

# An inflated view of the facts? How preferences and predispositions shape conspiracy beliefs about the Deflategate scandal

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## Abstract

Beliefs in conspiracy theories about controversial issues are often strongly influenced by people's existing beliefs and attitudes. We leverage a prominent football-related controversy – the US National Football League's "Deflategate" scandal – to investigate how factual perceptions and conspiracy beliefs vary by fan loyalties to sports teams. Using an original survey sample, we explore two key drivers of conspiratorial beliefs about the scandal. First, we analyze how beliefs about Deflategate vary by respondents' loyalties towards the New England Patriots. We find that beliefs are not only highly polarized by team loyalty but that the gaps are largest among more interested and knowledgeable fans, suggesting that individuals are processing the information they receive in a highly motivated fashion. Second, we find that individuals who endorse unrelated political conspiracy theories are also more likely to endorse two key conspiratorial claims about Deflategate. However, priming group solidarity and elite resentment – two possible motivations for the prevalence of conspiracy theories around controversial issues like Deflategate – does not have a significant effect.

## Keywords

Conspiracy theory, misperception, Deflategate

## Introduction

Conspiracy theories are pervasive in politics as well as in debates over food, health, and even sports (e.g. Bowman and Rugg, 2013; Gaines, 2014; Goertzel, 2011, Shiva, 2014). However, relatively little is known about why so many people endorse these often-unverified claims or how to most effectively correct them.

Previous research indicates that conspiratorial beliefs about controversial issues are strongly influenced by people's existing beliefs and attitudes (e.g. Oliver and Wood, 2014; Pasek et al., 2014). As theories of motivated reasoning suggest (e.g. Lord et al., 1979; Taber and Lodge, 2006), people tend to accept conspiracy claims that are consistent with their predispositions and reject those that are counter-attitudinal. These biases are often tribal in nature – people tend to hold beliefs that are consistent with in-group views (see, e.g., Hardin and Higgins, 1996; Suhay, 2015). Research also shows that people are susceptible to false or unsupported beliefs about outgroups (see, e.g., Kosloff

et al., 2010; Pyszczynski et al., 2010), especially when the target is a powerful elite (Uscinski and Parent, 2014).

Surprisingly, the tendency to endorse belief-consistent conspiracy theories may be *more* prevalent among the most knowledgeable people, who are often more motivated to challenge belief-inconsistent information and more capable of doing so effectively (Zaller, 1992). As a result, though more knowledgeable or educated people are least likely to believe in fringe conspiracy theories, the expected relationship can be reversed within groups such as political parties

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where belief in a particular conspiracy is prevalent (see, e.g., Nyhan, 2012; Nyhan et al., 2013).

However, previous research on political conspiracy beliefs has not fully separated the effects of group loyalties from other characteristics that might be correlated with group membership. For instance, Republicans are more likely to believe in the so-called birther conspiracy theory than Democrats (Pasek et al., 2014), but the two groups also differ on many observable and unobservable characteristics that could affect beliefs about Obama's citizenship. By contrast, loyalties to sports teams also generate strong directional preferences but are largely determined by geography and are thus likely to be orthogonal to many characteristics that are associated with conspiracy beliefs (Tainsky and Stodolska, 2010).

We therefore leverage a prominent football-related controversy – the US National Football League (NFL) “Deflategate” scandal – to investigate how factual perceptions and conspiracy beliefs vary by fans' arbitrary but deep loyalties to sports teams. Using a unique survey distributed by SurveyMonkey, an online survey platform company, we polled a large number of respondents both inside and outside “Patriots Nation” about the scandal. This research design allows us to explore two key aspects of the alleged conspiracy.

First, we show that factual perceptions not only vary widely according to team loyalty, but are *more* polarized among more knowledgeable fans, suggesting that individuals process the information they receive in a highly motivated fashion. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2011), individuals who endorse unrelated political conspiracy theories are also more likely to endorse two key conspiratorial claims about Deflategate.

