For immediate release…**Thursday, January 17, 2013** 9 pp.
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CONSPIRACY THEORIES PROSPER: 25% OF AMERICANS ARE "TRUTHERS"

Sixty-three percent of registered voters in the U.S. buy into at least one political conspiracy theory, according to results from a recent Fairleigh Dickinson University PublicMind Poll. The nationwide survey of registered voters asked Americans to evaluate four different political conspiracy theories: 56 percent of Democrats and 75 percent of Republicans say that at least one is likely true. This includes 36 percent who think that President Obama is hiding information about his background and early life, 25 percent who think that the government knew about 9/11 in advance, and 19 percent who think the 2012 Presidential election was stolen. Generally, the more people know about current events, the less likely they are to believe in conspiracy theories – but not among Republicans, where more knowledge leads to greater belief in political conspiracies.

The most popular of these conspiracy theories is the belief that President Obama is hiding important information about his background and early life, which would include what's often referred to "birtherism." Thirty-six percent of Americans think this is probably true, including 64 percent of Republicans and 14 percent of Democrats.

"This conspiracy theory is much more widely believed mostly because it's been discussed so often," said Dan Cassino, a professor of political science at Fairleigh Dickinson University and an analyst for the poll. "People tend to believe that where there's smoke, there's fire – so the more smoke they see, the more likely they are to believe that something is going on."

However, belief in such conspiracies is not limited to the political right. Twenty-five percent of registered voters think it's probably true that President Bush knew about the 9/11 terrorist attacks before they happened, a figure that includes 36 percent of Democrats. Similarly, 23 percent of those interviewed say that President Bush's supporters committed significant voter fraud to win him the 2004 Presidential election in Ohio. Belief in this conspiracy theory is highest among Democrats, (37 percent say it is likely true), though 17 percent of independents and 9 percent of Republicans think so as well.

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"It's easy to discount conspiracy theories about 9/11," said Cassino, "but this isn't some fringe belief. Trutherism is alive and well in America, and is only going to get stronger as memories of the actual event fade."

Still even current events aren't immune to conspiracy theories. Twenty percent of Americans think that President Obama's supporters committed significant voter fraud in the 2012 elections. Thirty-six percent of Republicans think this is the case, but only 4 percent of Democrats do.

"These beliefs in election fraud pop up after every election," said Cassino. "Americans tend to be politically isolated, and some can't fathom that there are people who actually voted for the other guy, so the only way he could have won is through cheating."

In general, higher levels of actual knowledge about politics tends to reduce belief in conspiracy theories. In the poll, respondents were asked a series of four questions about current events, and respondents who were able to answer more questions correctly were less likely to endorse the conspiracy theories. Fifteen percent of people who got none of the questions right thought that three or four of the conspiracies were likely, compared to three percent of those who answered three or four correctly. Education also tended to reduce belief in the conspiracy theories.

However, the relationship between current events knowledge and belief in conspiracy theories is conditional on partisanship. Among Democrats, each question answered correctly reduces the likelihood of endorsing at least one of the conspiracy theories by seven points. Among independents, each additional question reduces it by two points. For Republicans, though, each additional question answered correctly tends to increase belief in at least one of the theories by two points.

"There are several possible explanations for this," said Cassino. "It could be that more conspiracy-minded Republicans seek out more information, or that the information some Republicans seek out just tends to reinforce these myths."

Belief in these conspiracies is higher among young African-Americans than whites. For instance, 59 percent of African-Americans think that Bush knew about the 9/11 attacks before they happened, and 75 percent of African-Americans think at least one of the theories is likely true, compared with 62 percent of whites.

"Groups that feel more distanced from the political process are more likely to believe that sinister forces are at work," said Cassino. "These figures tell us more about a lack of trust in the political process than acceptance of particular conspiracies."

The Fairleigh Dickinson University poll of 814 registered voters was conducted nationally by telephone with both landline and cell phones from December 10 through December 16, 2012, and has a margin of error of +/-3.4 percentage points.

