"DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?"
CONSPIRACY THEORIES SERVE BELIEVERS TO PUNCH DOWN

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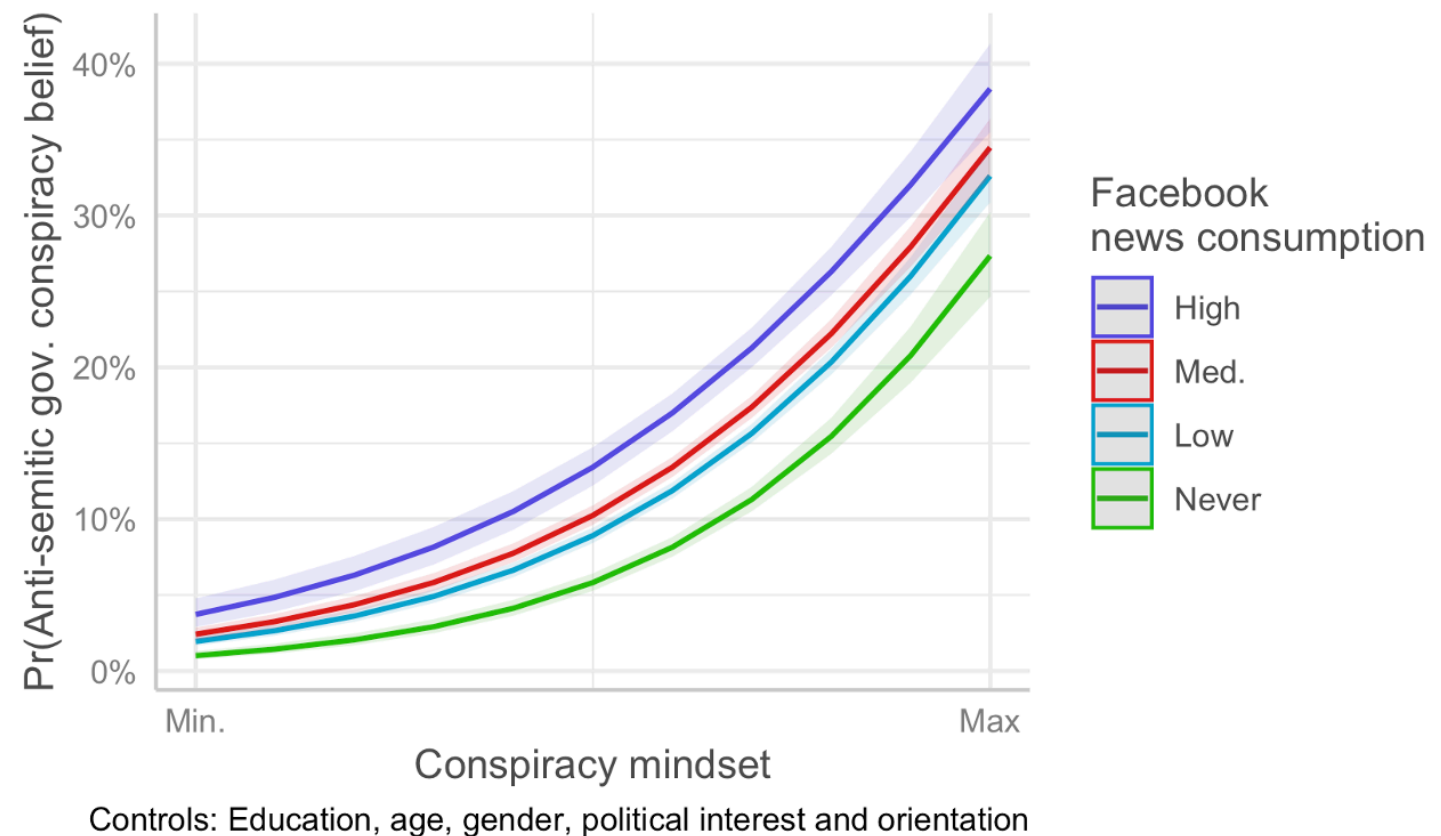
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(OLD TITLE) PUNCHING UP OR CONSPIRING DOWN?

PERCEIVED SOCIAL STATUS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Motivation I

Part of a larger study focusing on the impact of social media on disinformation about the war in Ukraine
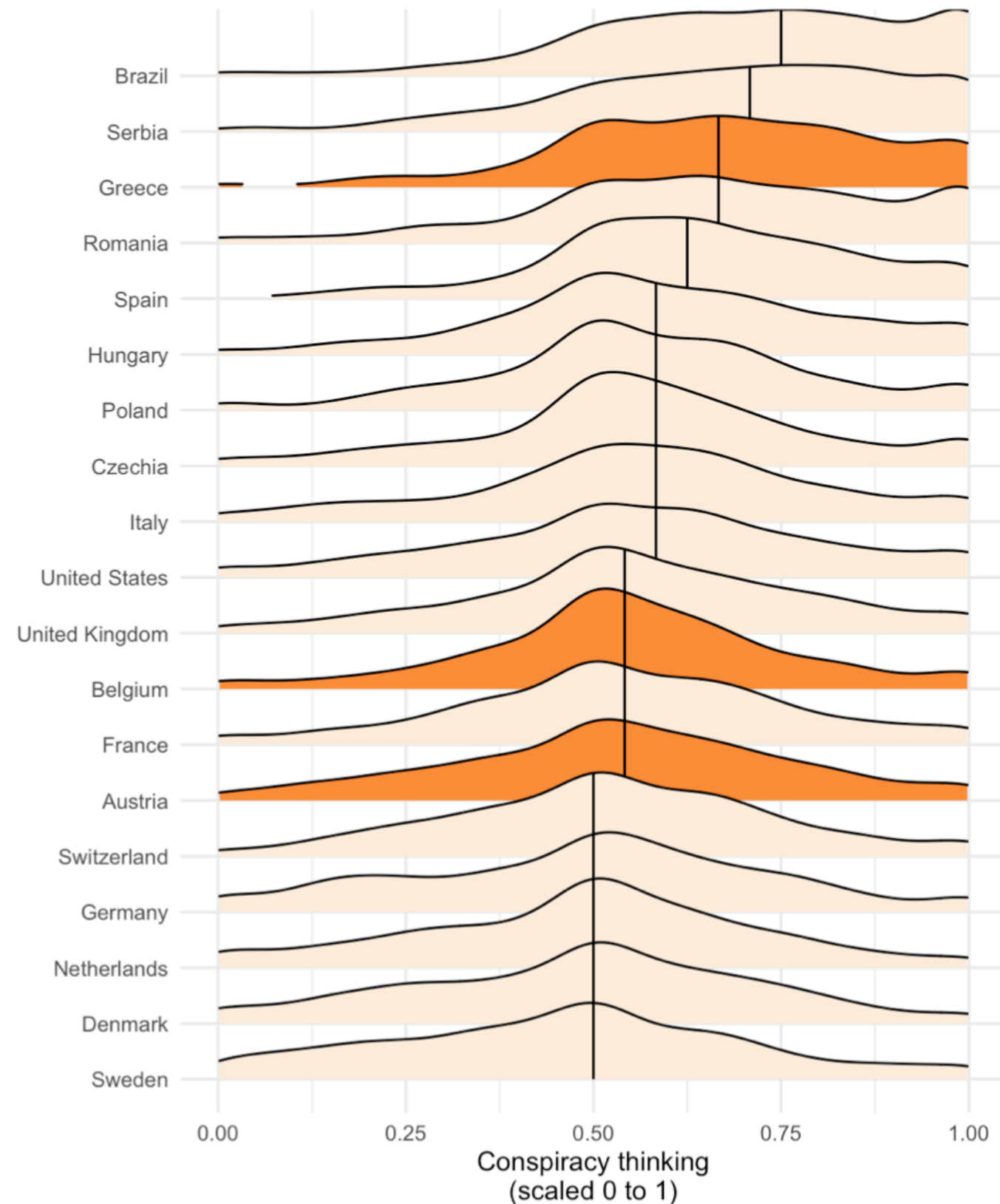
- 19 country survey

