

The New Satanic Panic

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Abstract

A moral panic animated by conspiracy theories alleging ritual sex abuse swept through the United States in the 1980s. During that “Satanic Panic,” as it came to be known, people expressed fears of social change regarding gender and sexuality. Beginning in 2022, conservative politicians, pundits, and pastors in the United States levied similar accusations of child grooming, sex trafficking, and satanic sex abuse at the LGBTQ+ community, teachers, liberals, and entertainment companies; these accusations were accompanied by repressive legislation and violence. Despite their political salience, little is known about the people who believe these accusations. Using a 2022 U.S. national survey ($N = 2,001$), we find that up to one-third of Americans believe accusations of satanic cult abuse, government sex trafficking, and an “agenda” to “groom” children into gay or trans lifestyles. These beliefs are correlated with a range of political attitudes (e.g., positive views of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, and white nationalists) and policy preferences (e.g., overturning *Roe v. Wade*), as well as with normative (e.g., a desire to run for political office) and nonnormative (e.g., the acceptance of

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political violence) political intentions and behaviors. Regression analysis further reveals that these conspiracy theory beliefs are positively associated with dark psychological traits, antiestablishment orientations, and repressive views toward sex and gender. Our findings suggest that these accusations can spark dehumanization and deadly violence by mobilizing into politics people who possess strong feelings of political efficacy, but also antisocial traits, nonnormative tendencies, and a desire to undermine established political institutions.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; violence; conspiracy theories; grooming; satanic panic

In the 1980s, unevidenced rumors and conspiracy theories of widespread coordinated satanic ritual sex abuse spread throughout the United States.¹ This moral panic, commonly referred to as the “Satanic Panic,” destroyed reputations, sparked numerous investigations, and resulted in the imprisonment of innocent people for fictitious crimes.² Beginning in 2022, journalists began to report that conservative opinion leaders had sparked a similar panic by accusing public school teachers, the LGBTQ + community, entertainment companies, and liberals of sexually harming children.³ These allegations, similar to those levied in the 1980s, expressed anxieties about the evolving norms of gender and sexuality.⁴

Much of the accusatory rhetoric deployed in 2022 was conspiratorial, inherently bigoted, expressed Manichean worldviews, and included graphic discussions of such things as “pedophiles,” “sex slave markets,” “child mutilation,” “grooming,” “gender indoctrination,” and “satanic agendas.” A sampling of this rhetoric, provided in the [supplemental materials online](#), shows that it was deployed by numerous influential politicians, pundits, and pastors and was often accompanied by calls for punitive government action or violence. For example, Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) described her political competitors as “child predators” and the “most disgusting, evil, horrible thing happening in our country.”⁵ On his television show, Tucker Carlson urged men to “go in and thrash” teachers and argued that teachers should be “beaten up” for allegedly “pushing sex values” on children.⁶ Conservative Pastor Greg Locke told his congregation that President Joe Biden was a “sex trafficking demon-possessed mongrel,” that Kamala Harris was a “Jezebel demon,” and that the Democratic National Party was part of a “Satanic agenda.”⁷ Such rhetoric was quickly embraced and celebrated by numerous high-profile political elites. For example, despite claiming on Fox News that the LGBTQ + community had “become [a] cult,” “brainwash[es]

¹ Joel Best, *The Satanism Scare* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

² Avi Selk, “Falsely Accused of Satanic Horrors, a Couple Spent 21 Years in Prison. Now They’re Owed Millions,” *The Washington Post*, 25 August 2017, accessed 2 April 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/24/accused-of-satanism-they-spent-21-years-in-prison-they-were-just-declared-innocent-and-were-paid-millions/?utm_term=.1fe47f035da7.

³ See, for example, Kat Tenbarge, “False Online Accusations of ‘Grooming’ against LGBTQ People Are Spiking, Experts Say,” *NBC News*, 19 April 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/lgbtq-abuse-spikes-online-fueled-intensifying-culture-war-rcna24904>.

⁴ Michael Karger, “Moral Panics of Sexuality,” in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Sexuality Education*, eds. L. Allen and M. L. Rasmussen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

⁵ Ewan Palmer, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Echoes QAnon, Calls Democrats ‘Party of Pedophiles,’” *Newsweek*, 6 April 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/marjorie-taylor-greene-pedophile-qanon-ketani-brown-jackson-1695404>.

⁶ William Vaillancourt, “Tucker Suggests Dads Should ‘Thrash’ Kids’ Teachers,” *The Daily Beast*, 9 April 2022, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/tucker-suggests-dads-should-thrash-kids-teachers>.

⁷ The Young Turks, “Pastor Goes on Insane Rant,” YouTube, 2021; Greg Locke (@pastorlocke), “So, yesterday on Twitter and Facebook, I managed to tick off tens of thousands of people because I brought to,” TikTok, 2022, accessed 2 April 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rrvs6BYFTCc>.

people to join,” is “evil,” and wants “to groom kids,” Chaya Raichik, of the “Libs of Tik-Tok” Twitter account, received an invitation to dine with Donald Trump.⁸

Following the elite rhetoric, social media posts accusing the LGBTQ + community of grooming became prominent and the LGBTQ + community was subsequently targeted with armed protests and acts of violence.⁹ The moral panic became so extreme that even schools and children’s hospitals received bomb threats.¹⁰ In response, some social media platforms removed posts slurring the LGBTQ + as “groomers.”¹¹ Rather than tamp down their caustic rhetoric amid escalating violence and warnings from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that further violence was likely,¹² many lawmakers chose to double-down, publicly aiming their moral outrage at drag shows, modern art, libraries, teachers, gender-affirming care, and the families of trans youth, as well as championing punitive legislation.¹³ Those who objected were smeared as groomers, with the state of Florida going so far as to subject the Walt Disney Company to punitive state action simply for speaking out.¹⁴

Despite the salience and pervasiveness of these accusations, there has been little research systematically illuminating who believes them and why people might take extreme violent action on them. This unfortunate lack of crucial insight inhibits efforts at increasing LGBTQ + acceptance and decreasing the violence aimed at that community. To build this knowledge base, we use a national survey of U.S. adults ($N = 2,001$; May–June 2022) to assess Americans’ beliefs in the accusations that became salient in 2022 addressing satanic ritual sex abuse, satanic cult activity, satanism in schools, the Walt Disney Company’s supposed child grooming efforts, a secret “gay agenda” aimed at “converting” schoolchildren to gay or trans lifestyles, and government and Hollywood involvement in child sex trafficking. To better understand the people who believe these ideas, we first examine the relationships between these Satanic Panic beliefs and then examine their association with beliefs in 14 other conspiracy theories,¹⁷ opinions about various sociopolitical issues, groups, and figures, and finally, with 24 different behavioral intentions and self-reported behaviors. To identify the individual characteristics underlying Satanic Panic beliefs, we then regress them on 35 presumably foundational psychological, political, and social predictors.

We find that these Satanic Panic beliefs are believed by upwards of one-third of Americans and are correlated with antisocial personality traits, support for

⁸ Jon Blisten, “Tucker Carlson and Libs of TikTok Spread Transphobia for the Holidays,” *Rolling Stone* (19 February 2022). <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/lib-of-tiktok-lgbtq-community-cult-tucker-carlson-1234653029/>.

⁹ Jay Ulfelder, “The Hate Drags On,” *Counting Crowds*, 15 May 2023, <https://countingcrowds.org/2023/05/15/the-hate-drags-on/>.

¹⁰ Brandy Zadrozny, Ben Collins, and Tom Winter, “FBI Charges Massachusetts Woman with Boston Children’s Hospital Bomb Threat,” *NBC News*, 12 November 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/fbi-charges-massachusetts-woman-boston-childrens-hospital-bomb-threat-rcna47973>.

¹¹ Claire Goforth, “Twitter Says It Bans Using ‘Groomer’ as an Anti-LGBTQ Slur—but Its Enforcement Is Lacking (updated),” *Daily Do*, 21 July 2022, <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/twitter-ban-groomers-lgbtq-slur/>.

¹² Julia Ainsley, “DHS Warns of Domestic Terror Threats to LGBTQ, Jewish and Migrant Communities,” *NBC News*, 30 November 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/dhs-warns-terror-threats-lgbtq-jewish-migrant-rcna59426>.

