

Conspiracy Theory Endorsement by Generation

Research Report: PCIS-005 | April 9, 2022

Research Question

Across the last four reports, we've tried to uncover which demographic groups in the United States most believe in a variety of conspiracies. In this report, we investigated how belief in conspiracy theories differs across generations. This is important because peoples' tendency to endorse conspiracy theories might ebb and flow across time as public trust in institutions rises or falls. Consider the "Birds Aren't Real" satire conspiracy, promulgated by those born in the mid-late 1990s and early 2000s ("Gen Z") which insists that birds are not what we see flying above our heads, but rather, government drones designed to fool us (Byrne, 2021). The ridiculousness of this conspiracy is exactly the point—conspiratorialism, itself, is being critiqued. So, here, we ask: is there any indication that younger generations are becoming more conspiratorial?

Methodology

Data Source

- Paranormal and Conspiratorial Ideation Study ("PCIS," collected in July-August 2021)

Data Quality Control

- All participants in this dataset passed attention, response time, fraud, duplication, and bot checks.

Participants

- 3,073 adults in the United States (53.3% Female)
- Average Age = 46.47 years ($SD = 19.38$ years)
- 58.1% White; 21.4% Hispanic; 14% Black; 6.4% Asian

Measures

- Endorsement:** Respondents were asked whether they agree with the statements provided. Answer options ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" using a 7-point scale.
- The key with a list of the eleven statements is on the next page (see Table 1).

Summary of Findings

- Younger adults were *more likely* than older adults to endorse conspiracy theories related to demographic groups (e.g., men, Jews), COVID vaccines (e.g., cause magnetic reactions), 2016 Election Fraud, QAnon, and the Deep State (Fig. 1).
 - For example, half (51%) of those under 24 years old agreed that only white people can be successful in the US and 33% endorsed the QAnon conspiracy theory. A quarter (25%) of Millennials agreed that Jews are in secret control of America's institutions.
 - In contrast, 10% of those over 76 years old agreed that only white people can be successful, 7% endorsed QAnon and 2% believed that Jews were controlling American institutions (Fig. 2).
- Overall endorsement in conspiracy theories across generational cohorts was low (Fig. 1).
- American adults were most likely to endorse the COVID-19 lab leak and Jeffrey Epstein murder conspiracy theories (Fig.1).

Take-Home Message

- We found astonishingly high rates of conspiracy belief amongst Gen Z and Millennials. We'll offer two brief interpretations here, but many more are possible.
 - One possibility involves the fact that trust in public institutions in the US has been declining since the 1960s (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2022). Born into this context, Gen Z and Millennials may default to the position that cynical, conspiratorial beliefs are likely to be true. Such beliefs can also now spread more quickly via social media.
 - A second possibility is that Gen Z and Millennials are not more likely to actually believe these conspiracies—at least not more than any prior generation. On this account, what we've identified might simply be recreational conspiratorialism, or the feigned endorsement of absurd beliefs as a form of comedy or satire (i.e., "trolling") in an environment of low public trust.

Share your interpretation with us (research@skeptic.com) and it may be included in Skeptic Magazine.

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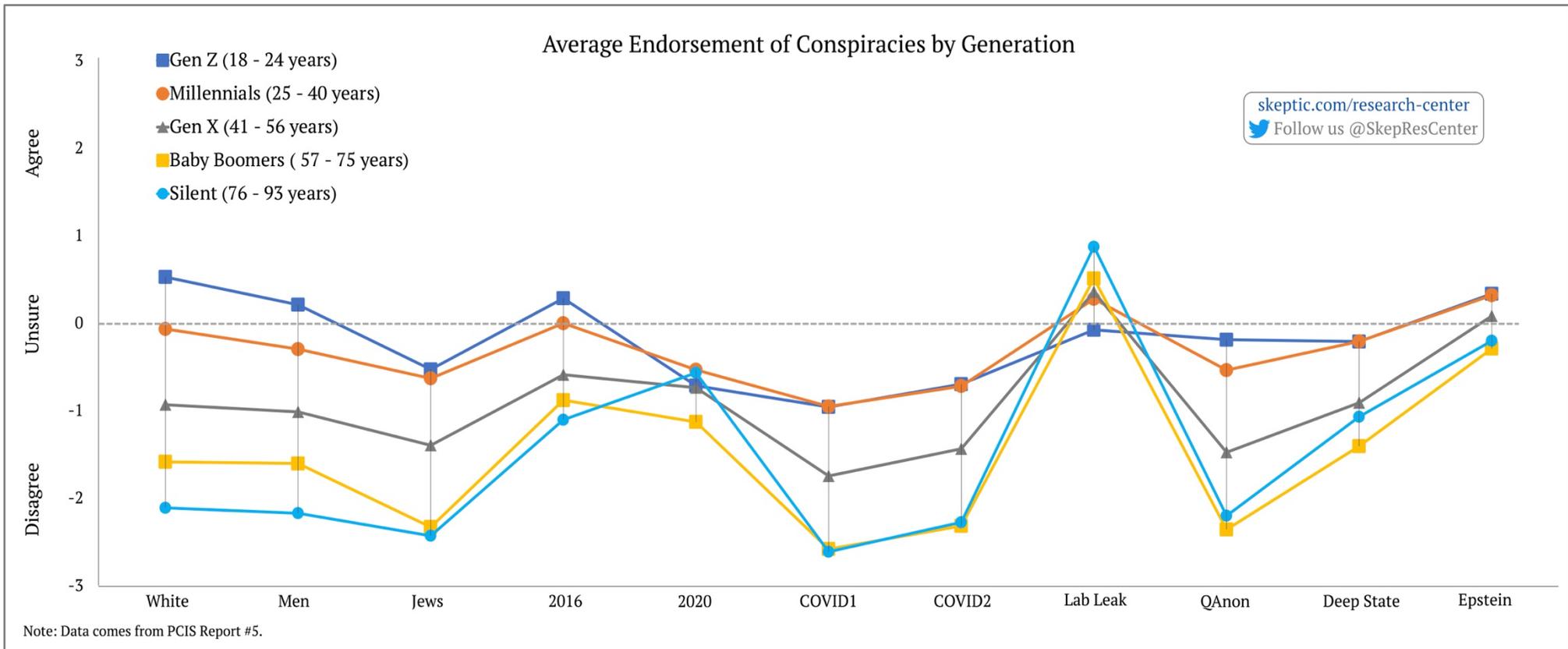
McCaffree, K., & Saide, A. (2022). Conspiracy Theory Endorsement by Generation. Skeptic Research Center, PCIS-005.

