opponents' agency sets the stage for the emergence and spread of conspiracy beliefs (Sullivan et al., 2010). Both historical analysis (Uscinski & Parent, 2014) and recent empirical studies have demonstrated that supporters of the losing political candidates are more likely to harbor higher conspiracy beliefs (Dow et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2022; Wang & van Prooijen, 2023).

While conspiracy theories often target powerful entities, recent research has highlighted the existence of "downward" conspiracy theories, in contrast to the more typical "upward" ones. These downward theories involve conspiratorial accusations against groups that objectively lack significant power, such as certain ethnic and religious minorities (Nera et al., 2021). Political figures, driven by self-interest, may craft or propagate conspiracy theories targeting their adversaries to maintain their political dominance (Nera et al., 2022). For example, anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant conspiracy theories are periodically utilized to consolidate power, despite the implicated groups not being in positions to influence global events significantly (Nera et al., 2021, 2022). This dynamic fits well with the social identity perspective on conspiracy theories (e.g., Cookson

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[1]The High-Frequency Active Auroral Research Program (HAARP) is actually a research program designed to study the ionosphere.

et al., 2021), where such theories act as rhetorical tools aimed at denigrating outgroups while bolstering the interests and cohesion of the ingroup (Robertson et al., 2022).

THE CASE OF 2023 EARTHQUAKES IN TÜRKIYE

We posit that the conspiracy theories emerging after the 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye exemplify how conspiracy theories might serve the interests of those in power. JDP and Erdogan maintained uninterrupted and unchallenged control over Türkiye for over two decades. Given this context, the extensive devastation caused by the 2023 earthquakes would typically lead to substantial public dissent against the ruling government.

In such situations, supporters of the incumbent government often seek to deflect blame and mitigate the accountability of the government. Invoking conspiracy theories provides a potential means for such deflection. Assigning blame to foreign entities, purportedly equipped with advanced (and fictional) technologies capable of triggering earthquakes, would fulfill this function. In other words, holding conspiracy beliefs about the origins of the earthquake would make it easier to support the government that had struggled to manage its aftermath. Although this narrative does not fit the typical "downward" conspiracy theory—since the alleged perpetrators are perceived as more powerful than the Turkish state—it demonstrates how certain conspiracy theories can benefit those in power. By adopting such narratives, they not only maintain the prestige of their social identity but may also strengthen their electoral prospects. Previous research has shown that anti-establishment sentiments have become a defining dimension for political differences (Uscinski et al., 2021), and in countries with weak institutions, including Türkiye, populist leaders frequently use conspiracy theories to maintain or regain support (Pirro & Taggart, 2023; Radnitz, 2022). Similarly, national narcissism has been linked to COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, likely because these theories help deflect national shortcomings in managing the pandemic (Sternisko et al., 2023). Studies on non-WEIRD cultures, with samples from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, have found anti-Western and anti-Jewish conspiracy beliefs to be widespread, especially among individuals possessing significant political knowledge (Nyhan & Zeitzoff, 2018). The situation is not very different in Türkiye, where both right-wing and left-wing politicians regularly make use of conspiracy theories to bolster their position (Nefes, 2018; Nefes & Aksoy, 2024). These findings imply that the proliferation of such conspiracy beliefs is not necessarily due to educational or cognitive deficits but is rather employed to protect ingroup interests.

THE CURRENT RESEARCH

A growing body of research suggests that conspiracy theories are not merely the refuge of the politically powerless but may also serve as instruments of symbolic power in contexts of political threat and social upheaval. Traditionally, conspiracy beliefs have been conceptualized as psychological responses to perceived powerlessness and uncertainty (Imhoff et al., 2022; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Yet, emerging perspectives in political psychology underscore a more complex dynamic: Conspiracy theories can also stabilize political hierarchies by shielding incumbents from blame, consolidating group identity, and redirecting public anger toward external enemies (Nera et al., 2022; Sternisko et al., 2023).

This research engages directly with that theoretical tension by examining how conspiracy beliefs function in a real-world political context: The aftermath of the February 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye. Following the disaster, a prominent conspiracy theory emerged across Turkish media, alleging that the earthquakes were artificially triggered by foreign powers using HAARP technology. This belief, while empirically baseless, provided a politically expedient narrative that

deflected blame from the state's disaster preparedness failures. We propose that such conspiracy narratives—especially when disseminated during high-threat events—can serve a palliative psychological function for government supporters, allowing them to preserve system-justifying beliefs and maintain political loyalty in the face of potential institutional disillusionment.

Building on insights from motivated reasoning, expressive responding, and social identity theory (Altay et al., 2023; Cookson et al., 2021; Sutton & Douglas, 2020), we hypothesize that these conspiracy beliefs may not merely reflect prior attitudes but function as post hoc rationalizations that help defend ingroup leaders and sustain regime legitimacy. These dynamics are likely to be amplified in contexts characterized by institutional fragility, low trust, and polarized political discourse—features that define many non-WEIRD societies, including Türkiye (Alper & Imhoff, 2023; Radnitz, 2022).