- Key Outcomes

  - *"The Ukraine's government is anti-semitic and controlled by Neo-Nazis"*

  - *"The U.S. is funding biological weapons research in Ukraine"*

- In thinking about disinformation and conspiracies, we devised additional CT items to be fielded in 3 countries

- Theorized and operationalized measures that combine status and self importance to estimate their impact

Controls: Education, age, gender, political interest and orientation

Motivation II

Case selection and focus

- Case selection for a 3-country study presented today: **Greece, Austria, Belgium**

- 5 outcomes

    - *Assigning blame to Germany / US / China for the war in Ukraine*

    - *"US secret services manufactured Barack Obama's 2008 election to avoid a revolution by African Americans."*

    - *"Powerful people intentionally planned the coronavirus outbreak."*

- New predictor: Externally perceived social status

Motivation III

Measure

- By now there is a long literature on political correlates of CTs

- However, it is likely that their effects are confounded by (social and psychological) traits that feature earlier in the causal chain.

- Previous research:

  - The Dark Triad (incl. narcissism)

  - Victimhood

  - Powerlessness

  - Relative deprivation

- Our contribution: conceptualize, theorize its role, and measure **perceived social status**

Externally Perceived Social Status (EPSS)

- Narcissism - a concept close to ours - comprises of two related dimensions (grandiosity and vulnerability)

- Psychodynamic studies consider the grandiosity dimension as a response to vulnerability

- With EPSS we try to explicitly combine both dimensions by measuring an individual's view of how highly regarded they are in their social context.

- Specifically we invite respondents to use a 1 to 7 scale to answer the following question:

- **"Most people think I play an important role in our society"**

Research questions

- **3-country study:** Do perceptions of high self-worth predict beliefs in geo-political, health-related, and racist conspiracy theories?

- **US study**:

  - Is self-worth different from narcissism (and **vulnerability** and a **need for uniqueness**)?

  - Which traits are especially prognostic of conspiracy thinking?

Theoretical Prediction

- Individuals **high** in EPSS will be more conspiratorial

- Why?

- **Conspiracy theories**

  - Interesting and different (theorists possess "unique insights", bravely speak truth to power)

  - Orchestrated malevolent actions (intentionality bias, cynicism)

  - Non-falsifiable (immune to criticism)
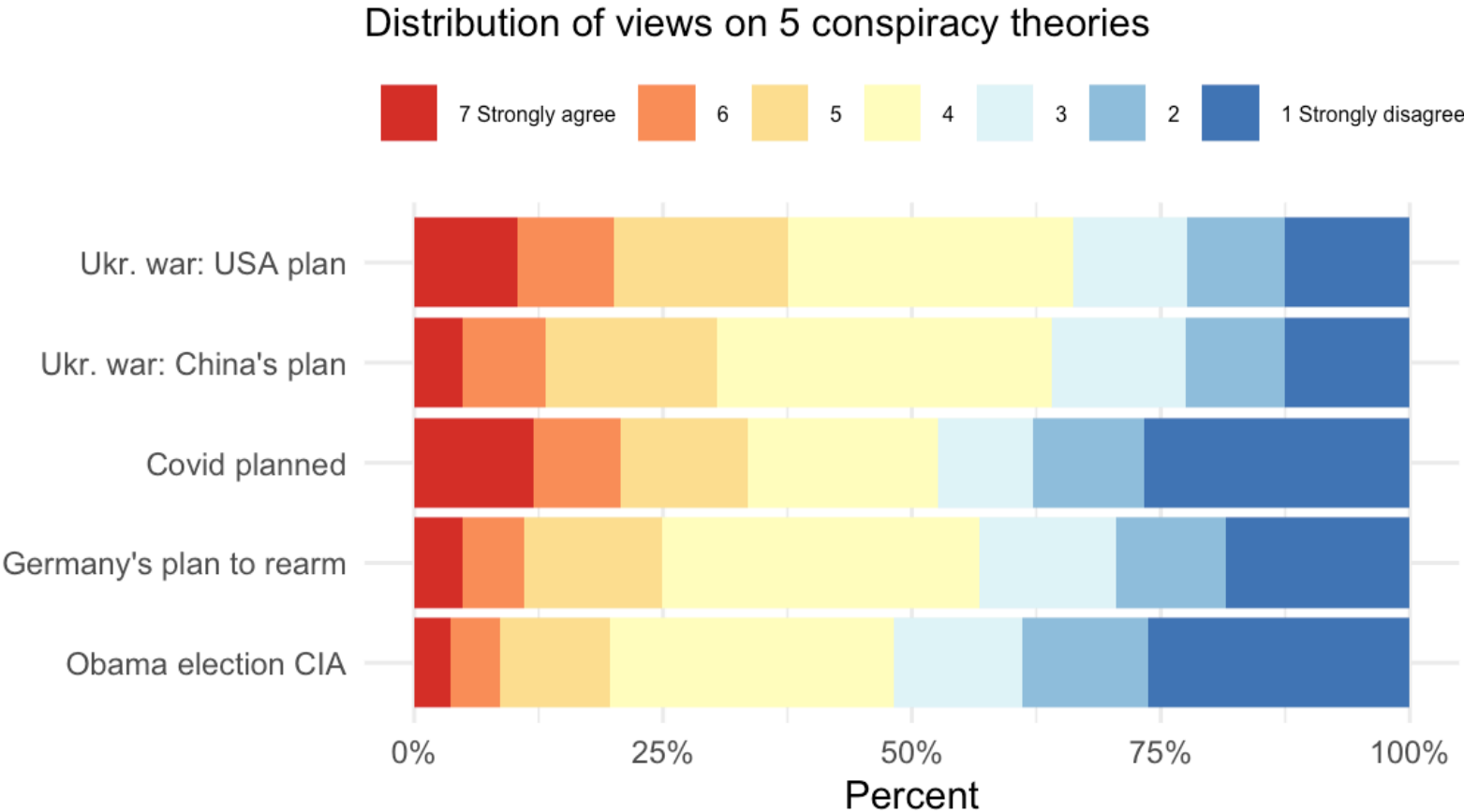
- (And do people feel "respected enough?")

