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Leading Away from Conspiracy: Exploring the Relationship Between Identity Leadership and Conspiracy Beliefs

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Contribution

Svenja B. Frenzel wrote the original draft and played a lead role in conception and design, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, funding acquisition, and project administration. *Schahryar Kananian* played a lead role in reviewing and editing the manuscript, conception, and design. *Alex Haslam* played a leading role in reviewing and editing the manuscript, conception and design, and supported the project administration and supervision. *Nina M. Junker* played a lead role in reviewing and editing the paper, conception and design, data curation, and played a supporting role in funding acquisition, supervision,

and formal analysis. *Karen M. Douglas* played a lead role in reviewing and editing the paper and played a supporting role in data interpretation. *Jan A. Häusser* played a lead role in reviewing and editing the paper, conception and design, data curation, and funding acquisition. *Andreas Mojzisch* played a leading role in reviewing and editing the paper, conception and design, and data curation. *Rolf van Dick* played a lead role in reviewing and editing the paper, conception and design, data curation, funding acquisition, and project administration. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Statements and Declarations

Ethical Considerations

All studies were conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of the German Psychological Association and the Declaration of Helsinki. The institution where the research was conducted only requires ethical approval when physical or mental impairment is expected or the data is not collected anonymously, which was the case in all three studies. However, Study 1 was part of a larger research project, which was approved by the ethics commission of the seventh author's institution (Approval no: 3419). Furthermore, we decided to obtain ethical approval for Study 2 as we manipulated identity leadership with real-life politicians. Study 2 was approved by the ethics commission of the second and last author's institution (Approval no: 2022-52).

Consent to Participate

All participants consented to participate and to use their data for research by ticking a box before they were granted access to the online questionnaire.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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Data Availability Statement

The data and syntax of all studies are publicly available (https://researchbox.org/2953&PEER_REVIEW_passcode=JMSZGH).

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Abstract

Conspiracy theories offer alternative explanations for socio-political events and can be attractive when a person's existential (i.e., to feel safe and in control) or social needs (i.e., to be part of meaningful social groups) are unmet. We argue that politicians who practice identity leadership can mitigate conspiracy beliefs by fulfilling these needs. We hypothesize that leaders address existential needs by promoting external political efficacy (i.e., perceived government responsiveness) and social needs by fostering shared social identification. A two-wave correlational study (N_{Study1}=1,635) and two experiments (N_{Study2} =190; N_{Study3}=264) in which we manipulated identity leadership tested these hypotheses. Study 1 revealed a negative association between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs mediated by external political efficacy. Studies 2 and 3 replicated these results, and the latter indicated a causal link between identity leadership and leader-related conspiracy beliefs. This research provides insights into how, should they want to, leaders might combat conspiracy beliefs.

Keywords: leadership, identity leadership, conspiracy beliefs, national identification, external political efficacy

In recent years, it has become apparent that believing in conspiracy theories – alternative explanations of critical events supposedly planned by powerful, malicious actors and hidden from the public – can pose a severe threat to democracy and political stability (Frenzel et al., 2025; Tollefson, 2021). Given these detrimental consequences, it is imperative to investigate ways to mitigate them. Politicians are often implicated in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen & Acker, 2015). But is this their only role? Might they have a part to play in actively reducing conspiracy beliefs?

The present research seeks to address these questions and to explore the possibility that political leaders can play a pivotal role in combating conspiracy beliefs. In particular, we focus on the ways in which conspiracy beliefs might be counteracted by politicians' *identity leadership* — that is, group-focused leadership through which leaders are perceived to be part of the group (in our study context, as part of the country), to act in its interests, to create a sense of shared identity with their followers, and to shape and represent collective norms and values (Haslam et al., 2025). We do this by focusing on top-level politicians and examining whether their engagement in identity leadership has the capacity to reduce conspiracy beliefs in the political realm by fulfilling citizens' *existential needs* (i.e., the need to feel in control and secure) and *social needs* (i.e., the need for meaningful group membership) — needs which, when unmet, might encourage those same citizens to indulge in conspiracy beliefs (Douglas, 2021; Kim et al., 2022; Liekefett et al., 2023). We propose that citizens who view their political leaders as identity leaders should have a stronger sense of external political efficacy (i.e., a perception that the government is responsive to the public; Beierlein et al., 2014) and national identification (i.e., a sense of belonging and being a part of one's nation; *cf.* Doosje et al., 1995) in ways that contribute to their existential and social need fulfillment. These hypotheses are schematically integrated into the model presented in Figure 1.

