

Who believes in conspiracy theories in Venezuela?

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Abstract: Conspiracy theories are central to political discourse in Venezuela and are widely supported. In the AmericasBarometer Venezuela survey from 2016-2017, 57% of respondents expressed agreement for at least one of three political conspiracy narratives unsupported by evidence. Political loyalties to *Chavismo* or to the anti-*Chavista* opposition drive much conspiracy theory belief, but not all. Politically motivated reasoning pushes citizens toward some conspiracy narratives but away from others. Other factors that are distinct from political loyalties, including low education levels and predispositions toward *Manicheanism* and *fatalism*, are associated with conspiracism in general. This paper presents new data on conspiracy theory belief in Venezuela as well as analysis of its individual-level correlates, then discusses how the current Venezuelan political environment fosters conspiracy and what changes might mitigate this phenomenon.

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Who believes in conspiracy theories in Venezuela? To what degree is support for conspiracy narratives a manifestation of political loyalty, and how much do individual characteristics like age, sex, education level, or non-political predispositions drive these beliefs? This paper brings survey data from Venezuela to bear on these questions and in doing so sheds light on how politicians in Venezuela and elsewhere deploy conspiracy theories strategically, and on what factors might impede their use as a political tool.

Conspiracy theories hold that hidden groups are perpetuating secret plots to advance their own interests, even at the expense of the broader public good. Such narratives are ubiquitous across diverse political environments. In the United States, unsupported beliefs that the 9/11 attacks were engineered by the U.S. government, that the 2008 financial crisis was orchestrated by Wall Street insiders, and that President Barack Obama was not, by rights, a U.S. citizen, are notorious for their persistence (Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013, Oliver and Wood 2014, Uscinsky and Parent 2014). In the Middle East, equally baroque narratives command widespread support – for example, that the United States created Islamic State (Hasan 2014, Weber 2014) or that Israeli’s Mossad intelligence agency choreographed attacks from 9/11 (Turki 2001) to sharks biting swimmers off the Egyptian coast (Fathi 2010). Public opinion researchers have explored the pervasiveness of conspiracy beliefs and the factors that contribute to them in the United States (Oliver and Wood 2014, Uscinsky and Parent 2014) and in other regions, including the Middle East (Lipstadt 2012, Klar and Baram 2014, Masoud 2017, Zeitzoff 2014), Asia (Radnitz 2015), and Europe (Uenal 2016).

Scholarship on public opinion in Latin America, by contrast, has not yet addressed how widely conspiracy theories are believed or the characteristics of those who embrace them.¹ It is not that Latin America lacks for conspiratorial subject matter. For example, in January 2015, Argentine federal prosecutor Alberto Nisman was found dead in his apartment the day before he was scheduled to present charges before Congress that then-President Christina Fernandez de Kirchner had, herself, conspired to cover up Iranian involvement in a 1994 terrorist bombing in Buenos Aires. The president’s opponents charged that Kirchner had further conspired with Argentine security agents to assassinate Nisman. The president, in turn, attributed Nisman’s death to a conspiracy by her opponents, to kill Nisman with the intention of discrediting her (Filkins 2015). The case remains unresolved. Examples from other countries are easy to summon (Hudson 1995, Nabel 2016).

Across Latin America, however, Venezuela can stake a strong claim as the regional champion of conspiracy. In the past decade, the presidential administrations of Hugo Chávez and then Nicolás Maduro have fostered and promoted political conspiracy theories at a staggering rate. These narratives are advanced by high government officials, up to and including the president, and they are promoted and disseminated by state news agencies (Pérez Hernáiz 2008). This paper draws

¹ Briggs (2004) describes a conspiratorial narrative among members of the Warao indigenous group in eastern Venezuela to explain a cholera epidemic that ravaged their community in the early 1990s. Political marginalization of the Warao is central to his account, which is entirely ethnographic and does not rely on survey data.

on new data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project's (LAPOP) 2016-2017 Venezuelan survey to measure rates at which citizens in that country subscribe to political conspiracy theories, and explores the individual respondent-level characteristics that correlate with conspiracy beliefs. The results support the proposition that conspiracy theory beliefs are largely motivated by respondents' political sympathies. But they also show that individual-level characteristics distinct from political identity affect these beliefs to a significant degree. Education discourages conspiracism whereas predispositions such as a Manichean worldview and a sense of fatalism are correlated with stronger conspiracy beliefs

Venezuelan conspiracy theories

The presidential administrations of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro have regularly endorsed, and produced, conspiracy theories as weapons to discredit or demonize adversaries and to generate a fortress mentality among supporters. The Venezuelan sociologist, Hugo Antonio Pérez Hernáiz, has chronicled the production of conspiracy theories under *Chavista* governments in academic research (Pérez Hernáiz 2008) and on his blog, the [Venezuela Conspiracy Theory Monitor](#) (VCTM), which provides the most complete catalogue of *Chavista* conspiracy theories available. Drawing from Pérez Hernáiz's work and related sources, some examples of recent government-sponsored conspiracy theories include:

May 2016 – The *Chavista* blog, [Aporrea](#), published a story elaborating on a long-standing conspiracy theory that Hugo Chávez was killed by agents of the United States, advancing a new claim that U.S. agents had deployed a “nano weapon” to inject Chávez with cancer-causing agents whose potency could be accelerated to hasten his death (Herrada Ávila 2016a).

July 2016 - After crowds looted supermarkets in the face of severe shortages of basic consumer goods, the vice president of the governing United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), Diosdado Cabello, claimed that the looting was coordinated, and the looters paid, by leaders of the opposition party *Voluntad Popular* (Arismendi 2016).