"My superpower is turning anything I don't understand into a conspiracy theory."
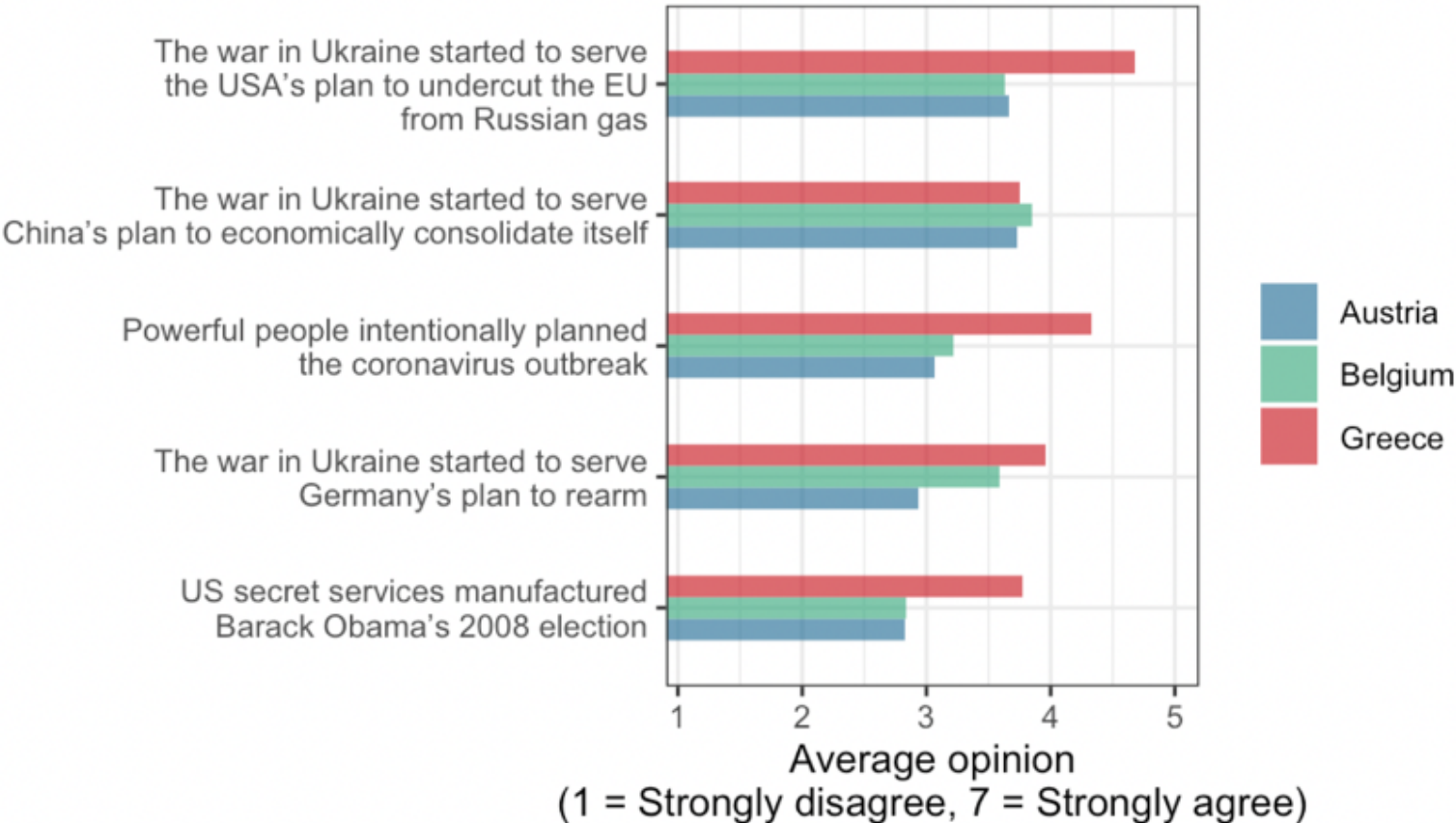
Hypotheses

- Individuals high in the externally-driven self-worth (or externally perceived social status) will be more conspiratorial (H1).

- Beliefs in specific conspiracy theories can be predicted with self-worth (i.e. "conspiring down") even **after conditioning generalized conspiracy thinking** (H2).

Beliefs in conspiracy theories

Pooled data

Disaggregated data

Distribution of views on 5 conspiracy theories

7 Strongly agree | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 Strongly disagree

Ukr. war: USA plan
Ukr. war: China's plan
Covid planned
Germany's plan to rearm
Obama election CIA

Percent

The war in Ukraine started to serve the USA's plan to undercut the EU from Russian gas

The war in Ukraine started to serve China's plan to economically consolidate itself