We combine research on political leadership and conspiracy beliefs to deepen our understanding of the psychology of conspiracy theories. While powerful leaders are often

integral to conspiracy theories, we aim to demonstrate that leadership that contributes to a sense of 'we-ness' can also reduce conspiracy beliefs. In exploring this possibility, we also examine the underlying mechanisms whereby political leaders might shape followers' conspiracy beliefs.

Identity Leaders in a Conspiratorial World

Identity leadership is grounded in the *social identity approach* (Reicher et al., 2010), comprised of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987). Both theories explore the conditions under which social groups are internalized into a person's sense of self and thus furnish them with a sense of social identity in which the self is defined as 'we' and 'us', not just 'me' and 'I' (Turner et al., 1994). People identify with a range of social groups (e.g., families, work teams, clubs), and these groups provide them with support, meaning, and agency (Haslam et al., 2018). Social identities can become relevant through contextual salience (Oakes et al., 1994); however, they can also be actively cultivated through identity leadership, which shapes and strengthens a particular social identity, and encourages group members to see themselves and the world through the lens of that identity and to coordinate their behavior in line with the group's goals, norms, and values (Haslam et al., 2025; Jetten et al., 2017; Turner, 1991). More generally, identity leadership refers to the process through which leaders create, advance, represent, and embed a shared sense of 'us-ness' in the groups they are leading (Haslam et al., 2025; Steffens et al., 2014), and it is central to leaders' ability to shape and influence the actions of group members (Turner, 1991).

In line with this theorizing, an abundance of evidence suggests that leaders are more effective to the extent that they are (a) identity entrepreneurs who cultivate a sense of shared social identity among potential followers (Reicher et al., 2005), (b) identity prototypes who represent and embody the group (Steffens et al., 2017), (c) identity champions who advance the group's interests (Haslam et al., 2001), and (d) identity impresarios who create structures

that give group members opportunities to live out their group membership (Haslam et al., 2025). Evidence of the importance of these different aspects of identity leadership has been provided by research in over 30 countries (van Dick et al., 2018; 2021) and in a diverse array of fields — including business (Bracht et al., 2023), health (Lee et al., 2021), sport (Fransen et al., 2022), and politics (Monzani et al., 2024). Identity leadership is also essential at the intersection of these fields. For example, Frenzel et al. (2022) found that national identity leaders were more successful in encouraging citizens to comply with health directives.

In the context of national politics, identity leadership centers around citizens perceiving their leader as 'one of us,' who is 'doing it for us' and 'making us matter' (Haslam et al., 2025). Put differently, citizens perceive their leader as an integral part of the country, as someone who acts in the country's interests and as someone who seeks to strengthen a shared identity within the country. This sense of shared identity is also bound up with political norms and values that followers and political identity leaders share. Indeed, this alignment supports a symbiosis between leaders and their followers in ways that motivate those followers to believe in and contribute to society through active citizenship (Mols et al., 2023; Monzani et al., 2024).

What happens, though, when leaders fail (or are perceived to fail) to show identity leadership? Here, people are likely to perceive the leader as an outgroup member who is 'one of them' rather than 'one of us' and as 'disempowering us' rather than 'making us matter' (Maskor et al., 2021). In other words, in such situations, citizens are unlikely to perceive the leader to represent their country and are unlikely to believe that the leader is prioritizing their country's advancement and the interests of its citizens. Indeed, in the political realm, many people feel that they are not adequately represented by their political leaders and perceive that their own goals conflict with the goals of those in power (Fiske & Durante, 2014; Teymoori et al., 2017). Moreover, this sense of being at the mercy of disliked political leaders has been found to be a correlate of endorsing conspiracy beliefs (Brandenstein, 2022). In other words,

under these circumstances, people are likely to see themselves as governed by a powerful outgroup. In the face of this, the absence of a shared identity (and accompanying norms and values) should be aversive (Edelson et al., 2017).

Consistent with this logic, evidence from organizational contexts suggests that being at the mercy of a supervisor who does not actively support a team's well-being and advancement, or having a supervisor who puts themselves above team members, makes employees more likely to embrace organizational conspiracy beliefs. Conversely, employees are less likely to embrace organizational conspiracy beliefs when they have participative leaders who value and listen to them (van Prooijen & de Vries, 2016). As a result, the absence of perceived political identity leadership should increase citizens' belief that conspiratorial forces are at work in national politics. This is a basis for our first hypothesis:

H1. Perceptions of political leaders' identity leadership will be negatively related to conspiracy beliefs.