¹³ Cullen Peele, “Weekly Roundup of Anti-LGBTQ+ Legislation Advancing in States across the Country,” *Human Rights Campaign*, 2 May 2023, <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/weekly-roundup-of-anti-lgbtq-legislation-advancing-in-states-across-the-country-3>.

¹⁴ Madison Selcho, “DeSantis vs. Disney: A Timeline,” *Deseret News*, 27 September 2022, <https://www.deseret.com/2022/9/27/23363693/ron-desantis-vs-disney-a-timeline>.

repressive policies and political violence, sympathies for extremist groups and foreign adversaries, and an antagonistic orientation toward the political establishment. Our data show that traditional left/right identities are not strong predictors of these beliefs and suggest that the deployment of such rhetoric by conservative leaders may be less about mobilizing Republican/conservative voters than mobilizing citizens animated by antisystem sentiment. Our findings suggest that this high-profile rhetoric, while perhaps narrowly intended to encourage normative political participation, such as voting and donating, might instead encourage nonnormative participation, such as criminal behavior and violence, by mobilizing into politics people with antisocial, conflictual, and violent tendencies that support the weaponization of government against perceived outgroup “deviants.”

Sex, Satan, and Moral Panics

Moral panics are characterized by (1) a “sudden eruption” of concern over new kinds of “deviants,” (2) hostility toward those supposed “deviants” and their “evil behavior,” (3) measurable public concern, (4) a “consensus among significant segments of the population” about the seriousness of the threat, (5) ambiguous tests to confirm that threat, and (6) a “disproportionality” between the actions taken in response to the allegations and the weight of the available evidence.¹⁵ To explain away the lack of evidence for the supposedly widespread deviant behavior, the accusations levied during panics often allege broad conspiracies involving coordinated covert activities and grand cover-ups.¹⁶ Panics can be driven by a combination of bottom-up (e.g., word of mouth) and top-down (e.g., political and media elites, religious leaders) forces.¹⁷ Moral panics also evolve over time, eventually focusing on policy solutions to better target, repress, or punish deviants to protect the public from those deviants¹⁸; this is why panics move from expressions of fear and outrage to prosecutions and legislative action.

Moral panics frequently express concerns over gender and sexuality because these topics are often deeply intertwined with the reigning social order, specifically as it pertains to the hegemony of heterosexuality and the nuclear family.¹⁹ Supposed sexual deviants (e.g., people engaging in sex outside of marriage, people associated with the LGBTQ + community, people engaging in sexual acts considered antithetical to societal norms) challenge that order.²⁰ Concerns about sexual harms to children, which tend to be already exaggerated in scope in the minds of

¹⁵ Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, “Moral Panics: Culture, Politics, and Social Construction,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 20 (1994): 149–71; Jeffrey S. Victor, “Moral Panics and the Social Construction of Deviant Behavior: A Theory and Application to the Case of Ritual Child Abuse,” *Sociological Perspectives* 41, no. 3 (1998): 541–65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1389563>; Lloyd W. Klemke and Gary H. Tiedeman, “Toward an Understanding of False Accusation: The Pure Case of Deviant Labeling,” *Deviant Behavior* 2, no. 3 (1982): 261–285; Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁶ Annika Rabo, “Conspiracy Theory as Occult Cosmology in Anthropology,” in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, eds. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (New York: Routledge, 2020).

¹⁷ Goode and Ben-Yehuda, “Moral Panics: Culture, Politics, and Social Construction”; Victor, “Moral Panics and the Social Construction of Deviant Behavior.”

¹⁸ Kathryn J. Fox, “Incurable Sex Offenders, Lousy Judges & The Media: Moral Panic Sustenance in the Age of New Media,” *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 38, no. 1 (3 January 2013): 160–81, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-012-9154-6>.

¹⁹ Karger, “Moral Panics of Sexuality.”

²⁰ Gilbert Herdt, ed., *Moral Panics, Sex Panics: Fear and the Fight Over Sexual Rights*, vol. 8 (NYU Press, 2009).

the public,²¹ particularly spark moral panics because they combine these supposed sexual and gender-based challenges to the social order with concerns for child safety and childhood sexual innocence, which tend to animate public outrage.²² Furthermore, because sexual “deviancy” defies religious doctrine and is often associated with evil practices involving Satan and satanic worship,²³ religious groups are often quick to organize against the supposed threats.²⁴

The accusations made during panics appeal more to some people more than others, such that panics having to do with sexual deviancy will often resonate with individuals who are both prone to conspiracy theory beliefs and have negative attitudes toward the LGBTQ + community, both of which are undergirded by antisocial personality traits.²⁵ This leads us to suspect that panics about sex and children represent something of a perfect storm, combining ideas that are themselves a call to action (i.e., children are being sexually harmed) to people who share antisocial personality traits and discriminatory viewpoints,²⁶ and who are subsequently willing to act in antisocial ways by levying flimsy accusations and taking action based on weak evidence.²⁷ In other words, panics involving supposed widespread harms coming from deviant sex and satanic influence may form and persist precisely because of the characteristics of the people drawn to those ideas, specifically their willingness to spread and act on those ideas. Thus, an important step in understanding panics is to understand more fully the political, psychological, and sociological characteristics of the believers.

The “Panic” of 2022

According to the above criteria, the high-profile accusations against teachers, the LGBTQ + community, entertainment companies, and various others beginning in 2022 likely jointly qualify as a moral panic. There appeared to be a sudden eruption of concern (from high-profile conservative politicians, pundits, and pastors), and opinion polls showed, in spring of 2022, for example, that 29 percent of Americans had adopted the specific language used by elites, agreeing that teachers and parents who support discussions about sexual orientation and gender identity

²¹ Erin O’Brien, Sharon Hayes, and Belinda Carpenter, “Measuring Trafficking,” in *The Politics of Sex Trafficking: A Moral Geography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013): 82–101.

²² Kristen M. Zgoba, “Spin Doctors and Moral Crusaders: the Moral Panic behind Child Safety Legislation,” *Criminal Justice Studies* 17, no. 4 (12 January 2004): 385–404, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1478601042000314892>.

²³ Joseph O. Baker, Andrea Molle, and Christopher D. Bader, “The Flesh and The Devil: Belief in Religious Evil and Views of Sexual Morality,” *Review of Religious Research* 62, no. 1 (3 January 2020): 133–151, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-020-00403-4>.

²⁴ Phil McCombs, “The Devil and Walt Disney,” *Washington Post*, 20 July 1996, accessed 15 May 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1996/07/20/the-devil-and-walt-disney/2fa22ab2-2fbe-420a-a702-1e8e27236c23/>.

²⁵ Cameron S. Kay and Sarah Dimakis, “Moral Foundations Partially Explain the Associations of Machiavellianism, Grandiose Narcissism, and Psychopathy with Homonegativity and Transnegativity,” *Journal of Homosexuality* (2022): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2022.2132576>; Baker, et al., “The Flesh and the Devil.”

²⁶ Kay and Dimakis, “Moral Foundations Partially Explain the Associations of Machiavellianism”; Cameron S. Kay, “Actors of the Most Fiendish Character: Explaining the Associations between the Dark Tetrad and Conspiracist Ideation,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 171 (3 January 2021): 110543, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.110543>.

²⁷ Peter K. Jonason, Minna Lyons, Holly M. Baughman, and Philip A. Vernon, “What a Tangled Web We Weave: The Dark Triad Traits and Deception,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 70 (11 January 2014): 117–119, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.06.038>.

in school are indeed “groomers.”²⁸ Furthermore, the accusations have been accompanied by protests and vigilante action,²⁹ and also by calls for, and the passage of, repressive government action, including state and local level policies banning books, gender-affirming care, sex education, and drag shows.³⁰ But unlike the 1980s Satanic Panic,³¹ the accusations in 2022 appear to have been more top-down, driven by conservative opinion leaders.

That said, we note that the criteria for what counts as a panic, as denoted in the prior literature, leaves much room for interpretation. For example, it is not entirely clear what counts as measurable public concern or as a sudden eruption of such concern. At the same time, it may be impossible to measure such sudden eruptions. If a panic suddenly erupts around a particular issue, it may be the case that public opinion on that issue was not measured beforehand, meaning that researchers lack a pre-panic comparison. For example, the term *grooming* was frequently used during 2022 by those propagating accusations of sexual harm to children. The term trended on social media³² and a substantial portion of the public reported believing that teachers who taught about sexual orientation and gender identity were groomers.³³ But we do not know what percentage of the public may have believed this prior to accusations about groomers being broadcast by conservative opinion leaders. Therefore, conservative opinion leaders may have either activated preexisting views among the public or persuaded members of the public to adopt new views.