Powerful people intentionally planned the coronavirus outbreak

The war in Ukraine started to serve Germany's plan to rearm

US secret services manufactured Barack Obama's 2008 election

Austria
Belgium
Greece

Average opinion
(1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)
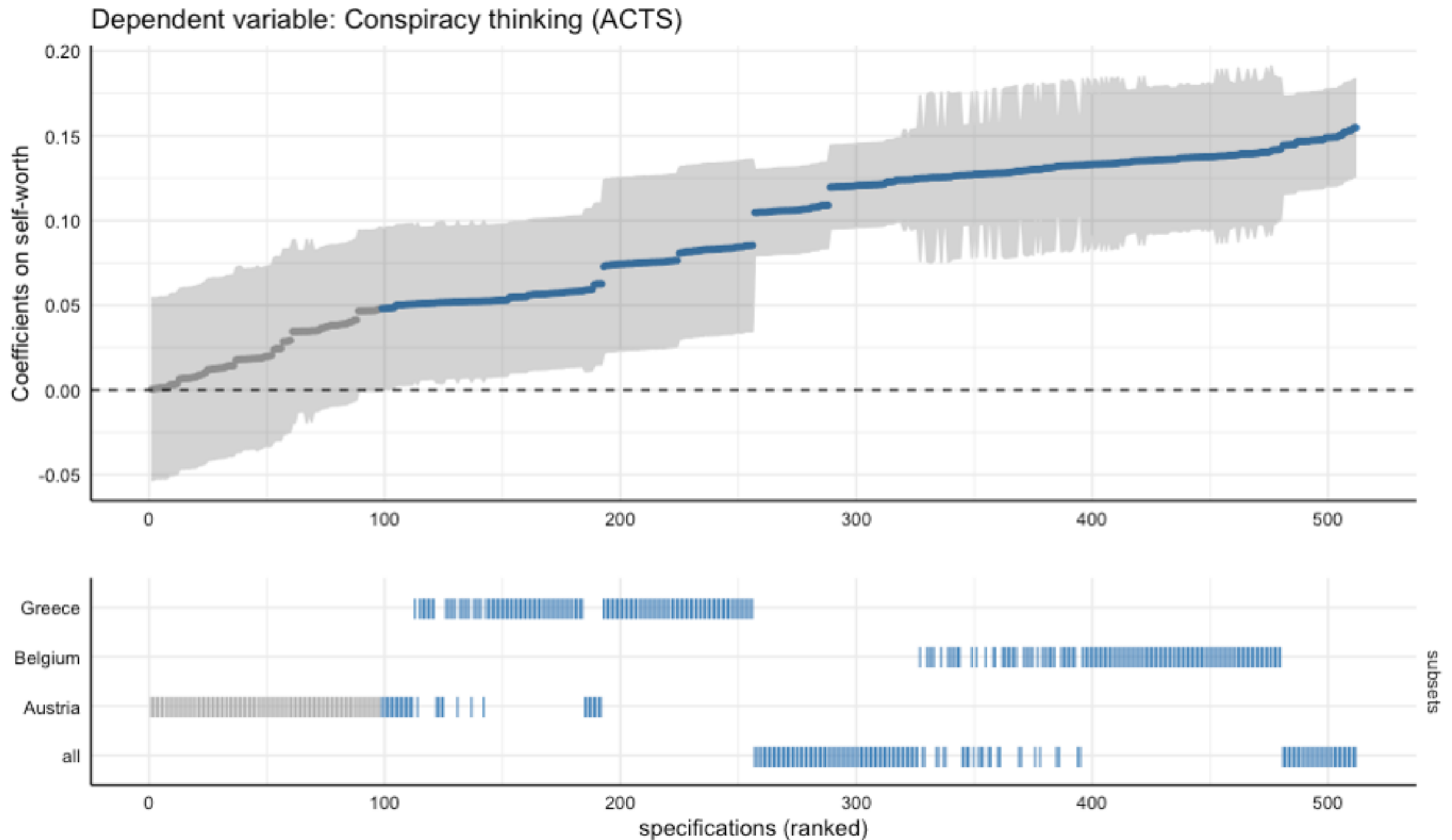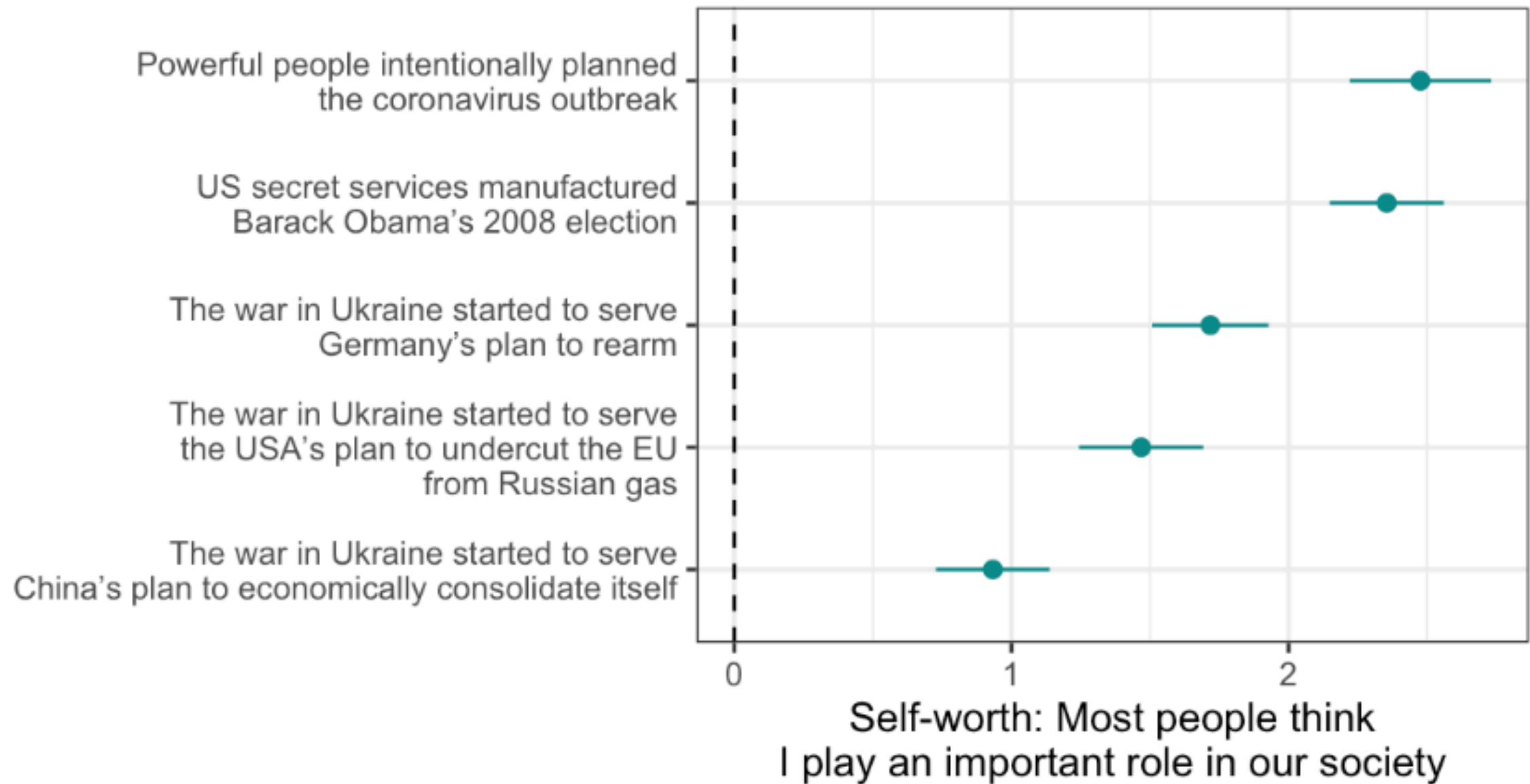
First test

- Model conspiracy thinking (a scale of comprised of sentiments such as "Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places" or "Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway")

- Y = f(self-worth, demographics, ideology, political interest, media consumption, political cynicism)

512 coefficients on self-worth

Bivariate associations

5 conspiracy theories and self-worth

Powerful people intentionally planned the coronavirus outbreak

US secret services manufactured Barack Obama's 2008 election

The war in Ukraine started to serve Germany's plan to rearm

The war in Ukraine started to serve the USA's plan to undercut the EU from Russian gas

The war in Ukraine started to serve China's plan to economically consolidate itself

Self-worth: Most people think
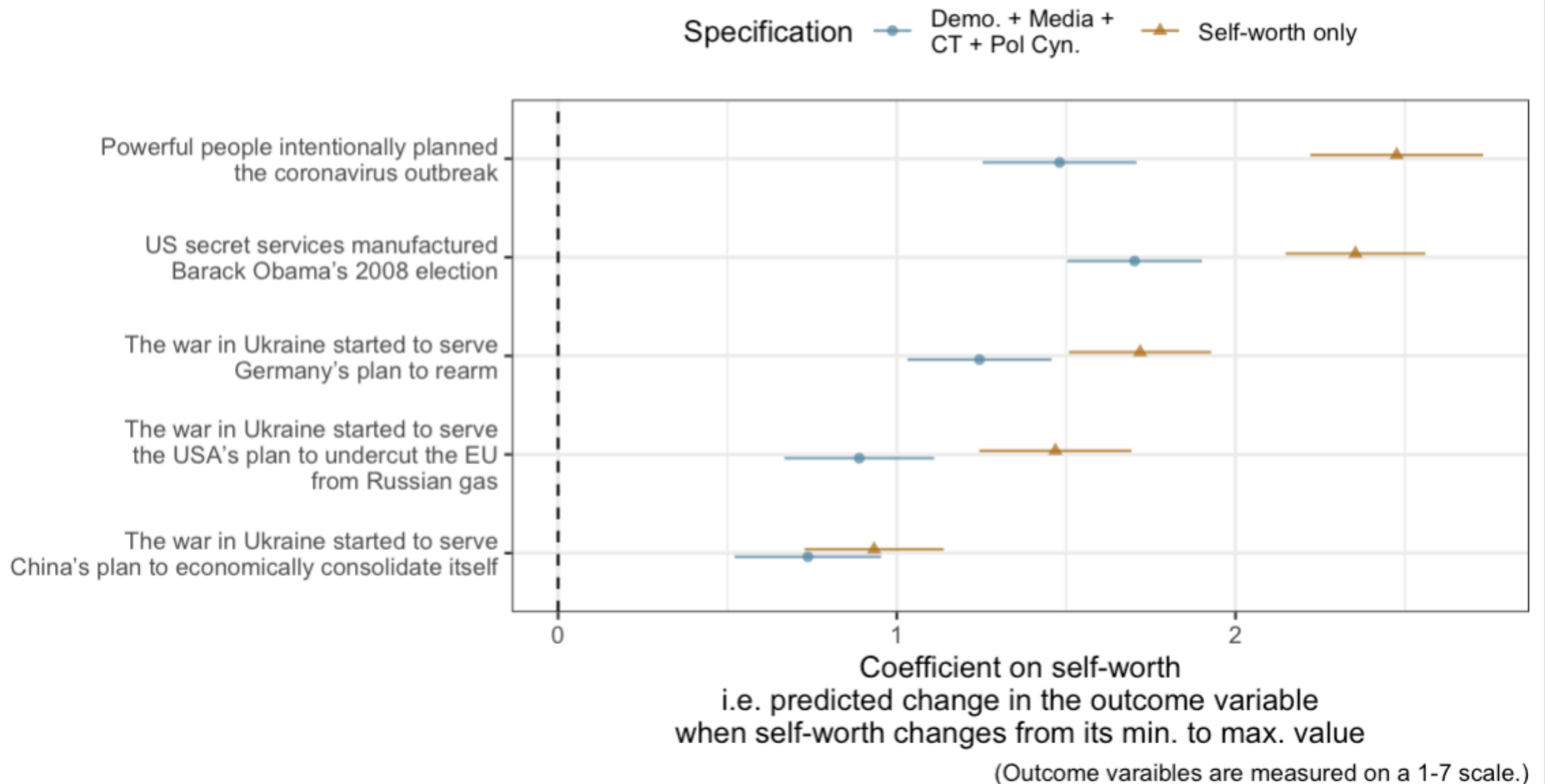I play an important role in our society

