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**Are anti-migration conspiracy beliefs associated with commitment to (violent) reactionary action and criticism of democracy? Evidence from 21 countries**

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### Article

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1           ARE ANTI-MIGRATION CONSPIRACY BELIEFS ASSOCIATED WITH  
2           COMMITMENT TO (VIOLENT) REACTIONARY ACTION AND CRITICISM OF  
3           DEMOCRACY? EVIDENCE FROM 21 COUNTRIES

4  
5                           **Abstract**

6     Despite widespread speculation that conspiracy beliefs foster anti-democratic outcomes, the  
7     empirical picture is inconsistent. To clarify this literature, we examine the relationships  
8     conspiracy beliefs have with commitment to reactionary action and criticism of democracy,  
9     focusing on a global issue: immigration. We expected that people who believe that their  
10    government uses immigration to diversify the population against citizens' wishes (anti-migration  
11    conspiracy beliefs) would be more committed to conventional and violent action to oppose  
12    immigration, and more critical of democracy. However, societal-level factors – economic  
13    performance and democratic functioning – were expected to qualify these links. As  
14    hypothesized, multi-level analyses (N = 4353) from 21 countries revealed that economic  
15    prosperity attenuated the positive link between anti-migration conspiracy beliefs and  
16    commitment to reactionary action. Paradoxically, more democratic societies evidenced stronger  
17    links between conspiracy beliefs and conventional (but not violent) action to oppose  
18    immigration. Thus, more democratic societies appear to invite conventional forms of action to  
19    oppose immigration which may, in turn, weaken democratic norms of inclusion. Results  
20    highlight the interplay of individual- and societal-level factors underlying illiberal movements.

21  
22    **Keywords:** conspiracy beliefs, reactionary collective action, cross-cultural psychology,  
23    immigration, economic performance, democracy.

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## Introduction

There are widespread concerns about the impacts of conspiracy beliefs for politics and society. Conspiracy beliefs are theorized to increase reactionary movements which seek to restore society to its “former glory”<sup>1</sup>, promote intolerance, damage social cohesion,<sup>2</sup> and weaken support for democracy across the world.<sup>3,4,5</sup> But do they? And are such links universal (i.e., evidenced across societies)? Or are there significant societal-level features that explain, attenuate or exacerbate these associations such that the destructive effects of conspiracy beliefs are stronger in some countries relative to others? We answer these important questions by examining the relationship between anti-immigration conspiracy beliefs (e.g., the great replacement conspiracy)<sup>6</sup> and commitment to (conventional and violent) reactionary action to oppose immigration, as well as criticism of democracy itself, across 21 countries (see Figure 1). Because conspiracy beliefs fundamentally reflect a criticism of the status quo, we reason that societal-level factors that capture the conditions within a particular nation (e.g., economic vitality, strength of democratic norms and institutions) should shape the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and outcomes. Figure 2 displays the primary hypotheses.

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<sup>1</sup>1 Becker, J. C. Ideology and the promotion of social change. *Current opinion in behavioral sciences* **34**, 6-11 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2019.10.005>

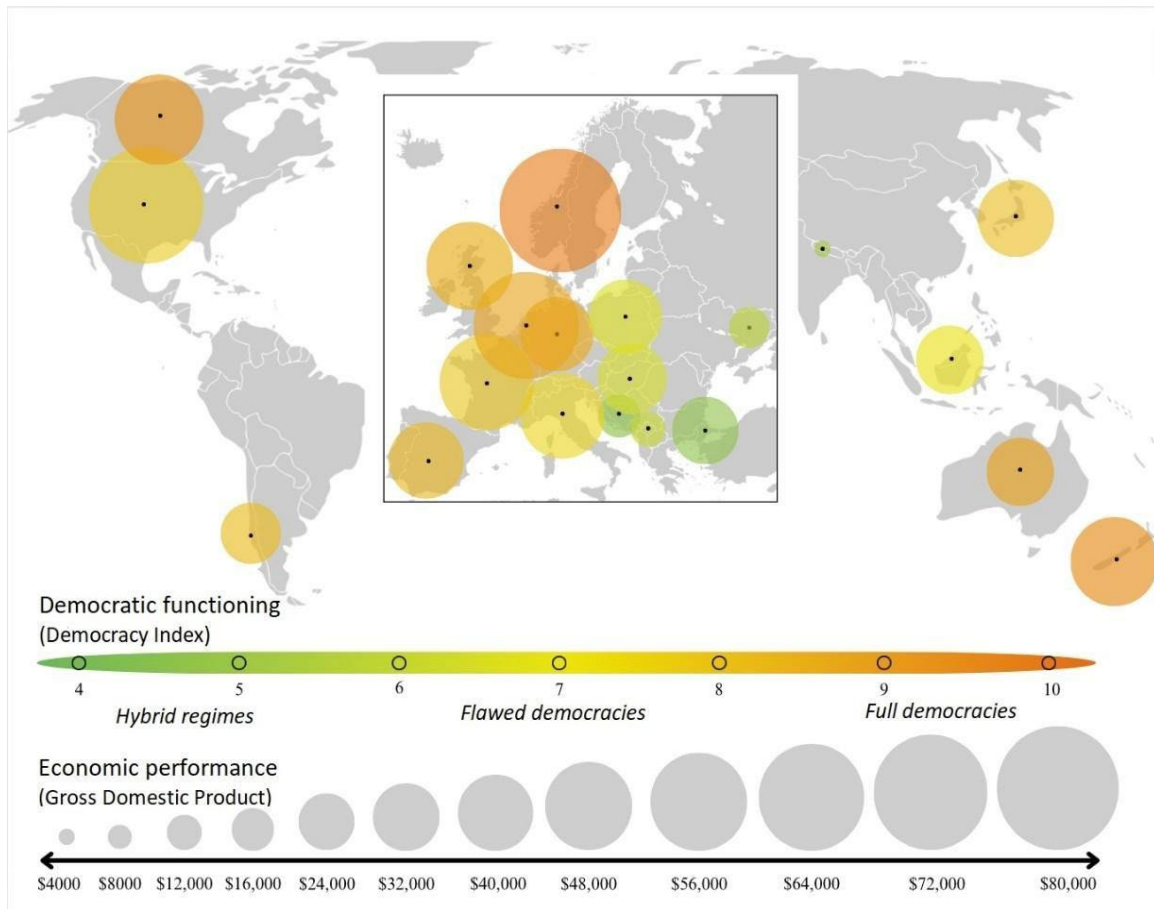
<sup>2</sup>2 Packer, D. J. & Ungson, N. D. Psychology and social cohesion. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* **10**, 3 (2024).

<sup>3</sup>3 Pantazi, M., Papaioannou, K. & Prooijen, J. W. Power to the People: The Hidden Link Between Support for Direct Democracy and Belief in Conspiracy Theories. *Political psychology* **43**, 529-548 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12779>

<sup>4</sup>4 Papaioannou, K., Pantazi, M. & Prooijen, J. W. Is democracy under threat? Why belief in conspiracy theories predicts autocratic attitudes. *European journal of social psychology* **53**, 846-856 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2939>

<sup>5</sup>5 van Prooijen, J.-W., Krouwel, A. P. M. & Pollet, T. V. Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories. *Social psychological & personality science* **6**, 570-578 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550614567356>

<sup>6</sup>6 Obaidi, M., Kunst, J., Ozer, S. & Kimel, S. Y. The “Great Replacement” conspiracy: How the perceived ousting of Whites can evoke violent extremism and Islamophobia. *Group processes & intergroup relations* **25**, 1675-1695 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684302211028293>



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50 *Fig 1.* Map of the 21 countries sampled in the current study. Color denotes the level of  
 51 democratic functioning within the country according to the Democracy Index and circle size  
 52 denotes the economic prosperity of the country according to Gross Domestic Product per capita.  
 53 The European region has been enlarged for clarity.

54

### 55 **Conspiracy Beliefs as a Call to Arms**

56 In this paper, we define conspiracy beliefs as those that suggest that “the public is being  
 57 pervasively lied to regarding some aspect(s) of reality, to allow some group(s) to enact a  
 58 harmful, self-serving agenda.”<sup>7</sup> Notably, there is widespread popular speculation and theorizing  
 59 about the perverse impacts of conspiracy beliefs for the emergence of illiberal or *reactionary*  
 60 *movements*.<sup>8</sup> Reactionary movements are a form of collective action whereby people act with

<sup>7</sup> Nera, K. & Schöpfer, C. What is so special about conspiracy theories? Conceptually distinguishing beliefs in conspiracy theories from conspiracy beliefs in psychological research. *Theory & psychology* **33**, 287 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543231155891>

<sup>8</sup> Sternisko, A., Cichocka, A. & Van Bavel, J. J. The dark side of social movements: social identity, non-conformity, and the lure of conspiracy theories. *Current opinion in psychology* **35**, 1-6 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsy.2020.02.007>

61 others to seek to make society more hierarchical or unequal,<sup>1</sup> by promoting the rights and access  
62 of hegemonically dominant or advantaged groups.<sup>9</sup> However, the empirical research testing the  
63 links between conspiracy belief and collective action has been sparse<sup>10</sup> and, where it does exist,  
64 the empirical findings are inconsistent.<sup>11</sup>

65 On the one hand, some studies demonstrate that exposure to conspiracy beliefs *reduces*  
66 conventional forms of political engagement (e.g., donation, voting<sup>12</sup>). However, longitudinal data  
67 from five democracies (United States, Japan, United Kingdom, Poland, and Estonia) showed  
68 little support for the hypothesis that generalized conspiracy mentality is related to political  
69 actions like voting, attendance at rallies, protests, or online actions (i.e., *a null effect*<sup>13</sup>). On the  
70 other hand, there is growing theoretical recognition<sup>8,14</sup> and empirical<sup>15,16</sup> evidence that people  
71 who endorse conspiracies may be *more likely* to engage in action. Imhoff et al.<sup>11</sup> reconciled some  
72 of these mixed findings by suggesting that conspiratorial thinking fosters support for more  
73 violent forms of action but not for non-violent forms of action (see also<sup>15,17</sup>). In this paper, we  
74 follow Imhoff et al.<sup>11</sup> in distinguishing between actions that involve conventional tactics  
75 (contacting authorities, peaceful protests, petitions) as opposed to more radical, violent tactics

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<sup>9</sup> 9 Thomas, E. F. & Osborne, D. Protesting for stability or change? Definitional and conceptual issues in the study of reactionary, conservative, and progressive collective actions. *European Journal of Social Psychology* **52**, 985-993 (2022).