Similarly, although much has been written about the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, there was little opinion polling about what the public believed before, during, and after the panic. Therefore, it is difficult to know who among the mass public believed the accusations made during that panic and what their characteristics were. In the shadow of this indeterminacy, there is some speculation that the beliefs animating the panic of the 1980s have remained stable, though dormant.³⁴ It is also possible that such beliefs may have even predated that panic. Thus, although any efforts to poll on such beliefs now lack a pre-panic comparison, it is imperative that we begin measuring and treating seriously such beliefs. In response, we deployed a public opinion survey in 2022 to better understand how many people in the mass public believe the accusations and what political, psychological, and social characteristics they share.

Methods

We administered a survey through Qualtrics (qualtrics.com) from 26 May —30 June 2022. Our sample includes 2,001 respondents and approximates U.S. Census records on gender, age, race, education, and income. We present the demographic

²⁸ Keya Vakil, “Exclusive Poll: Americans Reject GOP’s Attacks Targeting Teachers and LGBTQ People as ‘Groomers,’ Oppose Anti-LGBTQ Policies,” *The Gander*, 21 April 2022), accessed 5 May 2023, <https://gandernewsroom.com/2022/04/22/exclusive-poll-americans-reject-gops-attacks-lgbtq-people/>.

²⁹ Ulfelder, “The Hate Drags On.”

³⁰ Selcho, “DeSantis vs. Disney: A Timeline.”

³¹ Sarah A. Hughes, *American Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000* (Berlin: Springer, 2021).

³² Tenbarge, “False Online Accusations of ‘Grooming’ against LGBTQ People Are Spiking, Experts Say.”

³³ Vakil, “Exclusive Poll: Americans Reject GOP’s Attacks Targeting Teachers and LGBTQ People as ‘Groomers,’ Oppose Anti-LGBTQ Policies.”

³⁴ Aja Romano, “Why Satanic Panic Never Really Ended,” *Vox.com*, 31 March 2021, <https://www.vox.com/culture/22358153/satanic-panic-ritual-abuse-history-conspiracy-theories-explained>.

Table 1. Agreement with Satanic Panic Accusations^a

Statement	% Agree/Strongly Agree
1. Members of satanic cults secretly abuse thousands of children every year.	33
2. Elites, from government and Hollywood, are engaged in a massive child sex trafficking racket.	30
3. There is a secret “gay agenda” aimed at converting young people to gay and trans lifestyles.	28
4. There is a secret agenda in the public schools to indoctrinate children into gay and trans lifestyles.	27
5. The Disney Corporation “grooms” children into sexualized lifestyles.	26
6. Satanic ritual sex abuse is widespread in this country.	25
7. Numerous preschools and public schools secretly engage in satanic practices.	18

^aNational survey data from sample of N = 2,001 Americans (26 May–30 June 2022). The presentation of the statements in the survey was randomized.

characteristics of the sample, institutional review board information, steps we took to ensure data quality, and full survey items in the [supplemental materials online](#).

Satanic Panic Beliefs

To measure belief in contemporary Satanic Panic accusations, we developed seven survey items based upon the rhetoric of conservative opinion leaders and the concerns animating the Satanic Panic of the 1980s. These focus on (1) sexual coercion or harm being perpetrated on children, (2) the activities of political out-groups (in this case, public school teachers, the LGBTQ + community, entertainment companies, various “elites,” and satanists), (3) sex crimes (e.g., ritual sex abuse, sex trafficking), and (4) clandestine activities. In line with best practices,³⁵ respondents rated each of the seven statements on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Complete question wording, along with the proportion agreeing/strongly agreeing with each statement, are presented in [Table 1](#). Agreement rates range from 33 percent (satanic cults abuse thousands of children every year) to 18 percent (schools engage in satanism), suggesting that many of these beliefs are fairly widespread.

One may wonder if the results reported in [Table 1](#) are under- or overestimates of the true level of agreement with these propositions in the population, given that survey respondents sometimes conceal their true beliefs, express agreement as a joke, or express support for a specific idea they do not believe to signal support for more general propositions.³⁶ However, we are confident in the accuracy of our results. First, these aforementioned factors potentially affecting survey responses (e.g., joking, concealing true beliefs) likely have limited

³⁵ Robbie M. Sutton and Karen M. Douglas, “Agreeing to Disagree: Reports of the Popularity of Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories Are Greatly Exaggerated,” *Psychological Medicine* 52, no. 4 (2022): 791–79. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720002780>.

³⁶ Brian F. Schaffner and Samantha Luks, “Misinformation or Expressive Responding? What an Inauguration Crowd Can Tell Us about the Source of Political Misinformation in Surveys,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2018): 135–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfx042>; “Why So Serious?: Survey Trolls and Misinformation,” SSRN, updated 14 March 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3131087>.

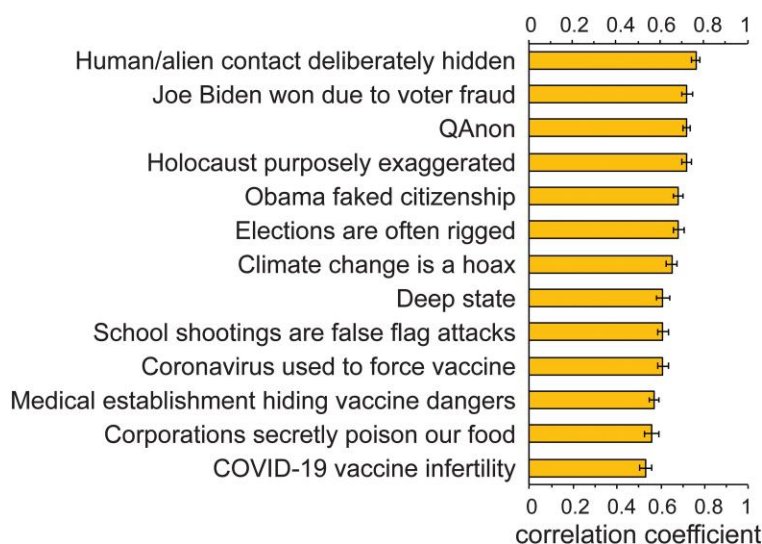


Figure 1. Pearson Correlations between Satanic Panic Beliefs and Sociopolitical Beliefs. Error bars represent 95 percent CIs. All correlations are statistically significant at $p < .001$ (Bonferroni corrected). Con, conservatism; Dem, Democrat; ID, identification; Lib, liberal; Rep, Republican; Sci, science.

effects.³⁷ Second, recent work shows that social desirability bias exerts some effect on conspiracy theory beliefs as measured on surveys, meaning that researchers are typically underestimating such beliefs, rather than overestimating them.³⁸

Fourth, the numbers in Table 1 are comparable to the results of other polls asking substantively similar questions, but which use a variety of sampling techniques. Polls over the past few years have shown that (1) 38 percent of Americans believe it is definitely or probably true that, “Leaked email from some of Hillary Clinton’s campaign staffers contained code words for pedophilia, human trafficking and Satanic ritual abuse”; (2) 25 percent agree that “top Democrats are involved in elite child sex-trafficking rings”; (3) 22 percent agree that a “Global network tortures and sexually abuses children in Satanic rituals”; (4) 16 percent agree that “the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation”; (5) 14 percent agree that “Satanic sex traffickers control the government”; and (6) 12 percent agree that “Celebrities harvest adrenochrome from children’s bodies.”³⁹ Such findings allow us to conclude that the results we report in

³⁷ Adam J. Berinsky, “Telling the Truth about Believing the Lies? Evidence for the Limited Prevalence of Expressive Survey Responding,” *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 1 (2018): 211–224, <https://doi.org/10.1086/694258>; James J. Fahey, “The Big Lie: Expressive Responding and Conspiratorial Beliefs in the United States,” *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 10, no. 2 (2022): 267–78, <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2022.33>.

³⁸ Steven M. Smallpage, Adam M. Enders, Hugo Drochon, and Joseph E. Uscinski, “The Impact of Social Desirability Bias on Conspiracy Belief Measurement across Cultures,” *Political Science Research and Methods* 11, no. 3 (2022): 555–69.