Thus far, we have focused primarily on the positive consequences of identity leadership. However, identity leadership can also have negative consequences — for example, promoting intergroup hostility or harmful behavior (Frenzel et al., 2022; Lê & Hoang, 2025). Indeed, a range of populist leaders have been observed to engage in these problematic forms of identity leadership (e.g., see Haslam et al., 2023; 2025; Uysal et al., 2022). Indeed, to secure their influence and power and simultaneously delegitimize potential opponents, some populist leaders exploit conspiracy narratives to construct enemies and crises and to mobilize groups around their cause (Pirro & Taggart, 2023). As the present research is the first to examine the relationship between political identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs, in what follows, we focus on positive forms of identity leadership, but will return to reflect on these more negative forms in the General Discussion.

Addressing Psychological Needs: External Political Efficacy and National Identity

Building on insights from the conspiracy theory literature, we now focus on *why* political leaders' identity leadership might reduce people's conspiracy beliefs. In particular, two processes potentially explain how political identity leaders might reduce the appeal of conspiracy beliefs. The first is by providing followers with a *voice* in politics (i.e., meeting their existential needs via a sense of external political efficacy). The second is by providing followers with a sense of meaningful group membership (i.e., meeting their social needs via a sense of national identity).

Reflecting on the first process, existential needs refer to people's need to feel in control and powerful (Douglas et al., 2017). In the political realm, studies have shown that political developments that are in one's own interest (e.g., when one's preferred party wins an election) are positively related to perceptions of personal control (Greenaway, 2023). Citizens can cope better with societal threats when they perceive the government to be responsive to their needs (Vashdi et al., 2019). However, these needs might be threatened in national politics when citizens perceive themselves to be overlooked by the prevailing political discourse (Reicher & Haslam, 2017). In an effort to restore some sense of (political) efficacy, people may therefore turn to other group memberships to achieve a sense of agency (Fritsche, 2022; Fritsche et al., 2013). In this case, endorsing conspiracy beliefs (by joining conspiracy-minded communities) should be attractive as a means of restoring a person's sense of control, because such beliefs undermine those established leaders who are perceived to have denied them voice (Edelson et al., 2017; Nyhan, 2017, February 15). This assumption aligns with the "conspiracy theories are for losers" narrative, which suggests that people lean towards conspiracy narratives when they perceive themselves to be neglected and undermined by those in power (Uscinski & Parent, 2014).

It follows that by advancing the interests of the collective and being responsive to followers' needs, identity leaders should foster a sense of control among those followers. As

elaborated earlier, identity leadership is a group-based process that activates a collective perspective. Accordingly, when people perceive their political leaders to be engaging in effective identity leadership, they are more likely to see themselves as part of a reciprocal political process in which their voices are 'heard' (Haslam et al., 2025). As a result, citizens should experience (personal) control through an identity leader because that leader is seen to be responsive to the public — a sentiment which is central to external political efficacy (Haslam et al., 2022).

In turn, external political efficacy should be negatively associated with conspiracy beliefs (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020). This speaks to the point that people who perceive the political system to be attentive to their group's needs should have a sense of control concerning national politics and have less reason to doubt the system (Teymoori et al., 2017). Indeed, in line with this point, empirical evidence suggests that people who have a sense of control and who do not feel like losers within the prevailing political system are less likely to embrace conspiracy beliefs (Kofta et al., 2020; van Prooijen & Acker, 2015; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H2. External political efficacy will mediate the relationship between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs. In particular, identity leadership will be positively related to external political efficacy, which, in turn, will be negatively related to conspiracy beliefs.

The second way in which identity leadership might reduce people's inclination to endorse conspiracy theorizing is by addressing their social need to feel connected to others as members of positively valued social groups (Douglas et al., 2019; Haslam et al., 2018). If social needs are under threat (e.g., due to marginalization), people may turn to conspiracy theories because they explain their lower group status and give them access to an alternative — ostensibly superior — group membership via which they can recover a positive sense of social identity (Douglas et al., 2019; Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012). In the political realm, people's social needs may be compromised if they believe that (political) leadership

threatens or undermines the status of their country by failing to represent and advocate for it. Indeed, if leaders are perceived to make national group membership unattractive and worthless, this seems likely to diminish citizens' sense of national identity and identification. To reclaim a positive sense of social identity, those who find themselves in this situation may therefore be motivated to scan their social environment for *identity alternatives* (Reicher & Haslam, 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This, in turn, may make conspiracy theories — and alliances with groups who share and promote them — more attractive (Smallpage et al., 2017; Sternisko et al., 2020; van Prooijen, 2024; van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018).