Second, we provide the results of an experiment embedded in the survey that primes two possible motivations for the prevalence of conspiracy theories around controversial issues like Deflategate – resentment toward the elites who are the supposed conspirators and pressure to remain loyal to an in-group – that are often confounded with group membership in politics. However, when we prime these motivations individually, neither has a substantial effect on conspiracy beliefs or factual perceptions.

## Theory and context

### The “Deflategate” controversy

The central allegation in the scandal known as “Deflategate” is that New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady conspired to reduce the air pressure in footballs that the team used in a playoff game (see Online Appendix A for a summary of the controversy at the time the survey was fielded). In the months following the initial accusations, Patriots fans, as well as fans of other NFL teams offered numerous accounts of the disputed events, many of which can be

characterized as conspiracy theories. Though many definitions of the term exist, we define a conspiracy theory as an explanation of events “which cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons (the conspirators) acting in secret for their own benefit, against the common good” (Uscinski and Parent, 2014: 32).<sup>1</sup>

We reviewed media and Internet coverage of the Deflategate affair and identified three notable conspiracy theories in discussions of the controversy.

- **Conspiracy to deflate** – The central allegation in the controversy is, of course, the claim that Brady and his equipment managers conspired to remove air from the footballs the Patriots would use on offense against the Colts.
- **Conspiracy to distract** – Some supporters of Brady and the Patriots have alleged that Goodell's punishment was motivated by the NFL's desire to distract attention from other public relations problems such as domestic abuse by players and the evidence of the negative health effects of concussions. As one fan wrote in the *Boston Globe*, the NFL was using the “team as a smokescreen to obscure the real problems, the concussions and domestic violence and legions of bankrupt ex-players. As a PR move, it's genius” (Dyer, 2015).
- **Conspiracy to absolve** – This conspiracy theory emerged after the NFL's punishment of Brady was initially overturned in court.<sup>2</sup> Proponents of this theory allege that the ruling by US District judge Richard M. Berman was the result of Brady's fame, wealth, and prestige rather than evidence. As one online reader wrote in response to an article on the ruling, “I guess it's good to be rich and handsome. You can get away with anything. And if at first you don't succeed you just keep paying a lawyer until you do. Justice in America” (Belson, 2015).

It is important to note that the facts of the deflation controversy remain unclear. In particular, the evidence in the report commissioned by the NFL (Wells et al., 2015) has been widely questioned (see, e.g., Hassett et al., 2015: 10–11). In this paper, we therefore do not take a position on the veracity of any of the alleged conspiracies described above.

### Hypotheses

We pre-registered the following hypotheses (<http://egap.org/content/motivated-reasoning-group-and-anti-elite-bias-and-nfl-deflategate-controversy>).<sup>3</sup>

#### H1: Motivated reasoning

- Respondent favorability toward the Patriots and ties to the New England region will be positively

associated with disbelief that Brady violated NFL rules and belief that he was punished to distract from the NFL's problems and negatively associated with belief that the judge in Brady's appeal was unduly influenced.

#### H2: Motivated and conspiratorial subgroups

- H2a: The relationship between Patriot favorability/New England ties and belief in attitude-consistent conspiracy theories about Deflategate (either pro- or anti-Brady) will be stronger among respondents with more interest in/knowledge of football in general and the details of the Deflategate controversy specifically.
- H2b: The relationship between Patriot favorability/New England ties and belief in pro- or anti-Brady conspiracies will be stronger among respondents predisposed toward conspiracy belief (as measured by their average belief in two political conspiracy theories conditional on party).

#### H3: Group solidarity and elite resentment primes

- H3a: The relationship between Patriot favorability/New England ties and belief in attitude-consistent conspiracy theories about Deflategate (either pro- or anti-Brady) will be stronger among respondents primed to feel a greater sense of group solidarity.
- H3b: The relationship between Patriot favorability/New England ties and belief in attitude-consistent conspiracy theories about Deflategate will be stronger among respondents primed to feel a greater sense of resentment toward elites.

H1 is the simplest test of motivated reasoning. We expect Patriots fans to absolve Brady, distrust Goodell, and regard Berman's decision as objective and just, whereas fans of other teams should do the converse.