³⁹ B. Schaffner, *QAnon and Conspiracy Beliefs*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, October 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/qanon-and-conspiracy-beliefs.pdf>; Kathy Frankovic, “Belief in Conspiracies Largely Depends on Political Identity,” *YouGov*, 27 December 2016, <https://today.yougov.com/news/2016/12/27/belief-conspiracies-largely-depends-political-iden/>; PRRI, “The Persistence of QAnon in the Post-Trump Era: An Analysis of Who Believes the Conspiracies,” *PRRI.org*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.prri.org/research/the-persistence-of-qanon-in-the-post-trump-era-an-analysis-of-who-believes-the-conspiracies/>.

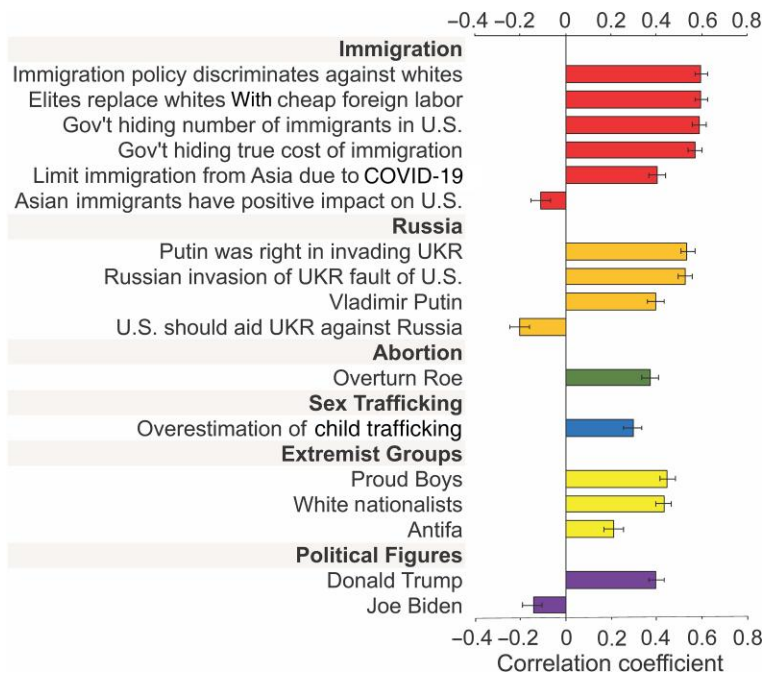


Figure 2. Pearson Correlations between Satanic Panic Beliefs and Sociopolitical Beliefs. Error bars represent 95 percent CIs. All correlations are statistically significant at $p < .001$ (Bonferroni corrected). Gov’t, government; UKR, Ukraine.

Table 1 are not outliers, compared with other surveys. Finally, our item regarding “elites, from government and Hollywood” previously garnered 35 percent agreement in 2020 and 34 percent agreement 2021, which are similar to the 30 percent reported in Table 1.⁴⁰

Collectively, our seven items in Table 1 tap into beliefs about groups secretly doing sexual harm to children, which matches the typical definition of a conspiracy theory (e.g., clandestine actors violating social and political norms for nefarious purposes).⁴¹ To verify that our Satanic Panic items represent this common underlying concept, we analyzed responses to the seven statements using iterated principal factor analysis. Results showed that all seven items loaded positively on a single factor (eigenvalue of 4.20), accounting for 84.7 percent of the variance. We subsequently produced a Satanic Panic belief index by averaging responses for each participant across the seven statements ($\alpha = 0.91$) for use in the analyses presented later in this article.

We now move to situate these Satanic Panic beliefs among other conspiracy theory beliefs, beliefs about contemporary phenomena, and behavioral intentions and behaviors. Our intent is not to explain the specific attitudes and political behaviors highlighted in figures 1–3, or to suggest that Satanic Panic beliefs are causal to them. Rather, we suggest that Satanic Panic beliefs do not exist in isolation: Satanic Panic believers, on average, also happen to share a range of other beliefs and engage in a range of behaviors—many of which are nonnormative. Thus,

⁴⁰ Joseph Uscinski, Adam Enders, Casey Klofstad, et al., “Have Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Increased over Time?,” *PLoS One* 17, no. 7 (2022): e0270429, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0270429>.
⁴¹ Joseph Uscinski and Adam Enders, *Conspiracy Theories: A Primer*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023).

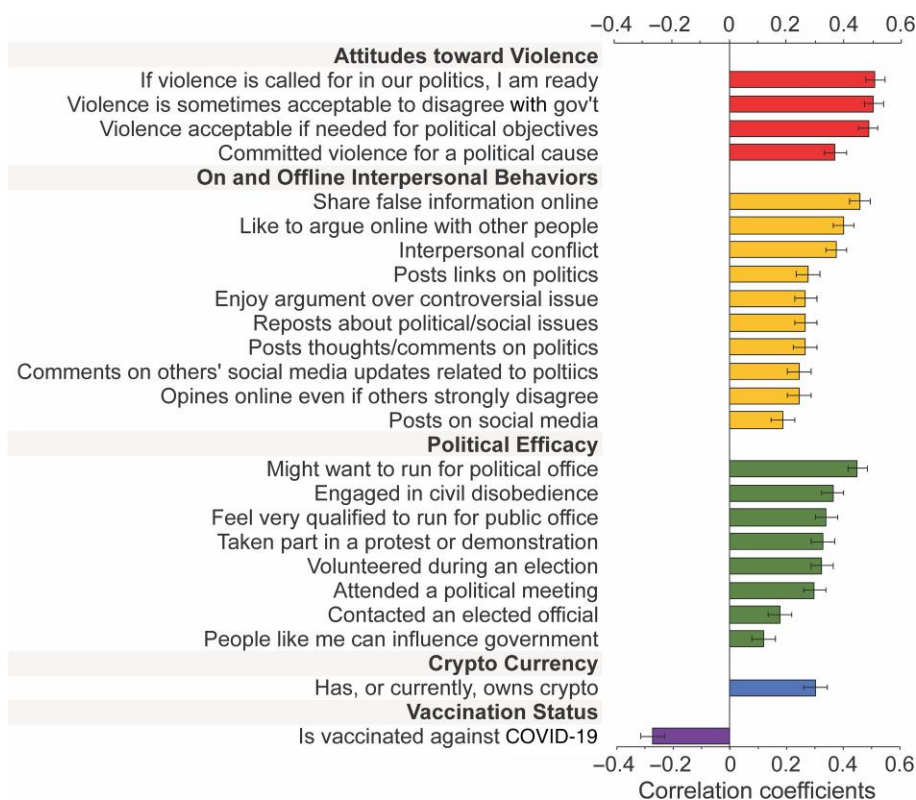


Figure 3. Pearson Correlations between Satanic Panic Beliefs and Stances toward Violence and Political Activities. Error bars represent 95 percent CIs. All correlations are statistically significant at $p < .001$ (Bonferroni corrected). Crypto, cryptocurrency; Gov't, government.

figures 1–3 tell us—descriptively—something about who the believers are. Our findings then support a broader argument that when elites use Satanic Panic or similar rhetoric to try to get people involved in politics, it may be normatively undesirable, because the believers may, on average, carry with them nonnormative attitudinal and behavioral baggage.

Satanic Panic Beliefs and Other Conspiracy Theory Beliefs

In our first analysis, we investigate whether individuals who exhibit Satanic Panic beliefs are also prone to beliefs in other conspiracy theories that vary widely in terms of substantive focus (fig. 1). Full-item wordings, percentage agreement, and correlation coefficients are included in the [supplemental materials online](#). The strong positive correlations ranging from 0.53 (“Humans have made contact with aliens and this fact has been deliberately hidden from the public”) to 0.76 (“The COVID-19 vaccine causes infertility in women and the government is covering this up”) presented in figure 1 reveal that those who hold Satanic Panic beliefs are also prone to believing other conspiracy theories.

