Who Supports QAnon? A Case Study in Political Extremism

Abstract: The QAnon conspiracy theory has garnered increasing attention as more than 80 pro-QAnon congressional candidates vied for nominations in 2020 primary races. The QAnon movement is widely characterized as "far-right" and "growing," but such claims rest on flimsy evidence. Using 6 public opinion polls from 2018-2020, we find that support for QAnon is both meager and stable across time. QAnon also appears to find support among both the political right and left; rather than partisan valence, it is the *extremity* of political orientations that relates to QAnon support. Finally, we demonstrate that while QAnon supporters are "extreme," they are not so in the ideological sense. Rather, QAnon support is best explained by conspiratorial worldviews, dark triad personality traits, and a predisposition toward other non-normative behavior. These findings have implications for the study of conspiracy theories and the spread of fake news and suggest new directions for research on political extremism.

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At its core, the QAnon movement—which started in 2017 on the 4chan message board—is group of individuals who believe that the anonymous "Q" is posting secret clues about President Trump's battle with a "deep state" comprised of Satanic sex-trafficking pedophiles. QAnon's seeming ascendancy has captured the attention of mainstream media who claim that it is spreading "like wildfire," "exploding in popularity," and "infiltrating mainstream American life." Journalists compare the QAnon movement to the "Christian Right" and Tea Party and posit that the group—which is usually labeled "far-right" due to its support for Trump and because most Q-linked candidates are Republicans—is taking over the GOP.[1] This supposed growth has been attributed to social media, the 2020 pandemic, and the seeming increase in conspiracy theorizing. QAnon followers have repeatedly engaged in harassment and violence that have caught the FBI's attention; even Congress officially condemned the movement (Pecorin 2020).

While reporters have generated some useful empirical information about QAnon, basic questions about the size, structure, and characteristics of the group abound. Additionally, many of the reports about these issues are at odds with each other. For example, how can a group be both "extreme" and "mainstream?" Moreover, while journalists often label the movement "far-right," suggesting ideological or partisan goals, followers repeatedly call for the executions of numerous Republicans, and most of the small number of Q supporters who have committed violence appear to have psychological motivations unrelated to the major parties or mainstream ideological camps (Collins 2020).

Logical tension aside, little supportive evidence has been produced for the many empirical claims made about QAnon. Some reporting finds the number of QAnon groups on social media platforms troubling, but this is hardly evidence for the mainstreaming of QAnon.

[1] The Appendix contains a list of recent reporting about QAnon by major news outlets.

Indeed, the selective exposure thesis, especially combined with the goals of social media algorithms, can comfortably account for these patterns. Complicating matters further, polls gauging knowledge and support for QAnon reveal that of the Americans who have heard of it, most did so through mainstream sources and do not support it (e.g., Pew 2020).

In an effort to address discrepancies in claims about the size, scope, and composition of QAnon, we endeavor to provide answers to three questions: 1) Is support for the QAnon movement growing? 2) Does support for QAnon stem from "far-right" ideologies or identities? 3) What explains QAnon support? Utilizing the literature on conspiracy beliefs to guide our analyses, we find that support for QAnon is born more of anti-social personality traits and a predisposition toward conspiracy thinking than traditional political identities and motivations.

Our findings have several implications, beyond QAnon, for the study of conspiracy beliefs and political extremism. In particular, our findings suggest that traditional political orientations may be frequently, and erroneously, mistaken for extreme psychological ones found on both the political left and right. This conflation of motivations can hinder the development of effective strategies for inoculating individuals to or correcting conspiracy beliefs and also misdirect critical research into potentially dangerous extremist movements, like QAnon.

Data and Findings

We first examine the level of, and temporal change in, QAnon support using six representative opinion polls—four national U.S. polls and two polls of Floridians—spanning August 2018–October 2020.[2] Support for the "QAnon movement" is assessed via a 101-point feeling thermometer in each case, whereby 0 reflects very negative feelings and 100 very positive feelings. We ask about the "QAnon movement," specifically, because QAnon followers

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[2] Details about survey methodology and the characteristics of the samples appear in the Appendix.

view themselves this way: there is an oath, believers use hashtags to signify Q support (e.g., #WWG1WGA), and supporters often reference themselves as a "research *movement*." Moreover, both the FBI and the congressional resolution condemning QAnon consider it a "movement." While there are many specific beliefs that QAnon appears to encapsulate (e.g., Satanic pedophilia), there is no one "official" version. Like other conspiracy theories, QAnon is ill-defined and can be molded to accommodate any new circumstance or evidence. Thus, we use the simple feeling thermometer instrument to gauge general feelings toward the QAnon movement.[3]

In August of 2018, the average thermometer score among Floridians was 24. Two years later, a June 2020 sample of Floridians rated the QAnon movement 21, on average. To put this in context, respondents were also asked to rate Fidel Castro, a much-reviled figure in Florida; QAnon was rated higher than the dictator, on average, by only 2 points. The broader American public rated QAnon 21 in August 2019, 25 in March 2020, 24 in June 2020, and 16 in October 2020, on average. Figure 1A, which plots each of these quantities, reveals no growth in QAnon support over time. There is also no substantive change in the distribution of QAnon support: the stability in averages is not masking bimodality, for example. Histograms for each year, which provide supporting evidence to this effect, appear in the Appendix. Simply put, QAnon is relatively unpopular, and stably so, over time.

