



# What motivates a conspiracy theory? Birther beliefs, partisanship, liberal-conservative ideology, and anti-Black attitudes<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Despite the release of his birth certificate, some Americans express continued skepticism over whether Barack Obama was born in the United States. This study examined two possible causes of birther beliefs: that Republicans and conservatives, whose ideological beliefs and policy preferences led to disapproval of the president, might be particularly prone to accepting birther beliefs, and that negative attitudes toward Blacks led some Americans to disapprove of the President and accept foreign birthplace claims. A nationally representative survey of Americans showed that birther sentiments were predominant among conservatives/Republicans and individuals holding anti-Black attitudes. These relations were mediated by disapproval of the president. Hence, it appears that birther beliefs were motivated both by politically-grounded disapproval and racially-driven disapproval of the president.

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## 1. Introduction

“They say in Hawaii, but I don’t believe it” –Survey respondent

Evidence from across the social sciences indicates that many individuals cling to verifiably incorrect beliefs. In American politics, a variety of such beliefs have gained

notoriety for their perceived political relevance, such as that President Kennedy was assassinated by an as-yet-undiscovered group of conspirators (cf. McCauley and Jacques, 1979), that the September 11 hijackings were domestically orchestrated (Stempel et al., 2007), that President Obama is Muslim (Hartman and Newmark, 2012), and that the Affordable Care Act included a provision that would allow bureaucrats to make individual decisions regarding which seriously ill people should live or die (Nyhan, 2010). The persistence of such incorrect beliefs even in the face of contradictory information, has long been lamented (Goertzel, 1994; Nyhan and Reifler, 2010).

One surprisingly prevalent recent claim has concerned the President’s place of birth. Despite more than four years in the White House and the release of his birth certificate,

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some Americans continued to believe that Mr. Obama was not born in the United States. According to surveys between 2008 and 2012, between 15 and 45 percent of Americans subscribed to so-called “birther” beliefs (see [Krosnick et al., 2014](#); [Traugott and Jardinia, 2013](#)) If true, this would mean that many Americans regard Mr. Obama as ineligible to serve as the nation’s first Black president ([Howell, 2012](#); [Krosnick et al., 2014](#)).

This study examines explanations for birther beliefs. Specifically, we explore the possibility that individuals who disapprove of the president may be most likely to accept negative information about him ([Kunda, 1990](#)). This disapproval could be motivated by a mismatch between the citizen and the President in terms of partisanship and liberal/conservative self-identification or by attitudes toward Blacks. People who disapprove of the president might, in turn, latch onto information about the president that could undermine his legitimacy, such as the claim that he was born overseas and therefore was ineligible for his office (cf. [Nyhan, 2010](#)).

To explore these possibilities, we first outline potential pathways to birther beliefs involving partisanship, liberal/conservative self-identification, and attitudes toward Blacks. We then describe how data were collected, show the demographic and attitudinal correlates of birther beliefs, and analyzed the data to test for the existence of birther beliefs motivated by disapproval of the president. We replicate the results using two measures of attitudes toward Blacks to ensure that they are robust to alternative strategies for measuring these constructs.

### 1.1. Motivated reasoning

Examinations of misinformation and of past conspiracy theories provide evidence that individuals accept incorrect claims when they are motivated to hold particular perceptions of the world. As information about the political world comes in, it is filtered through beliefs ([Berinsky, 2012](#); [Kunda, 1990](#); [Lewandowsky et al., 2005](#)). In line with theories of cognitive dissonance ([Festinger, 1957](#)), individuals are more likely to accept information that confirms existing schemata and more likely to discount or reject contradictory information ([Lewandowsky et al., 2012](#); [Taber and Lodge, 2006](#); [Zaller, 1992](#)). Variations in birther beliefs should therefore depend on the extent to which those beliefs correspond with pre-existing attitudes and beliefs.