Methodology, questions, and tables on the web at: http://publicmind.fdu.edu
Radio actualities at 201.692.2846 *For more information, please call 201.692.7032*

Methodology

The most recent national survey by Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind was conducted by telephone from December 10 through December 16, 2012, using a randomly selected sample of 814 registered voters nationwide. One can be 95 percent confident that the error attributable to sampling has a range of +/- 3.4 percentage points. The margin of error for subgroups is larger and varies by the size of that subgroup. Survey results are also subject to non-sampling error. This kind of error, which cannot be measured, arises from a number of factors including, but not limited to, non-response (eligible individuals refusing to be interviewed), question wording, the order in which questions are asked, and variations among interviewers.

PublicMind interviews are conducted by Opinion America of Cedar Knolls, NJ, with professionally trained interviewers using a CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system. Random selection is achieved by computerized random-digit dialing. This technique gives every person with a landline phone number (including those with unlisted numbers) an equal chance of being selected.

Landline households are supplemented with a separate, randomly selected sample of cell-phone respondents interviewed in the same time frame. The total combined sample is mathematically weighted to match known demographics of age, race and gender.

President Bush's supporters committed significant voter fraud in order to win Ohio in 2004

	Total	Party Identification (w/leaners)			Race		Number of Current Events Qs Answered Correctly				
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Black	0	1	2	3	4
Probably True	23%	37%	17%	9%	16%	51%	38%	14%	24%	18%	27%
Probably Not True	43%	29%	40%	61%	49%	15%	22%	34%	41%	52%	49%
Unsure	28%	29%	35%	23%	27%	26%	23%	42%	27%	24%	20%
Don't Know	7%	6%	8%	8%	8%	8%	15%	10%	8%	5%	4%
Refused	0%	0%		0%	0%		1%			0%	

President Obama's supporters committed significant voter fraud in the 2012 presidential election

	Total	Party Identification (w/leaners)			Race		Number of Current Events Qs Answered Correctly				
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Black	0	1	2	3	4
Probably True	20%	4%	25%	36%	22%	4%	22%	16%	20%	24%	11%
Probably Not True	55%	80%	44%	31%	52%	72%	33%	46%	53%	58%	75%
Unsure	20%	14%	23%	27%	20%	19%	32%	29%	21%	16%	13%
Don't Know	5%	2%	9%	6%	5%	5%	11%	9%	7%	2%	1%
Refused	0%	0%		0%	0%		1%	1%			

President Bush knew about the 9/11 attacks before they happened											
	Total	Party Identification (w/leaners)			Race		Number of Current Events Qs Answered Correctly				
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Black	0	1	2	3	4
Probably True	25%	36%	22%	12%	17%	59%	42%	27%	27%	22%	13%
Probably Not True	56%	47%	49%	71%	65%	23%	28%	45%	50%	67%	76%
Unsure	15%	14%	23%	12%	14%	13%	14%	22%	20%	9%	10%
Don't Know	4%	3%	6%	5%	4%	5%	15%	7%	3%	2%	1%
Refused	0%	1%			0%		1%		1%	0%	

President Obama is hiding important information about his background and early life											
	Total	Party Identification (w/leaners)			Race		Number of Current Events Qs Answered Correctly				
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Black	0	1	2	3	4
Probably True	36%	14%	33%	64%	42%	17%	41%	38%	40%	37%	22%
Probably Not True	51%	77%	39%	24%	47%	69%	34%	36%	47%	52%	74%
Unsure	10%	7%	23%	8%	8%	11%	12%	21%	10%	8%	3%
Don't Know	3%	2%	4%	3%	3%	4%	13%	4%	2%	2%	2%
Refused	1%	0%		1%	1%		1%	1%	0%	0%	

Number of Political Conspiracies the Respondent Considers "Probably True"											
	Total	Party Identification (w/leaners)			Race		Number of Current Events Qs Answered Correctly				
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Black	0	1	2	3	4
0	37%	44%	43%	25%	38%	25%	25%	40%	34%	36%	47%
1	30%	27%	25%	37%	33%	28%	22%	30%	30%	31%	35%
2	28%	25%	25%	32%	24%	39%	38%	27%	29%	28%	17%
3	4%	4%	5%	5%	4%	7%	14%	4%	6%	3%	1%
4	1%	0%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%		1%	2%	