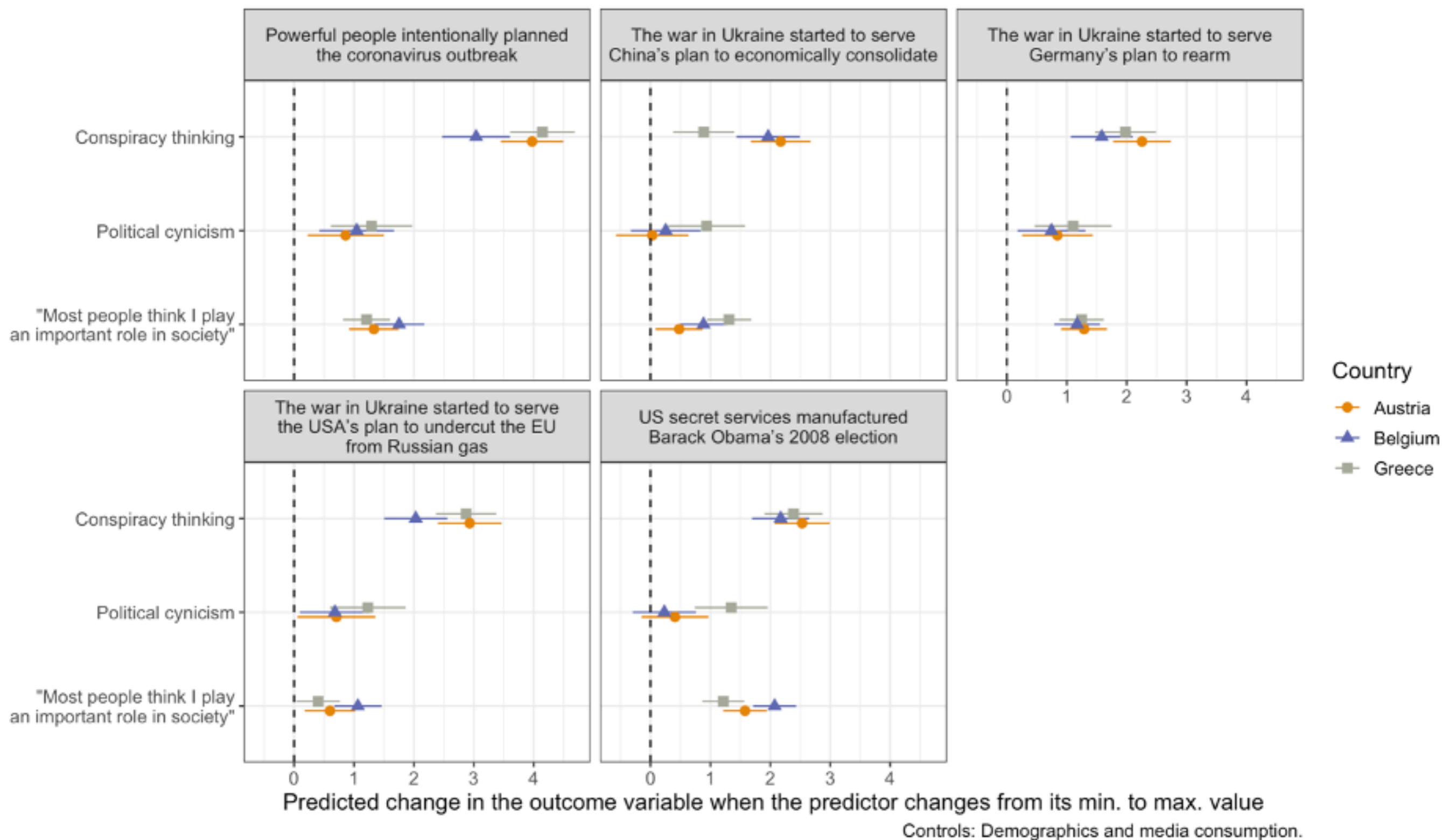# Adding controls (including ACTS) reduces coefficient magnitudes

Evidence from 10 models

Each row displays coefficients from a separate model.
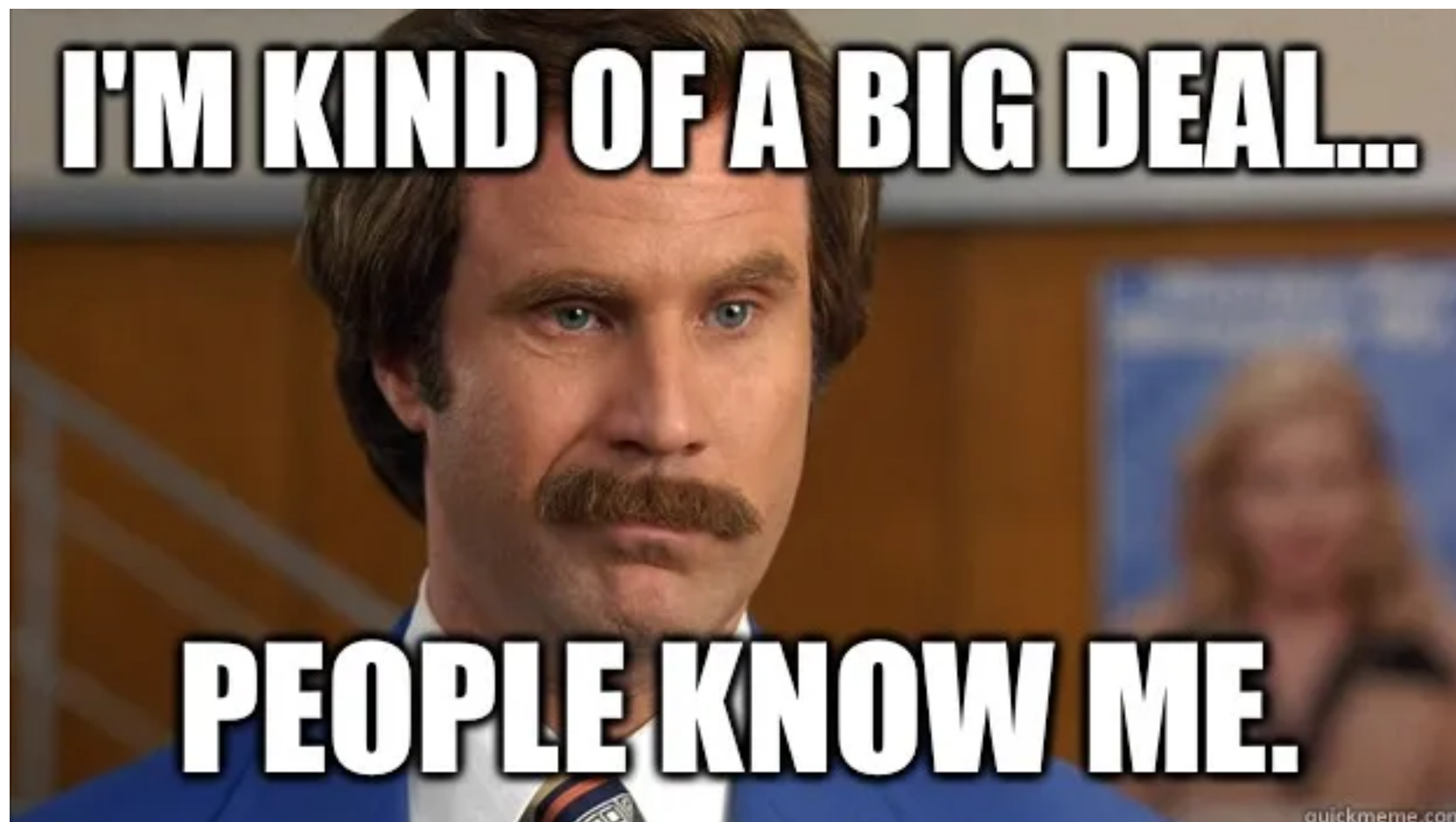The saturated models (blue circles) include these controls:
education, age, gender, media consumption, political interest and ideology.

