

# Scandals, Conspiracies and the Vicious Cycle of Cynicism

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## Abstract

Conspiracy belief has largely been linked with individual-level traits like partisanship and cynicism. We use a series of original survey experiments to investigate whether *macro-level* variables, like a high scandal political climate, might similarly affect beliefs in conspiracy theories. We document what we call **the vicious cycle of cynicism**. Political scandals diminish trust in government; this lower confidence in turn spurs higher levels of conspiracy belief, even in claims unrelated to ongoing scandals. Moreover, we uncover important methodological effects of scandal-heavy climates. In particular, we reveal that they affect the measurement of conspiracy experimental effects, a result with important implications for future researchers.

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\* Authors names are listed alphabetically. Working paper prepared for the 2013 APSA meetings. We'd like to thank Brendan Nyhan and Doug Kriner for insightful comments.

In recent years, scholars, the media, and policy-makers have become increasingly interested in and concerned by the proliferation of political conspiracy beliefs. The litany of conspiracy beliefs that Americans propagate and subscribe to is seemingly endless. To sample just a few: sizable portions of Americans are firmly convinced that the federal government is currently plotting the implementation of death panels, that President Obama was born outside the United States, that the federally-recommended schedule for vaccinations leads to autism, and that the government had prior knowledge of the 9-11 attacks. Belief in conspiracy theories is problematic for several reasons. First, a growing body of research suggests that it is extraordinarily difficult to shift those individuals who subscribe to conspiracies and other political misinformation (Kuklinski et al., 2003; Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Berinsky, 2013). Indeed, persuasive efforts appear, at best, to decay over time (Berinsky, 2013), and, in some cases, “backfire” (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). Moreover, there is evidence that mere exposure to conspiracy theories has troubling consequences for democratic governance: it has been linked with both lower levels of political participation (Jolley and Douglas, 2013) and even diminished trust in institutions completely unrelated to the disseminated conspiracy (Einstein and Glick, 2013).

Most of the existing scholarship explores the connection between individual-level attributes and conspiracy beliefs. It links traits like partisanship, knowledge, and general cynicism to conspiracy support (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Berinsky, 2013). This very fruitful focus on the micro level variables, however, ignores the possibility that broader environmental or macro factors might also drive conspiracy beliefs. For example, Uscinski, Parent and Torres (2011) discover that power asymmetries and perceptions of threat—both domestic and foreign—might help to explain conspiracy belief. We focus on a different environmental factor: political scandals. That is, we ask whether a scandal-spurred high cynicism political climate—a macro variable—makes individuals more likely to believe in conspiracy theories.

To assess this question, we introduce and test a novel theory which we term *the vicious cycle of cynicism*. Previous research has uncovered a strong link between experimental

exposure to conspiracy theories and diminished trust in government (Einstein and Glick, 2013). In this paper, we suggest that the causal arrow could point in the opposite direction: exogenous events—like political scandals—could spur lower levels of trust. In turn, declining trust could lead to more conspiracy beliefs. If true, this important substantive finding could also have far-reaching methodological implications. In particular, it suggests that scholars need to be particularly attentive to the context in which they run surveys and even experiments that attempt to assess conspiracy beliefs and effects.

Our method of addressing these questions is straightforward. We take advantage of a series of original experiments to answer both sets of substantive and methodological questions. Using an article containing a conspiracy claim related to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, we experimentally manipulate exposure to a realistic conspiracy in January 2013—when there were few political scandals afoot—and May 2013—during the height of several controversies surrounding President Obama’s administration. We seek to answer: (1) whether belief in conspiracies differs depending upon the political context, and (2) how a scandal-laden environment shapes the measurement of a number of important conspiracy effects.

We discover that belief that the BLS manipulated data—a conspiracy unrelated to any of the scandals occurring in late spring 2013—skyrocketed during our May experiment. Furthermore, we find that the controversial climate of summer 2013 diminished a number of the important effects of conspiracies uncovered in our earlier experiment. These results suggest under-appreciated effects of scandals and scandal coverage and indicate important methodological obstacles to scholars attempting to link these phenomena with conspiracy theories.

## 1 Scandals and Conspiracies

Before investigating the many possible effects of political scandals on conspiracy theories, we first need to define what we mean by scandal and conspiracy theory. We take a scandal

to be a incident rooted (at least somewhat) in reality in which political figures act contrary to expected behavioral norms. Take the example of the recent controversy surrounding the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), in which the Cincinnati office of the IRS was accused of conducting politically motivated investigations that disproportionately targeted conservative organizations for additional scrutiny. We consider this incident to be a scandal because it involved actual IRS bureaucrats using tactics that many Americans found completely unacceptable. Helpfully, the mainstream media confirmed our interpretation of the IRS revelations as a scandal (Nyhan, 2013).<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, a conspiracy theory is distinguishable from a scandal by its lack of basis in any sort of factual reality. For example, we would classify the belief that the Obama administration ordered the IRS to conduct politically motivated investigations as a conspiracy theory. As of this writing, at least, there is no evidence that President Obama or his staff had any prior knowledge of the Cincinnati office of the IRS' inappropriate targeting.

Moreover, conspiracy theories are a special case of factual misinformation. While factual misinformation encompasses essentially any fact that is incorrect, we define conspiracy theories as being an incorrect belief that the *government* is engaging in some kind of intentional and malicious behavior (see Stone, 1989). So, the view that the earth is not warming—while incorrect—does not represent a conspiracy. Should someone believe that his government is intentionally concealing scientific data that the earth is, in fact, not warming, his misinformation would then rise to the level of conspiracy theory. Our focus on conspiracies is thus similar to, but perhaps slightly narrower than, Berinsky's (2013) study of political rumors.

## 1.1 Scandals and Conspiracy Beliefs

With these definitions of scandals and conspiracies in mind, how might periods of political scandal shape belief in conspiracy theories? We argue that, in addition to the important

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<sup>1</sup>How politically biased those investigations actually were is becoming increasingly unclear as of this writing, with evidence suggesting that IRS bureaucrats were targeting liberal as well as conservative political organizations for additional scrutiny.

individual-level attributes identified in previous research, *macro-level variables* like a high scandal climate could have a profound effect on belief in conspiracies. Scandals which engender a high cynicism environment might have a reinforcing impact on belief in conspiracy theories. Jon Stewart perfectly articulates this point on the Daily Show on the day after the IRS scandal broke in May 2013:

Well, congratulations, President Barack Obama, conspiracy theorists who generally can survive in anaerobic environments have just had an algae bloom dropped on their...heads, thus removing the last arrow in your pro-governance quiver: skepticism about your opponents....This has, in one seismic moment, shifted the burden of proof from the tin-foil behatted to the government.

The logic undergirding this intuitive effect is straightforward: scandals diminish overall trust in government and make other claims of scandal seem plausible. This lower level of trust will in turn render conspiracy theories—even those not directly related to the scandal at hand—more believable. IRS scandal coverage would thus not only make conspiracies about the IRS—say, that the IRS assisted the White House in swinging the 2012 election—more plausible: it would also spur individuals to believe in conspiratorial claims concerning other parts of government. We term this prediction **Hypothesis 1**: *All else equal, we should observe greater belief in a conspiracy theory during a scandal-ridden climate than during a low-scandal period, even if the conspiracy claim is unrelated to the existing scandal(s).*

It follows, then, that the way that individuals process conspiracy theories may be different depending upon the prevalence of political scandals. In previous research, we found evidence for a *stop and think* mechanism surrounding conspiracy theories. Individuals who were experimentally prompted to give a conspiracy theory additional thought were less likely to support that conspiracy (Einstein and Glick, 2013). We called this the *backlash effect*. Scandals might diminish the ability of higher level cognitive processing to hold conspiracy theories at bay. In a scandal-laden environment, individuals exposed to a conspiracy theory might think about it and instead find it plausible—as in *Hypothesis 1*. This leads us to

**Hypothesis 2:** *We should observe lower levels of backlash via cognitive processing during periods of high political scandal.*<sup>2</sup>

Finally, if *Hypothesis 1* proves accurate, and declining trust does indeed spur more conspiracy belief during high-scandal periods, it also follows that conspiracy exposure should have a *lessened* effect on trust in more scandalous environments. Having already been diminished by ongoing political scandals, trust in government may be so low in scandal-heavy climates that it cannot be pushed downward any further by modest conspiracy exposure. This leads us to **Hypothesis 3:** *In a scandal-laden environment, conspiracy theories should have a more modest effect on trust in government than in a less scandal-heavy climate as a consequence of scandal-driven low trust levels.* Taken together, we term these three hypotheses the ***Vicious Cycle of Cynicism***.