<sup>10</sup> 10 Jolley, D., Marques, M. D. & Cookson, D. Shining a spotlight on the dangerous consequences of conspiracy theories. *Current opinion in psychology* **47**, 101363-101363 (2022).  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101363>

<sup>11</sup> 11 Imhoff, R., Dieterle, L. & Lamberty, P. Resolving the Puzzle of Conspiracy Worldview and Political Activism: Belief in Secret Plots Decreases Normative but Increases Nonnormative Political Engagement. *Social psychological & personality science* **12**, 71-79 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619896491>

<sup>12</sup> 12 Jolley, D. & Douglas, K. M. The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint. *The British journal of psychology* **105**, 35-56 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12018>

<sup>13</sup> 13 Ardèvol-Abreu, A., Gil de Zúñiga, H. & Gámez, E. The influence of conspiracy beliefs on conventional and unconventional forms of political participation: The mediating role of political efficacy. *British journal of social psychology* **59**, 549-569 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12366>

<sup>14</sup> 14 Wagner-Egger, P., Bangarter, A., Delouvée, S. & Dieguez, S. Awake together: Sociopsychological processes of engagement in conspiracist communities. *Current Opinion in Psychology* **47**, 101417 (2022).

<sup>15</sup> 15 Gkinopoulos, T. & Mari, S. How exposure to real conspiracy theories motivates collective action and political engagement? The moderating role of primed victimhood and underlying emotional mechanisms in the case of 2018 bushfire in Attica. *Journal of applied social psychology* **53**, 21-38 (2023).  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12923>

<sup>16</sup> 16 Thomas, E. F. *et al.* Do conspiracy beliefs fuel support for reactionary social movements? Effects of misbeliefs on actions to oppose lockdown and to “stop the steal”. *British journal of social psychology* **63**, 1297-1317 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12727>

<sup>17</sup> 17 Vegetti, F. & Littvay, L. Belief in conspiracy theories and attitudes toward political violence. *Italian Political Science Review* **52**, 18-32 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2021.17>

76 (i.e., those involving confrontation or violence) – referred to as *conventional action* and *violent*  
77 *action to oppose immigration*, respectively.<sup>18,19</sup>

78 Another reason for the mixed and inconsistent effects between conspiracy endorsement  
79 and outcomes for politics may be because much of the existing literature primarily addresses the  
80 relationship between conspiratorial mentality and political engagement *in general*. Imhoff et  
81 al.<sup>20</sup>, however, highlight that specific conspiracy beliefs are conceptually distinct from  
82 conspiracy mentality in general. Whereas conspiracy mentality reflects a relatively stable  
83 readiness to interpret events as being caused by plots hatched in secret by malevolent actors,  
84 conspiracy beliefs relate to beliefs about specific events, moments or people.<sup>20</sup> A similar  
85 distinction can be made for political engagement: when people engage in collective action, it is  
86 usually with a particular social change goal in mind<sup>9</sup> and more general measures of political  
87 engagement will not be sensitive to those goals. For instance, someone who believes that climate  
88 change is a hoax may be motivated to vote for a candidate or attend a protest that expresses those  
89 beliefs, but would be unlikely to vote or protest for climate justice. Thus, endorsement of specific  
90 conspiracies may shape motivation to participate in actions that address those specific grievances  
91 but not actions that address unrelated concerns.<sup>16</sup>

92 Our analysis addresses these limitations to provide a robust, multi-national test of the  
93 links between conspiracy beliefs and (conventional/violent) reactionary action in the context of a  
94 particular “real world” conspiracy belief, and a movement with specific political goals (i.e., to  
95 oppose immigration). Thus, we investigate the proposition that conspiracies specifically about  
96 migration can act as a “call to arms” for movements that oppose immigration (following<sup>21</sup>). For  
97 example, the great replacement theory is a conspiracy theory purporting that politicians are  
98 deliberately orchestrating the extinction of white people by replacing white people with non-  
99 white people via immigration policies. Such beliefs have been linked with hostility towards  
100 immigrants and commitment to violence in countries with a historically white majority

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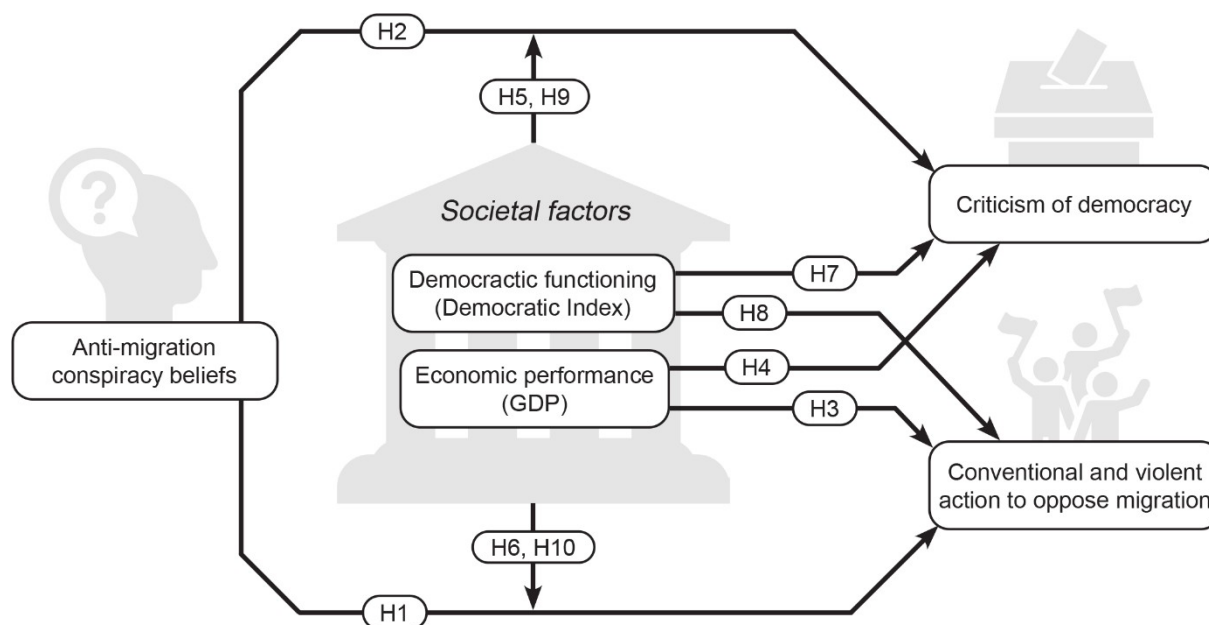
<sup>18</sup> 18 Louis, W. *et al.* The volatility of collective action: Theoretical analysis and empirical data. *Political Psychology* **41**, 35-74 (2020).

<sup>19</sup> 19 Uysal, M. S., Saavedra, P. & Drury, J. Beyond normative and non-normative: A systematic review on predictors of confrontational collective action. *British Journal of Social Psychology* (2024).

<sup>20</sup> 20 Imhoff, R., Bertlich, T. & Frenken, M. Tearing apart the “evil” twins: A general conspiracy mentality is not the same as specific conspiracy beliefs. *Current opinion in psychology* **46**, 101349 (2022).  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101349>

<sup>21</sup> 21 Douglas, K. M. *et al.* Understanding Conspiracy Theories. *Political psychology* **40**, 3-35 (2019).  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568>

101 population (e.g., Denmark, Norway<sup>6</sup>). In this paper, we focus on conspiracy beliefs about  
 102 government use of immigration programs to impose (cultural, racial) diversity on an unwilling  
 103 population<sup>22</sup> in 21 countries – termed *anti-immigration conspiracy beliefs*. We focus broadly on  
 104 beliefs about the role of the government but do not specify specific government representatives,  
 105 administrations or institutions per se.



106  
 107 *Fig 2.* Conceptual overview of key hypotheses (H). H1 and H2 probe individual-level  
 108 effects of conspiracy beliefs on outcomes; H3-4, H7-8 probe societal-level effects of democratic  
 109 functioning and economic performance on outcomes; H5-6, H9-10 probe interactions such that  
 110 societal-level factors impact the relationships between individual-level beliefs and outcomes.