In particular, individuals who disapprove of the president may be motivated to accept information that makes Mr. Obama seem illegitimate ([Lebo and Cassino, 2007](#)). Such information would serve to confirm their disapproval and thereby validate their opinions. That disapproval could itself emerge as a function of political disagreement or through negative perceptions of the president personally. Republicans and self-identified conservatives might be expected to disapprove of Mr. Obama for political reasons, namely because they oppose his policies and stances on issues (and those of his party). In this vein, attitudes toward the president might stem from partisanship and liberal/conservative self-identification ([Krosnick et al., 2014](#)). Because of this disapproval, these individuals may be susceptible to negative information about the president such

as rumors about his birthplace. In contrast, individuals holding more liberal political and ideological orientations might be predisposed to approve of Mr. Obama and to reject outlandish claims about his citizenship.

**H1a.** Conservatives and Republicans are more likely to hold birther beliefs than liberals and Democrats.

**H2a.** People’s approval or disapproval of President Obama will mediate relations linking partisanship and ideology with birther beliefs.

Alternatively, this same motivational pathway might be activated by anti-Black sentiments. Individuals who dislike Blacks and, by extension, Mr. Obama may be more likely to disapprove of the president. Attitudes toward Blacks could fuel disapproval perhaps because disliking Blacks would lead to a dislike of the president and his presidency (see also [Kunda and Sinclair, 1999](#); [Pasek et al., 2014](#)). Just as it is the case for disapproval based on political disagreement or ideology, individuals who disapprove of the president because of his race may be more susceptible for information that invalidates the legitimacy of his presidency. In contrast, people with positive attitudes toward Blacks and toward Mr. Obama should be more resistant to the claims of birtherism.

**H1b.** : Individuals holding anti-Black attitudes are more likely to hold birther beliefs than those holding neutral or pro-Black attitudes.

**H2b.** : People’s approval or disapproval of President Obama will mediate relations linking attitudes toward Blacks with birther beliefs.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Data

Data for the current study come from a 2012 survey conducted by The Associated Press, GfK KnowledgePanel® (formerly Knowledge Networks), Stanford University, and the University of Michigan. Data were collected by GfK from a probability sample of American adults who had been recruited to join GfK’s online panel and had agreed to complete questionnaires regularly via the Internet. Most individuals were initially recruited using Address Based Sampling (ABS) techniques. Panelists were sampled by mailing random households selected from the US Postal Service’s Computerized Delivery Sequence File. A small number of individuals who joined the panel prior to 2010 had been recruited via random digit dial techniques. Panelists who did not have high-speed Internet access at home were provided with a laptop and/or broadband Internet connection as needed.

Data collection proceeded in two parts. An initial survey presented respondents with only the Affect Misattribution Procedure (AMP), a measure of implicit prejudice (fielded August 3 to August 20, 2012). All self-report measures were administered in a follow-up survey with those who had completed the AMP (fielded August 30 to September 11). For the purposes of the current study, we were only interested in the 1071 individuals who completed the self-report wave (CUMRR1 = 4.3%; [Callegaro and DiSogra, 2008](#)). All survey

data were weighted using a raking procedure to match Current Population Survey statistics for gender, race, education, and Census region among all American adults at the time of data collection. The current study uses data from the 791 non-Hispanic White Americans in the sample.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Birtherism

Respondents were asked: “Where was Barack Obama born, as far as you know?” Open-ended responses were coded into three separate dummy variables. *US Born* was coded 1 for responses that indicated locations in the United States and 0 otherwise. *Non-US* was coded 1 for responses that indicated a place outside of the United States and 0 otherwise. *Unclear* was coded 1 for responses that indicated the United States answer but indicated skepticism (e.g. “Hawaii supposedly”) and answers that did not mention a specific location (e.g. “1961”) and 0 for all other responses. Coding of all answers to the open-ended question is shown in Table 1.