In addition to this substantive “vicious cycle,” *Hypotheses 2* and *3* also indicate important methodological implications for scholars attempting to estimate conspiracy beliefs and their effects on democratic governance. Indeed, they suggest that political scandals might have an insidious effect on the measurement of the effects of conspiracy theories. So, if *Hypothesis 2* proves accurate, researchers interested in the cognitive processing of conspiracies should play close attention to the political environment in which the conspiracies emerge to gauge conspiracy plausibility and social desirability. Similarly, *Hypothesis 3* suggests that estimations of the effect of conspiracy exposure on trust in government change depending upon the macro-level environment.

## 2 Data and Methods

We use two virtually identical sets of experiments to evaluate all of our hypotheses. The first took place in January 2013, and the second in May 2013. Within each of the two

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<sup>2</sup>As we noted in our other paper, it is very difficult to cleanly disentangle cognitive processing from social desirability effects. While we believe that the weight of the evidence is on the side of the stop and think mechanism, it is also plausible that in high scandal times people are more willing (maybe even enthusiastic) align with the conspiracy theorists

time periods, the key conspiracy theory treatment and experimental manipulations were identical. In this section, we first describe the two political climates before delving into the experimental design that allows us to tap into conspiracy and scandal effects.

## 2.1 Differing Political Climates

May 2013 was, to say the least, challenging for the Obama administration. The President was beset by a nonstop onslaught of scandals, including accusations that his administration had concealed information about the killing of Americans (including an ambassador) in Benghazi, inappropriately obtained Associated Press reporter phone records, and used the Internal Revenue Service to unfairly target conservative political organizations for additional scrutiny.

Figure 1 illustrates the sharp increase in political scandals in May 2013. Using a Lexis-Nexis search, this graph plots the number of mentions of “political scandal” per month in US newspapers from January-June 2013. While mentions of political scandals hovered below 200 per month between January and April 2013, they skyrocketed in May—with roughly three times as many mentions of “political scandal”—as the Benghazi, IRS, and AP phone tapping controversies emerged (see also Nyhan (2013)).

Our first set of experiments, in January 2013, took place during a period of average political scandal (at least relative to contemporary norms), according to Figure 1. Conversely, our May 2013 experiments were purposely timed to occur right at the peak of the IRS scandal, and should capture the kind of scandal-heavy political environment of interest in *Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3*.

## 2.2 BLS Conspiracy and Experimental Manipulations

*Hypothesis 1* represents a relatively simple comparison: it predicts that conspiracy belief will increase in periods of high political scandal. We therefore need a measure of conspiracy belief separate from Benghazi, the IRS, and the AP phone tapping scandals. For all of

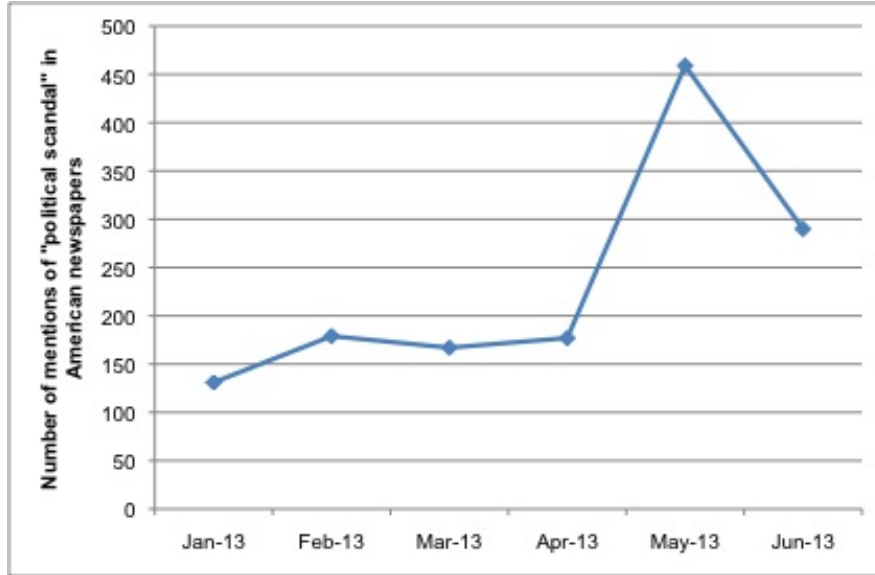


Figure 1: Number of mentions of “political scandal” in US newspapers, January-June 2013. Source: LexisNexis search.

our experimental manipulations we focused on the claim—most prominently promulgated by former General Electric CEO Jack Welch (but also by Donald Trump and others)—that the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) manipulated unemployment data for political reasons. This conspiracy claim was actually fairly widespread during the fall 2012 presidential election, when Welch made his comments. By the time we conducted both sets of experiments in January and May 2013, however, it had entirely vanished from mainstream political consciousness. Consequently, it is useful to us as both a measure of belief in and exposure to unrelated conspiracies.

To measure belief in the BLS conspiracy, we asked, similar to Nyhan (2012*b*), “Do you think that recent monthly employment data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics are always calculated as accurately as possible or are they politically manipulated?” Respondents were then offered two options: (1) “Calculated as accurately as possible;” or (2) “Politically manipulated.” We modified our question slightly from Nyhan’s: first, we used the “always” phrasing to move away from the conspiracy’s actual timing during the 2012 presidential election. Second, we added “as possible” to account for the possibility that people have heard that monthly jobs data are always revised and therefore never initially reported “accurately.”



Our exposure to conspiracy, like our belief question, focuses on claims of BLS data manipulation. Figure 2 illustrates the newspaper article we use as our conspiracy: it describes Jack Welch’s comments about purported BLS data manipulation, while including both economic data and a compelling rebuttal to the cynical claim.

The text in this article comes from two sources: a *USA Today* article about BLS jobs data from the fall 2012 election cycle and ABC News story about the conspiracy claims (Ellin, 2012). We selected the latter article because it epitomizes typical mainstream media coverage of conspiracy theories, in which each side of the conspiracy is offered equal weight. Nyhan (2012a) actually criticizes this exact ABC News story for offering the conspiracy credence by presenting it alongside its counterargument in a balanced way. We replicate this point-counterpoint treatment of the conspiracy by presenting paragraphs from both sides taken directly from the ABC News article. Because Welch’s criticism occurred during the fall 2012 election—and our experiments in January 2013—we removed obvious election content and focused our article on more generic and vague “political manipulation,” rather than election season jobs data.<sup>3</sup>

We opted for a newspaper article as our conspiracy treatment—rather than a shorter, easier-to-digest prompt—in order to obtain maximal external validity. We believe that Americans are more likely to receive conspiracy exposure in formats like those in Figure 2 than via artificial survey prompts. Moreover, this treatment actually represents a relatively weak conspiracy exposure. Indeed, it is accompanied by a powerful and plausible counterargument. Therefore, the fact that it has produced potent effects on belief in conspiracies and trust in government (Einstein and Glick, 2013) is especially striking.

Using our belief measure and our Welch article, we evaluate *Hypothesis 1* by assessing whether belief in the BLS conspiracy after exposure to Welch’s claim increased, stayed the same, or decreased between January and May 2013. Should *Hypothesis 1* prove correct, we

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<sup>3</sup>For example, we dropped “September” from the headline and article and replaced “July” and “August” with “the two previous months.”

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## Unemployment Rate Falls to 7.8%; Skeptics Claim Manipulation

Zoe Rodgers: USA TODAY

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The unemployment rate fell from 8.1% to 7.8%, the lowest since January 2009, as Americans benefited from a surge in part-time work, the Labor Department said Friday.

Employers added 114,000 jobs, about what economists expected, with health care and transportation and warehousing leading job gains.

Businesses added 104,000 jobs while federal, state and local governments added 10,000.

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One positive sign: the Labor Department revised up estimated job gains for the two previous months from 141,000 to 181,000 and 96,000 to 142,000.

"It's continued improvement at a modest pace," Wells Fargo Chief Economist John Silvia said of the report.