111 We propose that believing that immigration policies are part of a government conspiracy  
 112 should correlate positively with commitment to both conventional and violent reactionary action  
 113 to oppose immigration in one’s country (*Hypothesis 1*, Figure 2). Such conspiracy beliefs  
 114 directly implicate a clear target (immigrants) and/or conspirator (the government) and are  
 115 therefore likely to foster actions designed to hold that government to account via conventional  
 116 forms of collective action.<sup>16,23</sup> At the same time, conspiracy theories provide narratives that  
 117 question the fairness and legitimacy of processes that authorities use to make decisions and have

<sup>22</sup> 22 Gaston, S. & Uscinski, J. E. Out of the shadows: conspiracy thinking on immigration. . 60 (The Henry Jackson Society, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> 23 Kim, Y. How conspiracy theories can stimulate political engagement. *Journal of elections, public opinion and parties* **32**, 1-21 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2019.1651321>

118 been shown to decrease trust in government institutions (even if the theory is unrelated to those  
119 institutions<sup>24</sup>). A conspiracy mindset correlates negatively with trust in government institutions  
120 and their processes.<sup>13</sup> Thus, endorsement of immigration conspiracies should also be associated  
121 with more radical, violent actions – actions that do not appeal to, and conflict with the norms of,  
122 the political institutions per se.<sup>25,26</sup>

123 Our analyses also test the relationship between anti-immigration conspiracy beliefs and  
124 support for democracy itself (*Hypothesis 2*).<sup>27</sup> Public concerns about immigration have coincided  
125 with diminished trust in democratic government and institutions.<sup>22</sup> Although there is widespread  
126 concern about how conspiracy beliefs diminish support for democracies across the world,  
127 systematic empirical tests of these claims are sparse. Corroborating the observations about  
128 conspiracy beliefs and their association with decreased trust in democratic institutions,  
129 conspiracy beliefs correlate negatively with support for representative democracy (i.e., the form  
130 of government in most Western liberal democracies<sup>3</sup>). We provide a comprehensive test of the  
131 proposition that conspiracy beliefs about immigration will be associated with commitment to  
132 both conventional and radical action to oppose immigration (*Hypothesis 1*), and greater criticism  
133 of democracy (*Hypothesis 2*) in 21 countries (see Figure 2).

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### 135 **Societal-level Factors Shape the Relationship between Conspiracy Beliefs and Outcomes**

136 Cordonier et al.<sup>28</sup> suggest that conspiracy theories are more likely to flourish in some  
137 countries than others. Recent frameworks of collective action similarly emphasize the  
138 importance of understanding the societal conditions in which actions emerge.<sup>29</sup> However,

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<sup>24</sup> 24 Einstein, K. L. & Glick, D. M. Do I Think BLS Data are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories. *Political behavior* **37**, 679-701 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-014-9287-z>

<sup>25</sup> 25 Jolley, D. & Paterson, J. L. Pylons ablaze: Examining the role of 5G COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and support for violence. *British journal of social psychology* **59**, 628-640 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12394>

<sup>26</sup> 26 Tausch, N. et al. Explaining Radical Group Behavior: Developing Emotion and Efficacy Routes to Normative and Nonnormative Collective Action. *Journal of personality and social psychology* **101**, 129-148 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022728>

<sup>27</sup> 27 Albertson, B. & Guiler, K. Conspiracy theories, election rigging, and support for democratic norms. *Research & politics* **7**, 205316802095985 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168020959859>

<sup>28</sup> 28 Cordonier, L., Cafiero, F. & Bronner, G. Why are conspiracy theories more successful in some countries than in others? An exploratory study on Internet users from 22 Western and non-Western countries. *Social Science Information* **60**, 436-456 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/05390184211018961>

<sup>29</sup> 29 Thomas, E. F., Duncan, L., McGarty, C., Louis, W. R. & Smith, L. G. E. MOBILISE: A Higher-Order Integration of Collective Action Research to Address Global Challenges. *Political psychology* **43**, 107-164 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12811>



139 Hornsey and Pearson<sup>30</sup> note the rarity of data that provide robust tests of the individual- and  
140 societal-level factors side-by-side, and in a specific context that has meaning across countries.  
141 What aspects of a society might meaningfully explain variation in anti-immigrant conventional  
142 and violent action, and democratic attitudes? Here, we consider the role of two societal-level  
143 factors in predicting outcomes directly, as well as qualifying the relationship between conspiracy  
144 belief and outcomes: economic performance and democratic functioning.

145 **Economic performance.** Conspiracy beliefs in general, and sentiment towards  
146 immigrants specifically, are both shaped by perceived and actual economic performance.  
147 Hornsey et al.<sup>31</sup> show that generalized conspiracy beliefs about the trustworthiness of authorities  
148 are negatively associated with both perceived and actual economic performance across 36  
149 countries (see also<sup>32</sup>). Elsewhere, perceptions of realistic threat at the individual-level (i.e.,  
150 competition over economic resources) has been linked with anti-immigrant collective action.<sup>33</sup>  
151 Thus, societal-level gross domestic product (GDP) should correlate negatively with commitment  
152 to conventional and violent action to oppose immigration (a direct effect; *Hypothesis 3*). On the  
153 other hand, given the links between economic performance and governance,<sup>30</sup> countries that are  
154 performing well economically should report stronger, more supportive democratic attitudes  
155 (direct effect; *Hypothesis 4*).

156 While ‘macro’ societal-level features may shape commitment to action and democratic  
157 attitudes directly (reflected in Hypotheses 3 and 4, respectively), those societal-level features  
158 could also *qualify* links between individual-level conspiracy beliefs and commitment to  
159 reactionary action. Bilewicz<sup>34</sup> suggests that part of the cross-cultural variation in the uptake of  
160 conspiracy beliefs stems from cultural trauma – adverse societal conditions that make conspiracy  
161 beliefs a functional adaptation so that people can “fight for their own.” Drawing on this analysis,

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<sup>30</sup> 30 Hornsey, M. J. & Pearson, S. Cross-national differences in willingness to believe conspiracy theories. *Current opinion in psychology* **47**, 101391 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101391>

<sup>31</sup> 31 Hornsey, M. J. et al. Multinational data show that conspiracy beliefs are associated with the perception (and reality) of poor national economic performance. *European journal of social psychology* **53**, 78-89 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2888>

<sup>32</sup> 32 Adam-Troian, J. et al. Of precarity and conspiracy: Introducing a socio-functional model of conspiracy beliefs. *British journal of social psychology* **62**, 136-159 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12597>

<sup>33</sup> 33 Shepherd, L., Fasoli, F., Pereira, A. & Branscombe, N. R. The role of threat, emotions, and prejudice in promoting collective action against immigrant groups. *European journal of social psychology* **48**, 447-459 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2346>

<sup>34</sup> 34 Bilewicz, M. Conspiracy beliefs as an adaptation to historical trauma. *Current opinion in psychology* **47**, 101359 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101359>

162 we reasoned that the direct links between individual-level conspiracy belief and action  
163 (Hypothesis 1) and conspiracy belief and criticism of democracy (Hypothesis 2) will be qualified  
164 by societal-level GDP per capita (i.e., a cross-level interaction, *Hypotheses 5 and 6*).

165 Two specific, yet opposing, patterns seem plausible, reflected in *Hypotheses 5 and 6*  
166 respectively. On the one hand, countries with stronger economic performance should evidence  
167 weaker links between conspiracy belief and reactionary action (*Hypothesis 5a*), as well as  
168 weaker links between conspiracy belief and critical democratic attitudes (*Hypothesis 6a*).  
169 Specifically, stronger economic performance should signal greater competence and trust, and,  
170 therefore, attenuate the links between conspiracy belief and action, and criticism of democracy  
171 (see also<sup>35</sup>). Another possibility is that, if conspiratorial thinking is more prevalent in  
172 economically weaker countries,<sup>30</sup> these types of beliefs may be more normative and, therefore,  
173 attract broader support from across the population. As such, the relationships conspiracy belief  
174 has with action and attitudes towards democracy should be more diffuse. Under these  
175 circumstances, the relationships between conspiracy belief and action (*Hypothesis 5b*), as well as  
176 conspiracy beliefs and criticism of democracies (*Hypothesis 6b*), would be stronger in more  
177 prosperous societies where conspiracy beliefs are held by people who are more politically  
178 extreme.<sup>5</sup> Our approach tests these cross-level interactions to examine how factors that  
179 characterize societies (nations) shape the relationships between variables at the individual-level.

180 We test the proposition that there will be a negative relationship between economic  
181 performance and anti-immigration collective action. Specifically, more prosperous societies  
182 (higher GDP) will evidence lower conventional and radical action (Hypothesis 3) and lower anti-  
183 democratic attitudes (Hypothesis 4). We also test the competing predictions that more prosperous  
184 societies will evidence weaker links between conspiracy beliefs and conventional/violent action  
185 (Hypothesis 5a), and anti-democratic attitudes (Hypothesis 5b); *or* that, in stronger economies,  
186 belief in immigration conspiracies is held only amongst a fringe of people and is therefore more  
187 strongly associated with commitment to anti-immigrant action (Hypothesis 6b) and critical  
188 attitudes (Hypothesis 6b).

189 **Democratic functioning.** A similar logic underpins our tests in the context of societal-  
190 level democratic function. Our analyses distinguish between attitudes towards democracy and

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<sup>35</sup> 35 Jetten, J., Peters, K. & Casara, B. G. S. Economic inequality and conspiracy theories. *Ibid.*, 101358  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101358>

191 democratic institutions that can be held at the *individual level*,<sup>36</sup> and variation in the degree to  
192 which democratic government and institutions function effectively at the *societal level*. Anti-  
193 democratic attitudes are held by individual people whereas democratic functioning describes  
194 functioning of societies or nation states more generally (see Figure 2). Previous research has  
195 found that macro, societal-level indicators of the strength of a democracy correlate negatively  
196 with anti-immigrant attitudes.<sup>37</sup> Having a stronger democratic system should be associated with  
197 lower collective hostility because the affordances of strong democratic institutions (i.e.,  
198 procedural justice, free and open elections, political participation, rule of law) should promote  
199 support for the decisions of those institutions, including immigration policies. Accordingly, we  
200 predicted that the more democratic the society, the lower the commitment to conventional and  
201 violent action to oppose immigration at the individual level (a direct effect; *Hypothesis 7*).  
202 Additionally, the more functional democracy is in terms of having effective norms and  
203 institutions at the societal level, the more it correlates positively with support for democracy at  
204 the individual level (direct effect; *Hypothesis 8*).