July 2016 – Various agencies of the Venezuelan government released a twitter-storm of statements, supplemented with infographics, laying out a theory of non-conventional war conducted against the government by US special forces in cooperation with domestic traitors and multinational corporations. The strategy involved paramilitary operations, sabotage against the financial system and the electrical grid, hoarding, price speculation, usury, and the encouragement of street crime (Pérez Hernáiz 2016).

September 2016 - [Aporrea](#) published a further story identifying the date U.S. agents injected President Chávez with cancer-causing agents as September 15, 2005 (Herrada Ávila 2016b)

October 2016 - PSUV Vice President Cabello announced that the government had uncovered a coup plot coordinated by *Voluntad Popular* leaders. The plot would unfold over four stages, starting with a call for a recall referendum against President Maduro, the collection of fake signatures, followed by a national strike (when the signatures are judged invalid), and culminating with a takeover of military installations in the ensuing disorder (Correos de Orinoco 2016).

December 2016 - President Maduro announced the discovery of a plot engineered by US Department of Treasury and domestic conspirators to stifle the Venezuelan economy by sabotaging the timely arrival of new higher denomination Venezuelan currency bills (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias 2016a). Two weeks later, on national television President Maduro announced that the U.S. Embassy, together with leaders from *Voluntad Popular* and another opposition party, *Primero Justicia*, were behind a plot to sabotage the Venezuelan economy by disabling automated teller machines (ATMs) via cyber attack (Agencia Venezolana de Noticias 2016b).

January 2017 – President Maduro announced the formation of a unit headed by his newly appointed Vice-President, Tareck El Aissami, to monitor and thwart anti-government coups (*Correo de Orinoco* 2017).

Many of the government’s theories seem almost farcical, but their implications are grave. Announcements of conspiracies uncovered are often followed by the arrest and imprisonment of opposition politicians and activists. According to data collected by the Venezuelan human rights organization, *Foro Penal*, in its first three years and ten months, Maduro’s government imprisoned 56 political opponents on conspiracy charges (as well as another 48, mostly on protest-related charges), sentencing 21 of them as of February 2017 (Amaro Chacón and Carey 2017, *Foro Penal* 2017).

It is important to acknowledge that, although conspiracy theories are central to the government’s rhetoric, and it deploys substantial resources disseminating them, it does not have an absolute monopoly on conspiracy narratives. For example, a longstanding narrative among the opposition portrays President Maduro (and before him, portrayed Chávez) as a puppet for a cabal led by the Castro regime in Cuba (Pérez Hernáiz 2008, *Martinoticias* 2015). So it is worth assessing how conspiracy beliefs are distributed among Venezuelans, and whether receptiveness works the same way across the spectrum of political identification with *Chavismo*, the opposition, or independence from either.

Conspiracy theories on the 2016 LAPOP Venezuela survey

The LAPOP 2016 Venezuela survey was fielded in October 2016 to January 2017.² I included in the survey a module that contained questions about belief in three political conspiracy theories. To ensure that the theories would resonate with respondents, I monitored the Venezuelan press, as well as the [VCTM](#) blog through the summer and fall of 2016 and crafted statements consistent with narratives that were currently in circulation. Two were designed to appeal to government supporters and one to opponents:

² The survey went into the field on October 3, 2016 and was intended to be completed in November. However, the survey vendor, Datanalisis, initially confronted problems of enumerator safety (some neighborhoods enumerators could not enter because of crime), and of unreliable response data. Confronting evidence that responses from some enumerators may have been fabricated, Datanalisis re-surveyed in those instances. Of the 1,558 responses in the overall survey, 423, or 27%, were collected after November – 119 in December 2016, and 304 in January 2017.

Pro-Chavista

- Economic War: “Leaders of opposition parties conspire with foreign powers to foster economic warfare designed to bring about the fall of President Maduro.”
- Chávez Assassination: “Agents of the United States helped to kill President Hugo Chávez by giving him materials that induce cancer.”

Pro-Opposition

- PSUV Plot: “Leaders of the PSUV and top commanders of the Venezuelan military are secretly plotting to push aside President Maduro in order to preserve their own power.”

The response options were a seven-point Likert scale running from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”

The first two statements are straightforward. The economic warfare narrative and the proposition that U.S. agents helped to kill President Chávez are longstanding staples of Venezuelan government rhetoric.

The appeal of the PSUV Plot statement is slightly less clear cut, in part because the opposition is less active in promoting conspiracy theories than the government. That said, the narrative builds on factors that have sown divisions within the PSUV in recent years. The drop in oil prices starting in 2014 has plunged the Venezuelan economy into crisis and triggered massive street protests against the government (Nagel 2014). The PSUV’s loss in the 2015 National Assembly elections further undermined confidence in Maduro’s leadership. Throughout 2016, support for an opposition effort to force a recall referendum on the president highlighted the level of opposition to President Maduro (although the effort was blocked by judicial obstruction). In July 2016, President Maduro restructured responsibilities within his government, vastly increasing the authorities of his Minister of Defense, General Vladimir Padrino Lopez to include powers over the distribution of food and medicines. In this context, President Maduro was, quite plausibly, a political liability to the *Chavista* regime, and rumors circulated that military leaders and PSUV rivals were maneuvering either to marginalize Maduro within the government or to oust him altogether (Gunson 2016).

The PSUV Plot statement was designed to appeal primarily to regime opponents, who would embrace internecine battles within Maduro’s government as evidence of his fecklessness. It might, conceivably, also have resonated with some Maduro loyalists within *Chavismo*, although I would expect their numbers to be few and the appeal of a statement highlighting their champion’s weakness to be tepid.