However, when political leaders succeed in meeting people's social needs by promoting shared national identity (a sense of unity and cohesion) among citizens (Frenzel et al., 2022), they should feel part of a positively valued national group — something that is more likely when a leader who is in power is perceived to put the country's needs first and to advocate for it. In this case, people should have no need to entertain conspiracy theories because they already have a sense of positive social identity. This reasoning leads us to our third hypothesis:

H3. National identification will mediate the relationship between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs. In particular, identity leadership will be positively related to national identification, which, in turn, will be negatively related to conspiracy beliefs.

With regard to the mechanisms proposed in H2 and H3, we anticipate that they will operate simultaneously and that they are likely to be interdependent. In line with this point, Bibic et al. (2026) found that when (and to the extent that) employees perceived their direct supervisor as showing identity leadership, they reported *both* a stronger sense of team identification and greater trust in that supervisor, and that these in turn were positively associated with a range of organizational outcomes. These findings have relevance to the present research insofar as external political efficacy can be understood as trust in the responsiveness of the political system and, accordingly, should also be positively associated

with national identification. Furthermore, studies show that people's perception that they are living in a fair and just society (i.e., procedural fairness) is associated with stronger societal identification (Tyler & Blader, 2003). Accordingly, citizens who report having high levels of external political efficacy should also be more likely to have high national identification.

Overview of the Current Research

We tested the above hypotheses in three studies. Study 1 was a time-lagged field study with two measurement points (N_{Time1} = 1,635). Studies 2 and 3 were online experiments (N_{Study2} = 190; N_{Study3} = 264) in which we manipulated identity leadership to establish the causal direction of the proposed relationships. Importantly, we operationalized conspiracy beliefs in two different ways. In Studies 1 and 2, we measured general conspiracy beliefs; in Study 3, we assessed specific conspiracy beliefs related to the leader in question. We included both operationalizations — general and specific conspiracy beliefs — because they have been widely used in previous research, sometimes with different outcomes (Imhoff, Bertlich et al., 2022). This, then, allowed us to explore the robustness of our results. Furthermore, we assume that identity leadership is related to both general and specific conspiracy beliefs (i.e., conspiracy theories directly involving the leader), because favorable perceptions of a political leader can enhance evaluations of associated ingroup members (Dovidio et al., 2011). Consequently, individuals who perceive their political leader as engaging in identity leadership should be less inclined to endorse conspiracy beliefs pertaining to the broader political system, as well as to the leader personally. Details of ethical approval for all three studies are provided in the Appendix. The data and syntax of all studies are also publicly available (https://researchbox.org/2953&PEER_REVIEW_passcode=JMSZGH).

Study 1

Participants and Procedure

Study 1 used a two-wave correlational design. We recruited a large and heterogeneous German sample (N_{Time1} = 1,635) via the panel provider *Kantar*. Participants were financially

reimbursed for their participation. Data collection took place between March 25 and April 5, 2022. The second measurement point started approximately four weeks later, and we aimed to recruit around 1000 participants at Time 2.

Participants were required to be of legal age (18) and reside in Germany. Of the 1,759 people who clicked on the link, 111 did not fulfill the inclusion criteria and were excluded from the study at Time 1. Four individuals participated twice, and we accepted only their first responses. As suggested by Buchanan and Scofield (2018), we performed data quality checks based on the following indicators: (1) response time (flagging participants whose response times were 50% below the sample median) and (2) response patterns (flagging participants who showed repetitive response patterns, e.g., always ticking the lowest scale value). Participants flagged on both indicators were excluded from the analyses. Accordingly, we excluded nine participants at Time 1 and four at Time 2. The final sample consisted of N_{Time1} = 1,635 and N_{Time2} = 1,011 participants (mean age = 43.2 years, *SD* = 15.6; 55% women). As political orientation is a correlate of conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff, Zimmer et al., 2022), we asked participants about their political party preferences to control for it in our analyses (see Table 1).

Measures

This study was part of a larger research project in which we included additional measures (see Appendix). Unless otherwise stated, responses were made on 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 5 (*completely agree*). The full item list is presented in the Appendix.