Specification   ● Demo. + Media + CT + Pol Cyn.   ▲ Self-worth only

Powerful people intentionally planned the coronavirus outbreak

US secret services manufactured Barack Obama's 2008 election

The war in Ukraine started to serve Germany's plan to rearm

The war in Ukraine started to serve the USA's plan to undercut the EU from Russian gas

The war in Ukraine started to serve China's plan to economically consolidate itself

0   1   2

Coefficient on self-worth
i.e. predicted change in the outcome variable
when self-worth changes from its min. to max. value

(Outcome varaibles are measured on a 1-7 scale.)

Controls: Demographics and media consumption.

Predicted change in the outcome variable when the predictor changes from its min. to max. value

Summary of the 3-country study

- EPSS is a strong predictor of CT beliefs

- Different from general conspiracy thinking or political cynicism

Comments & feedback welcomed

- How citizens view themselves (and how they think others see them) seems to matter.

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Supplementary deck for Q&A

Summary

- How citizens see themselves (and how they think *others* in society view them) seems to matter.

- But has the importance of the dark triad been overstated?

- Best predictors of conspiracy thinking:

    - Need for chaos

    - "Vulnerability" (may need a better name)

    - Need for uniqueness

    - Victimhood

- **Future work**: experimentally move self-esteem to measure causal effects; measure and explain beliefs in specific narratives.

- **Caveat: this dataset lacks some key psychological traits**

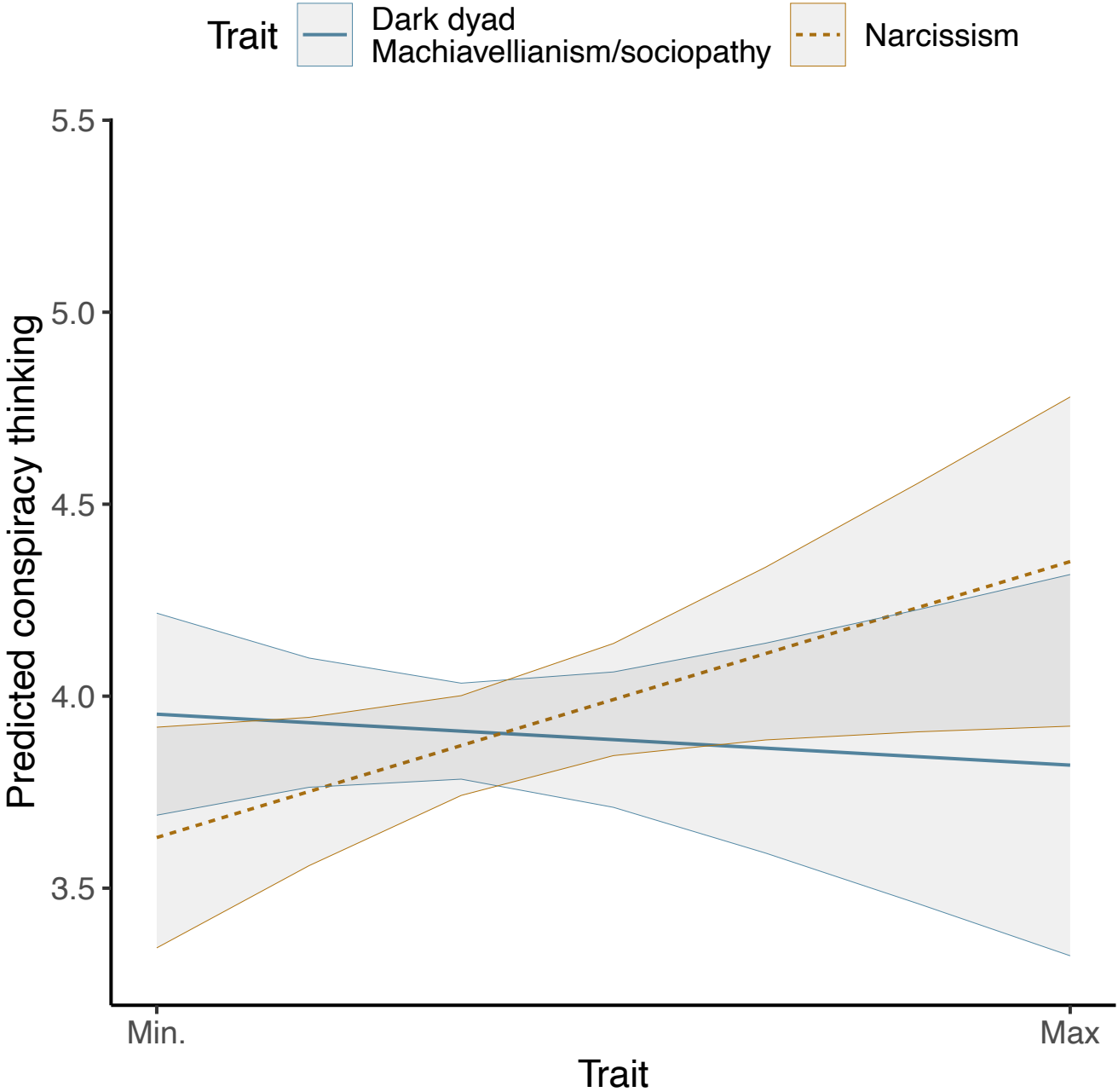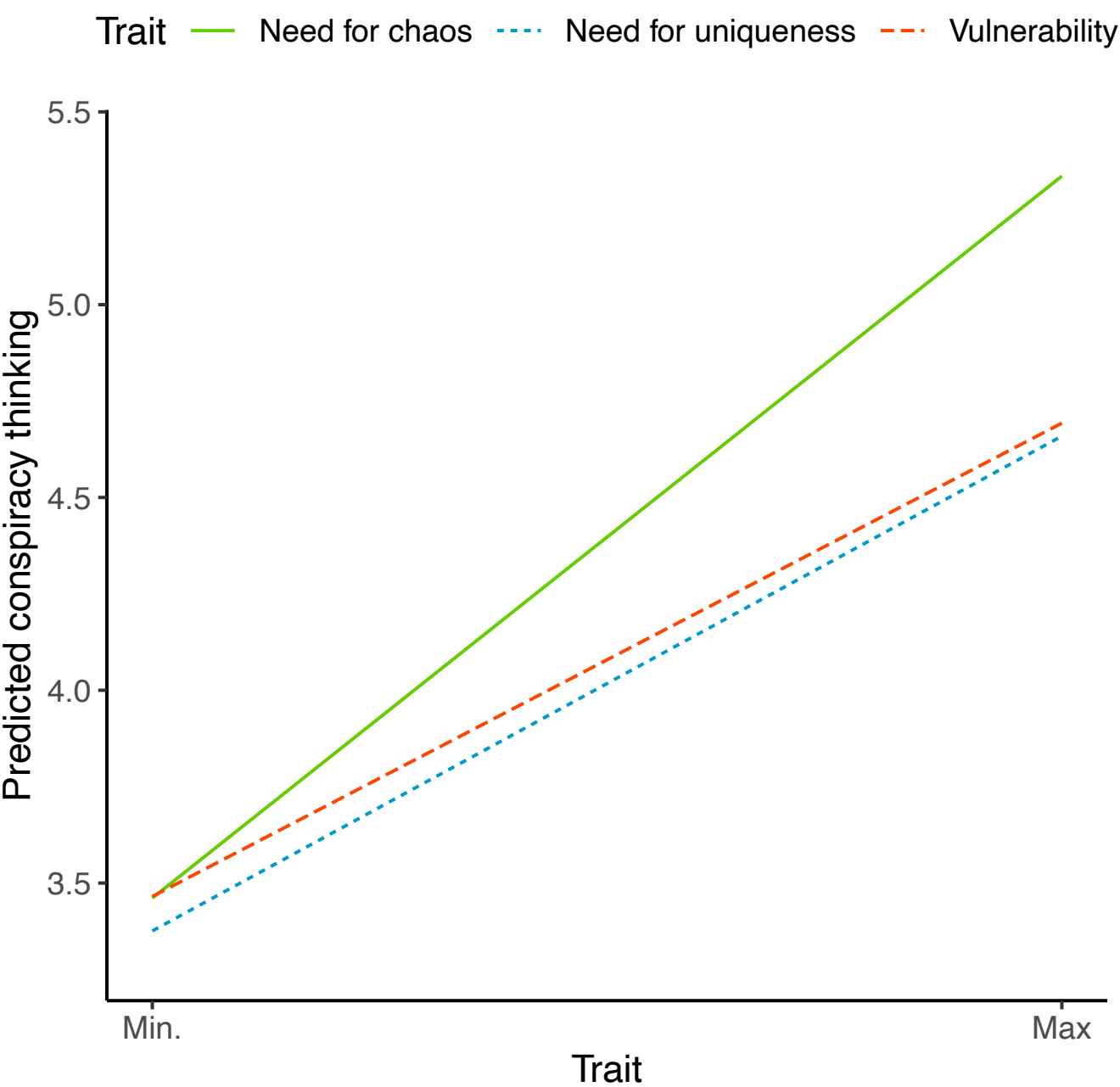 - So we run a follow-up study (US sample, Prolific)