Political identity and conspiratorial predispositions

I explore three categories of correlates to conspiracy theory belief in this paper: demographic characteristics, political identity, and predispositions. The first includes individual-level characteristics – age, income, gender, and level of education – that are conventional in studies of political opinion. The primary expectation attached to these characteristics is that, to the extent that education instills habits of evidence-based reasoning, we should expect more of it to diminish conspiracy theory belief (van Prooijen 2017).

Political identification warrants more discussion. First, there is a broad consensus that individuals are politically motivated to seek information consistent with their existing political beliefs and values, and to accept political narratives that confirm prior beliefs more uncritically than those that challenge them (Haidt 2012; Nyhan, Reifler, and Ubel 2013; Uscinsky and Parent 2014; Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2015). Toward that end, we should expect Venezuelan respondents who identify with *Chavismo* to embrace the Economic War and Chávez Assassination statements and to reject the PSUV Plot statement at higher rates than among respondents who identify with the opposition. Respondents who identify with neither *Chavismo* nor the opposition should fall in between.

To test this expectation, it is necessary to identify survey respondents with respect to their identification with *Chavismo* or the opposition. This is complicated in part because the opposition consists of a range of parties, many of which are relatively new, and because disillusionment with parties is such that 64% of Venezuelans professed no partisan identification in the LAPOP survey.³ The survey did not include a question about broader political sympathies with *Chavismo* or with the opposition, but it did include a pair of questions from which I constructed such an indicator:

- VENGRP1: "Thinking about the different groups and parties in Venezuela today, would you say your opinion toward people who are *Chavista* is very favorable, somewhat favorable, neutral, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable?"
- VENGRP2: "Thinking about the different groups and parties in Venezuela today, would you say your opinion toward people who are in the opposition is very favorable, somewhat favorable, neutral, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable?"

Respondents who are favorable toward *Chavistas* and neutral or unfavorable toward the opposition, I coded as *Chavista*. Those who are favorable toward the opposition and neutral or unfavorable toward *Chavistas* are coded opposition. All others are coded Ni-Ni, or neither-nor, which is Venezuelan political parlance for someone who identifies with neither side of the *Chavista*-opposition divide. The distribution of political identification among respondents in the LAPOP survey is shown in Table 1.

[Table 1 here]

The final category of respondent characteristics I explore are non-political predispositions that are posited to animate, or foster, belief in conspiracy theories. I sought to examine three types of such predispositions: a *Manichean worldview*, belief in *unseen forces*, and *fatalism*.

³ Venezuela's main organized opposition is known as the Mesa Unida Democrática (MUD – United Democratic Roundtable, in English). After years of divided and ineffectual opposition to Chávez, the MUD coalesced to contest the 2010 legislative elections, then rallied to back a single candidate the 2012 and 2013 presidential elections, and finally won a coalition victory in the 2015 legislative contest (Polga-Hecimovich 2015).

The first two build on work by Oliver and Wood (2014). *Manicheanism* is the proclivity to see the social world in terms of a struggle between good and evil. The rationale is that this predisposition is consistent with conspiracy theories which posit secret cabals pursuing their private interests at the expense of the societal good (Pérez Hernáiz 2011). Oliver and Wood also deploy a variety of survey questions related to supernatural phenomena, including respondents' belief in angels, ghosts, Satan, and extra-sensory perception (ESP). The rationale is that a predisposition to believe that such *unseen forces* act upon events in the physical world would be consistent with belief in hidden conspiracies determining outcomes in the political world. Finally, drawing on previous research showing that reduced perceptions of control can make people more prone to conspiracy theory beliefs (Whitson and Galinsky 2008; Sullivan, Landau, and Rothschild 2010), I sought to test whether a sense of powerlessness or *fatalism* among respondents correlates with conspiracy theory belief in Venezuela. The rationale here is that a predisposition to believe that one's fate is determined by forces beyond one's control should be consistent with subscription to narratives in which politics is driven by covert plots.

The LAPOP survey included three questions that were intended to reveal these predispositions:

- *Manichean worldview*: "Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil."
- *Unseen forces*: "The exhumation of the Liberator, Simon Bolívar, in 2010, awakened a curse that killed, by sudden illness or accident, the politicians and dignitaries who were involved with that event."
- *Fatalism*: "There is little I can do to change important things in my life."

The response options were the same as with the conspiracy theory statements above.

The questions on *Manichean worldview* and *fatalism* are straightforward. The question on belief in *unseen forces* requires further explanation – first, because it is Venezuela specific, and second because it did not work as intended, which has implications for the analysis that follows.

The legend of the curse stems from July 2010, when then-President Hugo Chávez presided over the exhumation of the corpse of Venezuelan independence hero, Simon Bolívar. Chávez had various motivations. Some of the Liberator's tissue was taken for chemical testing to determine whether his death may have been caused by poisoning rather than tuberculosis, as previous diagnoses had held. (The results were inconclusive.) More importantly, the event provided Chávez an opportunity to associate himself, and the political movement he led, ever more closely with Venezuela's most prominent national hero. Before reburying Bolívar in a new coffin with Chávez's government's seal, Chávez communed with the Liberator's bones and subsequently channeled a message to the nation – "I awaken every hundred years when the people awaken." (Halvorssen 2010).