To investigate this phenomenon, we conducted two complementary studies. Study 1 analyzed the online behavior of nearly 27,000 users on the platform X (formerly Twitter) in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes. We tracked the creation and dissemination of nearly 39,000 conspiracy-related tweets referencing HAARP and similar content, and examined whether such activity was disproportionately driven by users who followed or were ideologically aligned with President Erdogan. Grounded in the literature on partisan motivated cognition and digital political behavior, we expected that supporters of the incumbent government would be more likely to produce and circulate this content, using conspiracy narratives to reinterpret the disaster in politically functional ways.

Study 2, preregistered and based on a nationally representative face-to-face survey of 3568 Turkish adults, tested whether intention to vote for Erdogan and the ruling JDP in the general election held three months later predicted earthquake-related conspiracy beliefs. This design enabled us to move beyond online behavior and assess whether the endorsement of conspiracy narratives was associated with political preferences in a high-stakes, real-world electoral context. We controlled for key demographic variables, including education, gender, urban versus rural residence, earthquake exposure, and personal loss, allowing us to examine the robustness of the observed associations.

Together, these studies contribute to ongoing debates in political psychology by highlighting how conspiracy theories can serve to uphold, rather than challenge, dominant political structures—particularly under conditions of perceived national threat. By integrating large-scale digital behavior with representative survey data, the research sheds light on the socio-political utility of conspiracy narratives and underscores their role in identity-protective cognition and symbolic political communication. This dual function—mobilizing grievance while legitimizing power—raises important questions for political psychology about the boundary conditions under which conspiracy beliefs emerge, persist, and shape democratic outcomes.[2]

STUDY 1

Method

We gathered social media posts from X using the platform's streaming API. Our data collection approach monitors trending topics for Türkiye and its 12 available cities every 10 minutes. Once a new trend is identified, the streaming API starts to gather all public tweets that contain one of these trends. Minutes after the February 6th earthquake happened in southeast Türkiye, country-wide trends listed #deprem ("earthquake" in English) as the top trending topic and this hashtag

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[2]Data from Study 1 will not be made public due to privacy concerns related to the analysis of social media users. However, the data will be available upon request for any researchers wishing to reproduce our results. Data for Study 2 are available at https://osf.io/4tshk/?view_only=1601b2a8f3b84e3d805ee7944b7c0238.

remained on the list for the following week. Our data collection system captured all tweets on that topic for the following days along with other tweets mentioning other trending topics.

To identify social media posts about conspiracies, we filtered content with a frequently used concept "haarp" within the earthquake-related posts. Among that content, we analyzed hashtags co-occurrence to identify other relevant content and increase the recall of the conspiracy related data collection. Identifying the other central nodes (hashtags) in the network leads to extended data collection. We also inspect whether there are any irrelevant hashtags in the network, since the "hashtag piggybacking" concept observed for trending topics by Cresci et al. (2019). After inspecting the hashtag co-occurrence networks systematically, we do not observe significant activities of that sort and the only noteworthy hashtag was "mexctürkiye", a crypto trading platform, which appeared in 88 tweets in total. At the end we gathered data that contains one of the following keywords: #haarp, #depremsilahı ("earthquake weapon"), #haarpprojesi, #haarp_project, #haarpgerçekleri ("haarp facts"). This criterion captures 38,884 tweets posted by 26,992 unique users.

Political leaning estimation

In the current study, we use two different approaches to estimate political leaning of the social media users. First is a simpler, but robust approach based on following a particular political leader and later we estimate latent-ideology scores from social network information. The simpler approach requires no further assumptions or relies on additional models or training data. Our data collection contains lists of followers for Recep Tayyip Erdogan (@rterdogan) and Kemal Kilicdaroglu (@kilicdarogluk). We categorize users in our dataset based on their followership to these two politicians. Among all accounts posting at least one conspiracy tweet, 47.8% (12,924) of them follow either one of the politicians and 10.9% (2950) of them follow both politicians. Accounts following one of the politicians tend to follow @rterdogan account more frequently (5730) than @kilicdarogluk account (4244).

Second approach to estimate political leaning is a more sophisticated one: We use latent ideology estimation technique proposed by Barberá (2015) to calculate ideological embeddings for social media accounts. In Figure 1A, we present a two-dimensional representation of accounts in our dataset and some exemplar accounts from different political leanings. We can estimate ideologies for 72.9% (19,690) of these accounts since they follow at least one of the politicians in the Turkish Presidential Election dataset (Najafi et al., 2022). Although some indicators of political preferences are not orthogonal, we can suggest that the first dimension (horizontal) primarily captures the left and right leaning ideology, and the second dimension captures ethnic separation in Turkish politics.[3]

In both Study 1 and 2, we used ChatGPT (chat.openai.com) for proofreading purposes. ChatGPT's role was to revise existing bodies of text and it did not author any part of the article by itself.