205         There are also reasons to think that having strong democratic norms and institutions (at  
206 the societal-level) would shape the relationship between (individual-level) conspiracy belief and  
207 outcomes (cross-level interactions; *Hypotheses 9 and 10*). Here, again, competing hypotheses are  
208 plausible. On the one hand, strong democracies have a free and open media, separation of  
209 powers, and rule of law (i.e., all people are equal before the law). Greater legal protections,  
210 procedural justice and equal treatment for all people (underpinned by democratic principles)  
211 should also attenuate the links conspiracy beliefs have with willingness to act and criticism of  
212 democracy. Thus, having a relatively stronger democracy could weaken the links between  
213 immigration conspiracy beliefs and both action (*Hypothesis 9a*) and anti-democratic attitudes  
214 (*Hypothesis 10a*). On the other hand, weaker democratic institutions at the societal level may  
215 make endorsement of immigration-related conspiracies more widespread (normative) but without  
216 necessarily fostering concerted action or criticism. Under these circumstances, the relationships  
217 between conspiracy belief and action (*Hypothesis 9b*), as well as belief and criticism of  
218 democracy (*Hypothesis 10b*), would be weaker for countries that have fragile democratic

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<sup>36</sup> 36 Moghaddam, F. M. *The psychology of democracy*. (American Psychological Association, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> 37 Berkovich, I. Defensive Citizenship in Europe: Definition and Measurement. *Political studies review* **19**, 148-156 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929920906996>

219 governance but stronger for robust democracies where conspiracy beliefs are held by people who  
220 are more politically extreme.<sup>5</sup> Our approach tests these competing possibilities by modelling the  
221 cross-level interaction between individual-level beliefs and societal-level democratic functioning  
222 on our focal outcomes (Figure 2).

223 Specifically, we test the hypotheses that there more robust democracies (i.e., higher  
224 Democracy Index) will evidence lower conventional and radical action (Hypothesis 7) and lower  
225 anti-democratic attitudes (Hypothesis 8). We also test the competing predictions that the  
226 affordances of more strongly democratic societies will attenuate the links between conspiracy  
227 beliefs and conventional/violent action (Hypothesis 9a), and anti-democratic attitudes  
228 (Hypothesis 10a); *or* that, in stronger democracies, belief in immigration conspiracies is held  
229 only amongst a fringe of people and is therefore more strongly associated with commitment to  
230 anti-immigrant action (Hypothesis 9b) and critical attitudes (Hypothesis 10b).

### 231 **The Current Research**

232 Immigration is a global phenomenon, yet we know little about the factors that directly  
233 impact on action to oppose immigration at the individual- or societal-level, nor how conspiracy  
234 beliefs about immigration affect support for democratic institutions and values. Despite the clear  
235 real-world importance, the empirical literature addressing the relationship between conspiracy  
236 beliefs and commitment to reactionary social movements is inconclusive. It also seems likely  
237 that particular societal conditions could strengthen or weaken the links between conspiracy  
238 beliefs and action. Yet there are few robust tests of the individual- and societal-level factors side-  
239 by-side, nor those situated within a specific context that has meaning across countries.<sup>30,31</sup> We  
240 address these oversights by examining the relationships between immigration conspiracy beliefs  
241 and commitment to (conventional and violent) reactionary action and democracy (Figure 2) in 21  
242 countries that varied in their democratic functioning and economic performance (Figure 1).  
243 Table 2 provides an overview of the primary hypotheses.

244 **Openness and transparency.** Hypotheses 1-3 and 8 were pre-registered in November  
245 2022 (see [https://osf.io/wyr7t/?view\\_only=df5b3b9c896e412dbb8a95dfe5768956](https://osf.io/wyr7t/?view_only=df5b3b9c896e412dbb8a95dfe5768956) ). Note that the  
246 numbering of hypotheses in the pre-registration documentation differs from the numbering  
247 reported here. Specifically, Hypothesis 1 here relates to H1-2 in the pre-registration; Hypothesis  
248 2 reflects H3 in the pre-registration. While we pre-registered tests of the direct effects of the  
249 societal factors (GDP, DI) on conventional and violent reactionary action, we did not do so for

250 criticism of democracy (that is to say, Hypotheses 4 and 7 here were not pre-registered). In the  
251 pre-registration, we articulated competing hypotheses for Hypotheses 5-6 and 9-10; these were,  
252 therefore, exploratory and are described at H6a/b, H7a/b of the pre-registration. We also referred  
253 to the distinction between normative and non-normative collective action in the pre-registration  
254 but have conceptualised these as conventional and violent action here based on past work in the  
255 area.<sup>38,39</sup> Although we mentioned ‘mediation’ in the pre-registration, this was an error and none  
256 of the hypotheses articulate a test of indirect effects. Data are available at the links above and any  
257 other deviations from the pre-registered approach are noted below. Code and output for the  
258 analyses can be found in the supplementary materials.

## 259 **Methods**

### 260 **Participants and Procedure**

261 We collected data between December 2020 and November 2021 as part of a larger  
262 project investigating cross-cultural factors in collective action. All participants ( $N = 4353$ ) were  
263 undergraduate students recruited through convenience samples of the authors (e.g., SONA  
264 panels), who gave informed consent before starting the survey. The OSF contains details of the  
265 specific sample size and demographics of participants (age, gender), by country (Supplementary  
266 Table 1). Gender was not considered in the study design. Ethical approval was obtained from the  
267 Ethical Committee of the Social Sciences Department, at [University anonymized for peer  
268 review] as well as each participating institution when required. All authors were either local to  
269 the locations in which the data were collected or had recently relocated from that location and all  
270 were involved in co-authorship of this paper.

271 There was a larger set of measures than those reported here. The data, questionnaire and  
272 de-identified papers from the dataset are available via the OSF link  
273 ([https://osf.io/r4y6s/?view\\_only=0fef0882380a4a04b49cb4ef65ba251a](https://osf.io/r4y6s/?view_only=0fef0882380a4a04b49cb4ef65ba251a)). Surveys were translated  
274 and back-translated by the research team into languages other than English and distributed via  
275 Qualtrics software. Although the full dataset includes 22 countries, one of these countries  
276 (Singapore) was excluded prior to analysis because we could not secure ethical approval to  
277 collect politically sensitive measures of conspiracy belief or collective action. Consistent with

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<sup>38</sup> 19 Uysal, M. S., Saavedra, P. & Drury, J. Beyond normative and non-normative: A systematic review on predictors of confrontational collective action. *British Journal of Social Psychology* (2024).

<sup>39</sup> 18 Louis, W. *et al.* The volatility of collective action: Theoretical analysis and empirical data. *Political Psychology* **41**, 35-74 (2020).

278 our pre-registration, we removed 57 people who dropped out prior to completing the full survey,  
279 and 211 people who failed an attention check embedded within the questionnaire. An additional  
280 44 participants were missing more than one response on a focal measure and were removed via  
281 listwise deletion prior to analysis. Since this additional removal was not explicitly pre-registered,  
282 we conducted a sensitivity analysis to determine whether this decision affected the outcome. The  
283 pattern of results reported below was unchanged when using the full dataset (i.e., including  
284 missing data).

285

## 286 **Measures**

287 Items were measured on a 1-7 Likert-type scale unless otherwise described. An important  
288 precondition of cross-national analyses is that the measures display a minimum of configural  
289 invariance and metric invariance is considered necessary for indirect comparisons between  
290 groups (for example, comparisons of strength of relationships between nations). Given the well-  
291 known limitations of establishing full measurement equivalence where there are many groups  
292 (nations), we adopted the alignment and Baysean approximate invariance testing to distinguish  
293 error from cultural variance. Details of scale construction and measurement invariance testing for  
294 each of the measures are available in the supplementary materials  
295 ([https://osf.io/r4y6s/?view\\_only=0fef0882380a4a04b49cb4ef65ba251a](https://osf.io/r4y6s/?view_only=0fef0882380a4a04b49cb4ef65ba251a)). These supplementary  
296 analyses show that all scales met the minimal condition of configural invariance for cross-  
297 cultural analyses (Supplementary Table 2 and Supplementary Table 3). Commitment to violent  
298 action to oppose immigration demonstrated full scalar invariance, whereas conspiracy beliefs,  
299 criticism of democracy and commitment to conventional action to oppose immigration all  
300 displayed partial metric and partial scalar invariance (Supplementary Table 2 and Supplementary  
301 Table 3 for details). Here, we report the items that formed the final, manifest variables that we  
302 used in the primary analyses.

303 **Anti-migration conspiracy beliefs.** Four items, adapted from Gaston and Uscinski  
304 (2018),<sup>22</sup> measured conspiracy beliefs about immigration. The items were: “The government is  
305 hiding the true cost of immigration to taxpayers and society”, “Those who have spoken out  
306 against immigration in the media and politics have been treated unfairly”, “The government is  
307 concealing the true economic and social costs of immigration” and “Successive governments

308 have deliberately sought to make our society more diverse through its immigration policy.” The  
309 four items were averaged to form a manifest scale,  $\alpha = .79$ .