Economists had estimated that employers added 115,000 jobs including 129,000 in the private sector and 14,000 government job losses

Also, the number of Americans out of work at least six months fell by 189,000 to 4.8 million.

However, another barometer of future permanent hiring -- the addition of temporary workers -- was less encouraging. Employers cut 2,000 temporary workers.

Most economists were expecting a slight rise in employment, so the surprisingly positive growth has raised suspicions that the White House might be cooking the books.

Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, quickly came out with a tweet, voicing his suspicion. He accused the Obama administration of manipulating U.S. employment data for political advantage.


"Unbelievable jobs numbers...these Chicago guys will do anything...can't debate so change numbers," said Welch.

To be fair, not all of President Obama's political opponents felt something underhanded was going on. As former White House aide Tony Fratto put it, "BLS is not manipulating data. Evidence of such would be a scandal of enormous proportions & loss of credibility."

That is pretty much the sentiment among economists.

"I would be very skeptical of any claims the job statistics are manipulated," Gary Burtless, an economist at the Brookings Institution, in Washington, D.C., told ABC News. What's more, Burtless said it's uncharacteristic of the Obama administration to lie about something like this. "Richard Nixon was notorious for distrusting the BLS, and he probably managed to frighten some long-time BLS employees," said Burtless. "But I have not heard any persuasive reports of statistical manipulation in the BLS, even during the Nixon administration."

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Figure 2: Experimental Exposure to a Conspiracy Theory

would expect to see higher levels of belief in the BLS conspiracy in the May experiments. We thus compare respondents who were assigned the Welch article in January to those who were assigned it in May.

Our trust measure - the predicate to H1 and the dependent variable in H3 - is derived from a widely used Gallup poll question, which asks respondents to rate their confidence in multiple government institutions, ranging from federal to local, on a four point scale. It reads “below is a list of institutions in American society. Please indicate how much confidence you have in each one.” The four options are “very confident,” “somewhat confident,” “not so confident,” “not confident at all.” We provide a variety of government institutions, including the U.S. Census Bureau, the Food and Drug Administration, the President, Congress, and local police. If *Hypothesis 1* holds true, we anticipate that, relative to their January counterparts, May 2013 respondents will exhibit lower levels of confidence in government across an array of institutions.

*Hypothesis 2* turns to cognitive processing: to evaluate it, we require both a question about conspiracy belief *and* an exposure to a conspiracy theory. In previous work (Einstein and Glick, 2013) we identified a *backlash effect*, in which respondents who were both asked about their conspiracy belief and exposed to a conspiracy theory actually exhibited *lower* levels of belief than those who were merely asked if the BLS data are political manipulated. We attributed this difference to cognitive processing—that those respondents who were both exposed to a specific conspiracy theory and asked about their beliefs actually stopped to think about the conspiracy, while their counterparts who were only asked the question did not.

To measure the *backlash*, we compare respondents who were randomly assigned to (1) the BLS conspiracy theory and the question about their belief in it and (2) and an article that includes the jobs data without the conspiracy claim and the same conspiracy belief question described above. The specific indicator of backlash is the difference in reported beliefs in those who read the specific conspiracy allegation and those who did not. We compare, then,

the gap between beliefs in the treatment and control articles in January vs. May.

The control article we used was identical to that displayed in Figure 2, but without any reference to Welch’s conspiracy comments or the response to them (Figure A1 in the appendix). By featuring only straightforward news about positive jobs numbers, this article should help control for the possible effects of receiving positive news about the Obama economy.<sup>4</sup> After respondents read the article, they were asked two questions about the clarity of the data presented in the assigned article and about the media’s use of statistics in general. We placed these questions prior to our items exploring belief in conspiracy to moderately mask the purpose of the study and distract respondents from thinking about the experimental manipulation.

Finally, we also use the conspiracy exposure in Figure 2 to evaluate *Hypothesis 3*, which anticipates no conspiracy exposure effect on trust in a scandal-heavy climate like May 2013. In this final set of experiments, we randomly expose some respondents to the BLS conspiracy article but do not ask any of them a question about conspiracy belief to avoid triggering cognitive processing. We compare these respondents to a pure control group who did not read an article and were not asked if they believed in the conspiratorial claim. If *Hypothesis 3*’s predictions are correct, we should see reduced trust (relative to the control) among January 2013 respondents exposed to the BLS conspiracy, but no trust effects among their May 2013 counterparts.

## 2.3 Data Collection

We collected data for both experiments using participants recruited with Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online crowdsourcing marketplace increasingly used in social scientific experimental research (e.g. Berinsky, Huber and Lenz, 2012). The data in this paper include

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<sup>4</sup>In the January experiment we also used a second control article that described positive economic statistics that had nothing to do with the BLS, but rather, concerned the Oregon craft beer market. Because the article was unrelated to the BLS data, we included the following transitional preface to questions in this condition: “Speaking of numerical data, the government provides a lot of economic data of its own. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports monthly economic data.”

the data gathered for the original trust and conspiracy paper (Einstein and Glick, 2013) and those collected in May when we reran our earlier experiments on a new pool in the high scandal environment <sup>5</sup> As is typical with MTurk samples, our median participant is younger and more liberal than the average American. Nevertheless, while MTurk samples are less representative than the highest quality national samples, they have better demographic balance than other convenience samples and are increasingly used and accepted in experimental work where they have been used to replicate classic results (Berinsky, Huber and Lenz, 2012; Buhrmester, Kwang and Gosling, 2011). Indicative of the increasing acceptance of MTurk samples, results based on data collected using MTurk have recently appeared in our field’s top journals (Huber, Hill and Lenz, 2012). Table A1 (in the appendix) appends our two experiments’ demographics onto the demographic table in Berinsky, Huber and Lenz (2012). Our MTurk demographics are highly similar to Berinsky et al.’s survey, and only moderately differ (in expected ways) from American National Election Survey samples and the Current Population Survey. Our participants were paid .75, which is consistent with standard rates on MTurk. We restricted participation to those in American who had at least a 95% approval rate on at least 50 HITs and we dropped respondents from the second experiment who participated in the first by using their random MTurk ID numbers.

## 2.4 Control Variables

Because each of our treatment categories is relatively small and thus varies demographically, we include control variables in the models results we report. The controls we include are age and partisan identification (on a seven point branching scale) because these are two of most important deviations between MTurk samples and the overall population. We also control for political knowledge using a four point scale ranging from zero to three correctly answered factual questions about politics. Given the links between our study and awareness of current events, and between conspiracies and misinformation, political knowledge is an

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<sup>5</sup>we dropped repeat January-experiment MTurk participants from the May data where necessary.

important variable to include. Finally, because a growing body of research links the Obama administration with the racialization of federal policy (e.g. Tesler and Sears, 2010; Tesler, 2012), we also include a control for racial resentment. This measure is constructed using four standard questions designed to tap into subtle forms of racial bias (Kinder and Sanders, 1996).