Results and discussion

Content production rates by political followership

Although accounts followed either leader with similar rates, their contribution to the creation and dissemination of conspiracy content differed significantly. Despite the fact that only 21%

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[3]Pervin Buldan and Mithat Sancar were the heads of HDP, a pro-Kurdish political party.
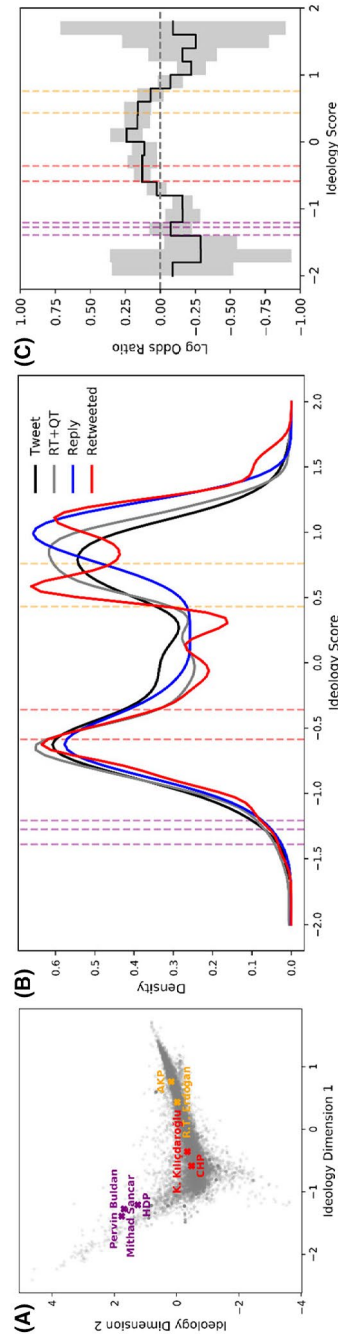
FIGURE 1 Account ideology scores and online activities. (A) Two-dimensional ideological embeddings of accounts capturing left/right ideologies and ethnic separation. (B) Distribution of ideology scores for different types of online activities reflecting how distinct political groups engage with conspiracy content. (C) Likelihood of posting conspiracy or earthquake-related content by different ideology groups used to calculate log10 odds ratio.

of the accounts followed only Erdogan, these accounts were responsible for creating 24.9% of the original content and 25.3% of the retweets spreading all conspiracy material. These content creation and dissemination followed expected values for other followership patterns. To quantify the statistical significance of our observations, we applied a chi-square test assuming all users tend to participate in online discussions at similar rates. We employed the test for content production, X^2 (3, $N = 38,884$) $= 329.66$, $p < .001$, and dissemination, X^2 (3, $N = 32,808$) $= 341.02$, $p < .001$, separately and obtained significant results for these observations. Compared to Kilicaroglu supporters, Erdogan supporters were significantly more likely to both produce and disseminate content related to the conspiracy theories on the recent earthquakes.

We also investigated different types of activities and participation rates based on political ideologies. We estimated the political leaning on a spectrum from left to right leaning and distribution of activities by ideology scores presented in Figure 1. Densities of activities are similar for left-leaning (negative scores on Figure 1B) ideologies, while the right-leaning users tended to be active more on social media. In terms of number of users in each group, only 46% of the accounts with estimated ideology scores are in the right-wing; however, when we analyzed the content creation and dissemination rates, they are responsible for 52.7% of the tweets and 58.7% of the retweets. Their activities also account for 55.5% of the replies of these two groups. We can suggest that right-wing users primarily consumed conspiracy-related content by retweeting, quoting, and replying to them on X despite their slightly smaller group size.

To compare activity rates across different ideological groups, we analyzed tweets related to conspiracies and earthquakes. Using ideology estimations for each user, we calculated the probability of a tweet being posted by users of particular ideologies. The odds ratio between conspiracy and earthquake-related activity is presented on a base-10 logarithmic scale, where positive values indicate higher activity for conspiracy content. In Figure 1C, we present the odds ratios for different ideologies along with bootstrapped confidence intervals. We found that ideologies closer to the center exhibit higher odds ratios, meaning these groups post more conspiracy content relative to earthquake-related tweets, while right-leaning users show slightly higher—but not statistically significant—activity. In short, the analysis reveals that centrist Twitter users are the most likely to post conspiracy-theory tweets (compared with earthquake tweets), whereas right-leaning users post only slightly—and not significantly—more conspiracy content.

In exploratory analyses, we also found a higher prevalence of potential bot activity spreading conspiracy content within a network that is more closely aligned with the incumbent government (see the Supplementary Material).

In Study 1, we found that the supporters of the incumbent president, Erdogan, were more likely to both produce and disseminate conspiracy content related to the 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye, compared to the supporters of Erdogan's main rival, Kilicdaroglu.