Next, we consider the relationship between QAnon support and both partisanship and ideological self-identifications in order to decipher whether QAnon support can be characterized as "far-right." For this and remaining analyses we employ the March 2020 national data in the main text, and replicate all analyses using the July 2019 national data in the Appendix. We additionally replicate our findings using responses to an alternative question about QAnon belief

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[3] For comparison, see the Appendix for polls using alternative measurement techniques, which support our findings.

in the October 2020 national data. In Figures 1B–C, we plot the QAnon thermometer responses

against standard measures of partisanship and ideology, along with LOWESS curves. For both

orientations, we observe parabolic relationships whereby self-identified "strong" partisans and

"extreme" ideologues exhibit more support for QAnon than Independents or weak/leaning

partisans and ideological group identifiers. This finding, while congruent with a growing

literature on the extremist roots of conspiracy beliefs (van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet 2015),

is in stark contrast to prevailing narratives about the nature of QAnon support. Extremity of self-

identification seems to matter more than partisan or ideological valence.

Figure 1: A) Support for the QAnon movement over time. B/C) Relationship between QAnon support and political identities, with LOWESS curves and 95% confidence bands. March 2020 data.
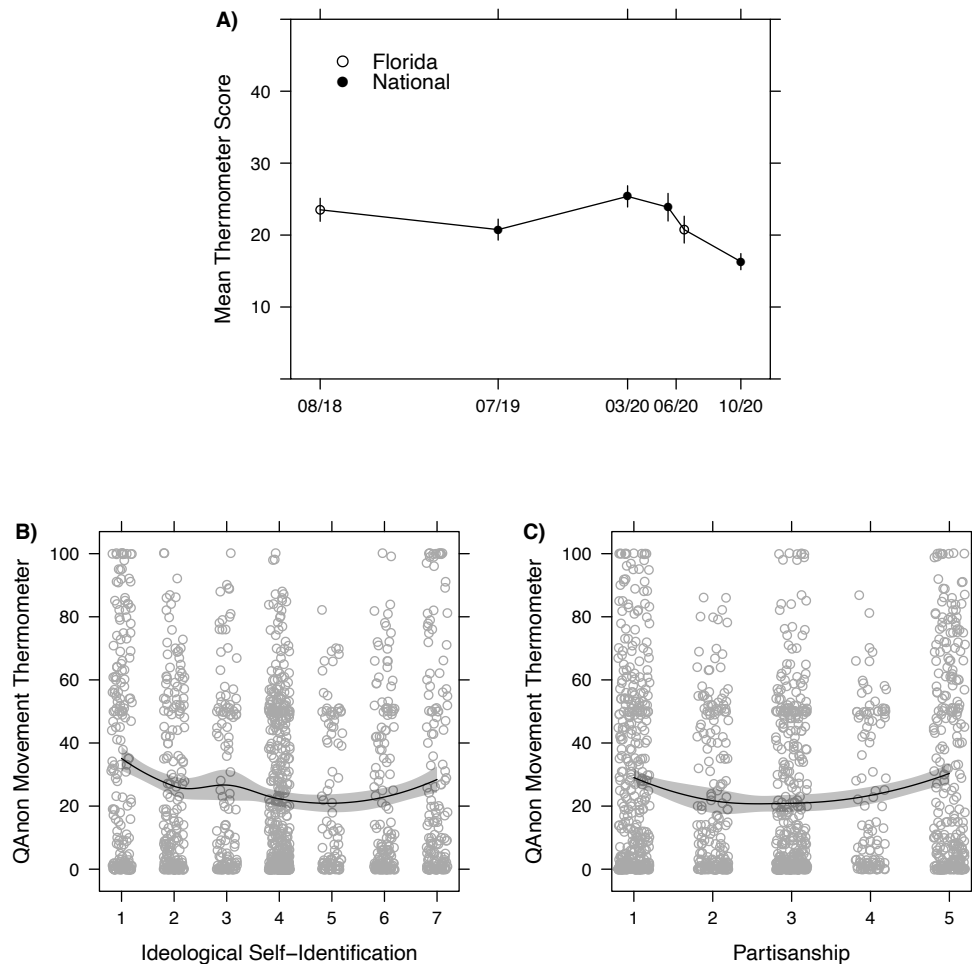
But, what exactly does "extremism" entail in this sense? Are people who identify as "extremely" ideological or "strong" partisans actually constrained ideologues and entrenched partisans? An examination of the relationship between differences in counter-party thermometers and QAnon support, which appears in the Appendix, suggests not. Rather it is individuals who are ambivalent about the parties and presidential candidates that show the most support for QAnon. We also reconsider the question of what extremity entails by examining the relationships between the strength of partisan and ideological orientations on the one hand, and psychological and behavioral correlates of beliefs in conspiracy theories and political extremism on the other. These correlates include conspiracy thinking, dark triad personality traits, the predisposition to share false information online, and the acceptance of political violence.