Table 1: Conspiracy Statement Key

Label	Full Statement
White	The way the founders of the United States set things up ensures that, even today, only whites can be truly free and successful.
Men	The way the founders of the United States set things up ensures that, even today, only men can be truly free and successful.
Jews	Israel/Jews secretly control most of the decision-making processes across key US institutions, including government and media.
2016	The 2016 Presidential election of Donald Trump was fraudulent because it was tampered with by high-ranking politicians and computer programmers in Russia.
2020	The 2020 Presidential election of Joe Biden was fraudulent because it was tampered with by high-ranking politicians, voting machine programmers, and poll workers.
COVID1	The COVID-19 vaccine contains tiny computer chips to help make government surveillance of people easier.
COVID2	Political and medical elites are hiding the truth about how the COVID-19 vaccines cause magnetic reactions.
Lab Leak	COVID-19 was developed in a Chinese lab and Chinese officials have covered it
QAnon	The government, media, and financial worlds in the United States are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation.
Deep State	The actions of the US government are not determined by elected officials, but by an unelected secret group of business and cultural elites known as the Deep State.
Epstein	High ranking officials, powerful politicians, and noted celebrities are hiding information about the murder of Jeffrey Epstein to cover up illegal or immoral sexual activity.

For additional information (e.g., statistical output, citations) not included in this document, view the supplemental page for this report located at skeptical.com/research-center/paranormal-conspiratorial-ideation-study/

Figure 2

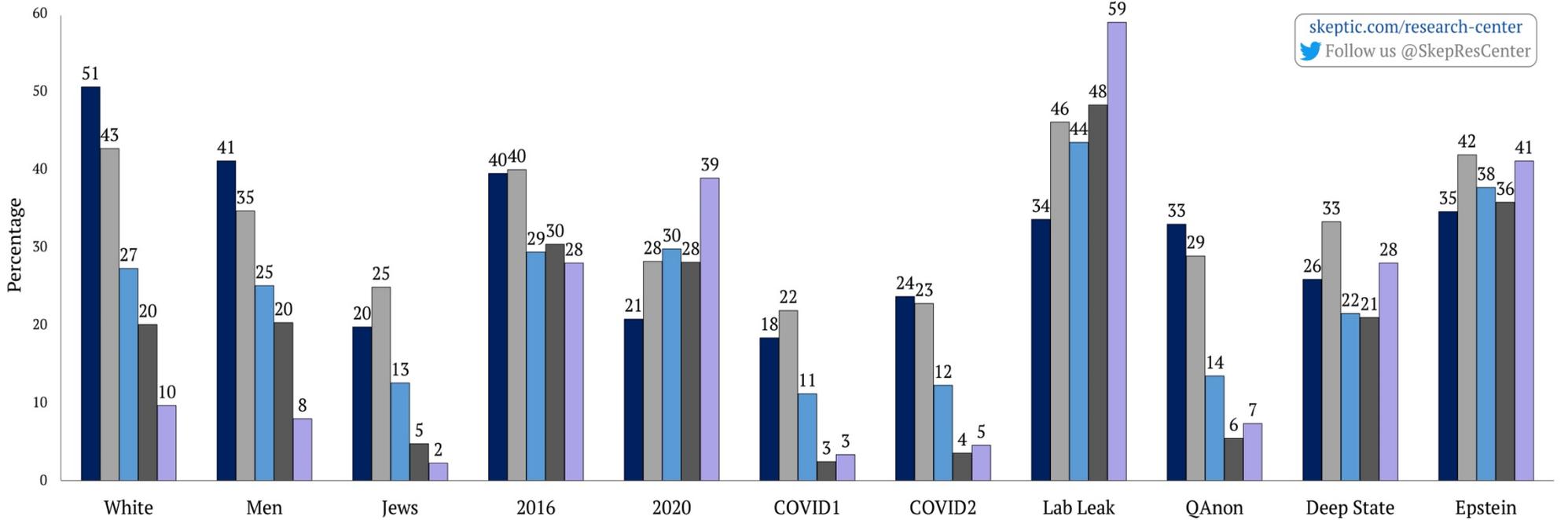


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Figure 3

Percent Within Each Generation that Endorsed Each Conspiracy Theory

■ Gen Z (18 - 24 years) ■ Millennials (25 - 40 years) ■ Gen X (41 - 56 years) ■ Baby Boomers (57 - 75 years) ■ Silent (76 - 93 years)



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Note: Data comes from PCIS Report #5.

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