However, the findings presented are of an exploratory nature, due to the absence of a preregistered research protocol. Additionally, Study 1 had two significant limitations. First, we inferred support for presidential candidates from account following behavior, which might not be true for every social media user. Second, we could not adjust for covariates, like sociodemographic differences. In Study 2, we overcome these limitations by preregistering the whole research protocol to confirm the results and conducting face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of 3568 participants from 32 cities in Türkiye.

STUDY 2

Participants

Data were retrieved from an election poll carried out by KONDA (2023) on March 4–5, 2023. The nationally representative sample was determined based on the address-based

population registration system in Türkiye and the sample was stratified based on the neighborhoods' population, education level, and election results in the last general election. In 122 districts in 32 cities, 3568 participants were interviewed face-to-face. Interviewers read the questions aloud from printed surveys, and no computer assistance was employed. Mean age was 43.00 ($SD = 16.53$) and the sample was also diverse in terms of sex, residence, education, and income of the participants (see Table 1). Participants with missing data or who claimed to be uncertain about their answers to our questions were excluded from the relevant analyses. We preregistered our hypotheses before data collection that earthquake-related conspiracy belief would predict (a) a higher likelihood to vote for the incumbent president; (b) the incumbent government; and (c) these associations would persist after

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics in Study 2.

	Frequency	Percent
Sex		
Female	1757	49.243
Male	1785	50.028
Missing	26	.729
Total	3568	100.000
Residence		
Rural	317	8.885
Urban	1282	35.930
Metropolitan	1969	55.185
Missing	0	.000
Total	3568	100.000
Education		
Illiterate	182	5.101
Literate but no formal education	75	2.102
Primary school	915	25.645
Middle school	592	16.592
High school	1078	30.213
Undergraduate	634	17.769
Master's degree	69	1.934
PhD	8	.224
Missing	15	.420
Total	3568	100.000
Income		
Lower class	188	5.269
Lower middle class	771	21.609
New middle class	622	17.433
Upper class	1339	37.528
Missing	648	18.161
Total	3568	100.000

Note: Lower class is the lowest 20% in terms of household income per capita. A participant in the lower middle class is in the middle 60% in terms of income and does not own an automobile. If she also owns an automobile, she is in the new middle class. Upper class is the top 20% in terms of income. The categorization was made by the research company, which carried out data collection.

adjusting for control measures of age, sex, education, income, residence, earthquake experience (inside or outside the earthquake zone), and personal loss due to earthquakes (whether the participant lost a family member, relative, or acquaintance) (https://osf.io/d628y/?view_only=6072ad66f37e4d1d8099349ccbb8013c).[4]

Materials

Responsibility in the destruction caused by the earthquakes

Participants were asked "In your opinion, who is responsible for the destruction and losses in the earthquake and to what extent?" and they responded using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *none*, 5 = *a lot*) separately for the following actors: (a) Government/ministries; (b) local governments/municipalities; (c) contractors/construction companies; (d) workplace or apartment dwellers who cut the columns or beams of the building; and (e) foreign powers triggering earthquakes using various technologies. The item (e) corresponds to the conspiracy belief on earthquakes and is the key variable of interest in our analyses.

Political orientation

Participants were dummy-coded in terms of the presidential candidate (0 = *Kilicdaroglu*, 1 = *Erdogan*) and the political party (0 = *Nation Alliance or Labour and Freedom Alliance*, 1 = *People's Alliance*) they are planning to vote for. The options coded as 0 correspond to a choice for the opposition while 1 corresponds to preferring the current government.

Control measures

Participants also stated their age, sex (biological sex as in their national identity card; female vs. male), residence (rural, urban or metropolitan), income (categorized into lower, lower middle, new middle and upper class), earthquake experience (the participant was in the earthquake zone at the time of the earthquake vs. not), and whether someone they knew died in the earthquakes (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*).

Results and discussion

Attributing the earthquake to foreign powers and their secret technologies (a conspiracy belief) did not show significant correlations with any other attributions of responsibility, including those assigned to residents, contractors, local and central governments (see Figure 2). However, other attributions of responsibility did correlate with each other, suggesting that the conspiracy belief concerning the earthquakes was categorically different from blaming other agents, who are far more likely to be the actual culprits compared to a secret organization wielding non-existent technologies.