The immediate motivation for the exhumation may have been macabre political theater, but the downstream events were even more unsettling. Various officials who had presided at the exhumation died within the next few years, including Deputy Luis Tascon (colon cancer, August 2010), General Alberto Muller Rojas (undetermined health issues, August 2010), Guárico State Governor William Lara (automobile accident, September 2010), Controller of the Republic Clodosbaldo Russian (stroke, June 2011), Deputy Robert Serra (murdered, apparent street crime,

October 2014), and most prominently of all, President Chávez himself, from colon cancer, in March 2013. The string of deaths gave rise to a legend that Bolívar, like the Egyptian Pharaoh Tutankamun, visited revenge from beyond the grave upon those who had disturbed his eternal rest. By 2015, there was a paperback tracing the effects of the curse (Torres Rodriguez 2015).

The survey question on Bolívar's Curse attempted to tap into respondents' proclivities to believe in supernatural, *unseen forces* acting upon the physical world. I found the question attractive for measuring belief in a uniquely Venezuelan phenomenon, and for economizing on survey space, relative to the four separate questions on supernatural and paranormal beliefs deployed by Oliver and Wood (2014). Lamentably, however, the Curse question failed on a critical count. Prior research based on US survey data show that conspiratorial predispositions are distributed across respondents without consistent or systematic correlations to ideology or partisanship, such that their contribution to conspiracy theory beliefs is distinct from politically motivated reasoning (Oliver and Wood 2014, Uscinsky et.al. 2014). In the Venezuelan data, this is the case for both *Manicheanism* and *fatalism*, which are uncorrelated with Political Identification (Pearson = .01 and -.04, respectively). But belief in Bolívar's Curse correlates with Political ID at .14, and in multiple regression analysis (shown below), identification with the opposition is its strongest predictor.

Why might this be the case? In retrospect, politically motivated reasoning seems plausible. Awakening a curse that kills not only oneself but one's compatriots is blameworthy. As Figure 1 shows, Venezuelans who identify with the opposition are twice as likely (32% to 16%) as *Chavista* loyalists to embrace the curse fully, and correspondingly less likely to reject it outright (28% to 44%), with Ni-Nis falling in between.

[Figure 1 here]

In short, the LAPOP Venezuela 2016 survey yielded two questions, on *Manicheanism* and on *fatalism*, that are uncorrelated with political loyalties and that can provide leverage on the proposition that respondents' predispositions contribute, distinctly from politically motivated reasoning, to belief in political conspiracies. The question intended to measure a third predisposition – belief in supernatural, *unseen forces* – functioned in practice more like a one of the conspiracy narratives themselves, attracting support according to political loyalties of respondents. For this reason, in the analysis below, I present the correlates of belief in Bolívar's Curse for comparison alongside those of the other posited conspiracies, although the curse narrative does not conjure a secretive cabal acting to advance its own political ends.

Belief in conspiracies

Turning to the political conspiracy theories themselves, two initial patterns are immediately apparent. First, these beliefs are widespread in Venezuela. Second, they track political loyalties. The histograms in Figure 2 show the distributions of agreement with each conspiracy theory statement, broken down by Political ID, with the distribution across all respondents in the bottom right panel of each set.

[Figure 2 here]

Overall, 30% of Venezuelans agree at least somewhat with the economic warfare narrative, 18% with the theory that Chávez was assassinated, and 28% with the idea that PSUV leaders were plotting to sideline President Maduro. But the conspiracy theories appeal largely to different sets of respondents. Those that were designed to appeal to *Chavistas* clearly did so. The plurality of *Chavistas* strongly agreed, and a majority agreed, that the opposition conspires to wage economic warfare against the Maduro government. The majority of Ni-Nis disagreed, and the majority of Opposition identifiers strongly disagreed. The theory that US agents helped kill Hugo Chávez is a harder sell, but even here, *Chavistas* are about evenly split whereas Ni-Nis (76%) and Opposition supporters (87%) overwhelmingly disagree. The theory of a PSUV plot is slightly less polarizing, but still divides by political identification, with 34% of opposition supporters and 29% of Ni-Nis finding it plausible, compared with 18% of *Chavistas*.

Beyond political loyalties, what individual-level characteristics are associated with belief in conspiracies? Table 2 presents OLS regression analyses of support for each of the conspiracy statements, as well as for the Bolívar's Curse narrative which, as noted above, appealed to respondents according to political leanings as much as the conspiracies did. The models include dummy variables for *Chavista* and opposition identification (with Ni-Nis as the baseline category), as well as for level of education, age, sex, and income, plus the two predisposition variables measuring *Manicheanism* and *fatalism*.

[Table 2 here]

As expected, the most powerful effects are for political identification. Relative to Ni-Nis, *Chavistas* and opposition supporters always go in opposite directions with respect to conspiracy theories, and the differences of each group from Ni-Nis – and from each other – are always statistically discernible. The other variables that matter consistently are education, *Manicheanism*, and *fatalism*. Note, however, that unlike political loyalties, each of these variables pushes in the same direction regardless of which narrative is at play. That is, more education always diminishes belief in every conspiracy theory, as well as in Bolívar's Curse. By contrast, both predispositions – the tendency to see politics as a matter of good versus evil, and a fatalistic outlook on life – are associated with stronger agreement with all the conspiracy theories.

The relative scales and directions of these effects are illustrated graphically in Figures 3–6, each of which shows four panels, with the marginal effects of shifts in political identification, years of education, and the *Manichean* and *fatalistic* worldviews, respectively. The error bars show the 95% confidence interval around each estimate.