Identity Leadership (Time 1)

Perceived identity leadership of Olaf Scholz, Germany's chancellor at the time of data collection, was measured with the four items of the Identity Leadership Inventory Short-Form (ILI-SF; Steffens et al., 2014; e.g., "The Chancellor is a model member of Germany.").

Participants were asked to rate Scholz's leadership on 7-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*completely*). McDonald's ω was .93.

National Identification (Time 2)

We assessed national identification with four items adapted from Doosje et al. (1995). Participants indicated their agreement with the statements (e.g., "I identify with the people in my country"). McDonald's ω was .90.

External Political Efficacy (Time 2)

Participants indicated their agreement with two items (Beierlein et al., 2014; e.g., "Politicians care about what ordinary people think.") to assess external political efficacy. McDonald's ω was .87.

General Conspiracy Beliefs (Time 2)

We measured conspiracy beliefs with five items of the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (Bruder et al., 2013). This scale does not measure beliefs in specific conspiracy theories; rather, it captures a generalized political suspiciousness targeted at powerholders, which suits our research context (sample item: "I think that politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions"). Participants indicated their agreement with statements on scales ranging from 1 (0% *certainly not*) to 11 (100% *certainly*). McDonald's ω was .88.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) indicated that the constructs were statistically independent. We present the complete CFA results in the Appendix.

Results

Data analysis was conducted in SPSS v. 29 (IBM, 2023) and Mplus v. 8.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017). Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 2.

Hypotheses Testing

We performed parallel mediation analysis with latent variables (treating observed variables as their respective indicators) to test whether external political efficacy (H2) and national identification (H3) mediated the relationship between identity leadership and

conspiracy beliefs. A significant total effect would support H1 (i.e., a negative association between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs). Accordingly, we regressed conspiracy beliefs on identity leadership, external political efficacy, and national identification. Moreover, we also regressed external political efficacy and national identification on identity leadership. We controlled for participants' party preferences in the analysis by including dummy-coded variables of the respective political parties as predictors in the model.[1] We multiplied the unstandardized regression coefficients of the respective paths to determine the indirect effect and used 95% confidence intervals (CI) to test the direct and indirect effects. To account for possible non-normal distribution, we used the maximum likelihood parameter estimation with robust standard errors (MLR; Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017).[2] The parallel mediation model allows us to test both mechanisms (H2 and H3) within a single model by accounting for their shared covariance. In what follows, we present the unstandardized results. Figure 2 depicts the standardized results.

The parallel mediation model had acceptable model fit (χ^2 = 1155.82, *df* = 156, p < .001, *scaling correction factor* MLR = 1.10; CFI = .91, TLI = .89, RMSEA = .06, 90% CI [0.06; 0.07], SRMR = .08). Supporting H1, the total effect of identity leadership in predicting conspiracy beliefs was significant and negative (γ = -.34, *SE* = .06, z = -5.93, p < .001, 95% CI [-0.46, -0.23]). The indirect association between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs via external political efficacy was also significant and negative (indirect effect = -.17, *SE* = .04, z = -4.67, p < .001, 95% CI [-0.25, -0.11]). In line with H2, identity leadership positively predicted external political efficacy (γ = .31, *SE* = .03, z = 12.54, p < .001, 95% CI [0.27,

[1] In the main analysis, we only controlled for the variance of party preferences, but did not interpret the results. In the Supplementary Materials, we present the results of a multigroup analysis in which we tested our hypotheses in relation to political party preferences.

[2] We also performed additional analyses to test whether trust in the leader functions as a third mediator. The results revealed that trust did not mediate the relationship between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs (see Supplementary Materials for detailed results). Adding trust as a mediator did not change our main results.

0.36]), which, in turn, was negatively related to conspiracy beliefs (γ = -.55, *SE* = .12, z = -4.73, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.79, -0.34]).

There was no support for H3 insofar as the indirect relationship between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs via national identification was not significant (indirect effect = .04, *SE* = .02, z = 1.60, p = .109, 95% CI [-0.01, .08]). While identity leadership was positively associated with national identification (γ = .22, *SE* = .02, z = 10.94, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.26]), national identification was not related to conspiracy beliefs (γ = .16, *SE* = .10, z = 1.62, p = .106, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.36]). Finally, there was a remaining direct effect between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs (γ = -.22, *SE* = .07, z = -3.27, p = .001, 95% CI [-0.41, -0.17]).