310 **Criticism of democracy.** Four items, adapted from Dowley and Silver (2002) and Louis  
311 et al. (2022),<sup>40,41</sup> measured criticism of democracy and ideals. Example items are: “Democracies  
312 are indecisive and have too much squabbling”, “Democracies aren't good at maintaining order”  
313 and “Freedom of expression is not very important in society”. The items were averaged to form a  
314 manifest scale,  $\alpha = .70$ .

315 **Commitment to conventional action to oppose immigration.** Four items measured  
316 intention to “...become involved with a group (or political party) focused on opposing  
317 migration”, “...contact my local government representatives to indicate my opposition for  
318 migration in my country (email, write a letter)”, “...sign a petition indicating my opposition for  
319 migration to the government of my country”, and “...attend a rally focused on the opposition for  
320 immigration.” The items were averaged to form a manifest scale,  $\alpha = .93$ .

321 **Commitment to violent action to oppose immigration.** Two items, adapted from  
322 Simon and Grabow (2010),<sup>42</sup> measured commitment to violent action to oppose immigration.  
323 The items were: “I would participate in a protest action to oppose migration to my country, even  
324 if it may involve a confrontation with the police” and “I think violent protest actions to oppose  
325 migration and raise awareness about threats related to migration are sometimes the only means to  
326 wake up the public.” The two items were averaged to form a manifest scale,  $r = .68$ .

327 **Democratic functioning.** Democratic functioning was quantified via the Democracy  
328 Index (DI).<sup>43</sup> The DI reflects domains including political participation, election process and  
329 pluralism, civil liberties, and political culture. Countries ranged from 0 to 10 with scores from 0  
330 to 4 capturing authoritarian regimes, and scores from 6.01 to 10 describing flawed and full  
331 democracies, respectively. In our sample, the lowest and highest DI scores were for Turkey  
332 (4.48) and Norway (9.81), respectively (see Figure 1).

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<sup>40</sup> 38 Dowley, K. M. & Silver, B. D. Social Capital, Ethnicity and Support for Democracy in the Post-Communist States. *Europe-Asia studies* **54**, 505-527 (2002). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130220139145>

<sup>41</sup> 39 Louis, W. R. et al. Failure Leads Protest Movements to Support More Radical Tactics. *Social psychological & personality science* **13**, 675-687 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506211037296>

<sup>42</sup> 40 Simon, B. & Grabow, O. The Politicization of Migrants: Further Evidence that Politicized Collective Identity is a Dual Identity. *Political psychology* **31**, 717-738 (2010). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2010.00782.x>

<sup>43</sup> 41 Economist, T. *Democracy Index 2020: In sickness and in health? London: The Economist.* , <<https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020>> (2020).

333           **Economic performance.** We used the Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDP per  
334 capita) in 2021 as a country-level indicator of economic performance. GDP is the measure of the  
335 value added by the production of goods and services in a country. In our sample, the lowest and  
336 highest GDP scores were for Nepal (4260.8) and Norway (79201.2), respectively (see Figure 1).

337           **Results**

338           The model was tested using the manifest/observed variables for which we had established  
339 reliable cross-cultural (partial) metric and scalar measurement invariance. Intraclass correlations  
340 (.11-.22) suggested small effects of the national-level clustering in the data. We therefore  
341 conducted a series of Multi-Level Models using Mplus Version 8.6, using maximum likelihood  
342 estimation with robust standard errors (MLR) and Huber-White (Sandwich) estimator to correct  
343 for non-independence of observations. We did not test for the assumptions for multi-level  
344 modelling (normality, non-normal residuals) because the Huber-White (Sandwich) estimator is  
345 robust to violations.

346           The models examined the relationship between (individual-level) anti-immigrant  
347 conspiracy belief (IV) on commitment to conventional (DV1) and violent (DV2) action to  
348 oppose immigration, as well as criticism of democracy (DV3), conditioned on the between-  
349 group (societal) factors of democratic functioning (MV1) and economic performance (MV2).  
350 The moderators were standardized so that the results were not affected by scale values, and both  
351 the predictor (conspiracy belief  $t$ , group mean) and moderators (democratic functioning,  
352 economic performance, grand mean) were centered to address multicollinearity and aid in  
353 interpretation of the cross-level interactions (see<sup>44</sup>). The DVs were allowed to correlate, as were  
354 the two moderator variables, to account for their shared variance. No covariates were tested. We  
355 note that the output displayed a warning suggesting problems with the standard errors due to the  
356 complexity of the model. However, none of the standard errors were out of range and there were  
357 no other indications of model non-identification. We conducted a sensitivity analysis by running  
358 an identical model for each outcome separately (i.e., a less complex model) and the error did not  
359 appear, nor were results different from those reported here. As such, we reported the full,  
360 comprehensive model for parsimony. Table 1 displays the results of the two focal models. Figure  
361 3 provides an overview of the findings across both models.

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<sup>44</sup> 42   Enders, C. K. & Tofighi, D. Centering Predictor Variables in Cross-Sectional Multilevel Models: A New Look at an Old Issue. *Psychological methods* **12**, 121-138 (2007). <https://doi.org/10.1037/1082-989X.12.2.121>

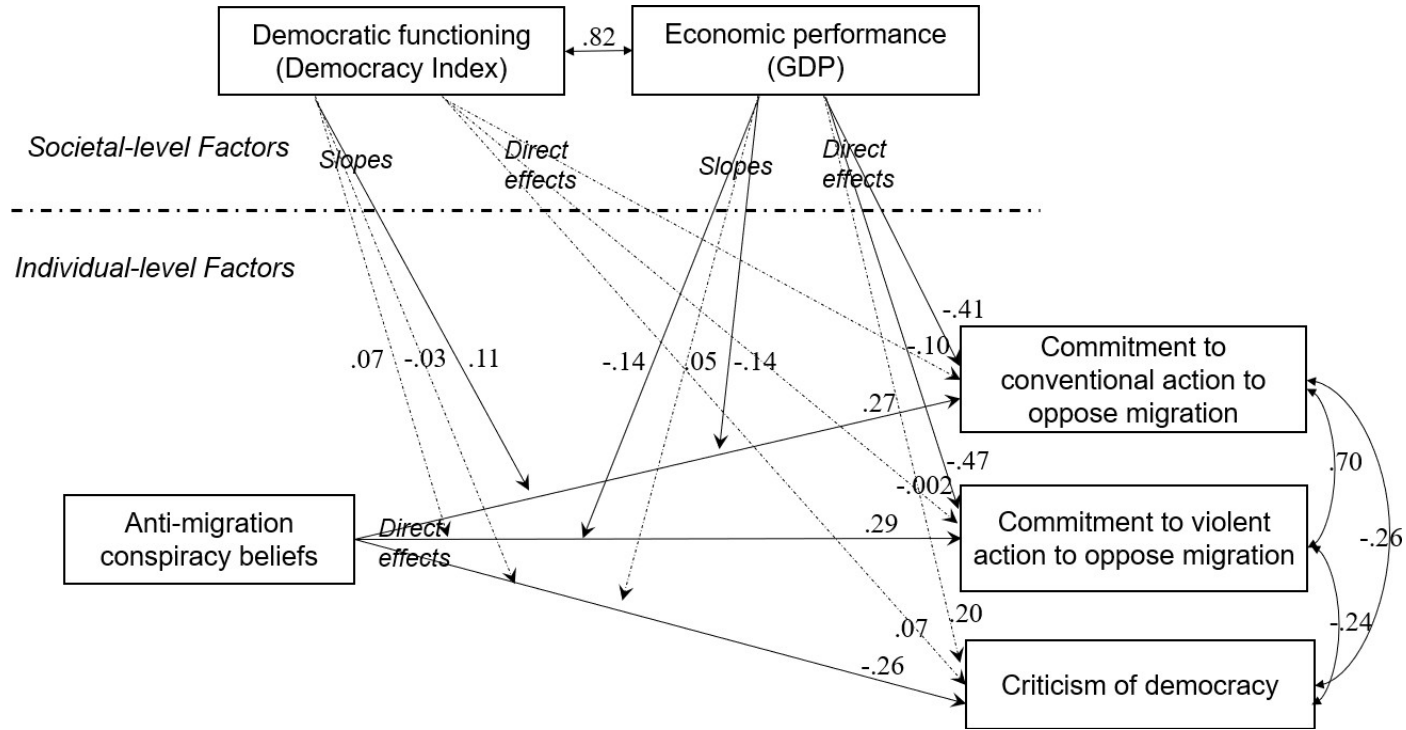


Anti-immigration conspiracy beliefs and commitment to reactionary action across nations

Table 1. Regression coefficients [confidence intervals], standard errors and *p* values for Multi-Level Models

