

Belief in Election Conspiracies: The Interplay of Evangelical Identity and Alienation in Democratic Trust

Abstract

This article interrogates the socio-political roots of election conspiracism among white Evangelical Christians by situating their beliefs within broader frameworks of cultural and social alienation, perceived discrimination, and identity-based grievance. Drawing on Fromm's Theory of Irrationality, Social Identity Theory, and Symbolic Interactionism, the analysis uses 2020 ANES survey data to examine how Evangelical orthodoxy and perceptions of systemic loss intersect to produce distrust in electoral legitimacy. While religious identity alone does not significantly predict belief in election conspiracies, perceptions of racial and religious discrimination—particularly among those who identify as white and Christian—emerge as strong predictors. This paradox of perceived victimhood among traditionally privileged groups underscores how reactionary worldviews can be weaponized to erode democratic trust. The article contributes to critical sociology by mapping the ideological terrain through which dominant groups reframe political decline as existential threat, offering insight into the mechanisms by which grievance politics are culturally and psychologically sustained.

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INTRODUCTION

American political attitudes over the years have been hugely influenced by religious identity. This is particularly true for evangelical communities, deeply anchored in traditional values and moral certainties. In recent years, fundamentalist evangelicals have emerged as prominent voices in discussions on election integrity, with a significant segment actively supporting claims of widespread voter fraud in the 2020 election by former President Trump and his allies, often referred to as the "Big Lie" (Perry, Whitehead, and Grubbs 2024). On its own, this phenomenon would provoke curiosity; however, these same populations have been mobilized around parental rights regarding educational decisions, leading the charge against trans rights issues and book bans in local communities across the country. It is thus incumbent upon us to better understand how certain religious beliefs and a sense of cultural alienation foster openness to election conspiracies within these groups.

Although studies have broadly explored the relationship between religious identity and political ideology, fewer have looked at how specific aspects of evangelical doctrine—such as fundamentalist adherence and moral absolutism—intersect with political misinformation (Whitehead and Perry 2020). Additionally, a sense of alienation from mainstream culture—prevalent in evangelical communities that view society's growing tolerance around issues of gender identity and sexual orientation as morally opposed to their traditional beliefs—may enhance susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs. This study addresses these gaps by investigating how adherence to evangelical orthodoxy and

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perceived alienation contribute to beliefs in election conspiracies, aiming to understand how these dynamics shape perceptions of election integrity.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses Social Identity Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and Fromm's Theory of Irrationality to investigate how evangelical orthodoxy and feelings of alienation influence susceptibility to election conspiracies. Together, these theories provide a framework examining social identity and psychological mechanisms behind conspiracy acceptance.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains how group affiliations shape self-concept, fostering loyalty to in-group beliefs and resistance to conflicting narratives (Tajfel and Turner 1979). For fundamentalist evangelicals, this loyalty is intensified by adherence to moral absolutes. As these communities feel increasingly isolated from mainstream culture, commitment to in-group beliefs strengthens, positioning secular authorities as adversaries out to destroy their way of life.

Symbolic Interactionism provides insight into how fundamentalist evangelicals assign meaning to political issues, framing them as spiritual or moral conflicts. For evangelicals, political battles are often viewed as part of a broader cultural struggle (or spiritual warfare), where secularism represents moral decline (Blumer 1969). Election conspiracies become symbols reinforcing an evangelical worldview.

Fromm's Theory of Irrationality adds a psychological dimension, explaining how powerlessness or alienation drives individuals toward simplified, often irrational beliefs

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to regain control (Fromm 1941). For evangelicals experiencing cultural alienation, election conspiracies may serve as psychological defense mechanisms.

Dualism as a Lens

Dualistic thinking is a defining characteristic of many fundamentalist worldviews, particularly within Evangelical subcultures. Rooted in notions of good versus evil, saved versus damned, and righteous versus sinful, this black-and-white framework heavily informs how evangelicals interpret political and cultural conflict. In the context of election conspiracism, dualism plays a central role. The narrative that the 2020 election was stolen is not simply a political grievance—it is often interpreted as a moral and spiritual assault against divine order and righteous governance.

This dualistic framework intensifies in-group/out-group dynamics, positioning Evangelicals as the defenders of moral truth and the secular left as agents of chaos, deception, or even evil. As such, belief in election conspiracies is not only rationalized but sanctified within this worldview. The perceived erosion of traditional values becomes intertwined with narratives of fraud, betrayal, and impending doom, reinforcing a psychological and ideological dependence on conspiracy as a form of resistance.

By adding a dualistic lens to Social Identity Theory and Symbolic Interactionism, this study illuminates how Evangelical communities create coherent, internally consistent narratives that reject nuance in favor of stark moral contrasts. In this context, conspiracism becomes a byproduct of theological rigidity as much as political

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misinformation, deepening the schisms between evangelical identity and democratic trust.