Respondents who did not give an answer or who answered, “don’t know” were asked: “Is it your best guess that Obama was born in the United States, or in another country?” Response options for this question were “In the United States” and “In another country.” Respondents who

chose “In the United States” were coded as 1 for *US Born* and 0 for the other variables. Respondents who chose “In another country” were coded 1 for *Non-US* and 0 for the other variables.

A combined birther variable was coded ordinally with individuals giving a US answer in the highest category (2), individuals with an unclear response in the middle category (1), and those with a non-US answer in the lowest category (0).

2.2.2. Liberal/conservative self-identification

Respondents were asked: “Generally speaking, do you consider yourself ...” Response options were “Very liberal”, “Somewhat liberal”, “Moderate”, “Somewhat conservative”, “Very conservative”. Responses were recoded into two dummy variables. For *Liberal*, respondents saying “Very liberal” and “Somewhat liberal” were coded 1, and all others were coded 0. For *Conservative*, respondents saying “Very conservative” and “Somewhat conservative” were coded 1, and all others were coded 0.

2.2.3. Party identification

Respondents were asked: “Do you consider yourself a Democrat, Republican, an independent, a supporter of some other party, or none of these?” Dummy variables were coded to identify *Democrats* and *Republicans*.

Table 1

Verbatim open-ended responses to Obama birthplace measure and coding categories among all non-Hispanic White Americans (n).

	US		Uncertain	Non-US
Open-Ended Responses	Hawaii (269) hawaii (106) USA (8) Usa (8) HAWAII (6) Hawii (6) United States (4) hawii (4) us (4)	Hawaii, US Hawaii, usa hawaii, USA Hawaii!!!!!!!!!!!! Hawaii????? hawaii????????????? Hawaii* HAWAIII hawiia	1961 (2) A hospital africa AFRICA.....Hawaii black and rich Claims Hawaii Don't Care Don't really know - he says HI dont care we will never know and he has been president so if it is true that he was not born in us you cannot change anything hawaii but i don't believe it Hawaii supposedly islam supposed to be Hawaii Supposidely Hawaii,which I do not believe They say Hawaii they say in hawii but I don't belive it We are told Hawaii Who Knows	Kenya (15) kenya (11) Africa (9) africa (3) KENYA (2) not in the u.s. (2) AFRICA indonesia kenya, africa  kenya or indonesia Kenya, Africa not America Not here not here in the US  not in america NOT IN AMERICA. Not in the States Not in the U.S.
	Hawaii, USA (3) united states (3) Hawai (2) Hawai'i (2) Hawaii? (2)	HI Hi hi HI. hiwaae	I do not believe who knows never got proof	not in the united states NOT IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA Not in the US for sure. Not in the USA not in the USA out of country south america thailand the bush
	“Hawaii” “hawaii” america America and if anyone says otherwise they are retarded chicago h	Honolulu honolulu Hawaii Honolulu, HI New York  New york? ohio		
	haw. hawaai Hawaaii Hawaii as on his birth certificate Hawaii I think Hawaii United States Hawaii USA	U.S. u.s. US Usa USA–HAWAII USA Hawaii		
Open-Ended N	466		20	63
Closed-Ended N	105		25	112
Total N	571		45	175

#### 2.2.4. Attitudes toward Blacks

A large number of strategies have been proposed for measuring attitudes toward Blacks in the American public, each with a set of different assumptions. For the current study, we incorporated two measures of attitudes toward Blacks: Symbolic Racism and stereotypes of Blacks. Full question wording and coding for each of these measures is shown in the [online appendix](#). Both indexes were scaled to range from 0 (most pro-Black) to 1 (most anti-Black). These items were chosen because the two sets of measures have been well validated, were closely associated with political outcomes in recent studies (Knuckey, 2011; Pasek et al., 2014; Piston, 2010), and we wanted to ensure that any results were robust to concerns over the conflation of racial attitude measures with related constructs (cf. Sears, 1994; Sniderman and Tetlock, 1986; Tesler and Sears, 2010).