[Figures 3 – 6 here]

Holding other factors constant, shifting from a *Chavista* to opposition loyalist produces an expected drop of 1.9 points (or 83% of a standard deviation) on the seven-point Likert scale of agreement with the economic warfare narrative. Shifting from no formal education to university level produces an expected drop of 0.7 points. The marginal effects of *Manicheanism* and *fatalism* are minimal by contrast, and the latter falls short of statistical significance. On the Chávez assassination story, the effects of political identification and education are similarly

powerful, while *Manicheanism* and *fatalism* provide more leverage – moving the needle about 0.3 and 0.2 points, respectively, on shifts from minimum to maximum values, and meeting conventional benchmarks for statistical significance.

Moving to the statement about the PSUV leaders' plot to remove President Maduro, the divide by political loyalties is less stark, with about one point separating *Chavistas* from the opposition rather than two. More education, as always, drives skepticism toward the conspiracy, whereas both *Manicheanism* and *fatalism* push conspiracism upward on the margin. All these relationships look similar for Bolívar's Curse, although the associations with *Manicheanism* and *fatalism* are stronger still.

Discussion

All the relationships estimated here are purely correlational. This analysis does not present a model for causal identification. Nevertheless, the opinions expressed in the survey data, and the relationships among respondents' characteristics and beliefs, illustrate some important elements of Venezuelan politics that previously had not been explored systematically. First, belief in conspiracy theories is widespread. 57% of respondents expressed some level of agreement, and 26% expressed strong agreement, with at least one of the three political conspiracy statements on the LAPOP survey. Conspiracy is a central element of Venezuelan political discourse and the narratives politicians promote are not falling entirely on deaf ears – they are resonating with wide swathes of Venezuelans.

Second, for the most part, different sets of Venezuelans subscribe to different conspiracies. Political loyalties are the strongest factor driving support for particular narratives. Of the 57% of respondents who subscribe to any of the three conspiracy theories presented in the LAPOP survey, 37% expressed support either for a pro-*Chavista* story but not for the pro-opposition story, or vice-versa. The multivariate analyses confirm that political identification is the strongest single predictor of support for any given conspiracy theory. Venezuelans tend to support conspiracies that vilify their political adversaries. In this light, politicians' promotion of conspiracy narratives as a method to rally support is sensible.

That said, motivated reasoning is not the whole story, and conspiracy belief is not limited to partisans. For example, the rate of belief in at least one conspiracy was indistinguishable among Ni-Nis, at 56%, from the 57% among the population at large. And 20% of respondents subscribed both to the pro-opposition narrative about a plot among PSUV leaders and to at least one of the pro-*Chavista* stories. Beyond politically motivated reasoning, there are individual-level characteristics that correlate with conspiracy theory belief and, unlike motivated reasoning, these predispositions do not push toward some narratives and away from others. Instead, they are consistent in their effects regardless of the conspiracy's content. Education diminishes both pro- and anti-*Chavista* conspiracism. *Manicheanism* and *fatalism* track with greater conspiracism of both varieties. These effects are generally not as large as that political identity, but they are substantial, particularly with regard to the Chávez assassination and PSUV plot narratives.

The results with regard to *Manicheanism* and *fatalism* are consistent with the proposition that, on the margin, events that cause people to feel less control over their lives, or that induce them to see the world in terms of good and evil, may push them toward greater belief in political

conspiracies (Pérez Hernáiz 2011). Both effects suggest that Venezuela's current political and economic context provides a perfect environment for conspiracy. The country's economic freefall is unprecedented and more Venezuelans face economic insecurity than at any point in living memory (*Economist* 2017). Violent crime has also reached levels among the highest in the world (UNODC 2014). Venezuelans have plenty of reason to sense that their fates are buffeted by forces beyond their control.

Just as troubling, Venezuelan political leaders have been fostering narratives of good against evil for years (Corrales and Penfold 2015). If *Manicheanism* itself fosters conspiracism, then the Maduro government's relentless manufacture of such narratives has a self-fulfilling quality to it. The greater the supply of conspiracies, the more citizens see the political world as populated by villains and heroes, and the more they see the world this way, the more receptive is the environment to conspiracy beliefs. This is consistent with recent research indicating that heightened polarization increases the willingness of citizens – even those who value democracy and the rule of law – to overlook abuses of the democratic process by their own side in the interest of electoral victory (Svolik 2017). All this suggests that the fantastic nature of many of the government's conspiracy narratives may matter less than that they provide a reliably adversarial script.

The data and analysis here also suggests some possible shifts to break the spell of conspiracy theories over Venezuelan politics. Most reliably, increasing education levels diminishes support for conspiracy narratives, probably by increasing citizens' abilities to parse evidence and the premium they place on evidence in forming beliefs. Second, stabilizing the economy and reducing levels of violent crime could reduce levels of *fatalism* – measured in the LAPOP survey as the degree to which respondents feel they do not control important aspects of their lives – which in turn are associated with greater beliefs that politics is driven by secret plots and conspiracies.

Third, and most importantly, a political resolution to Venezuela's persistent and heightened polarization between between *Chavistas* and the anti-*Chavista* opposition could roll back conspiracism in at least two ways – by reducing motivated reasoning and by mitigating the resonance of *Manicheanism*. The three years since Nicolás Maduro assumed the presidency have been marked by street protests, disputed elections, bitter rivalries among the branches of government, and more street protests. The environment promotes depictions of politics that demonize political adversaries while exonerating allies, thus encouraging citizens to embrace and filter evidence selectively in ways that reinforce beliefs in perfidy among opponents and righteousness among one's allies (Haidt 2012). It also fosters good-against-evil worldviews reinforce conspiratorial beliefs generally, rather than selectively.