Satanic Panic Beliefs and Opinions about Contemporary Issues and Figures

To further contextualize our measure of Satanic Panic beliefs, we next examine the correlations between these beliefs and views toward 17 contemporary issues (e.g., immigration, Russian invasion of Ukraine, abortion, sex trafficking), public

figures (e.g., Joe Biden, Donald Trump), and extremist groups (e.g., Proud Boys, white nationalists, Antifa). Because Satanic Panic beliefs speak to the abuse of children, we also measure respondents' estimation of the amount of child sex trafficking currently taking place in the United States. Full-item wordings and descriptive statistics are provided in the [supplemental materials online](#).

As shown in [figure 2](#), Satanic Panic beliefs are positively correlated with the beliefs that immigration policies discriminate against white people and that immigration from Asia should be limited because of COVID-19; they are negatively associated with beliefs that Asian immigrants positively affect the United States. Additionally, although Satanic Panic beliefs are negatively related to support for U.S. aid to Ukraine, they are positively related to support for Russia's invasion, belief that the invasion is the fault of the United States, and positive feelings toward Vladimir Putin. Satanic Panic beliefs are also positively associated with support for overturning *Roe v. Wade* and with vastly overestimating the scope of child sex trafficking in the United States. Moreover, Satanic Panic beliefs are positively associated with feelings toward extremist groups (e.g., Proud Boys, white nationalists), but less so with Antifa. Finally, Satanic Panic beliefs are associated with positive feelings toward Donald Trump, but negative feelings toward Joe Biden.

Satanic Panic Beliefs and Behavioral Intentions and Behaviors

To better understand the intentions and behaviors of those who hold Satanic Panic beliefs, we examined the relationship between these beliefs and 24 behavioral intentions and self-reported behaviors. [Figure 3](#) shows the statistical associations, and the full-item wordings are included in the [supplemental materials online](#). Beginning with views toward violence, Satanic Panic beliefs are most strongly correlated with agreement with three statements about political violence, including "If violence is called for in our politics, I am ready." Because such items may be tapping "big talk" rather than actual intentions, we also asked respondents if they had committed violence for a political cause in the previous 12 months (13 percent said they had at least once). This measure is also positively associated with Satanic Panic beliefs.

Satanic Panic beliefs are also positively correlated with various online and offline interpersonal behaviors, including knowingly sharing false information online; enjoying arguing with others online and offline; engaging in interpersonal conflict, including violence, to settle disagreements⁴²; and posting, reposting, and commenting online about politics. Respondents exhibiting higher levels of Satanic Panic beliefs tend to feel more politically efficacious than those with lower belief levels, including being more interested in running for political office, feeling more qualified to do so, and exhibiting a stronger tendency to believe they can influence government. Similarly, Satanic Panic beliefs are also positively correlated with various types of civic engagement, such as self-reported frequency of civil disobedience, taking part in protests and demonstrations, volunteering during elections, attending political meetings, and contacting elected officials. Finally, respondents exhibiting greater levels of Satanic Panic beliefs are more likely report having purchased cryptocurrency and are less likely to report being vaccinated against COVID-19.

⁴² Kendon J. Conrad, Barth B. Riley, Karen M. Conrad, Ya-Fen Chan, and Michael L. Dennis, "Validation of the Crime and Violence Scale (CVS) against the Rasch Measurement Model Including Differences by Gender, Race, and Age," *Evaluation Review* 34, no. 2 (2010): 83–115, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841x10362162>.

Independent Variables

Our final task is to explore the foundational characteristics of people who hold Satanic Panic beliefs: What types of characteristics might lead one believe in such ideas? We hypothesize that Satanic Panic beliefs are associated with many individual-level factors that typically predict other conspiracy theory beliefs. Although no single study could include all of the growing list of characteristics that are associated with conspiracy theory beliefs,⁴³ we use the interdisciplinary literature review of Douglas et al. to organize and motivate our list of potential covariates.⁴⁴ More specifically, we predict our index of Satanic Panic beliefs, with measures of psychological (personality traits, cognitive factors, and emotional conditions), sociological (demographics and religiosity), and political characteristics (traditional left/right identities and non-left/right worldviews and dispositions). We also include measures of our respondents' information environments, such as traditional and new media use, and their views toward science, experts, and authority, each of which have been previously found to predict at least some conspiracy theory beliefs.⁴⁵ Finally, we supplement these variables with measures of respondents' attitudes toward gender and sexuality, which have been identified as key components of previous similar panics and are the substantive focus of our Satanic Panic items (e.g., sexual abuse, grooming, gay "agenda").⁴⁶ Our purpose here is test a number of variables that previously have been hypothesized, or even empirically demonstrated, to predict beliefs similar to the ones we are attempting to predict here. Thus, our purpose is more about adjudicating among existing potential explanations while accounting for numerous such explanations rather than engaging in a series of piecemeal attempts to propose new explanatory variables. Although we make no causal claims, these predictors are, at least theoretically, foundational to the specific beliefs we are attempting to predict. Full-item wordings and descriptive statistics are included in the [supplemental materials online](#).

Psychological factors. For personality traits, we included need for chaos ($n = 6$ items; $\alpha = 0.79$),⁴⁷ dark tetrad ($n = 16$ items; $\alpha = 0.92$),⁴⁸ paranoia ($n = 3$ items;

⁴³ Matthew J. Hornsey, Kinga Bierwaczzonek, Kai Sassenberg, and Karen M. Douglas, "Individual, Intergroup and Nation-Level Influences on Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Nature Reviews Psychology* 2, no. 2 (2 January 2023): 85–97, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-022-00133-0>.

⁴⁴ Karen Douglas, Joseph E. Uscinski, Robbie M. Sutton, Aleksandra Cichocka, Turky Nefes, Chee Siang Ang, and Farzin Deravi, "Understanding Conspiracy Theories," *Advances in Political Psychology* 40, no. 1 (2019): 3–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568>.

⁴⁵ Eric Merkley, "Anti-Intellectualism, Populism, and Motivated Resistance to Expert Consensus," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2020): 24–48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz053>; Daniel Romer and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Patterns of Media Use, Strength of Belief in COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories, and the Prevention of COVID-19 from March to July 2020 in the United States: Survey Study," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 23, no. 4 (2021): e25215, <https://doi.org/10.2196/25215>.

⁴⁶ Sarah A. Hughes, "'The Perils of Punky,' Gender, Childhood, and the Occult," in *American Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021).

⁴⁷ Kevin Arceneaux, Timothy B. Gravelle, Matthias Osmundsen, Michael Bang Petersen, Jason Reifler, and Thomas J. Scotto, "Some People Just Want to Watch the World Burn: The Prevalence, Psychology and Politics of the 'Need for Chaos,'" *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 376, no. 1822 (2021): 20200147, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2020.0147>.

⁴⁸ Peter K. Jonason and Gregory D. Webster, "The Dirty Dozen: A Concise Measure of the Dark Triad," *Psychological Assessment* 22, no. 2 (2010): 420–432, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019265>; Kay, "Actors of the Most Fiendish Character."

$\alpha = 0.91$),⁴⁹ schizotypy ($n = 5$ items; $\alpha = 0.87$),⁵⁰ dogmatism ($n = 3$ items; $\alpha = 0.69$),⁵¹ national narcissism ($n = 3$ items; $\alpha = 0.80$),⁵² right-wing authoritarianism ($n = 4$ items; $\alpha = 0.66$),⁵³ and left-wing authoritarianism ($n = 3$ items; $\alpha = 0.90$).⁵⁴ For cognitive factors, we include patternicity ($n = 3$ items; $\alpha = 0.82$)⁵⁵ and subjective numeracy ($n = 3$ items; $\alpha = 0.81$).⁵⁶ To account for respondents' emotional states over the prior week, we include positive affect ($n = 10$ items; $\alpha = 0.84$), based on emotions such as "excited," and negative affect ($n = 10$ items; $\alpha = 0.88$), based on emotions such as "irritable."⁵⁷

Sociological factors. We include a standard battery of six demographic indicators measuring sex, race, household income, education, age, and whether respondents had children under the age of 18 years living at home (38.2 percent). Given the religious overtones associated with fear of satanic practices, as well as religious motivations for prejudice against the LGBTQ+ community,⁵⁸ we account for both generalized religiosity ($n = 3$ items; $\alpha = 0.85$) and Christian nationalism ($n = 5$ items; $\alpha = 0.82$).⁵⁹

Political factors. To operationalize left-right political orientations, we use standard measures of partisanship and ideology (coded so that greater values reflect stronger Republican or conservative identification). Partisan strength and ideological strength account for the extremity of respondents' ideology and partisanship, regardless of left/right valence, with "folded" versions of both measures.