#### 2.2.5. Job approval

Respondents were asked: “Overall, do you approve, disapprove, or neither approve nor disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as President?” Responses were coded 1 = Strongly approve, .75 = Somewhat approve, .50 = Have mixed feelings, .25 = Somewhat disapprove, and 0 = Strongly disapprove.

#### 2.2.6. Demographics

Age, education, gender, and marital status were included as covariates in all regressions.

### 2.3. Analyses

We first looked at the demographics of people who believed that the president was not born in the United States. We then used ordinal logistic regression to predict birther beliefs with demographics, partisanship, liberal/conservative self-identification, and attitudes toward Blacks. Structural equation models (SEM) tested hypotheses that relations linking partisanship/ideology, and attitudes toward Blacks with birther beliefs would be mediated by approval the president's job performance.

For all analyses, missing data were imputed using either multiple imputation (regressions) or maximum likelihood imputation (SEM). Data for regression predictors were imputed using multiple imputation via chained equations (MICE); beliefs about the president's birth were not imputed when they were missing. Five imputed datasets were created, and all regressions were run separately in each of the five datasets. Results were pooled across all five datasets to produce the coefficients shown.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. A taxonomy of conspiracy

Although most White Americans believed that the president was born in the United States, a sizable proportion did not believe this was the case. Overall, 71.8% of White Americans listed a US location (or answered US to the follow-up question) when asked to identify Mr. Obama's place of birth. The modal response was some variant of “Hawaii,” although some individuals who reported

answers in the United States placed the president elsewhere (e.g. “chicago”). All open-ended responses are shown verbatim in [Table 1](#). 21.7% of White Americans made it clear that they did not believe that President Obama was born in the United States. Their answers included “not in the USA,” “thailand,” “the bush,” and most frequently “Kenya.” Another 6.4% of responses could not be clearly categorized, either because they reported a US answer but indicated skepticism (e.g. “Don't really know – he says HI”, “Claims Hawaii”), did not answer the question the way it was intended (e.g. “1961”, “Don't Care”), or provided an answer that could not be coded such as “africa” (presumably intended as either “America” or “Africa”).

### 3.2. Correlates of birther beliefs

A variety of demographic attributes were associated with White Americans' beliefs that the President was not born in the United States. [Table 2](#) shows the distributions of demographic categories across each of the three categorizations for the president's birthplace as well as the overall distribution of birthplace beliefs in the weighted sample. One notable correlate was education. Among individuals who graduated from college, 11.8% asserted that Mr. Obama was born abroad and 84.5% stated that he was born in the United States. Conversely, more than one-third of the individuals who did not graduate high school did not believe Mr. Obama was born in the US (35.4%). These differences were again statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ; [Table 2](#)). Among other demographics, age group and region of the country were correlated with birther beliefs ( $ps < .05$ ) whereas gender and marital status were unrelated to birther beliefs ( $ps > .05$ ; [Table 2](#)).

Bivariate relations also linked partisanship, liberal/conservative self-identification, and attitudes toward Blacks with birther beliefs. Around one in ten Democrats reported a non-US birthplace for the president in contrast with 32.9% of Republicans ( $p < .001$ ; [Table 2](#)). These distinctions were even stronger for liberal/conservative self-identification. More than 90% of self-reported liberals asserted a US birthplace whereas more than one-third of conservatives indicated that the president was born outside of the United States ( $p < .001$ ). Similarly, symbolic racism and negative stereotypes of Blacks were each associated with birther beliefs in separate ordinal logistic regressions when additional variables were not controlled ( $bs = 2.65$  and  $1.44$ ,  $ses = .46$  and  $.43$  respectively,  $ps < .001$ ; not shown). Hence, we find initial evidence that the theorized variables were indeed related to birther beliefs.