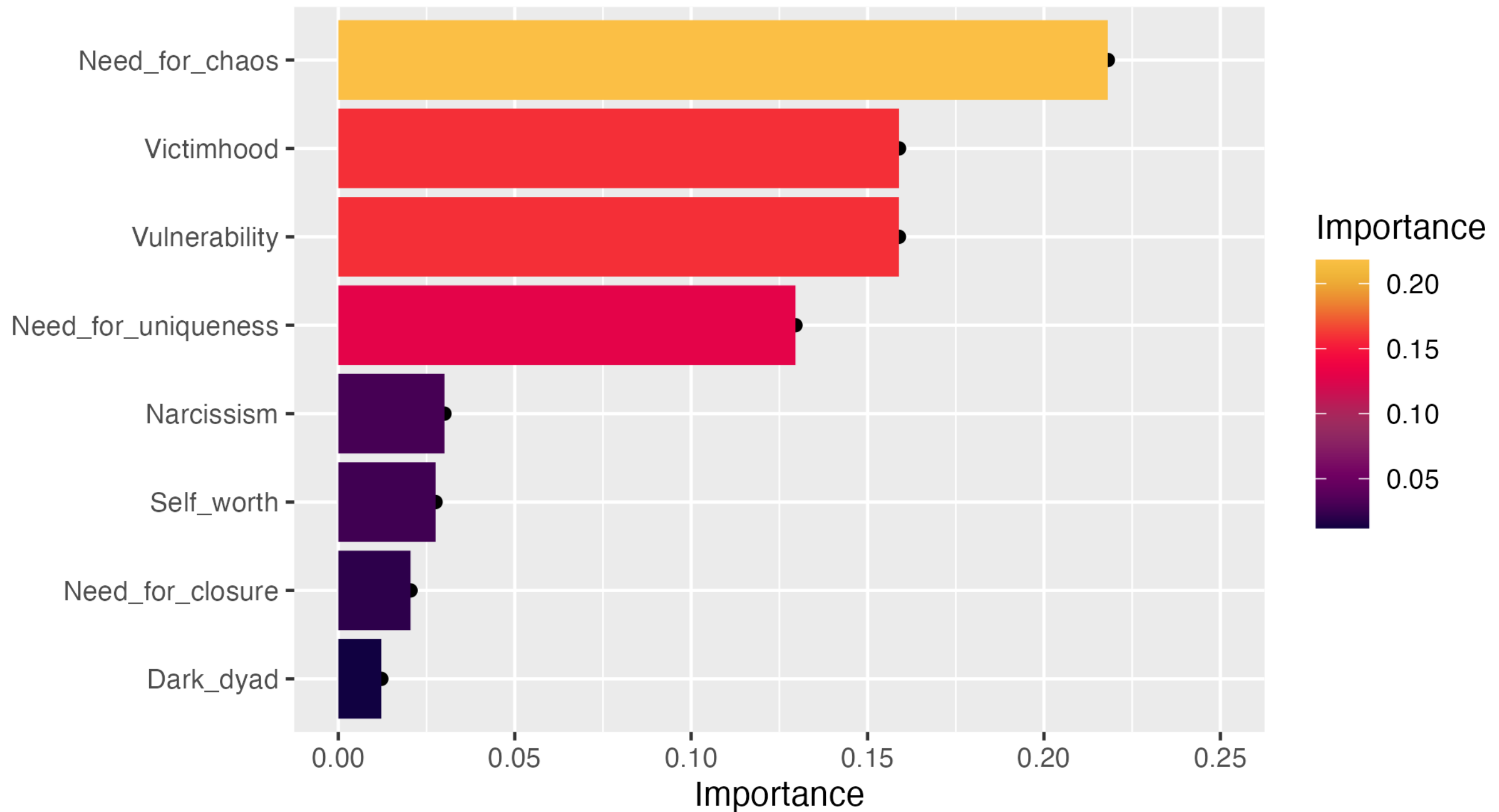Model conspiracy thinking (ACTS) as a function of:

- Narcissism

- Machiavellianism & Sociopathy

- Self-worth

- Vulnerability

  - "*People don't fully appreciate my unique insights*"