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[4]In our initial preregistration, we posited five hypotheses, four of which were supported. However, all findings are not included in the main manuscript to maintain a focused examination of the central research question under investigation. The outcomes of the analyses pertaining to these hypotheses are documented in the Supplementary Material (https://osf.io/4tshk/files/psxvt?view_only=1601b2a8f3b84e3d805ee7944b7c0238).
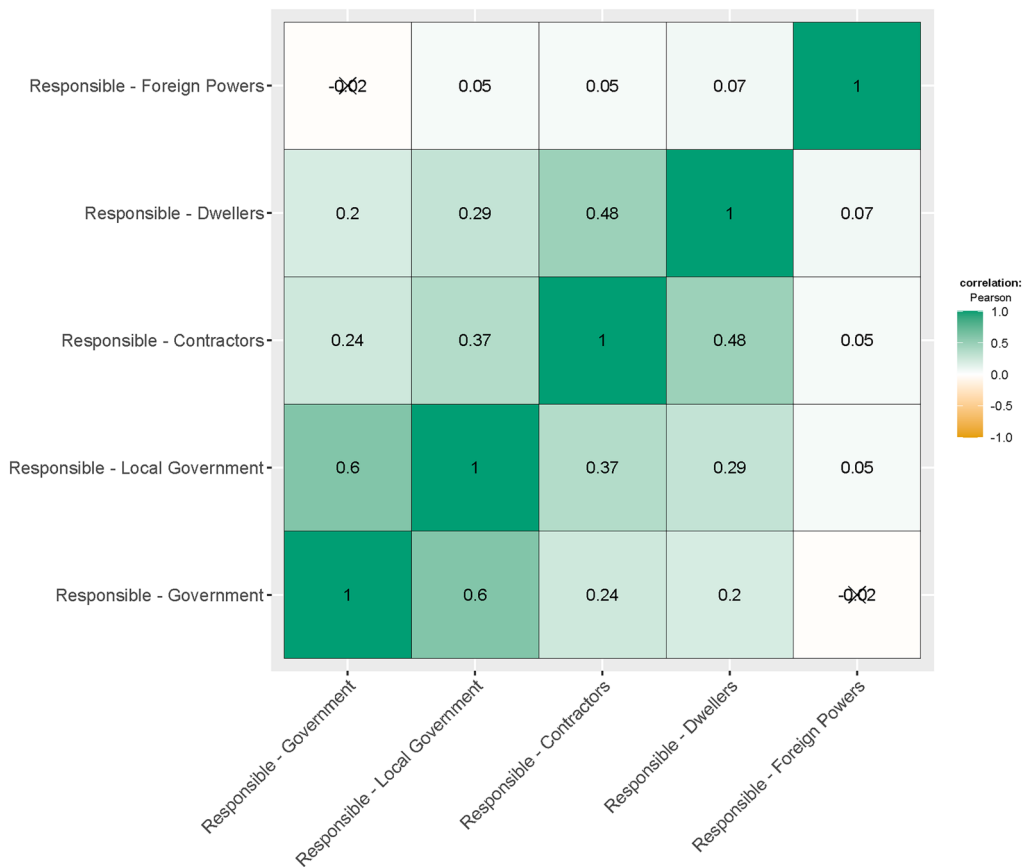
FIGURE 2   The correlations between attributions of responsibility for the destruction of the earthquakes. Crossed-out coefficients are not statistically significant at $p < .05$.

A one-unit increase in conspiracy belief predicted a 36.9% higher likelihood of voting for Erdogan, as opposed to Kilicdaroglu (see Table 2). After adjusting for control measures, a one-unit increase in conspiracy belief still predicted a 34.9% higher likelihood of voting for Erdogan (see Table 3). These results suggest that endorsing a conspiracy belief about earthquakes had a robust effect in predicting a higher likelihood of voting for the sitting president (see Figure 3).

The same pattern of results emerged for political party preferences. A one-unit increase in conspiracy belief predicted a 38.9% higher likelihood of voting for the People's Alliance (the political parties endorsing the existing government), as opposed to the opposition parties (see Table 4). After adjusting for control measures, the likelihood was 34.9% higher (see Table 5). These results suggest that endorsing a conspiracy belief about earthquakes robustly predicts a higher likelihood of voting for the sitting president (see Figure 4).

Other preregistered hypotheses

In our initial preregistration protocol, we posited three additional hypotheses. Because they are not directly relevant to the main research aims of the current manuscript, we have not delved

TABLE 2 Results of the logistic regression analysis predicting intention to vote for Erdogan.

	Estimate	Standard error	Standardized[a]	Odds ratio	z	Wald test Wald statistic	df	p	95% confidence interval (odds ratio scale) Lower bound	Upper bound
(Intercept)	−.425	.071	.163	.653	−6.004	36.044	1	<.001	.569	.751
Foreign powers	.314	.033	.416	1.369	9.562	91.437	1	<.001	1.284	1.460

Note: Intention to vote for Erdogan was coded as class 1 while intention to vote for Kilicdaroglu was coded as class 0.
[a]Standardized estimates represent estimates where the continuous predictors are standardized (X-standardization).

TABLE 3 Results of the logistic regression analysis predicting intention to vote for Erdogan, after adjusting for control measures.