H2a predicts that motivated reasoning should be stronger among respondents who are more invested in football and thus have stronger directional preferences.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, H2b suggests that a predisposition to believe in conspiracies should amplify the effects of motivated reasoning stemming from team loyalty.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, H3a and H3b describe the expected effects of our experimental treatments in priming group solidarity and elite resentment (described further below). If the group solidarity hypothesis is correct, the prime should prompt fans to rally to the cause of their side, amplifying the beliefs associated with motivated reasoning. The elite resentment prime should similarly rally Patriots fans against Goodell and the NFL (the elites whom they saw as the villains) and drive Patriots opponents toward stronger anti-Brady beliefs (by reminding them of a hated dynasty).

## Methods

### *Sample*

We fielded an original online survey of 2,920 respondents from September 15–19, 2015. The survey was conducted using SurveyMonkey Audience, an online nonprobability Web panel of respondents recruited from over 30 million people who complete surveys on SurveyMonkey's platform every month. The sample, while not representative, was diverse and included a large oversample of 1,407 respondents in New England (see Online Appendix B for details). Apart from the New England oversample, no quotas or weights were used in sampling or analysis of the data. The approval of the human subjects committee at Dartmouth College was obtained prior to fielding the survey (CPHS STUDY00029026).

### *Outcome measures*

The key outcome of interest is a respondent's level of belief in the three Deflategate conspiracies described above. We measured the perceived accuracy of four statements on a four-point scale (see Online Appendix B for question wording):

#### *Deflate*

- "Tom Brady broke the NFL's rules by directing team personnel to tamper with the footballs used in the playoffs last season." (reverse-coded)
- "There's no solid evidence that Tom Brady did anything wrong during the playoffs last season."

#### *Distract*

- "The NFL is trying to punish Tom Brady in order to distract people from the league's other problems."

#### *Absolve*

- "The judge's ruling overturning Brady's suspension has more to do with money and influence than with the facts of the case." (reverse-coded)

### *Independent variables*

The survey also measured several respondent characteristics that might affect motivated reasoning or conspiracy predispositions (wording in Online Appendix B):

#### *Patriots favorability:*

- US state of birth (New England = 1, elsewhere/not born in US = 0)
- US state of residence (New England = 1, elsewhere = 0)
- Favorite NFL team (Patriots = 1, another team/none/missing = 0)<sup>6</sup>

- Feelings toward Tom Brady (0–100 feeling thermometer scale)

#### ***Football interest:***

- Frequency of viewership of NFL games on television
- Extent of ownership of NFL team clothing

#### ***Deflategate knowledge:***

- Correct responses to three multiple-choice questions about the controversy<sup>7</sup>

#### ***Conspiracy predispositions* (four-point accuracy scale):**

- Belief in 9/11 “inside job” conspiracy
- Belief in Obama “birther” conspiracy

### ***Experimental treatments***

Respondents were assigned to a placebo essay task or to treatments that primed respondents to think about group loyalties or elite resentments.

- Group solidarity: “There are times when people have to stand up for the interests of their community even when it’s not easy to do so. Please tell us about a case where you did something difficult because it was the right thing for your community.”
- Elite resentment: “Some people would say that there are two kinds of people in America – the elites and everyone else – and that those who are already on top get opportunities not available to other people. Please tell us about a time when you think someone who already had great wealth or power got special treatment.”

Compliance rates were high for the essay (response rates: 96% controls, 77% group solidarity, and 86% elite resentment). Responses generally reflected the assigned topic.

### ***Statistical analysis***

Below we report the results of our pre-registered hypothesis tests as well as some additional analyses (all deviations are labeled). We used ordinary least squares with robust standard errors for all statistical tests. All treatment effects are estimated as intent-to-treat effects.