### 3 Results

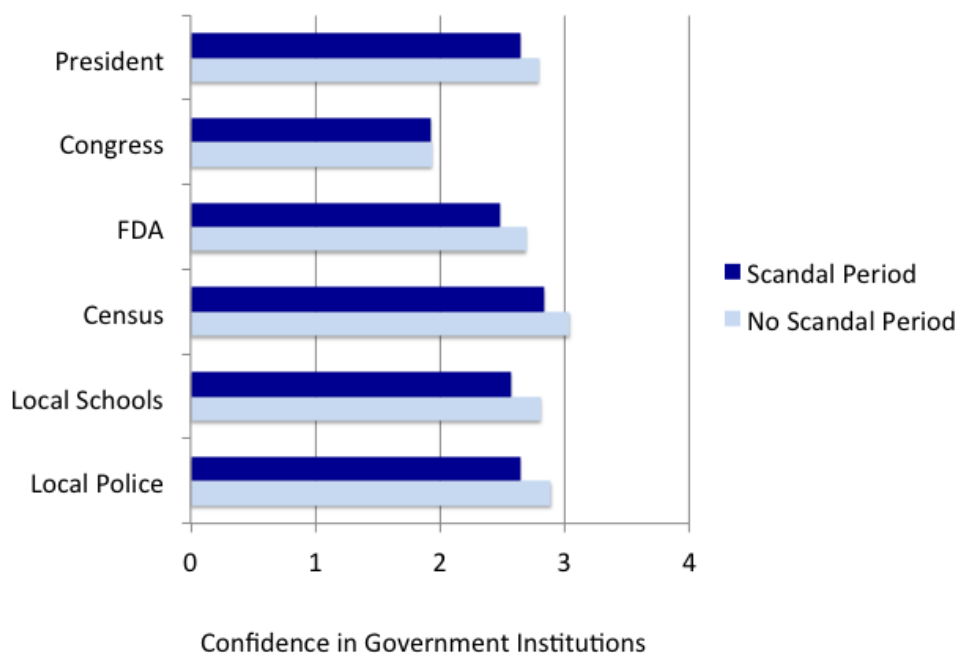
Our experimental results offer strong support for *Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3*. That is, we discover that belief in an unrelated conspiracy—in this case that the BLS manipulated data for political reasons—was higher during the scandal-heavy period than during a relatively calm climate (*Hypothesis 1*). Our trust measures suggest that lower levels of trust in May 2013 may help to explain this result. Moreover, we reveal that cognitive processing effects differ depending upon political climate; while in January 2013, cognitive processing diminished belief in the BLS conspiracy, we observe no analogous decrease in the scandal-rich environment of May 2013 (*Hypothesis 2*). Finally, unsurprisingly given the lower levels of government trust in May 2013, our results show that exposure to a conspiracy theory no longer has a potent effect on trust in a scandal-heavy environment (*Hypothesis 3*). We begin by outlining our results for *Hypothesis 1* before turning to *2 and 3*.

#### 3.1 Hypothesis 1: Conspiracy Belief

The assumption that the May period was a high scandal, high cynicism, and thus low confidence period is central to all of our hypotheses. We therefore begin by simply verifying that confidence was indeed lower. Figure 3 displays baseline trust in each period for a variety of institutions, including the Presidency, Congress, the FDA, the U.S. Census Bureau, local schools, and local police. These confidence data were derived from the control group in each experiment; these respondents were neither asked a question about conspiracy belief nor

exposed to the BLS conspiracy before assessing confidence.

Figure 3: Confidence in government institutions in control group (no articles and no conspiracy questions) by high and low scandal period



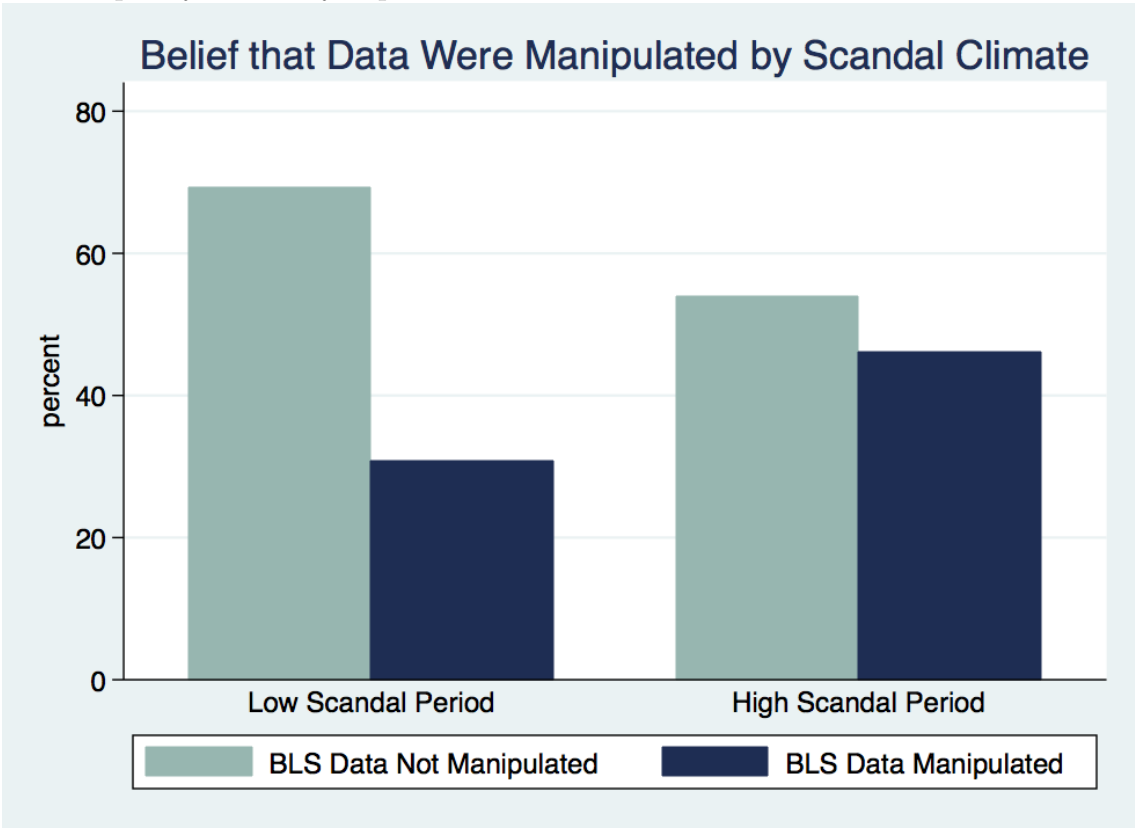
*Ns= 243 low scandal period, 109 high scandal period*

Trust was indeed consistently lower in the period around the IRS, Benghazi and AP scandal coverage. While the differences are not dramatic (and in some cases not statistically significant, as illustrated in Table A3), the relative effects are constant across institutions. These results are thus consonant with our empirical predictions: the scandal-heavy climate in May was at least associated with—if not a direct cause of—lower levels of trust in government.

Our most basic and important empirical question is whether this high-scandal, low-trust environment spurred greater belief in the BLS conspiracy. This is *Hypothesis 1* and we evaluate it by comparing respondents who were randomly assigned to read the treatment article with Jack Welch’s conspiracy claim in it across experiments. As described above,

our dependent variable is the response to a question about whether the BLS statistics are politically manipulated or calculated as accurately as possible. *Hypothesis 1* predicts that more people will select “manipulated” in the high cynicism environment—May 2013. Figure 4 illustrates this comparison. In January 2013, roughly 30 percent of respondents believed that BLS data were politically manipulated. In May, during the high scandal period, that figure was nearly 50 percent.

Figure 4: Percent of respondents who believe that BLS data were manipulated after reading the conspiracy article by experiment



*Ns= 221, 102 respectively*

While we believe the simple comparison in the table tells the story, we also estimated the effect of the scandal environment more rigorously in Table 1 by controlling for other variables such as partisanship, age, political knowledge, and racial resentment that could plausibly affect belief in the conspiracy claim. The key variable in this probit model is the *High Scandal Period* indicator, which captures the effect of being in the scandal environment



Table 1: Probit models for believing that data were manipulated for those who read the Welch story by scandal climate.

EQUATION	VARIABLES	(1) Manipulated
Manipulated	High Scandal Period	0.69*** (0.25)
	Age	0.00 (0.01)
	Partisanship	0.23*** (0.05)
	White	-0.17 (0.22)
	Female	-0.12 (0.18)
	PolKnowledge	0.02 (0.11)
	RacialResent	0.32*** (0.10)
	Constant	-2.42*** (0.43)
	Observations	288

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

relative to baseline the first experiment. The model shows a large and significant positive effect on belief that the data were manipulated as a result of being a participant in the high scandal experiment. More substantively, moving from the low to high scandal period increases the predicted probability of saying BLS data are manipulated by 25%. Finally, the model also shows that, not surprisingly, Republican partisanship (higher on a seven point scale) and racial resentment also increase avowed belief in the conspiracy claim.

So far, then, these data provide strong support for *Hypothesis 1*—that a scandal-heavy climate creates greater belief in unrelated conspiracies. We have shown that trust in government was lower in May and that Jack Welch was able to recruit more adherents in May

than he could in January with the same conspiracy claim.