It is important to acknowledge in closing that not all conspiratorial beliefs are misguided. Some conspiracies turn out to be real. Yet the conspiracy narratives examined here refer to secret plots for which verifiable evidence has not been produced. The normative skepticism toward conspiratorial politics reflects a normative preference for political discourse based on verifiable facts. Various sources have suggested that we are entering a post-factual era in politics – and not just in Venezuela (Pazzanese 2016, Suiter 2016) – but the operating premise here is that we should make every possible effort to resist any such transition.

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Table 1. Political identification of LAPOP 2016 respondents

Political Identification	N	Percent
Chavista	220	14
Ni-Ni	887	57
Opposition	451	29
Total	1,558	100

Figure 1. Responses to statement that, "The exhumation of the Liberator, Simon Bolívar, in 2010, awakened a curse that killed, by sudden illness or accident, the politicians and dignitaries who were involved with that event," by political identification.

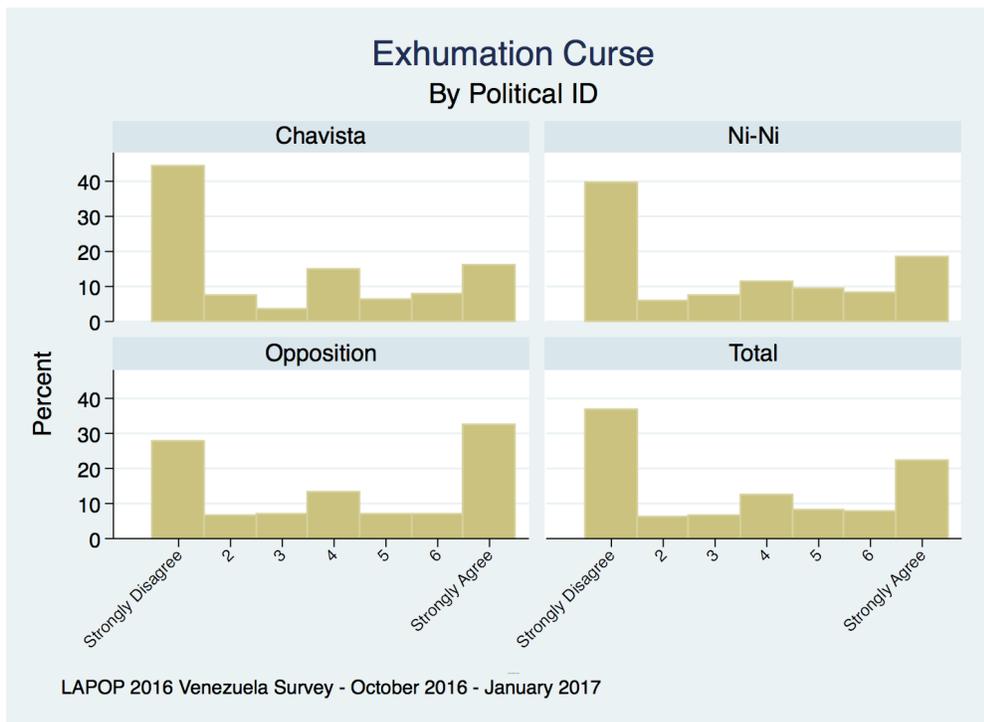


Figure 2. Beliefs in economic warfare, Chavez assassination, and PSUV plot narratives by Political ID.