⁴⁹ C. E. L. Green, D. Freeman, E. Kuipers, P. Bebbington, D. Fowler, G. Dunn, and P. A. Garety, "Measuring Ideas of Persecution and Social Reference: the Green et al. Paranoid Thought Scales (GPTS)," *Psychological Medicine* 38, no. 1 (2008): 101–11, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291707001638>.

⁵⁰ Alex S. Cohen, Russell A. Matthews, Gina M. Najolia, and Laura A. Brown, "Toward a More Psychometrically Sound Brief Measure of Schizotypal Traits: Introducing the SPQ-Brief Revised," *Journal of Personality Disorders* 24, no. 4 (2010): 516–37.

⁵¹ Herbert McClosky and Dennis Chong, "Similarities and Differences between Left-Wing and Right-Wing Radicals," *British Journal of Political Science* 15, no. 3 (1985): 329–363, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400004221>.

⁵² Anni Sternisko et al., "Collective Narcissism Predicts the Belief and Dissemination of Conspiracy Theories during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2021): 48–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211054947>.

⁵³ Boris Bizumic and John Duckitt, "Investigating Right Wing Authoritarianism with a Very Short Authoritarianism Scale," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 6, no. 1–22 (2018): 129–150, <https://doi.org/10.5964/jssp.v6i1.835>.

⁵⁴ Thomas H. Costello, Shauna M. Bowes, Sean T. Stevens, Irwin D. Waldman, Arber Tasimi, and Scott O. Lilienfeld, "Clarifying the Structure and Nature of Left-Wing Authoritarianism," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 122, no. 1 (2022): 135–170, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000341>.

⁵⁵ Rosa A. Hoekstra, Anna A. E. Vinkhuyzen, Sally Wheelwright, Meike Bartels, Dorret I. Boomsma, Simon Baron-Cohen, Danielle Posthuma, and Sophie van der Sluis, "The Construction and Validation of an Abridged Version of the Autism-Spectrum Quotient (AQ-Short)," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 41, no. 5 (5 January 2011): 589–596, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-010-1073-0>, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-010-1073-0>.

⁵⁶ Marie-Anne Durand, Renata W. Yen, James O'Malley, Glyn Elwyn, and Julien Mancini, "Graph Literacy Matters: Examining the Association between Graph Literacy, Health Literacy, and Numeracy in a Medically Eligible Population," *PLoS One* 15, no. 11 (2020): e0241844, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0241844>.

⁵⁷ David Watson, Lee Anna Clark, and Auke Tellegen, "Development and Validation of Brief Measures of Positive and Negative Affect: The PANAS Scales," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54, no. 6 (1988): 1063–1070.

⁵⁸ Joshua A. Cuevas and Bryan L. Dawson, "An Integrated Review of Recent Research on the Relationships between Religious Belief, Political Ideology, Authoritarianism, and Prejudice," *Psychological Reports* 124, no. 3 (2021): 977–1014, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294120925392>.

⁵⁹ Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker, "Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election," *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (2018): 147–71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srx070>.

We also include measures of non-left/right political orientations including antiestablishment orientations ($n = 9$ items; $\alpha = 0.86$), a combination of generalized conspiracy thinking, Manichean thinking, and populist sentiments representing respondents' views toward the political establishment as a whole⁶⁰; and trust in government, based on agreement with the statement "The government can be trusted."

Information environment. We measured respondents' media use with three variables: (1) legacy news media use ($n = 5$ items; $\alpha = 0.79$) measures how often the respondent gets "information about current events, public issues, or politics" from network television, cable news, local television, print newspapers, and radio; (2) online news media use, mainstream ($n = 8$ items; $\alpha = 0.84$) measures use of online newspapers, online news magazines, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and TV news websites; (3) online news media use, fringe ($n = 4$ items; $\alpha = 0.84$) measures use of less mainstream sources, including Reddit, 8kun, Telegram, and Truth Social. "Follows politics" is a single item measuring the extent to which respondents access information about politics and current events.

Views on science, experts, and authority. We measure scientific knowledge (scientific literacy) by summing respondents' correct answers to six true/false general science questions.⁶¹ Two variables account for attitudes toward scientists and experts: anti-intellectualism ($n = 7$ items; $\alpha = 0.92$) measures trust in experts,⁶² and confidence in the scientific community is a standard single-item measure.⁶³ Denialism ($n = 4$ items; $\alpha = 0.82$) measures a predisposition to deny, disbelieve, and distrust authoritative information.⁶⁴

Gender-relevant attitudes. Given that Satanic Panic accusations allege sexual acts and malign the LGBTQ+ community, we account for male role normativity ($n = 4$ items; $\alpha = 0.78$), which captures traditionalist attitudes toward gender and gender roles (e.g., "Homosexual men should not kiss in public"; "Boys should prefer to play with trucks rather than dolls"),⁶⁵ and gendered nationalism ($n = 3$ items; $\alpha = 0.86$), which captures gendered views toward the United States and its leadership (e.g., "America has grown too soft and feminine").⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Joseph Uscinski, Adam Enders, Michelle I. Seelig, Casey A. Klofstad, John R. Funchion, Caleb Everett, Stefan Wuchty, Kamal Premaratne, and Manohar N. Murthi, "American Politics in Two Dimensions: Partisan and Ideological Identities versus Anti-Establishment Orientations," *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 4 (2021): 773–1022, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12616>.

⁶¹ S. Okamoto, F. Niwa, K. Shimizu, and T. Sugiman, "The 2001 Survey for Public Attitudes towards and Understanding of Science and Technology in Japan," *NISTEP Report* 72 (2001).

⁶² Merkley, "Anti-Intellectualism, Populism, and Motivated Resistance to Expert Consensus."

⁶³ Matthew Motta, "The Dynamics and Political Implications of Anti-Intellectualism in the United States," *American Politics Research* 46, no. 3 (2018): 465–498, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673x17719507>.

⁶⁴ Joseph Uscinski, Adam M. Enders, Wuchty Stefan, Casey Klofstad, Michelle Seelig, John Funchion, Manohar Murthi, Kamal Premaratne, and Caleb Everett, "Why Do People Believe COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories?," *The Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) Misinformation Review* 1 (2020): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-015>.

⁶⁵ Ronald F. Levant, Rosalie J. Hall, and Thomas J. Rankin, "Male Role Norms Inventory–Short Form (MRNI-SF): Development, Confirmatory Factor Analytic Investigation of Structure, and Measurement Invariance across Gender," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 60, no. 2 (2013): 228–238. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031545>.

⁶⁶ Melissa Deckman and Erin Cassese, "Gendered Nationalism and the 2016 US Presidential Election: How Party, Class, and Beliefs about Masculinity Shaped Voting Behavior," *Politics & Gender* 17, no. 2 (2021): 277–

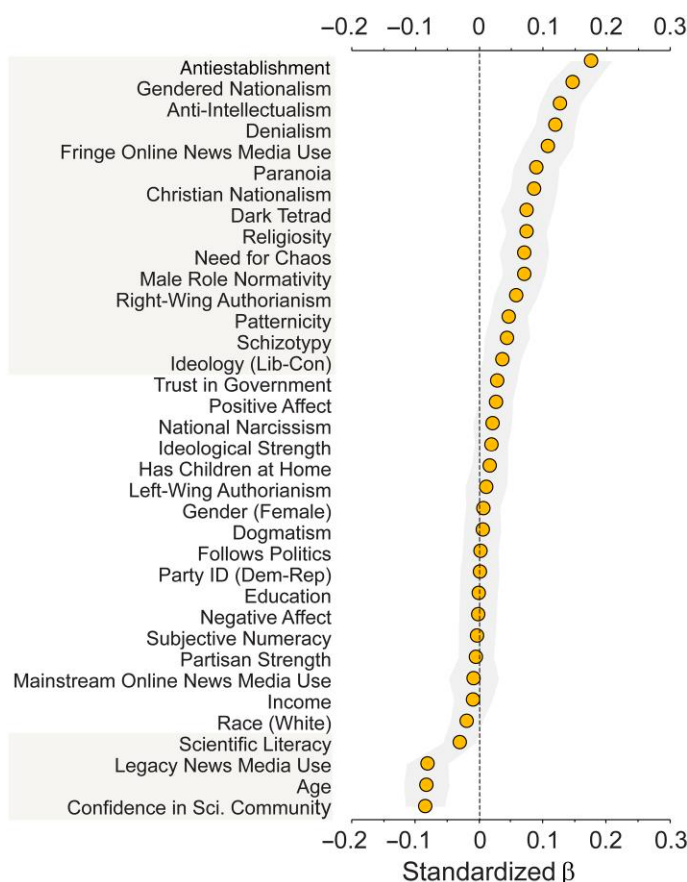


Figure 4. Standardized β Coefficients Predicting Satanic Panic Beliefs. Coefficients are sorted in descending order of magnitude, indicating that estimates with 95 percent CIs (shaded areas) that intersect with the reference line (dotted line) are statistically insignificant.