Predictor	Outcome								
	DV: Direct effect – Commitment to conventional action to oppose immigration			DV: Direct effect – Commitment to violent action to oppose immigration			DV: Direct effect - Criticism of democracy		
	Estimate [95% CI]	SE	<i>p</i>	Estimate [95% CI]	SE	<i>p</i>	Estimate [95% CI]	SE	<i>p</i>
<i>Individual level/ Within country</i>									
Anti-migration conspiracy beliefs	<b>0.27</b> [0.21, 0.33]	<b>0.03</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>	<b>0.29</b> [0.23, 0.35]	<b>0.03</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>	<b>-0.26</b> [-0.31, -0.20]	<b>0.03</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>
<i>Societal level/ Between country</i>									
	Estimate [95% CI]	SE	<i>p</i>	Estimate [95% CI]	SE	<i>p</i>	Estimate [95% CI]	SE	<i>p</i>
Democratic functioning (DI)	<b>0.11</b> [0.03, 0.23]	<b>0.05</b>	<b>.022</b>	0.07 [-0.05, 0.20]	0.07	.262	-0.03 [-0.11, 0.04]	0.04	.354
Economic performance (GDP)	<b>-0.14</b> [-0.28, -0.06]	<b>0.05</b>	<b>.008</b>	<b>-0.14</b> [-0.27, -0.012]	<b>0.07</b>	<b>.033</b>	0.05 [-0.02, 0.12]	0.04	.149
	Estimate [95% CI]	SE	<i>p</i>	Estimate [95% CI]	SE	<i>p</i>	Estimate [95% CI]	SE	<i>p</i>
Democratic functioning (DI)	-0.10 [-0.32, 0.24]	0.15	.506	-0.002 [-0.22, 0.21]	0.11	.985	0.07 [-0.11, 0.25]	0.09	.423
Economic performance (GDP)	<b>-0.41</b> [-0.81, -0.11]	<b>0.19</b>	<b>.030</b>	<b>-0.47</b> [-0.73, -0.21]	<b>0.13</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>	0.20 [-0.02, 0.42]	0.11	.071

362



363

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365

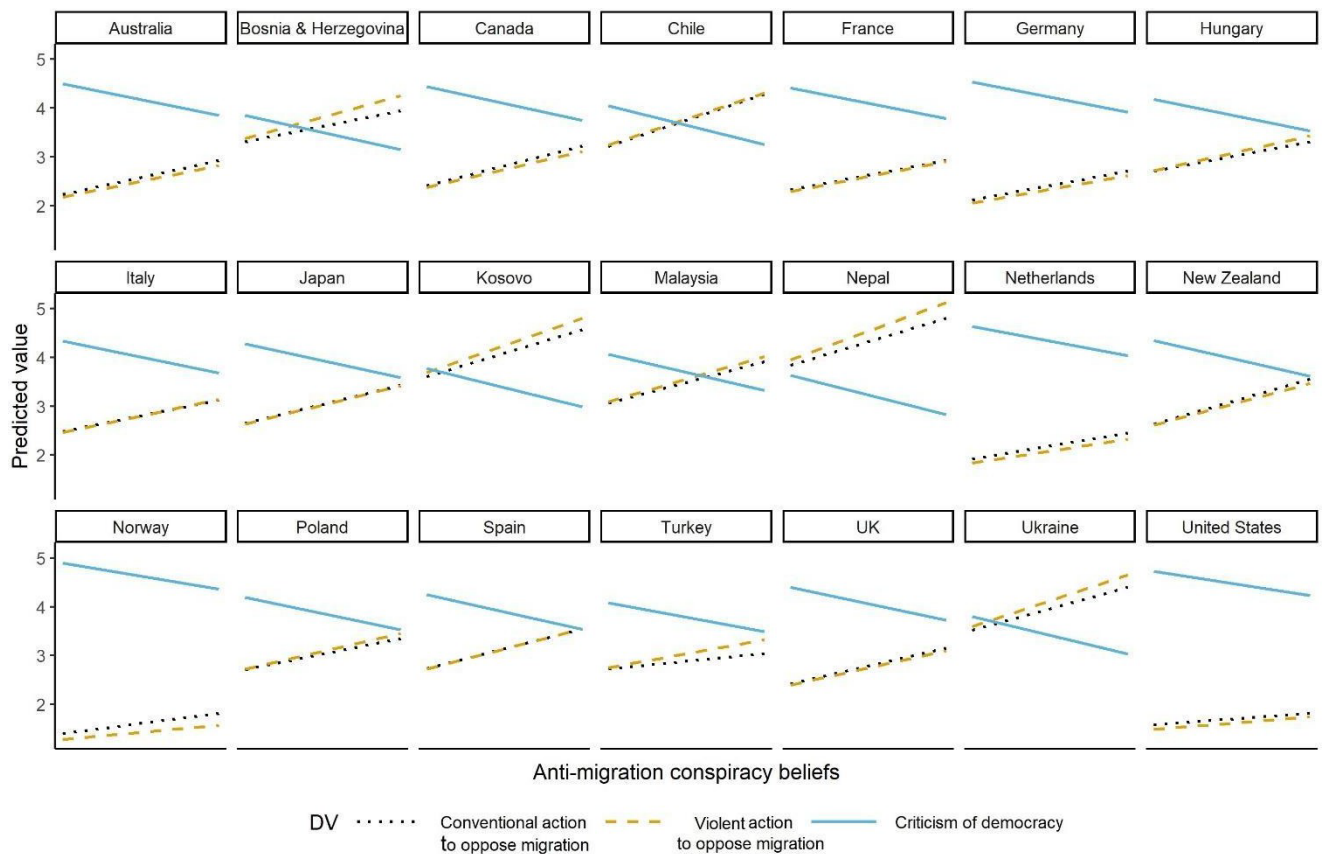
366

367

Fig 3. Regression coefficients for tests of individual-level effects (direct effects; below the line) and societal-level effects (direct effects; above the line), as well as their cross-level interaction. Dotted lines denote that the path was not significant,  $p < .05$ .

368 **Does individual-level conspiracy belief predict reactionary action and criticism of**  
 369 **democracy?**

370 The top panel of Table 1 displays the results of the random intercepts model, which  
 371 provides a test of the individual-level predictors. Figure 4 displays the effects for each of the 21  
 372 countries. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, anti-immigration conspiracy belief correlated positively  
 373 with both conventional and violent reactionary action to oppose immigration. Effects for both  
 374 conventional and violent action were of a similar magnitude (Table 1). Contrary to Hypothesis 2,  
 375 conspiracy belief was significantly *negatively* related to criticism of democracy. Given this  
 376 unexpected finding, we examined the bivariate correlations to see if this was an effect of  
 377 statistical suppression. Contrary to this possibility, the zero-order correlations between  
 378 conspiracy belief and critical attitudes were also negative ( $r = -.32, p < .001$ ).  
 379



380  
 381 *Fig 4. Relationship between conspiracy belief and outcomes across countries:*  
 382 *conventional and violent action to oppose immigration, denoted with the dotted and dashed lines*  
 383 *respectively; criticism of democracy denoted by solid lines.*

384

385 **Do societal-level factors predict reactionary action and criticism of democracy?**

386 The lower panels of Table 1 display the regression values with the random slope added  
 387 (i.e., a random intercept, random slope MLM) as a test of the direct and qualifying effects of the  
 388 societal-level factors on the outcomes. Looking first at the tests of the direct effects of societal-  
 389 level predictors (bottom panel Table 1), societal-level economic performance (GDP) was  
 390 negatively associated with commitment to reactionary conventional and violent action,  
 391 supporting *Hypothesis 3*. However, economic performance was not associated with democratic  
 392 attitudes (contrary to *Hypothesis 4*). Contrary to *Hypotheses 7* and *8*, societal-level democratic  
 393 functioning also did not directly predict variation in any of the outcomes (see also Figure 3).