	Estimate	Standard error	Standardized[a]	Odds ratio	z	Wald test			95% confidence interval (odds ratio scale)	
						Wald statistic	df	p	Lower bound	Upper bound
(Intercept)	1.507	.278	−.211	4.512	5.427	29.447	1	<.001	2.618	7.776
Foreign powers	.299	.034	.396	1.349	8.749	76.549	1	<.001	1.261	1.442
Age	−.009	.003	−.144	.991	−3.049	9.298	1	.002	.986	.997
Education	−.441	.038	−.606	.643	−11.756	138.205	1	<.001	.598	.692
Residence: Rural vs. urban	.750	.153	.750	2.116	4.904	24.049	1	<.001	1.568	2.855
Residence: Rural vs. metropolitan	.413	.146	.413	1.512	2.826	7.984	1	.005	1.135	2.013
Male vs. female	−.045	.087	−.045	.956	−.518	.268	1	.604	.807	1.133
Was in the earthquake zone vs. not	−.260	.134	−.260	.771	−1.941	3.769	1	.052	.593	1.002
Lost someone they knew vs. not	−.215	.100	−.215	.806	−2.152	4.629	1	.031	.663	.981

Note: Intention to vote for Erdogan was coded as class 1 while intention to vote for Kilicdaroglu was coded as class 0.

[a]Standardized estimates represent estimates where the continuous predictors are standardized (X-standardization).
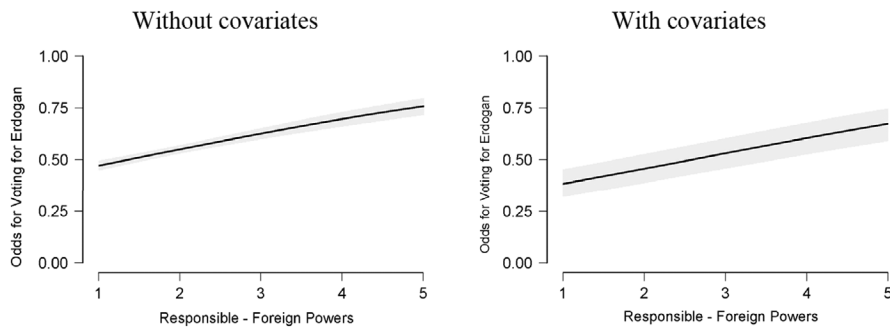
FIGURE 3 The odds of voting for Erdogan, as opposed to Kilicdaroglu, for different levels of earthquake-related conspiracy beliefs.

into the details of the analyses for these hypotheses. However, to ensure full transparency, we provide summary results in this section.

In our preregistration, beyond the hypotheses tested and reported above, we hypothesized that (H1) "A negative correlation exists between HCB (the HAARP conspiracy belief) and education level," (H4) "HCB will be negatively correlated with holding the 'Government/ Ministries' and 'Local Governments/Municipalities' accountable for the destruction caused by earthquakes," and (H5) "HCB is expected to have a positive correlation with having a favorable view of the government's performance in disaster management" (see the Supplementary Material).

H1, $r = -.061$, $p < .001$, and H5, $r = .157$, $p = .001$, were supported. H4 was not supported: HCB was not related to "Government/Ministries", $r = -.018$, $p = .289$, and was positively (rather than negatively, as proposed) related to "Local Governments/Municipalities", $r = .047$, $p = .006$.

Discussion

In Study 2, we overcame the limitations of Study 1 by directly measuring voting intentions in a nationally representative sample collected just three months after the 2023 Türkiye earthquakes. We also controlled for various covariates, establishing that the conservative political leaning was associated with the endorsement of conspiracy theories that deflect blame away from the incumbent government. Overall, this preregistered study confirmed the main exploratory finding obtained in Study 1.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Recent research (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2022) indicated that a lack of control and an absence of power intensify beliefs in conspiracies. However, conspiracy theories can serve the interests of those in power by deflecting blame for failures and unsatisfactory performance, such as in their response to natural disasters. Our first study delves into this by analyzing posts on platform X, which reflect real-life behavior and specific conspiracy beliefs about earthquakes. Our second preregistered study focused on a representative, non-WEIRD sample to determine if such beliefs contributed to electoral success for the ruling party that took place only three months later. The findings reveal that belief in advanced technologies like HAARP, purportedly developed by foreign entities to trigger earthquakes, correlates with voting for Erdogan and his alliance. Our results underscore the importance of investigating conspiracy theories

T A B L E 4 Results of the logistic regression analysis predicting intention to vote for people's alliance.

	Estimate	Standard error	Standardized[a]	Odds ratio	z	Wald test Wald statistic	df	p	95% confidence interval (odds ratio scale) Lower bound	Upper bound
(Intercept)	−.571	.078	.051	.565	−7.370	54.314	1	<.001	.485	.657
Foreign powers	.328	.035	.443	1.389	9.351	87.446	1	<.001	1.296	1.488

Note: Intention to vote for People's Alliance (current government) was coded as class 1 while intention to vote for the opposition parties was coded as class 0.

[a]Standardized estimates represent estimates where the continuous predictors are standardized (X-standardization).

TABLE 5 Results of the logistic regression analysis predicting intention to vote for people's alliance, after adjusting for control measures.