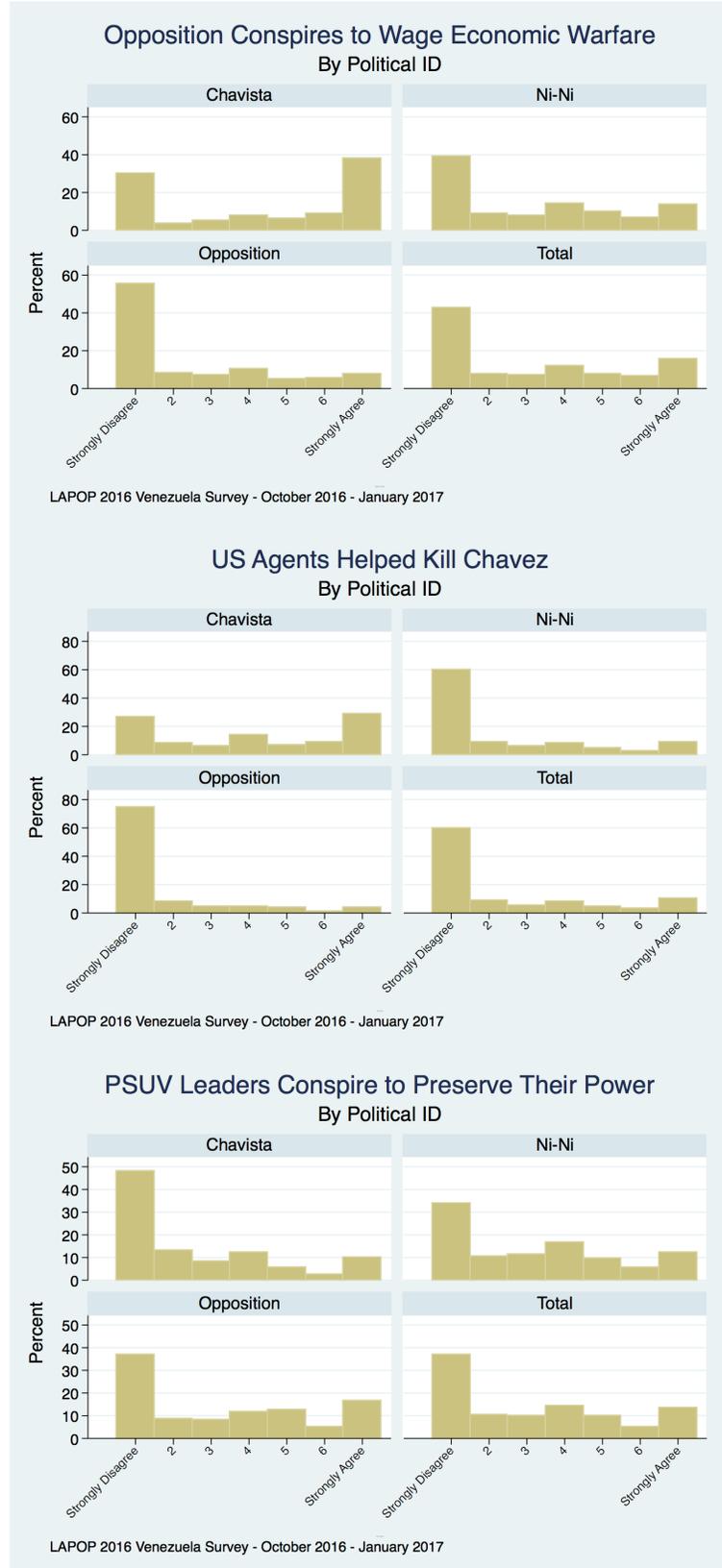


Table 2. Regressions of Beliefs in Venezuela Conspiracy Theories and in Bolívar's Curse on Political ID, Demographics, and Predispositions

	Economic Warfare	US Helped Kill Chavez	PSUV Leaders Plot	Bolívar's Curse
Chavista	1.221** (0.19)	1.568** (0.17)	-0.723** (0.18)	-0.391* (0.20)
Ni-Ni	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)	0.000 (.)
Opposition	-0.684** (0.15)	-0.566** (0.13)	0.238+ (0.14)	0.601** (0.15)
Years in School	-0.039* (0.02)	-0.051** (0.02)	-0.036* (0.02)	-0.032+ (0.02)
Age	-0.001 (0.00)	0.009* (0.00)	-0.007+ (0.00)	0.002 (0.00)
Sex	0.006 (0.13)	0.033 (0.11)	0.005 (0.13)	0.346* (0.14)
Income	0.004 (0.01)	-0.022* (0.01)	-0.003 (0.01)	0.007 (0.01)
Manichean worldview	0.060+ (0.03)	0.071** (0.03)	0.094** (0.03)	0.298** (0.03)
Little I can do ...	0.023 (0.03)	0.056* (0.03)	0.073** (0.03)	0.156** (0.03)
Constant	3.275** (0.41)	2.129** (0.36)	3.209** (0.40)	1.158** (0.42)
Observations	1177	1146	1155	1180
Adjusted R ²	0.075	0.155	0.035	0.125

Standard errors in parentheses

Source: LAPOP Venezuela 2016 Survey

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < .01$

Figure 3. Belief in economic warfare conspiracy theory - marginal effects.

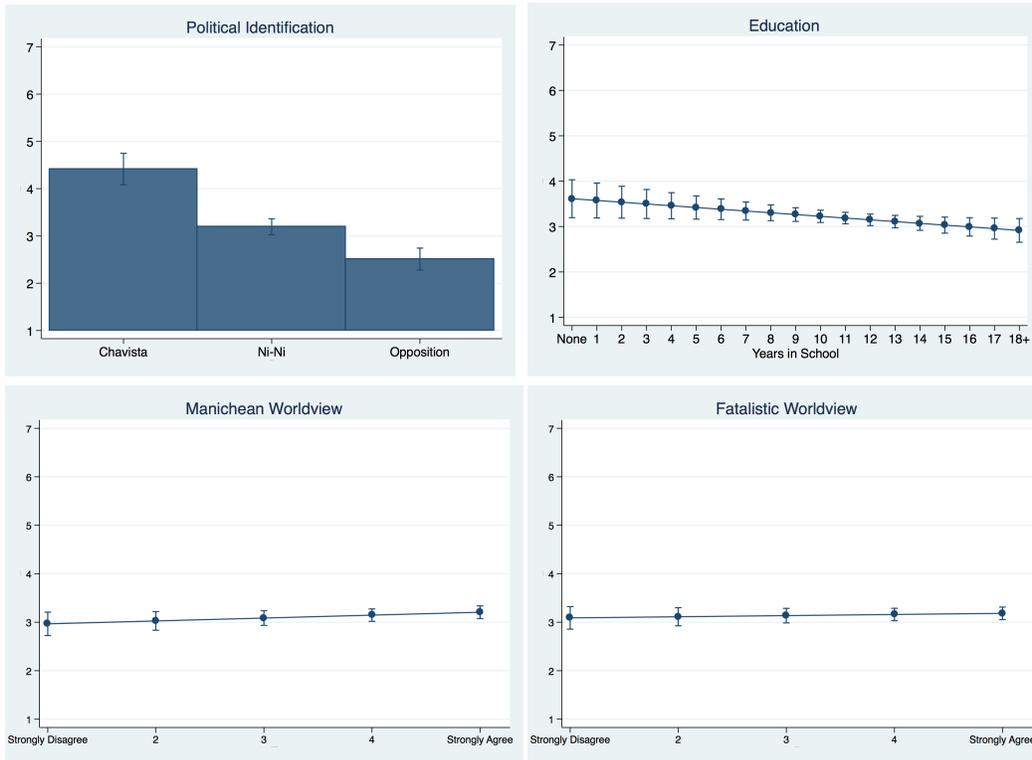


Figure 4. Belief in Chavez assassination conspiracy theory - marginal effects.