## **Results**

### ***H1: Motivated reasoning***

Our principal outcome measure is a composite index of Deflategate conspiracy beliefs that represents the mean of

our four outcome measures after reverse-coding them to be directionally consistent.<sup>8</sup> Higher values indicate what we refer to as more pro-Brady beliefs, which includes greater belief that Brady did not break the rules and is being punished by the NFL to distract the public as well as greater disbelief in evidence of wrongdoing by Brady or judicial favoritism. Low values correspondingly indicate the converse. (We also conduct exploratory analyses of the relationship between Patriots favorability and each outcome measure separately as described below. See Online Appendix C for summary statistics.)

To test the relationship between respondents’ views of the Patriots and Brady and their beliefs about Deflategate (H1), we regressed our index of pro-Brady beliefs on our estimates of Patriots favorability, interest in NFL football, inclination toward conspiracy belief, and a set of basic demographic indicators.<sup>9</sup> The results in Table 1 confirm that the relationship between Patriot favorability and pro-Brady beliefs is very strong for the composite measure (model 1) as well as exploratory analyses of each of the four individual outcome variables. Respondents with favorable views of Brady and the Patriots were significantly more likely to believe that there was no evidence Brady did anything wrong and that the NFL was using the controversy to distract from the league’s problems. In addition, these respondents were less likely to believe that Brady broke any rules or that the judge was swayed by Brady’s influence and wealth. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship for belief in the distraction measure, which is perhaps the most prominent conspiracy theory among Patriots fans. Non-Patriots fans are nearly twice as likely as Patriots fans to regard that theory as not at all or not very accurate.<sup>10</sup>

### ***H2: Motivated and conspiratorial subgroups***

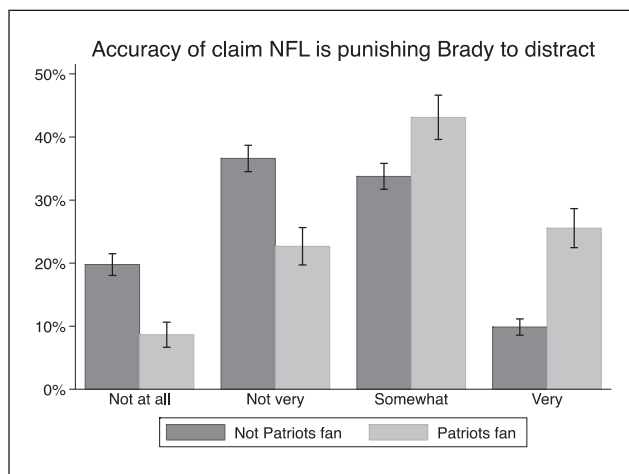
We predicted that the association between views of the Patriots and pro-Brady beliefs would be stronger among respondents who were more interested in the NFL and knowledgeable about Deflategate. Because these characteristics loaded on separate dimensions in a principal components factor analysis, we estimate two models to test H2a, estimating separately whether the relationship between Patriots fandom and conspiracy beliefs varies by NFL interest and Deflategate knowledge (see Table 2).

We find that the relationship between Patriots favorability and attitude-consistent beliefs is much stronger among the most devoted and knowledgeable fans (this relationship holds for each of the four individual outcome variables as well – see Tables C2 and C3 in the Online Appendix). To illustrate this finding, Figure 2 shows how responses to the statement that the NFL punished Brady to distract from the league’s public relations problems become more polarized between Patriots fans (light grey) and non-Patriots fans (dark grey) as they devote more

**Table 1.** Motivated reasoning in Deflategate beliefs.

	(1) Composite pro- Brady beliefs	(2) Broke rules	(3) No evidence	(4) US National Football League (NFL) distracting	(5) Judge influence
Patriots favorability	0.47*** (0.01)	−0.58*** (0.02)	0.52*** (0.02)	0.30*** (0.02)	−0.50*** (0.02)
NFL interest	0.00 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	−0.06*** (0.02)	−0.04* (0.02)
Conspiracy predisposition	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	0.13*** (0.02)	0.14*** (0.02)
Male	0.06** (0.03)	0.00 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	−0.21*** (0.04)
Age 30–44	−0.05 (0.04)	0.01 (0.07)	−0.08 (0.06)	−0.23*** (0.07)	−0.09 (0.07)
Age 45–59	−0.09** (0.04)	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.09 (0.06)	−0.37*** (0.06)	−0.08 (0.06)
Age 60+	0.06 (0.04)	−0.18*** (0.06)	0.08 (0.06)	−0.25*** (0.06)	−0.22*** (0.06)
Constant	2.58 (0.03)	2.56*** (0.05)	2.82 (0.05)	2.73 (0.05)	2.67*** (0.06)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.40	0.34	0.30	0.12	0.27
N	2594	2579	2583	2571	2575