	Estimate	Standard error	Standardized[a]	Odds ratio	z	Wald test			95% confidence interval (odds ratio scale)	
						Wald statistic	df	p	Lower bound	Upper bound
(Intercept)	1.083	.295	−.354	2.953	3.665	13.430	1	<.001	1.655	5.268
Foreign powers	.299	.037	.403	1.349	8.183	66.967	1	<.001	1.256	1.449
Age	−.006	.003	−.096	.994	−1.881	3.536	1	.060	.988	1.000
Education	−.409	.040	−.576	.664	−10.318	106.467	1	<.001	.614	.718
Residence: Rural vs. urban	.833	.162	.833	2.300	5.145	26.470	1	<.001	1.675	3.160
Residence: Rural vs. metropolitan	.496	.155	.496	1.642	3.199	10.233	1	.001	1.212	2.225
Male vs. female	−.047	.096	−.047	.954	−.491	.241	1	.624	.791	1.151
Was in the earthquake zone vs. not	−.695	.154	−.695	.499	−4.514	20.377	1	<.001	.369	.675
Lost someone they knew vs. not	−.209	.110	−.209	.812	−1.896	3.594	1	.058	.654	1.007

Note: Intention to vote for People's Alliance (current government) was coded as class 1 while intention to vote for the opposition parties was coded as class 0.

[a]Standardized estimates represent estimates where the continuous predictors are standardized (X-standardization).
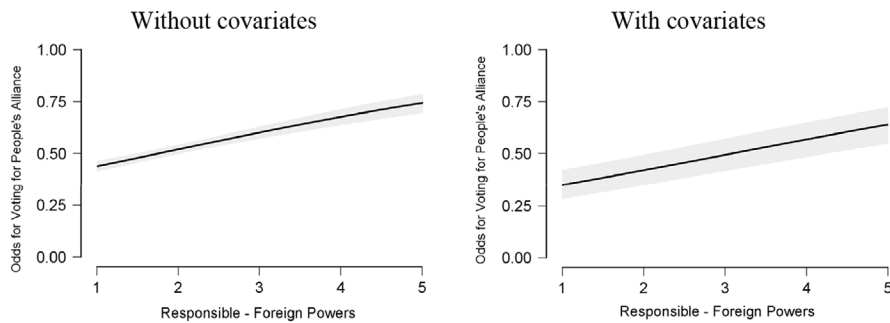
FIGURE 4 The odds of voting for People's Alliance (composed of political parties endorsing the current government) as opposed to the opposition parties for different levels of earthquake-related conspiracy beliefs.

within context-specific and ecologically valid frameworks to truly understand their prevalence and impact.

Past research has primarily focused on the connection between conspiracy beliefs and a perceived lack of political control. However, not all conspiracy theories are "upward" in nature, targeting powerful elites. Conversely, "downward" conspiracy theories often benefit the powerful, serving to consolidate the status of political leaders by targeting opposition groups (e.g., Nera et al., 2021, 2022; Robertson et al., 2022). This widespread dissemination of these conspiracy theories can significantly influence public opinion and critical democratic processes, such as voting behavior. More specifically, certain conspiracy theories may be strategically employed as rhetorical tools, aiming to deflect governmental responsibility and propagandize issues through social bots (e.g., Gruzd & Mai, 2020; Seckin et al., 2024; Xu & Sasahara, 2022). It is important to note that the earthquake conspiracy theory examined in our current research is not "downward" per se, as it involves foreign entities alleged to be even more powerful than the national government. Therefore, it can technically be classified as an "upward" conspiracy theory. However, one of its main functions is to justify the failures of the elites and to maintain their power. Our exploratory analyses (see the Supplementary Material) suggest a potential bot account activity that is more closely aligned with a network supportive of the incumbent government and spreading conspiracy content. However, these analyses are not direct evidence of whether these conspiracy theories were deliberately spread.

The prevalence of such conspiracy theories escalates in times of heightened threats, like pandemics or terrorist attacks. For instance, following the COVID-19 outbreak, some of Donald Trump's conspiracy theories regarding the virus's origin were evidently aimed at blaming China, thereby bolstering his own political standing. A similar dynamic was observed in Türkiye after the 2023 earthquakes. Although there is no direct evidence whether the earthquake-related conspiracy theories were employed as propaganda tools, the association between endorsement of these theories and voting preferences suggests that they might be used as such in different contexts in the future. The potential use of these theories as propaganda tools, especially in non-WEIRD societies with fragile democratic institutions and low scientific literacy among citizens, underscores their potential to influence election outcomes. Given that conspiracy beliefs and susceptibility to misinformation are higher in countries with high levels of corruption (Alper, 2023; Alper et al., 2024; Alper & Imhoff, 2023), this situation underscores a significant danger and acts as a cautionary note against future propaganda tactics. The widespread use of conspiracy theories by politicians in countries with weak democratic institutions, including Türkiye, suggests that this phenomenon may be more specific to non-WEIRD nations (Nefes, 2018; Nefes & Aksoy, 2024; Nyhan & Zeitzoff, 2018; Pirro & Taggart, 2023; Radnitz, 2022).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