### 3.3. Predicting birther beliefs

Multivariate ordinal logistic regressions revealed that relations linking partisanship and liberal/conservative self-identification with birther beliefs were robust to controls for demographics as well as attitudes toward Blacks ([H1a](#)). All else being equal, Democrats were less likely than other individuals to ascribe to birther beliefs ( $b = -.85$ ,  $s.e. = .27$ ,  $p = .002$ ; [Table 3](#)), though Republicans and independents were not statistically distinguishable from one-another

**Table 2**  
Birthplace belief categorization by demographic categories among non-Hispanic White Americans (weighted).

Category	Birthplace belief				N	p
	US	Unsure	NonUS	Total		
Gender						
Male (49.2%)	71.6%	6.5%	21.8%	100.0%		
Female (50.8%)	72.0%	6.3%	21.7%	100.0%		
Total	71.8%	6.4%	21.7%	100.0%	791	.69
Marital Status						
Not married (44.8%)	72.4%	6.1%	21.6%	100.0%		
Married (55.2%)	71.4%	6.8%	21.9%	100.0%		
Total	71.8%	6.4%	21.7%	100.0%	791	.91
Age Category						
Age 18–24 (11.2%)	73.1%	7.2%	19.6%	100.0%		
Age 25–34 (18.7%)	80.0%	4.3%	15.8%	100.0%		
Age 35–44 (16.8%)	65.3%	12.2%	22.5%	100.0%		
Age 45–54 (17.3%)	70.2%	10.3%	19.5%	100.0%		
Age 55–64 (18.4%)	70.4%	4.7%	24.9%	100.0%		
Age 65–74 (12.4%)	79.8%	1.4%	18.8%	100.0%		
Age 75 and Older (5.2%)	58.6%	2.2%	39.2%	100.0%		
Total	71.8%	6.4%	21.7%	100.0%	791	.003
Education Category						
< High school (11.0%)	53.2%	11.4%	35.4%	100.0%		
High school (30.8%)	69.1%	6.0%	24.9%	100.0%		
Some college (28.9%)	68.3%	7.9%	23.9%	100.0%		
BA or higher (29.3%)	84.5%	3.7%	11.8%	100.0%		
Total	71.8%	6.4%	21.7%	100.0%	791	<.001
Region						
Northeast (18.1%)	73.7%	3.6%	22.8%	100.0%		
Midwest (22.6%)	72.3%	6.2%	21.5%	100.0%		
South (35.0%)	65.7%	8.9%	25.3%	100.0%		
West (24.2%)	80.7%	5.0%	14.3%	100.0%		
Total	71.8%	6.4%	21.7%	100.0%	791	.04
Party Identification						
Republican (37.0%)	62.3%	4.8%	32.9%	100.0%		
Independent (35.6%)	69.5%	12.0%	18.5%	100.0%		
Democrat (27.4%)	87.9%	1.0%	11.1%	100.0%		
Total	71.8%	6.4%	21.7%	100.0%	791	<.001
Ideology						
Conservative (41.8%)	58.7%	5.1%	36.2%	100.0%		
Moderate (40.4%)	76.5%	9.4%	14.0%	100.0%		
Liberal (17.8%)	90.6%	2.5%	6.9%	100.0%		
Total	71.8%	6.4%	21.7%	100.0%	791	<.001
Presidential Job Approval						
Strongly disapprove (39.0%)	50.2%	7.8%	42.0%	100.0%		
Disapprove (12.5%)	71.0%	4.6%	24.4%	100.0%		
Neither (21.5%)	81.8%	7.6%	10.6%	100.0%		
Approve (17.8%)	93.0%	2.3%	4.7%	100.0%		
Strongly approve (9.2%)	97.7%	.0%	2.3%	100.0%		
Total	71.8%	6.4%	21.7%	100.0%	791	<.001

Note – p values calculated using Fisher's Exact.

( $b = -.06$ ,  $s.e. = .21$ ,  $p = .76$ ). To assess the scope of this difference, we generated predicted probabilities of each birthplace belief for a married college-educated Southern White woman aged 55–65 (modal categories for all predictors) with moderate ideology and the median level of attitudes toward Blacks using the coefficients in Table 3. For such an individual, Democratic identification would be predicted to increase the probability of asserting that Mr. Obama was born in the United States by 16.2 percentage points (from 65.1% to 81.3%) over an otherwise identical individual identifying as an independent.