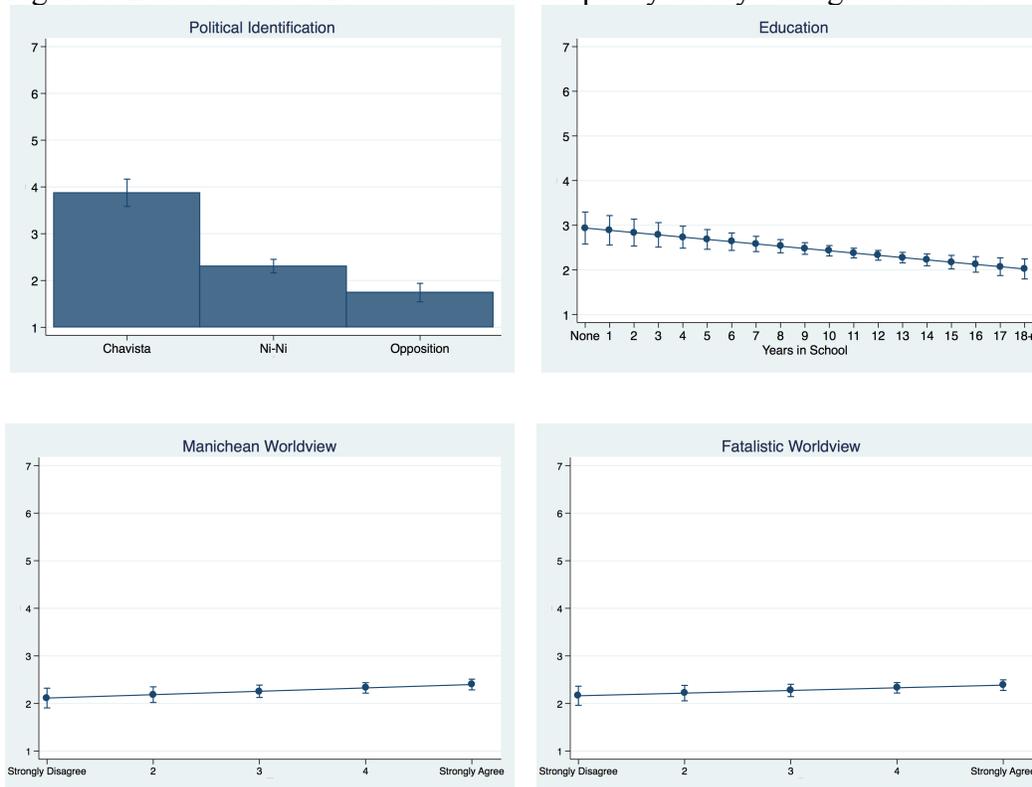


Figure 5. Belief in PSUV leaders' plot conspiracy theory - marginal effects.

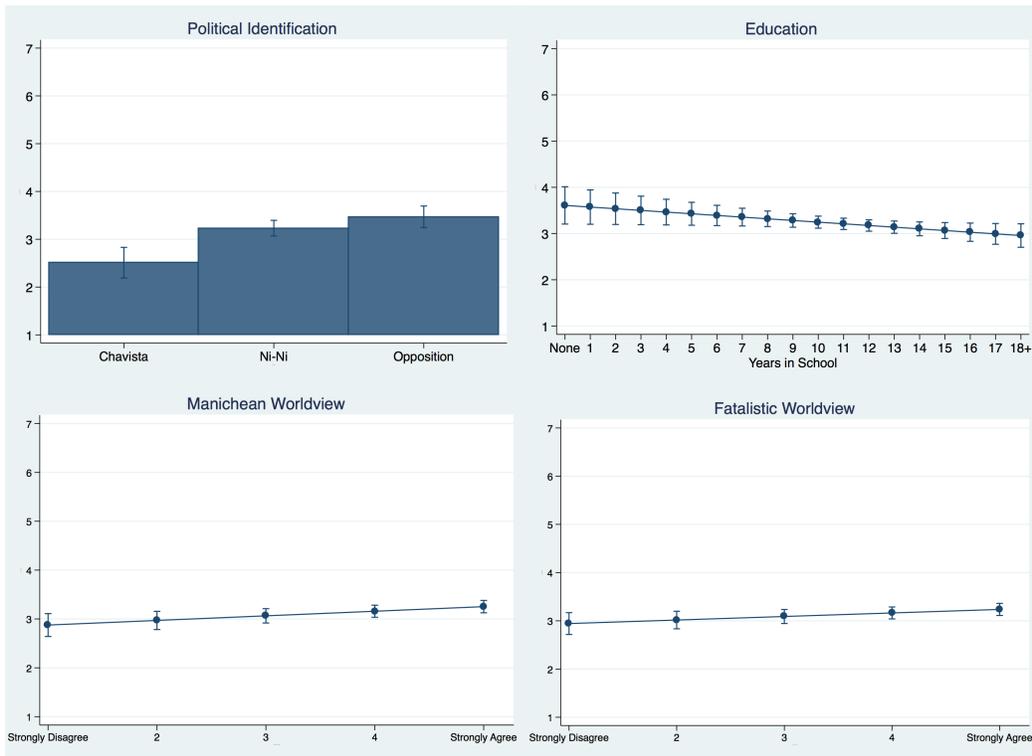


Figure 6. Belief in Bolívar's Curse narrative - marginal effects.