### 3.2 Hypothesis 2: Backlash

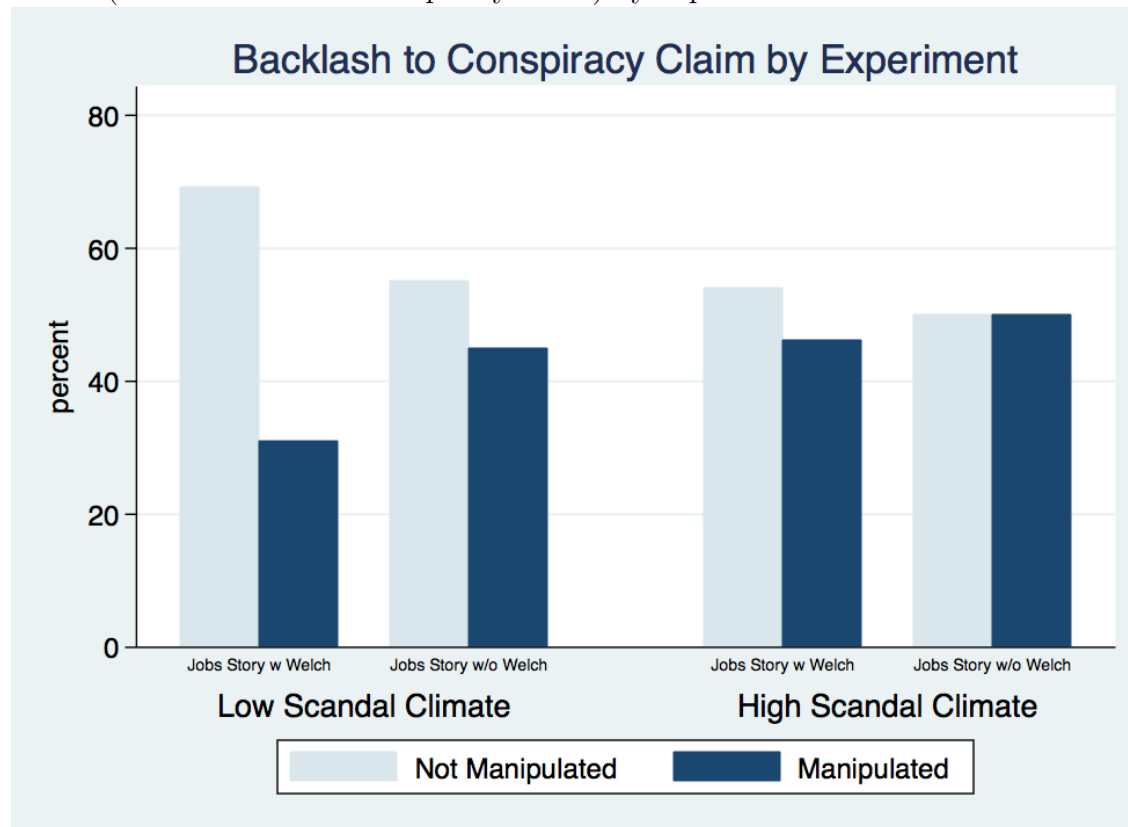
One of the notable findings in data from the non-scandal period (Einstein and Glick, 2013) is what we have termed the *backlash effect*. We found that respondents who read the article with the BLS conspiracy claim were actually *less likely* to say that BLS data are manipulated than those who read about positive economic news without the manipulation claim. We attributed this effect to the fact that the conspiracy claim forced respondents to actively consider their beliefs, while simply asking about the manipulation of BLS statistics without an accompanying specific allegation did not. *Hypothesis 2* suggests that, in our high cynicism period, we should observe little to no backlash. We suspect that, during a high scandal period, respondents who actively think about a new allegation are more likely to find it plausible, which would undermine the backlash effect.

We test this expectation in Figure 5. Here, we compare people who read the article with the Welch claim to those that read the article with the same jobs data but no conspiracy. A large *backlash effect* occurs when a significantly smaller proportion of participants who read the Welch claim express belief in BLS conspiracy relative to control group respondents.

The figure provides strong support for the prediction that the *backlash effect* erodes in high scandal times. The left side reproduces the results from our previous research in January: fewer respondents agreed that the BLS data were manipulated after being forced to confront a specific allegation. Conversely, the right side shows that this effect vanishes when respondents are identically confronted with the conspiracy allegation during the high scandal period. We corroborate these graphical findings with regressions and statistical controls, as with *Hypothesis 1*. More details are available in the appendix in Table A2.

We believe that this shift between January and May is a consequence of the conspiracy claim becoming more plausible in scandal-ridden May. When respondents are confronted with both a specific conspiracy allegation and a question about their belief in that conspiracy,

Figure 5: Percent of respondents who believe that BLS data were manipulated after reading article (with and without conspiracy claim) by experiment



*Ns= 136, 138, 102, 108 respectively*

they are forced to cognitively engage with that claim and determine whether they believe it to be plausible. In January, when there were few ongoing political scandals, participants did not find the BLS allegation particularly likely. Conversely, by May, the combination of the IRS, AP, and Benghazi controversies rendered the BLS claim far more plausible, diminishing the *backlash effect*.

### 3.3 Hypothesis 3: Confidence in Government

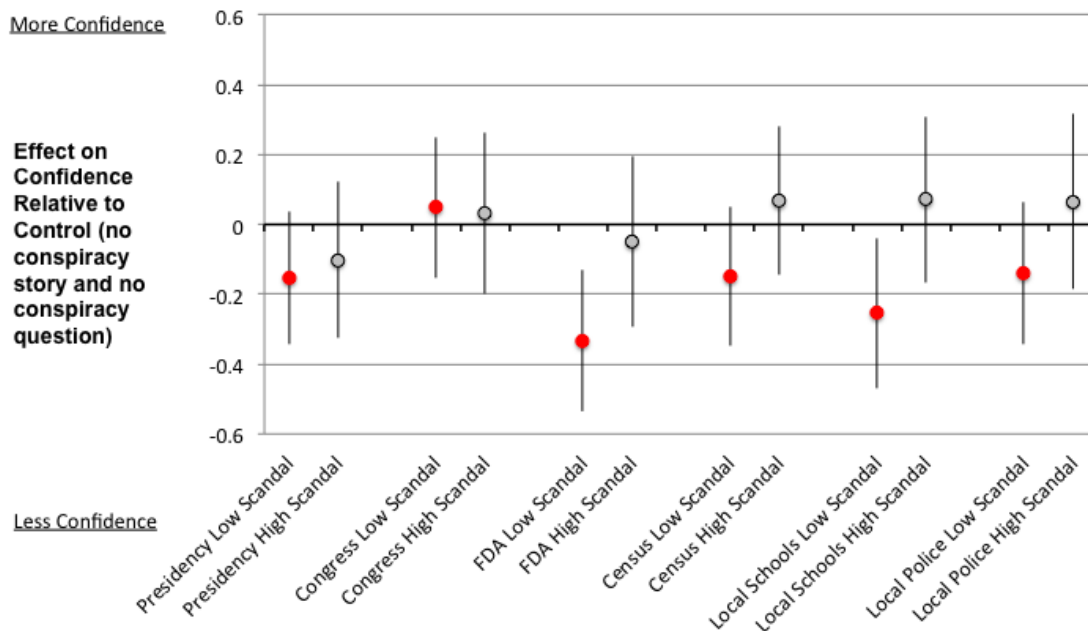
Our final prediction, *Hypothesis 3*, concerns trust in government. Here, we expect that the conspiracy claim in the high cynicism period will have a smaller effect on trust in government institutions than its counterpart in the low scandal period. We estimate this effect by comparing those who were assigned the Welch article but not asked about conspiracy beliefs

to those in the pure control group who neither read an article nor were asked about beliefs. We anticipate smaller confidence effects as a consequence of diminishing marginal effects; ongoing scandals would have already lowered confidence in government to such an extent that conspiracy exposure would have, at best, a very modest effect. This result would be consistent with the idea that conspiracy claims reduce trust in government generally—just that this effect diminishes in scandal-heavy climates.

We already know from Figure 3 that trust in government is lower during the scandal-heavy climate. Figure 6 turns, then, to the effect of the Welch article relative to our control groups for both the high and low cynicism periods. It illustrates coefficient estimates and 95 percent confidence interval estimates for six government institutions. The coefficients are outputs from two sets of seemingly unrelated regressions—one for the high (Table A5) and one for the low scandal period (Table A4)—and include our standard control variables. The figure plots the coefficients relative to the control for each condition and each institution. Negative estimates mean the Welch claim had a confidence reducing effect.