Ordinary least squares coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. The composite pro-Brady belief measure is the mean of the four outcome variables after the outcome variables in models 2 and 5 were reverse-coded (see text and Online Appendix A for details). \* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Figure 1.** Belief in the US National Football League (NFL) distraction conspiracy by Patriots fandom.

Survey respondents' evaluations of the accuracy of the statement that "The NFL is trying to punish Tom Brady in order to distract people from the league's other problems" by whether they identified the New England Patriots as their favorite NFL team (includes 95% confidence intervals).

interest to the NFL and are more knowledgeable about the Deflategate controversy. As Figure 2 indicates, belief polarization is greater among respondents with higher levels of interest and knowledge using a tercile split on the variable in question.<sup>11</sup>

## H2b: Predispositions toward conspiratorial belief and motivated reasoning

We find no evidence to support hypothesis H2b. Respondents' conspiratorial predispositions, as measured by their belief in the 9/11 inside job and Obama birther myths, do not significantly moderate the relationship between Patriots favorability and pro-Brady beliefs or any individual outcome variables (see Table C4 in Online Appendix C). As Table 1 (above) shows, conspiracy predispositions are also not associated with our composite measure of pro-Brady beliefs conditional on other covariates.

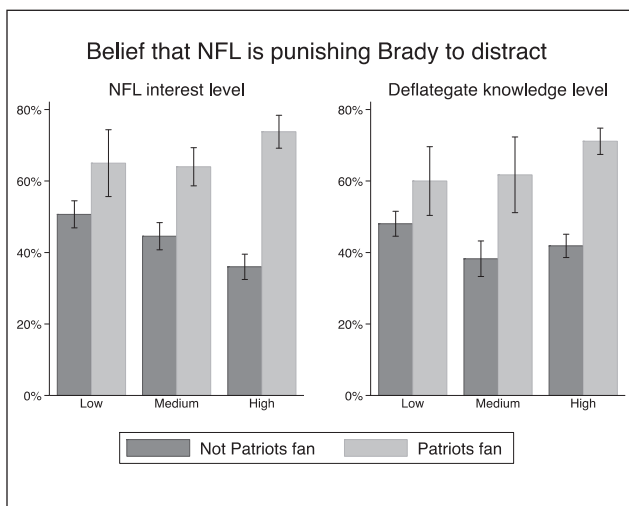
However, the construction of the composite variable specified in our preregistration plan may obscure the relationship between conspiracy predispositions and beliefs about Deflategate. Because the models in Table 1 were designed to test hypotheses about motivated reasoning, our outcome variables were coded such that higher values indicate more pro-Brady beliefs, including both belief in conspiracies that exonerate him (the NFL targeting him to distract the public) and disbelief in those that implicate him (the judicial influence claim). Previous research, however, indicates that people who are predisposed to conspiracy may endorse conspiracy theories even when they are seemingly contradictory (e.g. Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2011; Wood et al., 2012). The exploratory results for models 4 and 5 in Table 1 are consistent with these findings. We observe a positive relationship between endorsing conspiracy beliefs



**Table 2.** Motivated subgroups by interest/knowledge.

	(1) Interest	(2) Knowledge
Patriots favorability	0.45*** (0.01)	0.43*** (0.01)
US National Football League (NFL) interest	0.01 (0.01)	
Patriots favorability × NFL interest	0.10*** (0.01)	
Deflategate knowledge		0.06*** (0.01)
Patriots favorability × Deflategate knowledge		0.10*** (0.01)
Conspiratorial mind	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Male	0.05* (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Age 30–44	–0.05 (0.04)	–0.06 (0.04)
Age 45–59	–0.10** (0.04)	–0.10** (0.04)
Age 60+	0.06 (0.04)	0.05 (0.04)
Constant	2.57 (0.03)	2.55 (0.03)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.41	0.41
N	2594	2602

Coefficients from ordinary least squares models of composite pro-Brady beliefs (see text and Online Appendix A for details) robust standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Figure 2.** Motivated beliefs in distraction conspiracy by interest/knowledge.