Method of Analysis

We use linear regression to test whether and how the aforementioned independent variables explain variation in our measure of Satanic Panic beliefs. The [supplemental materials online](#) include the full model as well as the variance inflation factor estimates (which confirm that multicollinearity is not a concern) and bivariate correlations between our independent variables and Satanic Panic beliefs, which show patterns similar to the regression coefficients we presented later in the article. Furthermore, we re-estimate the model discussed in the next section, using each of the individual seven Satanic Panic beliefs as the dependent variable (see [supplemental materials online](#)); those findings show that individual Satanic Panic beliefs tend to share the same correlates. Shorrocks-Shapley R^2 decomposition was used to examine the relative predictive power of our independent variables when grouped as described above.⁶⁷ This postestimation procedure estimates

300, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X19000485>; Olyvia R. Christley, “Seeing Gender Everywhere: Assessing the Impact of Traditional Gender Attitudes on American and European Public Opinion,” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2022).

⁶⁷ Anthony F. Shorrocks, “Decomposition Procedures for Distributional Analysis: a Unified Framework Based on the Shapley Value,” *The Journal of Economic Inequality* 11, no. 1 (3 January 2013): 99–126, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10888-011-9214-z>.

Table 2. Proportion of Explained Variance by Independent Variable Group (Shorrocks-Shapley R^2 Decomposition)

Independent Variable Group	Shapley Value ^a	% Variance Explained ^b
Psychological factors: personality traits (need for chaos, dark tetrad, right-wing authoritarianism, left-wing authoritarianism, paranoia, dogmatism, schizotypy, national narcissism)	0.16	21.32
Views on science, experts, and authority (scientific literacy, anti-intellectualism, confidence in the scientific community, denialism)	0.12	16.59
Gender-relevant attitudes (male role normativity, gendered nationalism)	0.11	15.52
Political factors: non-left/right political orientations (antiestablishment orientation, trust in government)	0.11	14.62
Sociological factors: religious (religiosity, Christian nationalism)	0.07	10.10
Information environment (legacy news media use, mainstream and fringe online news media use, follows politics)	0.05	7.08
Sociological factors: demographics (gender, race, household income, education, age, has children at home)	0.04	5.57
Psychological factors: emotional conditions (positive affect, negative affect)	0.03	3.46
Psychological factors: cognitive factors (patternicity, subjective numeracy)	0.02	3.21
Political factors: traditional left/right political orientations (partisanship, ideology, partisan strength, ideological strength)	0.02	2.34
Total model R^2	0.73	100

^aValues calculated using the “shapley2” module in Stata.

^bNumbers are rounded to whole numbers because of variance in values. Full regression results are listed in [supplemental materials online](#).

the model using all possible combinations of the 10 groups of predictors, thereby revealing which group(s) demonstrate the most explanatory power in the model.⁶⁸

Modeling Satanic Panic Beliefs

Figure 4 presents the results of our regression analysis, with predictor variables sorted in descending order of coefficient magnitude (full results reported in [supplemental materials online](#)). Coefficients plotted to the right of the reference line at 0 indicate a positive relationship with Satanic Panic beliefs; those plotted to the left indicate a negative relationship. Estimates with confidence intervals that intersect the reference line are statistically nonsignificant. Notably, the adjusted R^2 of the model is quite high for survey data at 0.73, indicating that the model explains 73 percent of the variance in Satanic Panic beliefs.

Beginning at the top, right-hand side of figure 4, we observe that the strongest positive predictors of Satanic Panic beliefs are antiestablishment orientations, followed by gendered nationalism, anti-intellectualism, and denialism. Our results also show that Satanic Panic beliefs are predicted, in descending order of magnitude, by fringe online media use, paranoia, Christian nationalism, the dark tetrad,

⁶⁸ Stan Lipovetsky, “Entropy Criterion in Logistic Regression and Shapley Value of Predictors,” *Journal of Modern Applied Statistical Methods* 5, no. 1 (2006): 1–13.

religiosity, need for chaos, male role normativity, right-wing authoritarianism, patternicity, schizotypy, and ideology.

The middle portion of [figure 4](#) shows the predictors whose confidence intervals include zero, indicating they are not significant predictors. These include trust in government, emotional states (both positive and negative affect), many traditional political orientations (e.g., partisanship, partisan strength, ideological strength), most demographic characteristics, national narcissism, left-wing authoritarianism, dogmatism, subjective numeracy, political engagement (i.e., follows politics), and mainstream online news media use. Finally, the bottom, left-hand portion of [figure 4](#) shows the factors that are negatively related to Satanic Panic beliefs, including scientific literacy, legacy news media use, confidence in the scientific community, and age.

[Table 2](#) presents the explained variance decomposition of the model presented in [figure 4](#), organized by type of predictor, as introduced above. Starting at the top, personality traits account for 21.3 percent of the variance in Satanic Panic beliefs explained by our model. The next most influential group of variables (16.6 percent of explained variance) represents “views towards science, experts, and authority,” which includes scientific literacy, anti-intellectualism, confidence in the scientific community, and denialism. The next two most influential groups were non-left/right political orientations (14.6 percent) and orientations toward gender (15.5 percent), followed by our religion variables (10.1 percent). Finally, the bottom portion of [Table 2](#) lists the variable groups that account for the least amount of variance, including information environment, demographics, emotional conditions, cognitive factors, and left/right political orientations.

Discussion

We find that agreement with the seven Satanic Panic accusations we polled on ranged between 18 and 33 percent ([Table 1](#)). These beliefs are positively associated with a variety of antisocial and conflictual personality traits, such as paranoia, a need for chaos, dark tetrad traits (e.g., sadism), right-wing authoritarianism, and schizotypy ([fig. 4](#)). Moreover, Satanic Panic beliefs were strongly predicted by respondents’ non-left/right political orientations (e.g., antiestablishment orientations), but traditional political orientations, such as Democratic-Republican partisanship and liberal-conservative ideology, are less predictive. Because the accusations involved issues about gender (e.g., a “gay agenda”) and the supernatural (e.g., satanic ritual abuse), it is perhaps not surprising that agreement with them is also predicted by religiosity and restrictive attitudes toward gender. These findings suggest that endorsement of Satanic Panic beliefs is not merely an issue of cognitive processing errors (e.g., patternicity, receptivity to epistemically unwarranted beliefs) but is also heavily influenced by important psychological, social, and ideological factors that are not properly accounted for in simpler models that rely primarily on more traditional left/right orientations. Our observations are all the more concerning given the other beliefs and behavioral intentions associated with these beliefs ([figs. 1–3](#)).

In [figure 4](#), the factors most predictive of Satanic Panic beliefs were antiestablishment orientations and gendered nationalism. If one believes that members of government (including public school teachers) are engaged in perpetrating widespread harms to children, or that widespread abuse of children is common under the

current system, then it logically follows that such a person would also be more likely, in general, to harbor antipathy toward the political establishment regardless of partisan leanings. Likewise, it makes substantive sense that Satanic Panic beliefs are positively related to gendered nationalism (e.g., America has grown too soft and feminine) and male role normativity (e.g., boys should play with trucks rather than dolls) because these attitudes speak to traditional conceptions of gender and sexuality and contain anti-LGBTQ + overtones. Finally, it stands to reason that sociopolitical beliefs such as negative views toward Ukraine, abortion, and immigration are positively associated with Satanic Panic beliefs (fig. 2) because such views are often expressed by many of the same opinion leaders who are engaging in the current Satanic Panic rhetoric (e.g., Marjorie Taylor Greene).