Can you name the current Secretary of State?						
	Total	Party Identification (w/leaners)			Race	
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Black
Hillary Clinton	69%	64%	62%	79%	74%	53%
Susan Rice	1%	1%		1%	0%	1%
Condaleeza Rice	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%
Other	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	2%
Don't Know	28%	33%	36%	19%	24%	42%
Refused	0%	0%			0%	

Which party currently has the most seats in the U.S. House of

Representatives?						
	Total	Party Identification (w/leaners)			Race	
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Black
Republican	64%	62%	62%	67%	66%	49%
Democrat	21%	22%	11%	23%	20%	27%
Don't Know	16%	16%	26%	10%	14%	24%

As far as you know, has unemployment increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the past twelve months?						
	Total	Party Identification (w/leaners)			Race	
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Black
Increased	33%	23%	31%	45%	32%	33%
Decreased	44%	55%	41%	32%	44%	42%
Stayed the Same	18%	17%	22%	17%	19%	19%
Don't Know	6%	5%	6%	6%	5%	6%

The US is currently using unmanned aircraft to target terrorism suspects in various countries around the world. Right now, in what country are those attacks most concentrated						
	Total	Party Identification (w/leaners)			Race	
		Dem	Indp	Rep	White	Black
Pakistan	13%	14%	9%	13%	14%	6%
Afghanistan	37%	34%	33%	42%	39%	30%
Iraq	7%	10%	7%	3%	4%	20%
Other	16%	15%	16%	18%	16%	10%
Don't Know	27%	27%	35%	25%	26%	35%

Exact Question Wording and Order

US1, US2, US4 released December 19, 2012
US3 series released December 18, 2012
US5 and US6 released December 21, 2012
DR1 through DR3 withheld for future release
CJ1 and CJ2 withheld for future release

KN1 Can you name the current Secretary of State? [Do not read choices]
OPEN END, PRE CODE
Hillary Clinton (correct)
Susan Rice
Condoleezza Rice
Other
DK

KN2 Which party currently has the most seats in the U.S. House of Representatives? [Do not read choices]
OPEN END, PRE CODE
Republican (correct)
Democrat
DK

KN3 Is unemployment higher, lower, or the same as it was when President Obama first took office in 2009? [Do not read choices]
OPEN END, PRE CODE
Higher
Lower
Same
DK

KN4 The US is currently using unmanned aircraft to target terrorism suspects in various countries around the world. Right now, in what country are those attacks most concentrated? [Do not read choices]
OPEN END, PRE CODE
Pakistan
Afghanistan
Iraq
Other
DK

For each of the following statements, could you tell me if it is very likely that it is true, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely.
[Rotate items]

CON1 President Bush's supporters committed significant voter fraud in order to win Ohio in 2004.

1 True
2 Somewhat true
3 Unlikely
4 Not at all likely
8 DK (vol)
9 Refused (vol)

CON2 President Obama's supporters committed significant voter fraud in the 2012 presidential election.

1 True
2 Somewhat true
3 Unlikely
4 Not at all likely
8 DK (vol)
9 Refused (vol)

CON3 President Bush knew about the 9/11 attacks before they happened.

1 True
2 Somewhat true
3 Unlikely
4 Not at all likely
8 DK (vol)
9 Refused (vol)

CON4 President Obama is hiding important information about his background and early life

1 True
2 Somewhat true
3 Unlikely
4 Not at all likely
8 DK (vol)
9 Refused (vol)

Sample characteristics – Registered voters

Gender

Male	48
Female	52

Age

18-29	14
30-44	26
45-59	29
60+	30
Refused	1

Race/Ethnicity

White	72
Black/African-American	13
Latino or Hispanic	9
Asian	2
Other/refused	4

Census region

Northeast	19
Midwest	22
South	32
West	27

Education

HS or less	29
Some college	34
College graduate	37

Party identification

Democrat	34
Independent	39
Republican	26
Other	1
DK/Refused	1