Birthplace beliefs were even more strongly associated with conservative self-identification ( $b = 1.00$ ,  $s.e. = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Table 3). Compared to a moderate with modal values on all predictors, we estimate that a self-reported conservative would be 22.7 percentage points more likely

to accept a non-US birthplace for the president (49.0% vs. 26.3%). Indeed, self-reported conservatives were the only group predicted to report a foreign birthplace more frequently than an American one (49.0% vs 40.9%). Self-reported liberals did not significantly differ from moderates in these beliefs ( $b = -.34$ ,  $s.e. = .35$ ,  $p = .34$ ). The lack of statistical significance for Republicans and liberals can likely be attributed to shared variance between partisanship and liberal/conservative self-identification.<sup>1</sup>

Measures of attitudes towards Blacks were also significant predictors of birthplace beliefs when controlling for

<sup>1</sup> Testing these measures independently revealed that Republican was statistically significant when conservative was removed and that liberal was statistically significant when Democrat was removed.

**Table 3**  
Ordinal logistic regressions predicting birthplace belief with partisanship, liberal/conservative self-identification, and one of two different racial attitude measures among non-Hispanic White Americans (weighted).

	Attitudes toward blacks measure	
	Symbolic racism	Black stereotypes
Democrat	-.85 (.27)**	-.88 (.27)**
Republican	-.06 (.21)	-.04 (.21)
Liberal	-.34 (.35)	-.34 (.35)
Conservative	1.00 (.22)***	1.12 (.22)***
Attitudes toward Blacks	1.63 (.54)**	1.11 (.48)*
Female	.17 (.18)	.17 (.18)
Married	-.05 (.19)	-.06 (.19)
Age 25–34	.17 (.37)	.25 (.37)
Age 35–44	.80 (.35)*	.83 (.35)*
Age 45–54	.39 (.35)	.46 (.34)
Age 55–64	.51 (.34)	.55 (.34)
Age 65–74	-.06 (.40)	.00 (.40)
Age 75 and older	1.01 (.43)*	1.06 (.43)*
Education – High School	-.84 (.30)**	-.83 (.30)**
Education – Some College	-.77 (.30)**	-.79 (.30)**
Education – BA or higher	-1.76 (.33)***	-1.82 (.33)***
Region – Midwest	-.05 (.26)	.02 (.26)
Region – South	.28 (.25)	.30 (.24)
Region – West	-.10 (.31)	-.04 (.31)
Cutpoints:		
US Unsure	1.71 (.54)**	1.40 (.52)**
Unsure NonUS	2.12 (.54)***	1.81 (.52)***
N	791	791
McFadden's Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.122	.119

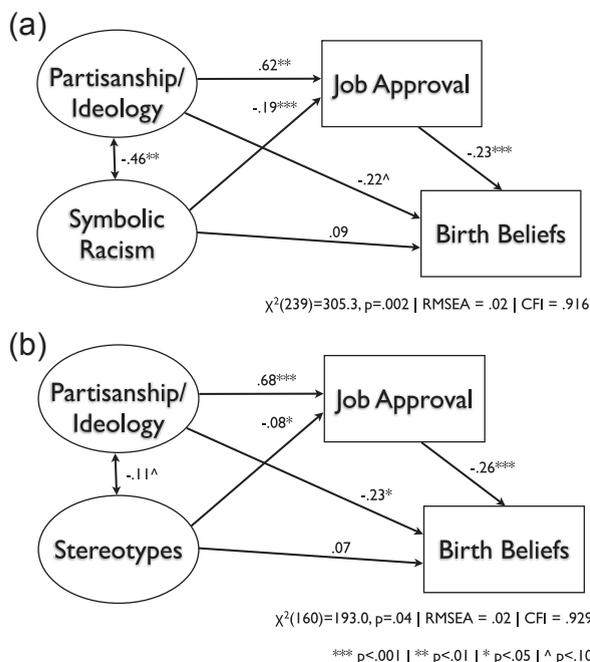
Note – Omitted categories were independent, moderate liberal/conservative self-identification, age 18–24, Education – Less than HS, Male, Region – Northeast, and Unmarried. \**p* < .05 | \*\**p* < .01 | \*\*\**p* < .001.