Conspiracy thinking is a predisposition to view major events as the products of conspiracies. Not only is this predisposition consistently related to specific conspiracy beliefs (Miller 2020), but others have found that extreme political self-identifiers exhibit higher levels of conspiracy belief (van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet 2015). The dark triad is a confluence of three primary anti-social personality traits—psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism— that are correlated with both conspiracy beliefs and political extremism (Douglas et al. 2019). Correlations appear in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlations between QAnon support, political predispositions, and correlates of conspiracy beliefs.

	Partisan Strength	Ideological Strength	QAnon Support
Conspiracy Thinking	0.049*	0.075***	0.261***
Dark Triad	0.104***	0.089***	0.413***
Spread False Info.	0.140***	0.062**	0.398***
Accept Violence	0.110***	0.098***	0.344***

Note: Pearson product-moment correlations. *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$. Partisan and ideological strength are "folded" (at the midpoint) versions of the partisanship and ideology measures.

We observe weak, but statistically significant, correlations between partisan/ideological extremity and the psychological traits and non-normative behavior. Correlations with QAnon support are considerably larger—up to 0.413 for dark triad personality traits. Thus, while self-identified partisan/ideological extremity may factor into QAnon support, it seems that the type of extremity that undergirds such support has less to do with traditional, left/right political concerns and more to do with extreme, anti-social psychological orientations and behavioral patterns.

Next, we turn to modeling QAnon support. A naïve model of QAnon support might include measures of partisanship and ideology, and controls for standard sociodemographic characteristics. Because we know that the relationship between political predispositions and QAnon support is parabolic, our baseline model also includes quadratic (squared) terms for each predisposition; but even this model seems inadequate given our exploration of political extremity and QAnon support. Thus, we build on this model by adding conspiracy thinking, dark triad personality traits, the predisposition to share false information online, and acceptance of political violence. We control for religiosity, education, age, income, gender, race, and ethnicity.[4]

Since partisanship and ideology are highly correlated, and the addition of quadratic terms additionally increases the variance inflation factors beyond common cutoffs, we present two models each—a reduced and full—for partisanship and ideology in Table 2. In each case the coefficient on every substantive predictor—except the acceptance of political violence—is statistically significant. Importantly, addition of the psychological correlates in the full models nearly doubles the model R^2 values. To better understand the substantive impact of the predictors, we present marginal effects graphically in Figure 2.[5]

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[4] Question wording and other measurement details appear in the Appendix. All variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1 so that the magnitude of coefficients can be compared. Full model results appear in the Appendix.
[5] All predictions except for ideology are from the full partisanship model; other independent variables held at their mean values. Marginal effects of the psychological variables from the ideology model appear in the Appendix.

Table 2: OLS regressions of QAnon support on explanatory factors. March 2020 national data.

	Partisanship Models		Ideology Models	
	Reduced	Full	Reduced	Full
Partisanship	-0.333***	-0.185*		
	(0.096)	(0.090)		
Partisanship^2	0.338***	0.189*		
	(0.096)	(0.090)		
Ideology			-0.368***	-0.234*
			(0.098)	(0.092)
Ideology^2			0.311**	0.212*
			(0.097)	(0.091)
Conspiracy Thinking		0.101***		0.096**
		(0.030)		(0.031)
Dark Triad		0.222***		0.216***
		(0.043)		(0.043)
Spread False Info.		0.153***		0.159***
		(0.028)		(0.028)
Violence Attitudes		0.028		0.027
		(0.031)		(0.031)
Sociodemographic Controls?	✓	✓	✓	✓
R^2	0.128	0.246	0.131	0.247

Note: OLS coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$; $n=1418$.