Proportion of respondents who state it is somewhat or very accurate that “The NFL [US National Football League] is trying to punish Tom Brady in order to distract people from the league’s other problems” by Patriots fan affiliation and NFL interest/Deflategate knowledge (includes 95% confidence intervals).

**Table 3.** Experimental effects on pro-Brady Deflategate beliefs.

	Coefficient (standard error)
Patriots favorability	0.51*** (0.02)
Group solidarity	0.04 (0.03)
Elite resentment	0.08*** (0.03)
Patriots favorability' × group solidarity	–0.03 (0.03)
Patriots favorability × elite resentment	–0.07** (0.03)
Constant	2.54 (0.02)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.39
N	2621

Coefficients from ordinary least squares model of composite pro-Brady beliefs (see text and Online Appendix A for details) robust standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

about politics and believing in conspiracy theories about the motives and intentions of the NFL and the judge who heard Brady’s appeal ( $p < 0.01$  in both cases) even though they have differing directional implications. For instance, the proportion of respondents who found the claim that the NFL is punishing Brady to distract the public to be somewhat or very accurate increased from 44% among those who endorsed neither political conspiracy theory to 54% for those who endorsed one and 59% among those who endorsed two.<sup>12</sup>

### H3: Group solidarity and elite resentment primes

Finally, Table 3 reports the results of our experimental treatments priming group solidarity (H3a) and elite resentment (H3b), which did not have the expected effects on the relationship between Patriots favorability and pro-Brady beliefs about Deflategate.

Specifically, the group solidarity prime did not moderate the effect of Patriots favorability; the marginal effect was not significant for any subgroup (Online Appendix Figure C2).

By contrast, we find that the elite resentment prime significantly moderated the effect of Patriots favorability, but the sign on the interaction term is negative – the opposite of our expectations. As Online Appendix Figure C3 illustrates, the marginal effect was *positive* for people with a neutral or negative views of the Patriots and null otherwise. Though the reason for this result is uncertain, one possible explanation is that the respondents who do not view the Patriots favorably still see the NFL as more powerful than the team or Brady.<sup>13</sup>

## Discussion

Using a unique sample and a novel topic, we examine the prevalence of motivated belief in conspiracy theories about a controversial issue. We find that beliefs about Deflategate are closely associated with respondents' views of the New England Patriots, especially among those with high levels of interest and knowledge. These results are consistent with previous research on belief in political conspiracy theories. Motivated reasoning was not stronger among individuals with greater conspiracy predispositions or those primed with feelings of group loyalty or elite resentment. Instead, individuals who believed in unrelated conspiracy theories were more likely to endorse two seemingly contradictory conspiracy theories about Deflategate.

We note some important limitations to this research. The sample design allows us to make more confident inferences about Patriots fans due to our regional oversample but is not nationally representative. In addition, the study was conducted months after the Deflategate controversy peaked. Finally, we did not manipulate fan loyalty or exposure to information about the controversy.

Still, these results have several important implications for research on motivated reasoning and conspiracy belief. First, we confirm previous research that suggests conspiratorial beliefs are powerfully shaped by motivated reasoning. Second, our findings suggest that partisans with more factual knowledge about a contentious issue are more likely to hold attitude-consistent beliefs. Third, we find that some individuals have a conspiratorial mindset that extends across domains and induces them to accept seemingly contradictory conspiratorial explanations for phenomena. Finally, we help rule out the possibility that group membership and conspiratorial beliefs are determined by a common unobserved factor. By studying sports loyalties, which are primarily geographical, our research helps isolate the causal effects of motivated biases.