Although much has been written by scholars and journalists about previous panics involving sex and Satan, a lack of consistent opinion polling over time has left social scientists with little insight into the powerful dynamics involved. Thus, it is difficult to know whether the beliefs polled here represent increases or decreases compared with previous decades. Crucially, it is also unclear whether opinion leaders are persuading the masses to adopt these beliefs or are merely activating, by making salient, beliefs that are already present but previously absent from mainstream political discourse. These shortcomings have left social scientists, journalists, and policymakers without the tools to prevent, or at least minimize, the dangers associated with this and similar panics. Similarly, a lack of surveys investigating panics of various types has left us unable to know who is most likely to panic more generally: Although our results here speak to panics about sex and Satan, panics involving other subject matters likely attract different members of the public with different political, psychological, and sociological traits. Future research into other panics may shed light on which factors may generalize across panics.

Some opinion leaders have openly taken credit for having engineered the Satanic Panic of 2022. This makes it strikingly like the recent controversy over critical race theory in that both were fostered by many of the same politicians, activists, and pundits.⁶⁹ It remains to be seen how long prominent opinion leaders will continue levying accusations of widespread child grooming and abuse. But even if prominent opinion leaders stopped engaging in such rhetoric, the accusations may remain salient indefinitely for some people, potentially motivating them to act—sometimes violently—against what they see as a vast conspiracy to harm children.

Our findings underscore the need for a continuing, robust, and interdisciplinary research agenda focused on the spread, psychology, opinion dynamics, and politics of panics, as well as their resultant behavioral outcomes. In particular, the causes of Satanic Panic beliefs should be of prime concern: Are these beliefs driven by top-down persuasion, merely activated by opinion leaders after lying dormant for some time, or are they driven by other forces, such as social media? Satanic Panic rhetoric and beliefs should also be studied in relation to populism,⁷⁰ democratic backsliding,⁷¹ and the transmission of online conspiracy

⁶⁹ Trip Gabriel, “He Fuels the Right’s Cultural Fires (and Spreads Them to Florida),” *The New York Times*, 24 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/24/us/politics/christopher-rufo-crt-lgbtq-florida.html>.

⁷⁰ Jan-Werner Müller, “What, If Anything, Do Populism and Conspiracy Theories Have to Do with Each Other?,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 89, no. 3 (2022): 607–625.

⁷¹ Robert Mickey, Steven Levitsky, and Lucan Ahmad Way, “Is America Still Safe for Democracy: Why the United States Is in Danger of Backsliding,” *Foreign Affairs*, no. 3 (2017): 20–29.

theories such as QAnon.⁷² It is imperative that social scientists not treat these accusations as benign or fringe. Instead, the accusatory rhetoric, beliefs, policy proposals, policy outcomes, and associated acts of violence must be documented and analyzed so the effects of these panics can be blunted in the future. Given that opinion leaders outside the United States have engaged with this rhetoric as well, such a research agenda must be global in scope. For example, Russian leaders have attempted to justify their ongoing military actions by arguing that Ukraine needs “desatanization.”⁷³

Taken together, our findings present a “catch-22” for democracy. On the one hand, believers in the Satanic Panic accusations show higher levels of political efficacy: in comparison with nonbelievers, they take part in the political process and feel qualified for and want to run for political office. On the other hand, these same people exhibit higher levels of dark psychological traits, have conflictual personality styles, hold antisystem views, and are more likely to hold extremist groups, foreign adversaries, and acts of political violence in high regard. The political mobilization of Satanic Panic believers, therefore, may impact politics, not just because of their espoused beliefs but because of who they are and the style of politics they prefer.⁷⁴ Our results suggest that these Satanic Panic believers, and the opinion leaders they appear to align with, are willing to restrict other’s rights based on their own warped views of morality. Therefore, the danger of popular politicians, pastors, and pundits driving a panic is not just that they might convince some people of dubious ideas but rather that they will motivate dangerous people to take matters into their own hands or to act on those ideas in the arena of mainstream politics. Since 2020, hundreds of candidates who espoused such beliefs ran for national, statewide, and local office in the United States. Perhaps because their confidence in their qualifications outstrips their actual qualifications for political office, or because their antisocial and disagreeable traits inhibit their success, most of these candidates lose. However, some—like Marjorie Taylor Greene—do win, enabling them to use their institutional power to influence public opinion and policy.

Limitations

As we have emphasized, our data cannot shed light on causal associations or temporal trends. Future research should gather data capable of addressing both. That said, a large body of previous scholarship suggests that cues from opinion leaders have some effect on the public,⁷⁵ if not through persuasion, then at least through

⁷² Adam Enders, Joseph Uscinski, Casey Klofstad, Stefan Wuchty, Michelle Seelig, John Funchion, Manohar Murthi, Kamal Premaratne, and Justin Stoler, “Who Supports QAnon? A Case Study in Political Extremism,” *Journal of Politics* 84, no. 3 (2022): 1844–1849.

⁷³ Isabel Van Brugen, “Putin Appointed ‘Chief Exorcist’ as Kremlin Whips up Satanic Panic,” *Newsweek*, 26 October 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-chief-exorcist-kremlin-desatanization-ukraine-security-council-1754912>.

⁷⁴ Benjamin Moffitt, “What Was the ‘Alt’ in Alt-Right, Alt-Lite, and Alt-Left? On ‘Alt’ as a Political Modifier,” *Political Studies* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217221150871>; Daniel Jolley, Silvia Mari, and Karen M. Douglas, “Consequences of Conspiracy Theories,” in *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, eds. Michael Butter and Peter Knight (London: Routledge, 2020): 231–41.

⁷⁵ Nicolas Berlinski, Margaret Doyle, Andrew M. Guess, Gabrielle Levy, Benjamin Lyons, Jacob M. Montgomery, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler, “The Effects of Unsubstantiated Claims of Voter Fraud on Confidence in Elections,” *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 10, no. 1 (2021): 34–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2021.18>; Philip Edward Jones and Paul R. Brewer, “Elite Cues and Public Polarization on Transgender Rights,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 8, no. 1 (1 January 2020): 71–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1441722>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1441722>.

activation.⁷⁶ Our findings suggest that Satanic Panic believers are a sizable idiosyncratic voter bloc whose beliefs and concerns do not map neatly onto conventional left/right politics. For example, Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene accused U.S. senators from her own party of being “pro-pedophile.” Therefore, it would be fruitful for future work to take a more atomized approach and examine potential intergroup or partisan fracturing associated with belief in these types of conspiracy theories. Similarly, although religiosity is a predictor of Satanic Panic beliefs (fig. 4), our data do not ask about religious affiliation. Although we suspect many of the believers represented in Table 1 are evangelicals, recent events suggest these beliefs are not confined to Christians.⁷⁷ Therefore, we encourage social scientists to examine these beliefs with finer-grained measures of religion and in other political contexts.

Conclusion

Child sex trafficking, abuse, and grooming are real problems that deserve society’s attention. However, fictitious accusations divert attention away from real victimization and efforts to curtail it. Whether the high-profile accusations are borne of sincere concern for the supposed victims or merely intended to gain a short-term political advantage is largely irrelevant to those being accused of irredeemable crimes and threatened with violence. Furthermore, levying poorly evidenced accusations of child abuse at political opponents, teachers, entertainment companies, and the LGBTQ+ community serves only to inflame—to the point of violence—an already polarized populace.⁷⁸ Unlike panics of previous eras, current technologies allow both common citizens and popular opinion leaders to broadcast unevidenced accusations in the public sphere. If politicians, pastors, and pundits continue with this rhetoric, there is good reason to believe that, when combined with contemporary environmental factors, today’s Satanic Panic could be considerably more damaging—both socially and politically—than were those of the past. Indeed, the violence committed so far all but ensures that will be the case.*

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Political Science Quarterly* online.

⁷⁶ Lilliana Mason, Julie Wronski, and John V. Kane, “Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support,” *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 4 (2021): 1508–1516, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000563>.

⁷⁷ Siraj Hashmi, “Muslim Parents Defy Intersectionality, Join Christian Parents against Sexualizing Kids | Opinion,” *Newsweek*, 13 October 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/muslim-parents-defy-intersectionality-join-christian-parents-against-sexualizing-kids-opinion-1751525>.

⁷⁸ Nathan P. Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason, *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

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