One potential counterargument is that the conspiracy belief regarding the nature of the earthquakes is influenced by specific ideologies, rather than indicating a general susceptibility to conspiracy theories (Imhoff et al., 2022; Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Supporters of the government might be predisposed to accept any claim, conspiracy theory or not, that exonerates the government from wrongdoing, a phenomenon known as "expressive responding" (Altay et al., 2023). However, this does not negate our argument, as we do not claim that supporters of Erdogan and JDP are generally more prone to conspiracy thinking. Rather, they may be employed to rationalize continuing support for the incumbent government. Past research indicates that both right- and left-wing supporters endorse politically aligned conspiracy theories, especially in countries with high levels of corruption, such as Türkiye (Alper & Imhoff, 2023). Thus, it is likely that the political opposition in Türkiye also utilizes its own conspiracy theories to further its interests (Nefes & Aksoy, 2024). However, this does not diminish the significance of the finding that conspiracy theories are not exclusively embraced by the "losers" but can also be exploited by those in positions of power.

Another potential limitation is the possibility that there are other reasons for Erdogan and JDP supporters to embrace HAARP conspiracy theories. It might not be solely about being in power, but rather their conservative and nationalistic tendencies, which could make them more likely to endorse conspiracy theories about other countries in general. However, previous research suggested that supporters of the JDP and the Republican People's Party (the main opposition party led by Kilicdaroglu) did not significantly differ in terms of ingroup-binding moral sentiments (Yilmaz et al., 2016).

In our initial preregistration, we posited five hypotheses, four of which were supported. These included the prediction that conspiracy beliefs would be positively associated with favorable evaluations of the government's disaster response (H5), which was confirmed. However, H4—predicting a negative correlation between conspiracy beliefs and attributing responsibility to the government or local authorities—was not supported. Specifically, conspiracy beliefs showed no significant association with attributing responsibility to the central government or ministries and were weakly, positively associated with blaming local governments (see the Supplementary Material). Although conspiracy beliefs were significantly associated with increased support for the incumbent government and president, they were not associated with reduced attribution of blame to central government or ministries. This result was unexpected and may be due to a limitation in how the responsibility item was framed. Participants were asked about "Government/Ministries" as a single combined entity, which may have obscured more nuanced distinctions participants made between elected and unelected officials. For example, some conspiracy believers may hold ministries or lower-level actors responsible without implicating the president himself. Additionally, voters may differentiate between central and local governments even when they are led by the same political party. Future research should disaggregate responsibility attributions by specific actors to better capture these distinctions.

Future research should further explore the relationship between HAARP conspiracy theory and voting intentions, potentially through an experimental mediation model. Our findings currently illustrate only the correlation between conspiracy beliefs and political preferences, though past research suggests that the likely direction of causality runs from political rumors to political beliefs (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2018). Further studies should delve into how governments may intentionally or implicitly engage in such practices. Future investigations might also explore causality through longitudinal measurements. Despite its limitations, this study significantly contributes to the field by analyzing actual behavior analysis through X posts and providing convergent analyses on a representative non-WEIRD sample in an ecologically valid context (e.g., post-earthquake), with consistent findings.

Future research should also account for alternative explanations of the current findings. It could plausibly be argued that Erdogan and the JDP are perceived as victims of oppression by foreign powers, a dominant discourse in Turkish politics (e.g., Arısan, 2023; Yilmaz 2017) that has influenced the content of prevalent conspiracy theories (Nefes, 2018, 2025; Yilmaz & Shipoli, 2022). It is therefore possible that supporters of Erdogan and the JDP may still consider themselves as "losers" despite their party's uninterrupted control of the government for more than 23 straight years. Such alternative explanations should be tested in future research by employing measures of the perceived power of different political actors in shaping events in Türkiye.

CONCLUSION

While conspiracy theories are often perceived as narratives of the weak and powerless, they can also serve those in power to maintain their dominance. This study demonstrates how a conspiracy theory can potentially sway votes in favor of a ruling party. It highlights that conspiracies can reinforce the position of both the powerless and the powerful, leading to tangible political outcomes.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in OSF at https://osf.io/4tshk/?view_only=1601b2a8f3b84e3d805ee7944b7c0238.

TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT
Data from Study 1 will not be made public due to privacy concerns related to the analysis of social media users. However, the data will be available upon request for any researchers wishing to reproduce our results. Data for Study 2 are available at https://osf.io/4tshk/?view_only=1601b2a8f3b84e3d805ee7944b7c0238.

Study 2 was preregistered prior to data collection (https://osf.io/d628y/?view_only=6072ad66f37e4d1d8099349ccbb8013c).

Supplementary Material is accessible at https://osf.io/4tshk/files/psxvt?view_only=1601b2a8f3b84e3d805ee7944b7c0238.

We used ChatGPT (chat.openai.com) for proofreading purposes. We asked ChatGPT to proofread and improve the language when necessary in our texts. ChatGPT's role was to revise existing bodies of text and it did not author any part of the article by itself.

ORCID
Sinan Alper https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9051-0690

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Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.