partisanship, liberal/conservative self-identification, and demographics (H1b). Symbolic racism (*b* = 1.63, *s.e.* = .54, *p* = .002) and endorsement of stereotypes of Blacks (*b* = 1.11, *s.e.* = .48, *p* = .02) were each related to greater endorsement of birther beliefs in separate models. Moving across the interquartile range of symbolic racism represented an 8.6 percentage point difference in reports that the president was born in the United States for a moderate, independent with modal values on all demographic variables (68.9% for the 25th percentile of attitudes toward Blacks to 60.3% for the 75th percentile). Movement across the interquartile range of stereotypes accounted for a 6.2 percentage point difference in endorsement of birther beliefs (22.0%–28.2%). Hence, partisanship, liberal/conservative self-identification, and attitudes toward Blacks all appear to be independently related to perceptions of Mr. Obama's birthplace.

3.4. Mediation

To test whether negative attitudes toward the president might motivate perceptions of a non-US birth and account for the influence of partisanship, liberal/conservative self-identification, and attitudes toward Blacks on birther beliefs, we used the structural equation modeling (SEM) program MPlus. Due to a large portion of shared variance between indicators for Republican, Democrat, conservative, and liberal, these items loaded onto a single partisanship/ideology measure for the SEM analysis. Partisanship/ideology and attitudes toward Blacks were treated as two separate latent variables and were used to predict both presidential job approval and birther beliefs. In addition, birther beliefs were also predicted with presidential job approval. Demographic covariates were controlled for all predictions. In this manner, it was possible to calculate both the direct influence of partisanship/ideology and attitudes toward Blacks on birther beliefs as well as the indirect relation mediated by presidential job approval. Parameters of two models were estimates – one for each racial attitude measure – and both demonstrated adequate goodness of fit (RMSEAs below .05 and CFIs above .90; Fig. 1; Hu and Bentler, 1999).<sup>2</sup>

Partisanship/ideology and attitudes toward Blacks each independently predicted presidential job approval. This was true for models incorporating either set of racial attitude measures. Individuals who were more Democratic/liberal were relatively more likely to approve of the President's job performance (std. βs = .62 and .68, ps = .002 and .001 respectively; Fig. 1). Individuals who reported more anti-Black attitudes were less likely to approve of Mr. Obama's performance than those with more pro-Black views (std. βs = -.19 and -.08 respectively, ps < .02). These relations suggest that partisanship/ideology and attitudes toward Blacks relate to disapproving of the



**Fig. 1.** Structural equation models predicting birther beliefs with partisanship/ideology and measures of attitudes toward Blacks and assessing mediation through job approval. Standardized coefficients shown. Separate models shown for symbolic racism (a) and endorsement of stereotypes of Blacks (b).

<sup>2</sup> Loadings for partisanship/ideology and racial attitude indicators are not shown for the sake of parsimony; they can be found in the online appendix. Job approval (5-categories) and Birther beliefs (3-categories) were both predicted using ordinal logistic regression. Estimations were produced using weighted least squares with variance adjustment (WLSMV).

president, in line with the motivated reasoning expectations (H2a and H2b).