## Acknowledgements

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## Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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## Supplementary material

The online appendix is available at: <http://rap.sagepub.com/content/3/3>.

## Notes

1. It is important to note that although the term “conspiracy theory” is often used to describe fringe, outlandish or unfounded beliefs, conspiracies can of course be real.
2. In March 2016 (after our survey had been fielded), the lower-court ruling in Brady’s favor, which nullified the NFL’s suspension of Brady, was itself overturned by the US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.
3. Due to an oversight by the authors, the wording of the original hypotheses in the preregistration includes only anti-Brady conspiracy theories and does not indicate that the dependent variable includes both pro- and anti-Brady conspiracy theories. However, our preregistered analysis plan states that the outcome variable includes both types of theories (reverse-coded as appropriate). We have therefore reworded the hypotheses above for clarity and to match our intended meaning.
4. The pre-registered hypothesis refers to both “interest in” and “knowledge of football in general and the ‘Deflategate’ controversy specifically.” As discussed below, however, factor analysis suggests that fan interest and knowledge are distinct traits. We therefore analyze these factors separately below.
5. In our analysis below, we also test whether a predisposition toward conspiracies can encourage seemingly contradictory beliefs in conspiracies regardless of directional preferences. As we discuss below, this possibility is consistent with prior research but was not preregistered by the authors.
6. Our preregistration states that we will code the favorite team variable as “1 for Patriots; 0 otherwise.” We therefore code anyone who did not choose the Patriots as 0. However, our results are substantively identical if we code those who chose “None” for their favorite team or left the item blank as missing (available upon request).
7. Per our preregistration, we tested whether football interest and knowledge scaled together. They did not (see below). We therefore describe the scales separately for clarity and analyze them separately below.
8. We first verified the outcome measures load on a single dimension per our preregistration.
9. Per our preregistration, each of the scales was constructed from a principal components factor analysis after verifying that items loaded on a single dimension. The NFL interest and Deflategate knowledge scales were originally constructed as a single scale but loaded on separate dimensions (available upon request). We thus only include the interest scale here. The knowledge scale is tested separately below.
10. Because of the possibility that subjects’ views about Tom Brady might be endogenous to their perceptions of Deflategate, we also re-estimated all of the models reported in this article using a measure of Patriots favorability that did not include the Brady feeling thermometer measure. Our

main results were substantively unchanged (available upon request).

11. See Online Appendix Figure C1 for formal estimates of how the marginal effects of Patriots favorability vary by NFL interest and Deflategate knowledge, respectively. We also conducted an exploratory analysis of whether the relationship between Deflategate knowledge and team loyalty is non-monotonic. It is possible that greater knowledge might initially increase divergence in beliefs by team loyalty but could then lead to greater convergence in views among the most knowledgeable fans. To evaluate this conjecture, we added a squared knowledge term and an interaction between the squared term and Patriots favorability to Model 2 in Table 2. We then estimated exploratory models of the aggregate pro-Brady beliefs measure as well as each individual outcome variable using this new specification. We could not reject the null hypothesis at the  $p < 0.05$  level for any of these models in likelihood ratio tests against the specification from Table 2, Column 2 (results available upon request). Nevertheless, our indicators of Deflategate knowledge were not sufficiently difficult to identify the most knowledgeable respondents – approximately 33% of respondents answered each knowledge question correctly. It is possible that questions which required more detailed knowledge of the controversy might reveal different relationships.
12. Based on the reasoning above, we report exploratory results for individual outcome measures in Table 1 as well as the Online Appendix. These analyses were not preregistered.
13. See Online Appendix Table C5 for exploratory analyses of individual outcome measures. The results are largely similar to those presented in Table 3. We find that the negative interaction effect of the resentment prime is strongest for the claims that there is no evidence against Brady and that the NFL is punishing him as a distraction. We also find unexpected evidence that the group solidarity prime modestly decreased the negative relationship between Patriots favorability and belief that Judge Berman had been influenced.

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