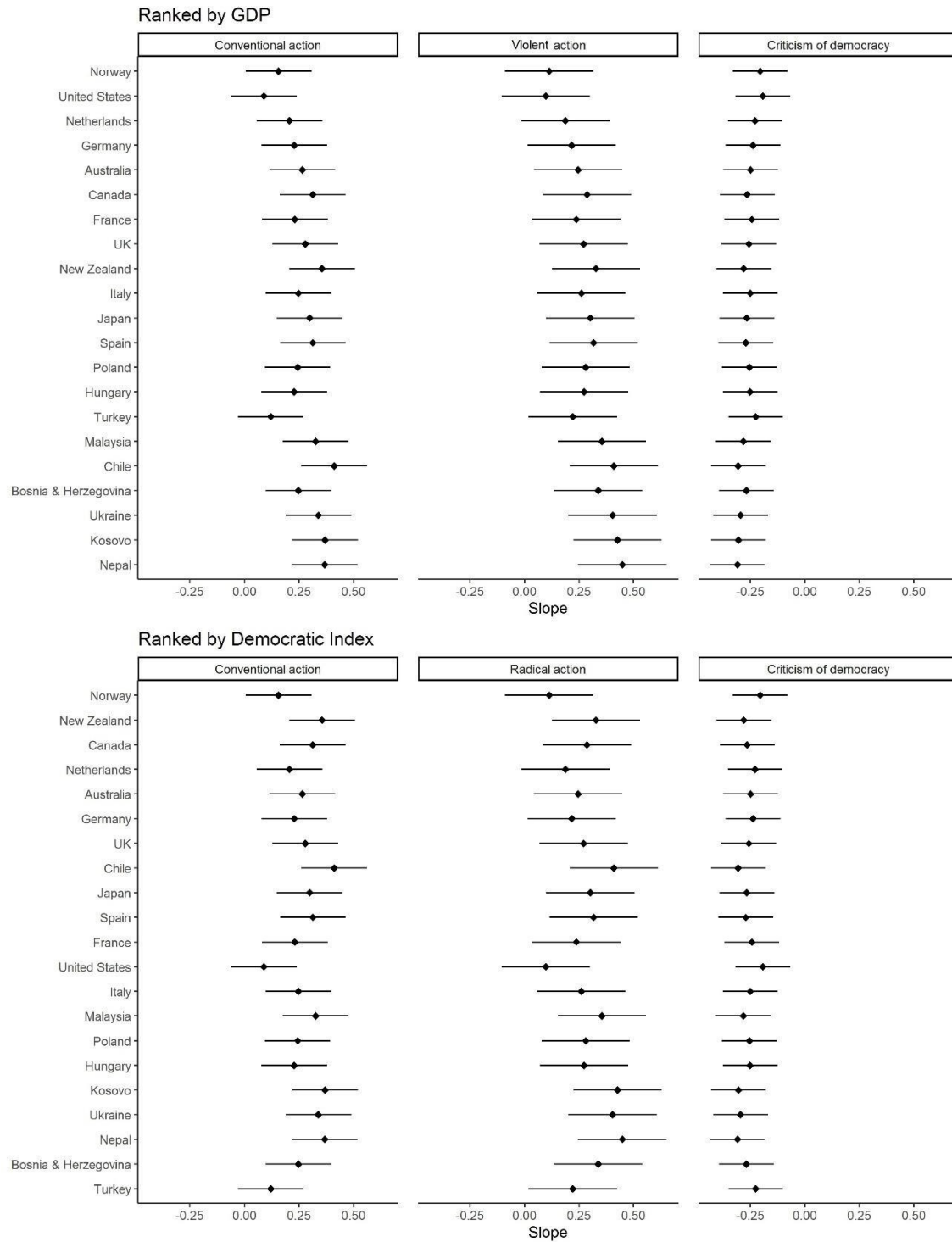
394

395 **Do individual- and societal-level factors interact to predict reactionary action and criticism**  
 396 **of democracy?**

397 Finally, the cross-level interactions between conspiracy beliefs and outcomes under  
 398 discrete societal conditions revealed a negative relationship between conspiracy beliefs and both  
 399 conventional and violent forms of action varied by economic conditions (middle panel, Table 1).  
 400 Figure 5 displays the slopes, by country. Under conditions of weaker economic performance (1  
 401 SD below the mean), there was a positive association between conspiracy beliefs and  
 402 conventional action,  $\gamma = 0.38$ , s.e. = .05,  $p < .001$ . Consistent with *Hypothesis 5a*, this  
 403 relationship was significant but weaker under conditions of higher economic performance (1 SD  
 404 above the mean),  $\gamma = 0.16$ , s.e. = .06,  $p = .003$ . Also supporting *Hypothesis 5a*, conspiracy beliefs  
 405 were positively associated with violent action under conditions of weaker economic  
 406 performance,  $\gamma = 0.40$ , s.e. = .05,  $p < .001$ , but not when economic performance was relatively  
 407 stronger,  $\gamma = 0.11$ , s.e. = .06,  $p = .07$ . The slope was not significant for individual-level  
 408 democratic attitudes (Table 1) (no effect for *Hypothesis 6*).

409 On the other hand, stronger democratic functioning at the societal level strengthened the  
 410 positive relationship between conspiracy beliefs and conventional action (Table 1). Specifically,  
 411 conspiracy beliefs and conventional action correlated positively in countries with relatively  
 412 stronger democratic functioning,  $\gamma = 0.42$ , s.e. = .06,  $p < .001$ , but this relationship is attenuated  
 413 (and non-significant) in countries with weaker democratic functioning,  $\gamma = 0.15$ , S.E. = .08,  $p =$   
 414 .059, a pattern that supports *Hypothesis 9b*. Intriguingly, there was not a significant effect of the  
 415 interaction between democratic function and conspiracy belief on violent action (Table 1).

416 Finally, there was no significant effect of the interaction between democratic functioning and  
 417 conspiracy beliefs on critical democratic attitudes (Table 1; per *Hypothesis 10*).



418  
 419 *Fig 5.* Slopes reflecting moderation of individual-level conspiracy beliefs by societal-level  
 420 factors: Gross Domestic Product (GDP; top panel) and Democratic Index (bottom panel).  
 421

**Power**

Given the complexity of the model, we conducted a monte carlo simulation study to

examine the power of the observed parameters given the sample size and clustering of the data using Mplus Version 8.6. We saved the parameter estimates from the primary analysis and used these as population parameter and coverage values in a simulation study with 10 000 replications. This analysis showed that we had excellent power to detect effects at the individual level (power  $\geq .93$ ) and acceptable power to test the societal-level effects (power  $\geq .88$ ), as well as the cross-level interactions (power  $\geq .87$ ).

**Discussion**

Despite widespread speculation about the damaging effects of conspiracy beliefs for politics and society, the literature addressing *outcomes* of conspiracies is relatively nascent<sup>10</sup> and the empirical picture is mixed and inconclusive.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, it is unclear whether these links exist and under what conditions misinformation and conspiracy foster illiberal, anti-democratic sentiment and movements – partly because few studies have examined individual- and societal-level factors side-by-side.<sup>31</sup> The goal of the present study was to examine whether (individual-level) anti-immigration conspiracy beliefs were associated with violent and conventional reactionary action to oppose immigration, and criticism of democracy. We examined whether societal-level factors such as economic performance and democratic functioning both directly predict these outcomes and qualify (strengthen, weaken) the individual-level relationships between conspiracy beliefs and outcomes (Figure 2). Table 2 provides an overview of the key hypotheses and whether they were supported by the data.

The results revealed that anti-immigration conspiracy beliefs correlated positively with commitment to both conventional and violent reactionary action to oppose immigration, in 21 countries (supporting Hypothesis 1). Notably, we found that endorsement of anti-immigration conspiracy beliefs was also associated with commitment to conventional action – contrary to other work which suggests that conspiracy beliefs may uniquely foster more radical forms of action.<sup>11,15</sup> Thus, whilst there is mixed evidence for the relationship between conspiracy mentality and general forms of political engagement,<sup>13</sup> the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and mobilization is clear in the context of *specific* beliefs and political actions<sup>20,25</sup> Our study demonstrates that this relationship exists in the important context of immigration<sup>6</sup> indicating that such beliefs pose a threat to social cohesion. Socially cohesive societies are those

454 where there are high levels of mutual trust and positivity between people and groups.<sup>2</sup>  
455 Conspiracy beliefs can incite intolerance of immigrants and help to mobilize protest against  
456 them, thus exacerbating tensions between different groups in society (see also <sup>33,2</sup>).

457         Contrary to Hypothesis 2, anti-immigration conspiracy beliefs at the individual level were  
458 related to *greater* support for democratic values and norms. That is, believing that governments  
459 use immigration programs to promote ethnic and cultural diversity on an unwilling population<sup>22</sup>  
460 was associated with less criticism of democracy. Given that conspiracy beliefs are more  
461 pronounced at the political extremes,<sup>5</sup> this unexpected relationship may reflect political  
462 engagement more broadly, such that the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and anti-  
463 democratic attitudes exist only for those at the extremes. Alternatively, given that conspiracy  
464 beliefs can foster support for alternative forms of democracy (e.g., direct democracy<sup>3</sup>),  
465 participants may have imagined alternatives to representative democracy when forming their  
466 attitudes about democracy in general.

467

468 *Table 2. Overview of hypotheses and findings.*  
 469

Hypothesis	Prediction	Supported (✓) / No sig difference (✗)
1	Anti-immigration conspiracy beliefs will be positively associated with conventional and violent reactionary action to oppose migration	✓
2	Anti-immigration conspiracy beliefs will be positively associated with criticism of democracy	✗
3	Societal-level GDP will be negatively associated with conventional and violent reactionary action to oppose immigration	✓
4	Societal-level GDP will be negatively associated with criticism of democracy	✗
5	a) Countries with greater GDP will evidence weaker links between conspiracy belief and conventional/violent action; <i>or</i> b) Countries with greater GDP will evidence stronger links between conspiracy belief and conventional/ violent action	5a supported ✓
6	a) Countries with greater GDP will evidence weaker links between conspiracy belief and criticism of democracy; <i>or</i> b) Countries with greater GDP will evidence stronger links between conspiracy belief and criticism of democracy	✗
7	Societal-level democratic index will be negatively associated with conventional and violent reactionary action to oppose immigration	✗
8	Societal-level democratic index will be negatively associated with criticism of democracy	✗
9	a) Countries with greater democratic index will evidence weaker links between conspiracy belief and conventional/ violent action; <i>or</i> b) Countries with greater democratic index will evidence stronger links between conspiracy belief and conventional/ violent action	9b supported for conventional action only ✓
10	a) Countries with greater democratic index will evidence weaker links between conspiracy belief and criticism of democracy; <i>or</i> b) Countries with greater democratic index will evidence stronger links between conspiracy belief and criticism of democracy	✗

470



471 A particular strength of the current approach is that immigration is a global phenomenon,  
472 and it is increasingly clear that the form and direction of collective action is shaped by societal  
473 conditions<sup>29</sup> and cultural values.<sup>45</sup> Empirically, tests of how macro, societal-level economic and  
474 social factors shape the relationships between conspiracy belief and outcomes are sparse.<sup>30</sup> Our  
475 results indicate that stronger economic performance at the society-level is linked to lower  
476 commitment to both conventional and radical action at the individual level (*Hypothesis 3*). We  
477 are unaware of many tests of societal-level predictors of collective action, although these are  
478 increasingly theorized to be an important part of understanding the interplay between people  
479 seeking to change society through collective action, and societal factors shaping the emergence  
480 of action per se.<sup>29, 43</sup>