Figure 6 shows that, consistent with *Hypothesis 3*, the Welch story reduced confidence in the low scandal period, but not during the high cynicism climate in the high scandal environment. The estimates in the high scandal period are all very close to zero, whereas nearly all of the estimates in the low scandal period are substantially negative. Table A6 in the appendix confirms these results by including both the high and low scandal periods in the same model with a variable indicating the IRS scandal and an interaction for the scandal period and the Welch article. The model reveals that the Welch article had an effect when controlling for the scandal environment, but not when it was interacted with the high scandal period.

Figure 6: Comparison of trust effects between high and low scandal environment across institutions. Estimated effect of reading story without being asked about belief relative to baseline confidence in control group.



Points are coefficients from seemingly unrelated regression models of confidence with controls for partisanship, age, political knowledge and racial resentment. Bars indicate 95 % confidence intervals on estimates

## 4 Implications: Replication and Methodological Lessons

The results described above raise two questions. The first centers on whether these they challenge the findings from our earlier (low scandal) experiment, while the second explores the methodological implications. This section thus first investigates our experiment's replicability before delving into broader methodological questions.

### 4.1 Replication

Do the two experiments together tell a compelling and consistent theoretical story about conspiracy theories, beliefs, and confidence in government? Or, have we inadvertently shown

that the May experiment undermines the primary results from the January experiment by demonstrating that they are not replicable? Clearly the replicability question is crucial so we address it first and explain why we believe the difference in our results above is not simply a failure to replicate.

First, as Figure 1’s analysis of media coverage shows, we conducted our May experiments in a qualitatively different environment. The focus on scandals was overwhelming in May. Perhaps even more importantly, our January experiment was actually two sets of experiments on two different samples conducted 15 days apart, with some treatments repeated across the two experiments. We treated them as one set of experiments above for simplicity and because the most relevant comparison here is the low to high scandal period. While each condition included a multitude of conditions described in greater depth in previous work, for our purposes here, we focus on two conditions that were almost identical—and therefore replicable—across the two experiments: our measurement of belief in conspiracy and the *backlash effect*.<sup>6</sup>

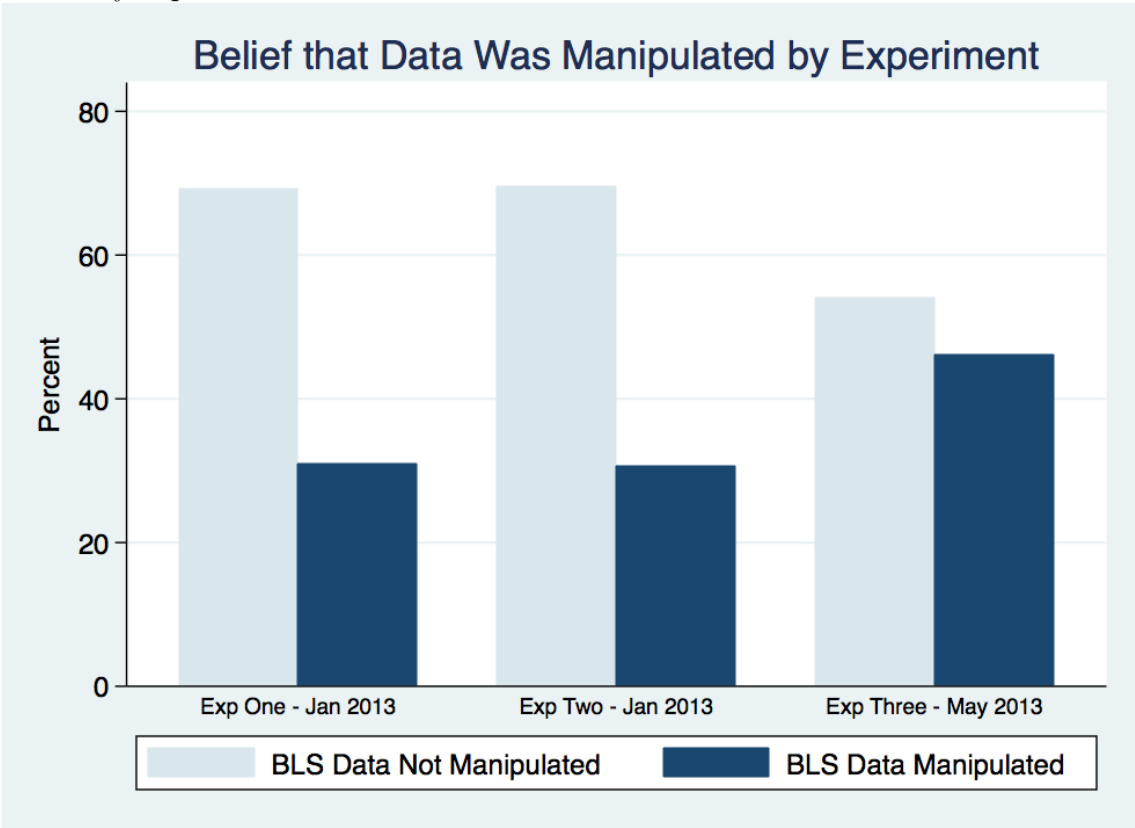
Figure 7 illustrates belief in conspiracy across three experimental conditions: our two January experiments and their counterpart in May. It reveals that the percent of respondents believing the data were manipulated was almost identical in the first two, and dramatically different in the third—the high scandal period. In other words, the change in belief between January and May is not simply a failure to replicate. Thus, while baseline belief was identical in the two January experiments, it was markedly different in May’s scandal-laden environment. Moreover, Figure 8 illustrates that the *backlash effect* remains constant across the

---

<sup>6</sup>Our first low-scandal study included four conditions: three different articles (1 - Jobs data with Welch conspiracy, 2 - Jobs data without Welch conspiracy, 3 - Data filled article about the Oregon craft beer industry) and a 4- a condition without any articles. All respondents who were exposed to an article were also asked about their belief in the conspiracy and their trust in government, while the no-article group was only asked about trust. The second January study did not include the Jobs without Welch or the Beer article conditions, and instead focused on randomizing whether respondents were asked about their conspiracy beliefs and confidence in government. This focus on cognitive processing yielded two experimental manipulates. In one, we randomized whether participants who read the Welch article and were asked about their confidence in government were also asked about their conspiracy beliefs. The second randomized whether those respondents were not asked a question about their conspiracy beliefs were exposed to a conspiracy article.

two January experiments.<sup>7</sup> Across both experimental conditions, exposing respondents to both an article about the conspiracy and a question about their beliefs reduced their support of the BLS conspiracy. The left side of the figure shows the *backlash* in the first low scandal experiment, while the right illustrates the same effect in the second. Both parts of this figure stand in sharp contrast to our May experimental findings, which reveal no *backlash* in a high scandal climate.

Figure 7: Percent of respondents who believe that BLS Data were manipulated after reading article by experiment