Further, both partisanship/ideology and attitudes toward Blacks were indirectly related to birther beliefs via presidential approval (H2a and H2b). Significant negative relations between approval and birther beliefs were apparent in both models (std.  $\beta$ s =  $-.23$  and  $-.26$ ,  $ps < .001$ ; Fig. 1). Combining both estimated pathways, we find significant indirect relations linking partisanship/ideology with birther beliefs in both models (std.  $\beta$ s =  $-.14$  and  $-.18$ ,  $ps = .002$  and  $.004$ ). Similar significant pathways exist for the indirect pathway between attitudes toward Blacks and birther beliefs (std.  $\beta$ s =  $.04$  and  $.02$ ,  $ps = .006$  and  $.04$  for symbolic racism and stereotypes respectively). These pathways are in line with hypotheses positing that individuals accepting the birther narrative may have been otherwise motivated to disapprove of Mr. Obama.

Finally, direct relations from partisanship/ideology to birther beliefs indicated that some of the correspondence between these measures may not have been mediated by presidential approval. Holding presidential approval constant, more Democratic/liberal individuals were somewhat less likely to endorse birther beliefs in both models (std.  $\beta$ s =  $-.22$  and  $-.23$ ,  $ps = .07$  and  $.04$ ; Fig. 1). Direct relations linking attitudes toward Blacks with birther beliefs also trended in the same direction as indirect relations, but were not statistically significant (std.  $\beta$ s =  $.09$  and  $.07$ ,  $ps = .20$  and  $.19$ ; Fig. 1). Hence, these relations do not provide evidence of an alternative pathway linking attitudes toward Blacks with birther beliefs.

#### 4. Discussion

This study is among the first to explore the mechanisms through which overarching political and attitudes toward Blacks might result in acceptance of conspiracy theories. Partisanship, liberal/conservative self-identification, and racial animus appear to provide a basis for accepting claims that President Obama was not actually born in the United States (H1a and H1b). Our results also provide general support for the notion that birther beliefs are predominant among those motivated to disapprove of the president (H2a and H2b). Indeed, much of the pathway linking partisanship, liberal/conservative self-identification, and attitudes toward Blacks to birther beliefs can be accounted for by controlling for presidential job approval.

The results of this study fall in line with a growing body of evidence that individuals preexisting beliefs may predispose them toward accepting misinformation. In particular, we find evidence consonant with the notion that political and attitudes toward Blacks – which have generally been found to be stable over time (Converse, 1962; Jennings and Markus, 1984; Miller, 1979; Tesler and Sears, 2010) – can facilitate acceptance of inaccurate claims (Fischle, 2000; Nyhan, 2010).

Although the current study presents evidence consistent with the proposal that presidential approval mediates relations between anti-Black attitudes and birther beliefs, this is far from the only mechanism that may be at play. Recent evidence from psychology provides some reason to expect that anti-Black attitudes may be more directly associated

with perceptions that President Obama is un-American. In particular, many White Americans appear to view Whiteness as central to American identity (Devos and Banaji, 2005; Devos and Ma, 2012), and this schema appears to be predominant among those who hold negative views of non-Whites (Yogeeswaran and Dasgupta, 2010). Individuals associating Whiteness and American identity might therefore be more prone to accepting a foreign birthplace for Mr. Obama when confronted with circulating claims that he was born in Kenya or perhaps elsewhere. The lack of a direct pathway linking attitudes toward Blacks with birther beliefs is not in line with these expectations, but we cannot conclude these pathways are not present from the current data. It remains quite possible that the direct pathway here is either not strong enough to reach statistical significance or that the directionality of the model presented here is somewhat misspecified. The data used for the present study were cross-sectional, making the directional relations presented at best theoretically justified.

Taken together, the current results provide evidence in line with hypotheses that the individuals most motivated to disapprove of the president – due to partisanship, liberal/conservative self-identification, and attitudes toward Blacks – were the most likely to hold beliefs that he was not born in the United States (and therefore that he was illegitimate). Controlling for presidential job approval provided further evidence in line with this proposed pathway. Birther beliefs thus appear to emerge from a general disapproval of the president motivated by both political and attitudinal predispositions toward that disapproval.

#### Author note

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#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2014.09.009>.

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