Methods

This study employs quantitative analysis to test the hypothesis that Evangelical orthodoxy and alienation increase belief in election conspiracies. Rather than relying on a composite index, Evangelical orthodoxy is represented using three specific measures: a dummy variable capturing fundamentalist or evangelical self-identification, frequency of church attendance, and identification as a born-again Christian. Alienation is measured using indicators like perceived government fairness, political powerlessness, and perceived discrimination.

Data come from the 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES), a nationally representative survey of voting-age Americans. The final analytic sample includes 5,486 observations after removing cases with missing data. The dependent variable, *perceptions of vote-counting fairness* (V202219), is ordinal and derived from the question: “How often do you think votes in national elections are counted fairly?” Responses range from 1 (*All of the time*) to 5 (*Never*). One key independent variable, *political alienation* (V202213), is based on agreement with the statement, “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does.” Responses range from 1 (*Strongly agree*) to 5 (*Strongly disagree*), and the scale was reverse coded for interpretation.

Additional dummy variables were constructed for race, sex, income, education, and party affiliation to control for sociodemographic and ideological differences. Three key

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religious indicators were included: a dummy variable for respondents identifying as both Evangelical and Fundamentalist (from V201459), frequency of church attendance, and identification as born-again Christian. Political alienation is measured using ANES item V202213, which asks whether respondents agree with the statement, "People like me don't have any say about what the government does." Responses were reverse coded so that higher values reflect greater feelings of powerlessness. The final regression models also include interaction terms for perceived discrimination against whites and Christians to explore how identity-based grievance intersects with religious belief and political trust.

Results

Descriptive statistics indicate variability in vote-counting perceptions, with an average response suggesting votes are counted fairly "most of the time." Table 1 presents the key descriptive variables and their summary statistics.

Model 1 establishes a baseline using sociodemographic and ideological variables. Model 2 incorporates religious identity through born-again status and church attendance, revealing a temporary significance for the born-again variable. However, in Model 3, once variables for perceived discrimination and political agency are introduced, the religious variables lose significance. This suggests that political alienation and identity-based grievances—particularly perceptions of discrimination against whites and Christians—exert greater influence on election conspiracism than religious orthodoxy alone. These findings suggest alienation and perceived discrimination drive conspiratorial beliefs more than theological identity alone.

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Discussion and Conclusion

While this study anticipated a strong connection between Evangelical orthodoxy and belief in election conspiracies, the results complicate that assumption. Religious orthodoxy does not significantly predict distrust in vote-counting when controlling for political alienation and perceived discrimination. Instead, political alienation and cultural grievance appear to be more central.

These findings emphasize how members of traditionally privileged groups—white Christians—are increasingly framing themselves as victims. This identity-based grievance may serve as fertile ground for conspiratorial thinking, with alienation functioning as both a psychological and cultural bridge to such beliefs. These dynamics highlight the political consequences of perceived victimhood and the power of narrative frameworks in shaping political trust.

Future research should refine measures of religiosity and incorporate longitudinal data to assess how these beliefs evolve. Scholars must also consider the dual role of religious institutions in both resisting and reinforcing democratic mistrust. Understanding these layered dynamics is critical to mitigating polarization and restoring democratic legitimacy.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Votes Counted Fairly (V202219)	2.67	1.09	1	5
No Say in Government (V202213)	2.55	1.24	1	5
Whites Discriminated Against	3.90	1.35	1	5
Christians Discriminated Against	3.62	1.48	1	5
Born Again Identity	0.29	0.45	0	1
Fundamentalist or Evangelical Identity	0.22	0.41	0	1
Weekly Church Attendance	0.47	0.50	0	1
Male	0.47	0.50	0	1
White	0.73	0.44	0	1
College Graduate	0.46	0.50	0	1

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Table 2: OLS Regression Results – Predicting Belief that Votes Are Counted Unfairly

VARIABLE	MODEL 1	MODEL 2	MODEL 3
NON-WHITE (RACE)	-0.12***	-0.10**	-0.10**
MALE (SEX)	-0.16***	-0.15***	-0.14***
COLLEGE GRADUATE	-0.24***	-0.23***	-0.17***
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE	0.12**	0.12**	0.10*
LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL	0.15*	0.15*	0.10
DEMOCRAT	-0.93***	-0.92***	-0.79***
REPUBLICAN	0.25**	0.23*	0.18*
INDEPENDENT	-0.37***	-0.36***	-0.32***
LOW INCOME	0.13**	0.13**	0.10**
HIGH INCOME	-0.14***	-0.13***	-0.11**
RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM	0.00	-0.01	-0.01
CHURCH ATTENDANCE		0.00	-0.02
BORN AGAIN CHRISTIAN		0.12***	0.06
DISCRIMINATION (WHITES)			0.17***
DISCRIMINATION (CHRISTIANS)			0.11***
POLITICAL AGENCY			-0.11***
CONSTANT	2.90***	2.85***	2.79***
ADJUSTED R ²	0.1987	0.2006	0.2500

*Notes: Standard errors robust to heteroscedasticity.

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001