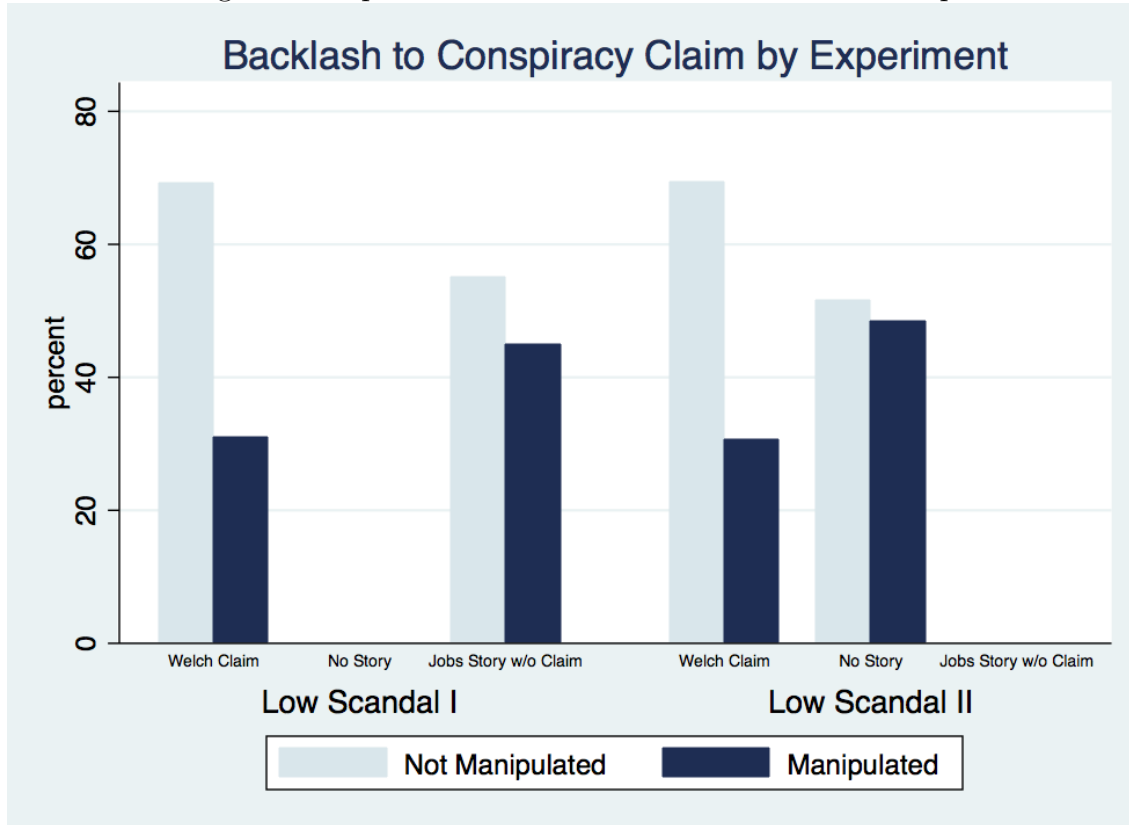


Ns= 136, 85, 102 respectively

Putting our experiments together thus tells a cohesive story. Conspiratorial claims reduce trust in government; at the same time, scandals and external events that lower trust in

<sup>7</sup>The replication of the backlash between the two experiments is not perfect. We did not rerun the jobs story without the Welch article in our second January experiment, precluding us from exactly replicating our first experiment’s manipulation. Instead, as the figure shows, we compare jobs with Welch to jobs without Welch from experiment one to jobs with Welch to no article in experiment two. Both show similar levels of backlash.

Figure 8: Replication of backlash in the low scandal experiments



$N = 136, 138, 89, 95$  respectively. Low Scandal I included jobs story without Welch claim but did not include the no story with conspiracy belief question condition. Low Scandal II was the opposite. Thus, our backlash replication relies on comparing the Welch article to two different types of controls.

government increase susceptibility to conspiratorial claims. Moreover, our lack of a *backlash* finding in the high scandal experiment supports our claims about the cognitive processing of conspiracies. Specifically, asking people about a conspiracy claim forces them to actively consider whether they find it plausible. While a rich body of literature shows that individual traits shape which members of the population are most apt to find a conspiracy believable, our research shows that macro factors—like political scandals—can play a similar role. In a period like May 2013 replete with scandals and cynicism, people think about a new conspiracy claim, are more likely to find it plausible, and are therefore more likely to express belief in that conspiracy on a survey. Conversely, in climates like January 2013, the same cognitive process yields lower conspiracy belief.



## 4.2 Methodological Lessons

Moving beyond the replicability of our January experimental findings, the results from this paper present important methodological challenges to future research in this field. In particular, they suggest that the period in which an experiment or survey is run can dramatically shape results. Indeed, in our own research, periods of high cynicism altered our *backlash effect* and reduced the impact of conspiracy exposure on trust. We could easily imagine these types of effects applying to other important findings in the field: for example, the *backfire effect* (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010) might be enhanced in a high scandal period in which conspiratorially-minded survey participants are even less persuadable than in a low cynicism environment.

This macro-level interaction with experimental effects does not challenge the validity of these important research findings. Rather, it suggests that these experimental effects are mutable depending upon the political environment. Scholars should therefore be attentive to macro-level variables, and carefully consider the theoretical implications of the real world environments in which their experiments are conducted. More concretely, the results of studies of beliefs about Obama’s citizenship, death panels, autism, global warming, 9-11 coverups, and other issues may depend on what else is going on in the world when data are gathered.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper illustrates that political scandals, a macro-level variable, have important effects on substantive and methodological outcomes of interest to scholars of political behavior, democracy, and public policy. Future research should therefore endeavor to include these societal-level measures alongside the critical individual traits that have long been the focus of conspiracy and misinformation scholarship. A better understanding of the macro- and micro-foundations of conspiracy belief would allow scholars and policy-makers alike to predict—and

potentially even address—the deleterious consequences of conspiracy belief and exposure for democratic governance.

In particular, future research might incorporate additional experimental treatments testing other macro-level variables and conspiracies. Our paper only tests one macro predictor—political scandals—and one conspiracy—Welch’s BLS claims. Similarly, the wealth of observational surveys that have already been conducted exploring conspiracy beliefs might be deployed to explore the interactions between a multitude of macro variables and conspiracy belief. The wider samples in these surveys would improve on the somewhat limited MTurk sample represented in our paper—a necessity for its experimental design. Nonetheless, this paper represents an important first step in untangling the complex connections between ongoing scandals, trust in government, and the psychology of conspiracy belief.

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# Appendix

## 5.1 Design and Data

Figure A1 shows the control article we used for estimating backlash. It includes the good news about economic data that is in the Welch conspiracy article but does not include anything about the conspiracy.

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51°

Unemployment Rate Falls to 7.8%

Zoe Rodgers: USA TODAY

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STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Employers add 114,000 jobs
- Unemployment rate is lowest in nearly four years
- Economists say 'fiscal cliff' causing uncertainty for businesses

The unemployment rate fell from 8.1% to 7.8%, the lowest since January 2009, as Americans benefited from a surge in part-time work, the Labor Department said Friday.

Employers added 114,000 jobs, about what economists expected, with health care and transportation and warehousing leading job gains.

Businesses added 104,000 jobs while federal, state and local governments added 10,000.

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One positive sign: the Labor Department revised up estimated job gains for the two previous months from 141,000 to 181,000 and 96,000 to 142,000.


"It's continued improvement at a modest pace," Wells Fargo Chief Economist John Silvia said of the report.

Economists had estimated that employers added 115,000 jobs including 129,000 in the private sector and 14,000 government job losses

Also, the number of Americans out of work at least six months fell by 189,000 to 4.8 million.

However, another barometer of future permanent hiring -- the addition of temporary workers -- was less encouraging. Employers cut 2,000 temporary workers.

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Figure A1: Experimental story: Straight jobs data without Welch

30

Table A1: Sample Demographics by Experiment: The table compares our sample demographics to those found in another MTurk study and to other high quality surveys.

Variable	Jan '13	May '13	Internet Samples		Face to Face Samples	
			BHL Turk	ANES-P 08-09	CPS 08	ANES 08
% Female	47.2	50.4	60.1	57.6	51.7	55.0
% White	80.3	82.2	83.5	83.0	81.2	79.1
% Black	7.6	8.3	4.4	8.9	11.8	12.0
% Hispanic	6.0	5.9	6.7	5.0	13.7	9.1
Age (years)	35.1	34.3	32.3	49.7	46.0	46.6
Party ID (7 pt.)	3.1	3.0	3.5	3.9		3.7
Ideology (7 pt.)	3.2	3.3	3.4	4.3		4.2
Education	15.3 yrs	15.3	15.3 yrs	16.2 yrs	13.2 yrs	13.5 yrs
Income (median)	30-49K	30-49K	45K	67.5K	55K	55K

“BHL Turk” = Berinsky, Huber and Lenz (2012), ANES-P = American National Election Panel Study (Knowledge Networks), CPS = Current Population Survey, ANES = American National Election Study), CPS and ANES are weighted. Data from all columns other than those corresponding to our experiments are reproduced from Table 3 in Berinsky, Huber and Lenz (2012).

Table A1 compares the demographics of our low (Jan) and high (May) scandal period experiments to other survey samples including the MTurk sample that was used to replicate classic experiments and to high quality representative samples. Our two MTurk samples were very similar to each other and deviated from non Turk samples in the expected ways.



## 5.2 Backlash

Table A2 supports the backlash figure and discussion in the text. It shows that the Welch claim has a negative effect on conspiracy beliefs relative to the baseline of the jobs article without the Welch claim, but that the interaction of the Welch claim and high scandal period have a positive effect on belief that essentially cancels out the main backlash effect. In other words, the model confirms what the tabulation shows. There is only backlash in the low scandal period.