481 Indeed, it stands to reason that some societal conditions would foster conspiracy-fuelled  
482 grievances more than others. In our data, economic performance – national GDP – qualified the  
483 links between conspiracy belief and reactionary action. Specifically, the links between  
484 immigration conspiracy beliefs and mobilization were weaker or non-significant for both forms  
485 of reactionary protest in societies with more flourishing economies (per *Hypothesis 5a*<sup>31</sup>).  
486 Countries with higher economic performance might have more stable economies and greater  
487 opportunities, leading to less feelings of insecurity among citizens. Countries with higher  
488 economic performance also often tend to be more diverse and cosmopolitan. Establishing  
489 positive interactions with individuals from diverse groups may mitigate the formation of  
490 detrimental intergroup conspiracy beliefs.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, our results suggest that  
491 conspiracy beliefs about the role of immigration may fall on fertile ground in societies with  
492 weaker economies by helping activate the sense of grievance or injustice that is a key antecedent  
493 to collective action.<sup>47</sup>

494 Indeed, countries with relatively stronger economic performance should foster stronger,  
495 more supportive democratic attitudes at the individual level.<sup>30</sup> Surprisingly, however, we did not

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<sup>45</sup> 43 van Zomeren, M. & Louis, W. R. Culture meets collective action: Exciting synergies and some lessons to learn for the future. *Group processes & intergroup relations* **20**, 277-284 (2017).  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430217690238>

<sup>46</sup> 44 Jolley, D., Seger, C. R. & Meleady, R. More than a prejudice reduction effect: Positive intergroup contact reduces conspiracy theory beliefs. *European journal of social psychology* **53**, 1262-1275 (2023).  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2973>

<sup>47</sup> 45 Agostini, M. & van Zomeren, M. Toward a comprehensive and potentially cross-cultural model of why people engage in collective action: A quantitative research synthesis of four motivations and structural constraints. *Psychological Bulletin* **147**, 667 (2021).

496 find evidence for the direct role of democratic functioning on predicting democratic attitudes  
497 (contrary to *Hypothesis 4*), nor was there evidence that GDP qualified links between conspiracy  
498 belief and antidemocratic sentiment (as per *Hypothesis 6*). A null effect is not evidence of no  
499 effect, however, and some research suggests that varying responses to the country's economic  
500 situation and its influence on satisfaction with democracy are moderated by political ideology.<sup>48</sup>  
501 These alternatives should be further explored in future research.

502 Democratic attitudes exist at the individual level where people can differ in their support  
503 for democratic institutions and values, but democratic norms and institutions also differ in their  
504 effectiveness at the collective, societal level (reflected in the Democratic Index<sup>41</sup>)<sup>36</sup>. Our research  
505 is amongst the first to consider both levels simultaneously. Contrary to expectations, we did not  
506 find evidence that the strength of democracy directly predicted either form of collective action  
507 (contrary to *Hypothesis 7*<sup>37</sup>), nor did it predict individual-level democratic attitudes  
508 (disconfirming *Hypothesis 8*). That is, measures relating to societal-level institutional and  
509 procedural qualities of democracy did not appear to relate to the more subjective evaluations of  
510 individual citizens directly (see<sup>49</sup>).

511 Although we did not find support for Hypothesis 8, the (societal-level) robustness of  
512 democracy did qualify the relationship between immigration conspiracy beliefs and reactionary  
513 collective action: states with a stronger democracy exhibited stronger links between conspiracy  
514 beliefs and conventional action, but not radical, violent action (per *Hypothesis 9b*). Intriguingly,  
515 the relationship between conspiracy belief and action is stronger in robust democracies only  
516 when that action involves interacting with those democratic, political processes (i.e., via  
517 conventional collective action) but not for more radical forms of action.<sup>26</sup> These results are  
518 somewhat paradoxical because our findings suggest that democracies foster the kind of  
519 contention (protest, collective action) that is so central to democratic rights and freedoms. Yet  
520 anti-immigrant protests signal an intolerance of immigrants and could directly impinge on the  
521 democratic rights and freedoms of immigrant communities (e.g., a right to be free from  
522 persecution). In this sense, democracies appear to encourage the kind of action that weakens

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<sup>48</sup> 46 Jurado, I. & Navarrete, R. M. Economic Crisis and Attitudes Towards Democracy: How Ideology Moderates Reactions to Economic Downturns. *Frontiers in political science* 3 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.685199>

<sup>49</sup> 47 Fuchs, D. & Roller, E. Conceptualizing and Measuring the Quality of Democracy: The Citizens' Perspective. *Politics and Governance* 6, 22-32 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i1.1188>

523 support for democratic values. These nuances suggest that governments and authorities must  
524 strike a careful balance between allowing anti-immigrant protests as a legitimate form of  
525 democratic expression whilst managing its other harmful effects on democratic societies.

### 526 **Limitations**

527         Although we are amongst the first to test the links between conspiracy beliefs and  
528 illiberal outcomes in 21 countries, we acknowledge several limitations. First, the research is  
529 correlational, which means that causal relationships between variables could not be determined.  
530 Conspiracy beliefs may be “contaminated” by other dispositions<sup>50</sup> – third variables that we did  
531 not control for. For example, realistic and symbolic threat are particularly important predictors of  
532 anti-immigrant attitudes,<sup>51,52,53</sup> including anti-immigrant action.<sup>33</sup> Future research could consider  
533 how these variables relate to the outcomes examined here. Conspiracy beliefs may also reflect  
534 prior commitment to reactionary groups, and/or are bidirectionally associated with the predictors  
535 and outcomes. Longitudinal studies with multi-national samples and multiple timepoints could  
536 address these unresolved questions. Although our primarily student samples allowed us to adopt  
537 a common sampling approach across countries, the sample was relatively younger, more  
538 politically liberal and educated than more representative samples. At the cluster level, we did not  
539 include countries with authoritarian regimes (see Figure 1), and some regions were not  
540 represented in our data. These sample characteristics may have truncated the range on some  
541 variables, providing a conservative test of our hypotheses. Future studies could incorporate a  
542 broader, more representative community sample and examine non-linear (e.g., quadratic)  
543 relationships between conspiracy beliefs and outcomes.

544         Conspiracy beliefs can differ in their level of specificity – while some allege harms  
545 perpetrated by the government and authorities more generally, others implicate particular people  
546 (representatives, politicians), administrations or institutions. Given our cross-national test, we

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<sup>50</sup> 20 Imhoff, R., Bertlich, T. & Frenken, M. Tearing apart the “evil” twins: A general conspiracy mentality is not the same as specific conspiracy beliefs. *Current opinion in psychology* **46**, 101349 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101349>

<sup>51</sup> 48 Stephan, W. G., Renfro, C. L., Esses, V. M., Stephan, C. W. & Martin, T. The effects of feeling threatened on attitudes toward immigrants. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* **29**, 1-19 (2005).

<sup>52</sup> 49 Schmuck, D. & Matthes, J. Effects of economic and symbolic threat appeals in right-wing populist advertising on anti-immigrant attitudes: The impact of textual and visual appeals. *Political Communication* **34**, 607-626 (2017).

<sup>53</sup> 50 Rios, K., Sosa, N. & Osborn, H. An experimental approach to intergroup threat theory: Manipulations, moderators, and consequences of realistic vs. symbolic threat. *European Review of Social Psychology* **29**, 212-255 (2018).

547 required a measure that could be readily adapted across contexts and, therefore, assessed beliefs  
548 about government conspiracy more generally rather than specific people or institutions that may  
549 not generalize across context. Future research could examine the links between more specific  
550 conspiracies and also offer a more differentiated approach to the measure of criticism of  
551 democracy. “Democracy” involves specific actors (representatives, politicians), institutions  
552 (government, which can be both administrative and political) and values (e.g., respect for human  
553 rights) but conspiracy beliefs may affect some of these facets more than others. For example,  
554 there is evidence that conspiracy beliefs may promote support for direct democracy but not  
555 representative democracy.<sup>3</sup> Future research should develop a more differentiated approach to the  
556 measurement of democracy that allows for an assessment of these effects.

### 557 **Conclusion**

558         The 2024 Global Risks Report cites the interconnected effects of false information,  
559 societal polarization and involuntary immigration as amongst the biggest short-term threats to  
560 global peace and security.<sup>54</sup> The current research underscores the importance of considering both  
561 the individual, as well as the broader socio-economic and political contexts (i.e., economic  
562 performance and democracy functioning), in addressing these major challenges. Indeed, although  
563 anti-immigration conspiracy beliefs appear to foster reactionary action, our results demonstrate  
564 that this is particularly true in countries facing economic challenges. Conversely, societal-level  
565 democratic functioning paradoxically strengthens the positive association between conspiracy  
566 beliefs and conventional action to oppose immigration. These results indicate that attempts to  
567 identify the consequences of conspiracy beliefs on anti-democratic outcomes must consider both  
568 individual- and societal-level factors. Doing so will advance understanding of one of the biggest  
569 contemporary threats to democracy and enable researchers and policymakers alike to develop the  
570 tools needed to address the increasing proliferation of conspiracy beliefs.

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<sup>54</sup> 51 Forum, W. E. The Global Risks Report 2024. (2024).

572 **Data Availability Statement**

573           The data, questionnaire and de-identified papers from the dataset are available via the  
574 OSF link ([https://osf.io/r4y6s/?view\\_only=0fef0882380a4a04b49cb4ef65ba251a](https://osf.io/r4y6s/?view_only=0fef0882380a4a04b49cb4ef65ba251a)).

575 **Code Availability Statement**

576           Code and output for the analyses can be found in the supplementary materials.

577 **Competing Interests Statement**

578           The authors did not declare any financial or non-financial competing interests.

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