Figure 2: Predicted QAnon thermometer scores with 95% confidence bands. March 2020 data.
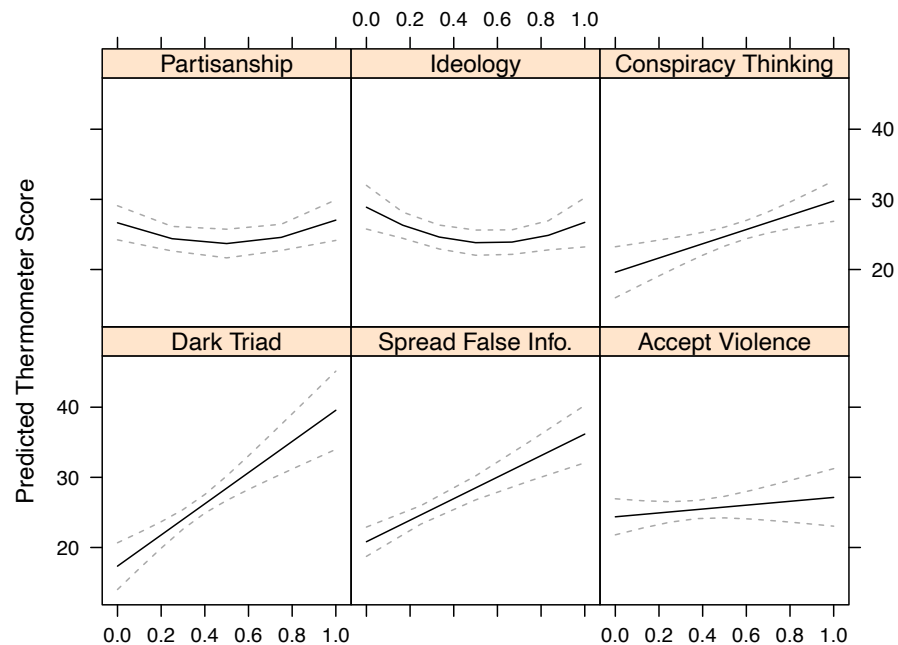
The magnitude of the marginal effects point toward two conclusions. First, QAnon is probably not a product of strong attachments to traditional political groups or objects, like the parties, candidates, or ideological labels. Not only do we observe no difference in QAnon support by partisan or ideological valence, the average difference in support between extreme identifiers and Independents/moderates is a maximum of 5 thermometer points. Second, QAnon support is considerably more strongly related to conspiracy thinking (10-point average difference from minimum value to maximum value), dark triad personality traits (23-point difference), and the predisposition to share false information online (19-point difference), than (the strength of) political orientations. Thus, QAnon support does appear to be born of extremity, albeit one founded in anti-social personality traits and behaviors.

Conclusion

Despite relatively large-scale social media activity, our findings show that such activity may not translate into public support. Indeed, support for QAnon is meager and stable, revealing a vast chasm between news coverage and polling data. This comports with studies finding that online fake news and conspiracy theories are less influential than popularly assumed (Guess, Nagler, and Tucker 2019, Guess, Nyhan, and Reifler 2020, Bail et al. 2019). In other words, QAnon support may be deeper than it is wide. Of course, this does not imply that QAnon support cannot grow or become more politically influential, regardless of size. With Trump's and other leaders' continuing overtures to the group, QAnon could potentially become a larger movement, but we should caution journalists about making such claims until there is evidence of growth.

Furthermore, the "far-right" lacks a monopoly on QAnon support in our polls. Rather, Q finds support among extreme/strong conservatives/Republicans and liberals/Democrats, alike. However, even this finding is somewhat illusory. Political extremists are not merely farther to

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the poles along a unidimensional partisan or ideological continuum than their more moderate counterparts. Instead, extremity appears to define a second substantive dimension of political identification, as the parabolic relationships we uncover suggest: not left-right ideologues or steadfast partisans, but people who, irrespective of political commitments, exhibit elevated levels of conspiracy thinking, dark triad traits, and anti-social behavior. QAnon supporters, like other conspiracy theorists (Enders 2019), do not love the parties, or hold coherent, constrained policy positions. Political extremism is better cast as a toxic blend of partisan/ideological valence and other non-normative traits than as a deep entrenchment within the party system.

Our findings emphasize the gap in our understanding and measurement of political extremism. Questions about the "self" could be markers of psychological traits not intended to be measured by researchers. Likewise, people identifying as "extreme" may not necessarily be expressing deep-seated partisan commitments or constrained ideology. While partisan and ideological valence are far from irrelevant, extremism likely requires additional ingredients. Political scientists have long sought to understand Independents and their unwillingness to identify as partisans or ideologues; perhaps a new focus is needed on "extremists."

The recent influx of extremist political activity in the U.S. should prompt researchers to further invest in the study of extremism—what extremity entails, what makes people hold extreme views, and what the consequences of those views are. These questions are especially pressing during a polarized political climate in which extremism regularly carries the burdens of normative concerns and democratic failures. Particularly, we must distinguish between traditional political identities and motivations and other social and psychological ingredients of extremist behavior. To continue to conflate these two broad categories of motivations is to misdirect the development of strategies to address conspiracy beliefs and extremist behavior.

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