Table A2: Probit models for believing that data were manipulated as a function of exposure to the Welch story, IRS scandal period, and controls

EQUATION	VARIABLES	(1) Manipulated
Manipulated	High Scandal	0.29 (0.22)
	WelchClaim	-0.68*** (0.18)
	High Scandal x Claim	0.58** (0.26)
	Age	-0.00 (0.01)
	Partisanship	0.19*** (0.04)
	White	-0.05 (0.17)
	Female	0.04 (0.13)
	PolKnowledge	0.14* (0.09)
	RacialResent	0.37*** (0.07)
	Constant	-1.99*** (0.35)
	Observations	443

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$

### 5.3 Confidence

Table A3 estimates the effect of the low/high scandal variable on baseline levels of confidence in government. Each column corresponds to a different institution and the confidence scores are from respondents who neither read an article nor were asked about their conspiracy beliefs. The sign on the IRS variable - indicating the high scandal period - was always negative consistent with lower confidence in government but it was only significant for a couple of institutions.

The coefficients and confidence intervals in Figure 6 are derived from the models summarized in Tables A4 and A5. These models estimate the effect on confidence in institutions that results from reading the conspiracy claim. In both, the baseline category is the true control group (no article and no conspiracy questions) and the main variable of interest is the Welch NotAsked variable which indicates that the respondent was in the group that read the conspiracy article but were not asked about their belief that the data were manipulated. The coefficients on this variable indicate the “real world” effect of the conspiracy claim on confidence. Table A6 estimates similar effects without splitting the sample. Instead it includes the IRS variable for the high scandal group and the interaction between IRS and Welch NotAsked.

Table A3: Seemingly unrelated regression models of baseline (control group) confidence by period

VARIABLES	(1) President	(2) Congress	(3) FDA	(4) Census	(5) Local_Schools	(6) Local_Police
High Scandal	-0.11 (0.12)	-0.22* (0.13)	-0.23* (0.12)	-0.04 (0.12)	-0.12 (0.12)	-0.14 (0.12)
Age	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Partisanship	-0.29*** (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.06** (0.03)	-0.08*** (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)	0.00 (0.03)
PolKnowledge	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.17*** (0.05)	0.00 (0.05)	0.11** (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
RacialResent	-0.09* (0.05)	0.08 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
Constant	3.95*** (0.21)	2.31*** (0.22)	2.89*** (0.22)	3.15*** (0.21)	2.61*** (0.21)	2.51*** (0.22)
Observations	312	312	312	312	312	312
R <sup>2</sup>	0.34	0.06	0.03	0.07	0.02	0.03

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table A4: Trust effect on confidence in responses collected before the IRS scandal

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	President	Congress	FDA	Census	Local_Schools	Local_Police
Conspiracy w/o Belief Q	-0.15 (0.10) 0.11	0.05 (0.10) 0.63	-0.33*** (0.10) 0.00	-0.15 (0.10) 0.14	-0.25** (0.11) 0.02	-0.14 (0.10) 0.18
Age	0.00 (0.00) 0.81	-0.01 (0.00) 0.15	-0.00 (0.00) 0.24	-0.00 (0.00) 0.40	0.00 (0.00) 0.71	0.00 (0.00) 0.38
Partisanship	-0.30*** (0.03) 0.00	-0.04 (0.03) 0.23	-0.08*** (0.03) 0.01	-0.08*** (0.03) 0.01	-0.03 (0.03) 0.34	-0.00 (0.03) 0.94
PolKnowledge	-0.03 (0.05) 0.53	-0.18*** (0.05) 0.00	0.05 (0.05) 0.34	0.12** (0.05) 0.02	0.01 (0.06) 0.91	0.07 (0.05) 0.18
RacialResent	-0.11** (0.05) 0.04	0.05 (0.05) 0.33	0.07 (0.05) 0.23	-0.08 (0.05) 0.14	0.03 (0.06) 0.63	0.07 (0.05) 0.23
Constant	4.05*** (0.20) 0.00	2.43*** (0.22) 0.00	2.83*** (0.22) 0.00	3.42*** (0.22) 0.00	2.77*** (0.23) 0.00	2.47*** (0.22) 0.00
Observations	296	296	296	296	296	296
R <sup>2</sup>	0.38	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.02	0.02

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table A5: Trust effect on confidence in responses collected during the IRS scandal

VARIABLES	(1) President	(2) Congress	(3) FDA	(4) Census	(5) Local_Schools	(6) Local_Police
Conspiracy w/o Belief Q	-0.10 (0.11) 0.37	0.03 (0.12) 0.79	-0.05 (0.12) 0.69	0.07 (0.11) 0.53	0.07 (0.12) 0.55	0.07 (0.13) 0.61
Age	-0.00 (0.00) 0.68	0.00 (0.00) 0.57	-0.00 (0.01) 0.38	0.00 (0.00) 0.53	-0.00 (0.01) 0.57	0.01* (0.01) 0.05
Partisanship	-0.24*** (0.03) 0.00	-0.05 (0.04) 0.16	-0.03 (0.04) 0.37	-0.08** (0.03) 0.02	0.00 (0.04) 0.90	0.04 (0.04) 0.26
PolKnowledge	-0.00 (0.09) 0.97	0.03 (0.10) 0.75	-0.10 (0.10) 0.33	0.01 (0.09) 0.95	-0.09 (0.10) 0.35	-0.02 (0.11) 0.88
RacialResent	-0.09 (0.06) 0.15	0.10 (0.06) 0.12	0.02 (0.07) 0.72	-0.02 (0.06) 0.78	0.00 (0.07) 0.99	0.02 (0.07) 0.78
Constant	3.78*** (0.24) 0.00	1.71*** (0.25) 0.00	2.73*** (0.26) 0.00	3.06*** (0.23) 0.00	2.78*** (0.26) 0.00	2.15*** (0.27) 0.00
Observations	195	195	195	195	195	195
R <sup>2</sup>	0.28	0.02	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.03

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table A6: Combined Trust (IRS\*WelchNotAsked interaction

VARIABLES	(1) President	(2) Congress	(3) Supremecourt	(4) Bureaucracy	(5) Local_Services	(6) Churches	(7) Corporations
Conspiracy w/o Belief Q	-0.16 (0.10)	0.04 (0.10)	0.00 (0.10)	-0.24*** (0.08)	-0.20** (0.09)	0.11 (0.13)	0.02 (0.10)
High Scandal	0.11 (0.11)	0.70 (0.12)	1.00 (0.11)	0.00 (0.09)	0.02 (0.10)	0.41 (0.14)	0.86 (0.11)
(High Scandal)*(Conspiracy...)	-0.10 (0.35)	-0.17 (0.15)	0.02 (0.89)	-0.14 (0.13)	-0.19* (0.06)	-0.09 (0.54)	-0.11 (0.32)
Age	0.05 (0.15)	-0.02 (0.16)	0.07 (0.15)	0.27** (0.13)	0.28** (0.13)	-0.18 (0.19)	-0.04 (0.15)
Partisanship	0.75 (0.00)	0.90 (0.00)	0.64 (0.00)	0.03 (0.00)	0.04 (0.00)	0.35 (0.00)	0.79 (0.00)
PolKnowledge	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.01*** (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)
RacialResent	0.84 (0.04)	0.28 (0.05)	0.55 (0.04)	0.36 (0.04)	0.20 (0.04)	0.00 (0.05)	0.72 (0.04)
Constant	-0.28*** (0.17)	-0.04* (0.18)	-0.03 (0.17)	-0.07*** (0.14)	0.00 (0.15)	0.10*** (0.22)	0.09*** (0.17)
	0.00	0.05	0.17	0.00	0.97	0.00	0.00
	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.14*** (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.04)
	0.70	0.00	0.59	0.15	0.73	0.14	0.39
	-0.09** (0.04)	0.09** (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.16*** (0.05)	0.15*** (0.04)
	0.01	0.03	0.61	0.79	0.45	0.00	0.00
	3.97*** (0.17)	2.19*** (0.18)	2.81*** (0.17)	3.11*** (0.14)	2.66*** (0.15)	1.07*** (0.22)	1.28*** (0.17)
	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Observations	491	491	491	491	491	491	491
R <sup>2</sup>	0.34	0.04	0.01	0.07	0.02	0.12	0.10

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p&lt;0.01, \*\* p&lt;0.05, \* p&lt;0.1