  - "*I am a big deal but many people fail to notice that*"

  - "*I spend a lot of time wondering whether people really like me.*"

- Victimhood (Armaly and Enders, 2021)

- Need for chaos

- Need for uniqueness

US Study: Using *aggregated* psychological scales to predict conspiracy thinking (ACTS)
(all included in a single model)

Trait — Need for chaos --- Need for uniqueness --- Vulnerability

Trait ▨ Dark dyad Machiavellianism/sociopathy ⋯⋯ Narcissism

Ranked importance of psychological predictors of ACTS

Permutation-based variable importance conveys the magnitude of a counterfactual
increase in errors/residuals if the values of a given predictor are reshuffled

	ACTS	Covid planned	War started for profit	Platforms hide the truth
Need for uniqueness	0.214 ** (0.057)	0.013 (0.058)	0.092 (0.055)	0.125 * (0.059)
Need for chaos	0.312 ** (0.065)	−0.043 (0.066)	0.299 ** (0.062)	0.038 (0.067)
Vulnerability	0.205 ** (0.066)	0.023 (0.067)	−0.103 (0.063)	0.046 (0.068)
Narcissism	0.120 * (0.057)	0.006 (0.057)	−0.010 (0.054)	0.027 (0.058)
Machiavellianism/Sociopathy	−0.022 (0.060)	−0.093 (0.060)	−0.170 ** (0.057)	−0.152 * (0.061)
Self-worth	0.056 (0.055)	0.068 (0.055)	−0.003 (0.052)	−0.0008 (0.055)
College graduate	−0.446 ** (0.134)	−0.106 (0.135)	−0.004 (0.127)	−0.093 (0.137)
Low income	0.159 (0.156)	−0.150 (0.155)	−0.031 (0.146)	−0.093 (0.157)
ACTS		0.687 ** (0.046)	0.600 ** (0.044)	0.697 ** (0.047)
Num.Obs.	472	472	472	472
R2	0.214	0.375	0.404	0.410
RMSE	1.37	1.36	1.28	1.38

	Conspiracy thinking (ACTS)	Need for chaos	Vulnerability
Need for uniqueness	0.213 ** (0.058)	0.128 ** (0.041)	0.129 ** (0.041)
Need for chaos	0.307 ** (0.064)		0.225 ** (0.045)
Vulnerability	0.197 ** (0.065)	0.225 ** (0.045)	
Narcissism	0.123 * (0.056)	−0.097 * (0.040)	0.216 ** (0.039)
Machiavellianism/Sociopathy	−0.023 (0.060)	0.165 ** (0.042)	0.045 (0.043)
Most people think I play an important role in society	0.039 (0.043)	−0.048 (0.030)	−0.096 ** (0.030)
College graduate	−0.448 ** (0.134)	−0.164 (0.095)	−0.046 (0.096)
Low income	0.147 (0.154)	−0.153 (0.109)	0.332 ** (0.108)
ACTS		0.153 ** (0.032)	0.098 ** (0.032)
Num.Obs.	472	472	472
R2	0.213	0.253	0.278
RMSE	1.37	0.96	0.96

Conspiracy thinking index components
(ACTS)

- Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places.

- Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway.

- The people who really run the country\nare not known to the voters

- Big events like wars and the outcomes of elections are controlled by small groups of people who are working in secret against the rest of us.
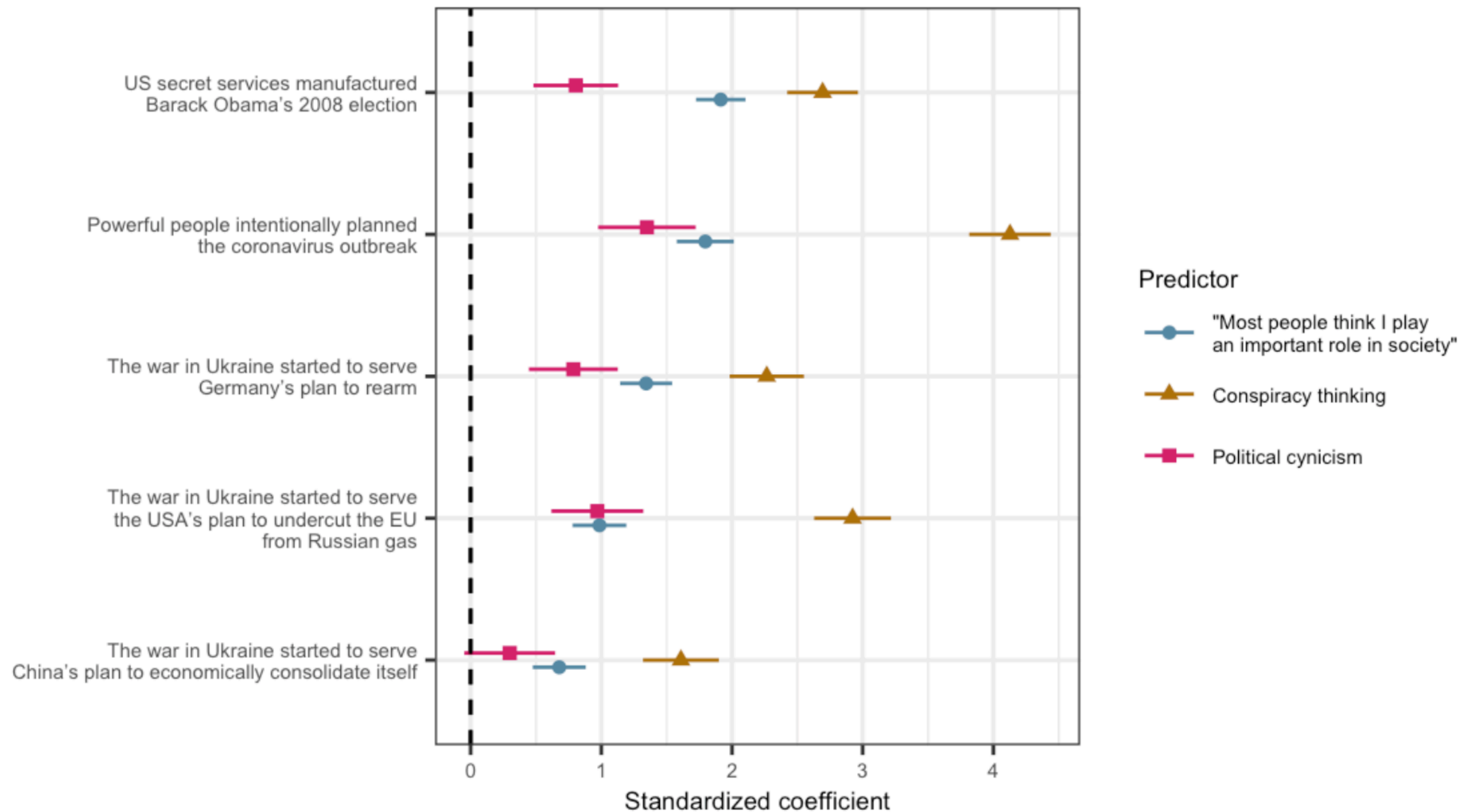
Perceived social status

7-point scale

"Most people think I play an important role in our society"

Perceived social status / self-worth

Country	Average response	% agree
Austria	2.55	10.90
Belgium	2.61	10.50
Greece	3.77	30.15

ACTS, of course, explains most of the variation

3 predictors (no other controls)

Bivariate associations

5 conspiracy theories and ACTS