We performed sensitivity analysis in G*Power (v.3.1.9.6; linear multiple regression: Fixed model, single regression coefficient; Faul et al., 2009) for the anticipated indirect effect. As we aimed for a power of .80 for the indirect effect, we indicated a required power for the a-and b-path of .89 (0.89*0.89=.80, α = .05). The results indicate that a sample size of 1,011 is sufficient to detect small indirect effects, f^{2} = 0.01 (f = 0.10). The results of a simulation analysis with parameters obtained from this study to determine the sensitivity in detecting the focal indirect relationships (Schoemann et al., 2017) revealed a power of 1.00 to detect the indirect effect of identity leadership on conspiracy beliefs through external political efficacy, and a power of 0.41 to detect the indirect effect via national identification. Hence, both the sensitivity and the simulation analysis indicate that the study was adequately powered to detect the indirect effect of identity leadership on conspiracy beliefs via external political efficacy (actual effect size: f = 0.18), but the sample size might have been too small to rule out the indirect effect via national identification (actual effect size: f = 0.08) completely.

Discussion of Study 1

Consistent with H1, we found that identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs were negatively related. Consistent with H2, external political efficacy mediated this effect.

However, as national identification was not found to be a mediator, there was no support for H3. Nevertheless, this study used a correlational design and hence cannot establish causality. To address this limitation, we conducted an online experiment in Study 2 that manipulated identity leadership and tested whether this would have an impact on the appeal of conspiracy beliefs for participants.

Study 2

Participants and Procedure

Study 2 was an online experiment with two conditions and was conducted in October 2022. The results of an *a priori* power analysis using G*Power with a medium-sized effect and a power of .80 between two groups (means: difference between two independent means) suggested a required sample size of $N = 128$ — a sample size that is also large enough to detect an indirect medium-sized mediation effect with a power of .80 (Fritz & Mackinnon, 2007). We recruited $N = 201$ participants (to account for potential dropouts due to low data quality) via the panel provider *Prolific*, and they were financially reimbursed. Consistent with Study 1, the inclusion criteria were to be of legal age, reside in Germany, and speak German fluently.

We randomly assigned participants to one of two conditions (-1 = low identity leadership [low IL condition] vs. 1 = high identity leadership [high IL condition]). After providing informed consent, we first explained the concept of identity leadership. Next, in the low IL condition, we asked participants to think about and write down the name of a German politician (past or present) who, in their opinion, was a *poor* identity leader. Conversely, in the high IL condition, participants were asked to think about and write down the name of a former or present *good* German identity leader (the full manipulation is presented in the Appendix). Following this instruction, participants were asked to identify behavioral examples of this specific politician regarding the four identity leadership dimensions (i.e.,

prototypicality, advancement, entrepreneurship, and impresarioship). Table 3 depicts an overview of the named politicians.

Next, participants responded to the manipulation check by rating the identity leadership of the politician that they had identified on the ILI-SF (Steffens et al., 2014), responded to the remaining items, and provided demographic information. At the end of the survey, participants were fully debriefed.

We excluded eight participants because they did not name a specific German politician, and another three because they failed to generate examples of at least two identity leadership dimensions (exclusion from low IL condition: $n = 6$; high IL condition: $n = 5$). Some people struggled to create examples for the identity leadership dimension prototypicality ($n = 2$) or impresarioship ($n = 31$). However, their examples for the remaining identity leadership dimensions were meaningful, and so we retained them in the final data. Based on the same data quality criteria as in Study 1, no further participants were excluded. Accordingly, the final sample consisted of $N = 190$ participants (mean age = 30.9 years, SD = 10.5; 50% women). As in Study 1, we asked participants about their political party preferences and controlled for them in the statistical analysis (see Table 4).

Measures[3]

The construct validity of the CMQ (that we used in Study 1) has been criticized on the grounds that not all items measure conspiracy ideation, but rather "rational beliefs about the current state of the world" (Swami et al., 2017, p. 22). For this reason, we assessed conspiracy beliefs with the seven-item subscale of conspiracy ideation from the Conspiracy Mentality Scale to capture the irrational dimensions of conspiracy beliefs (Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2019). Participants indicated how much they agreed with seven statements (e.g., "Many

[3] Additional measures that go beyond the scope of the presented research: Trust in the national leader, internal political efficacy, scepticism (subscale of conspiracy beliefs), conspiracy mentality, and perceived stress.

situations or events can be explained by illegal or harmful acts by the government or other powerful people") on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (s*trongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). McDonald's ω was .92.

All other constructs were assessed in the same way as in Study 1. McDonald's ω was .93 for identity leadership, .67 for external political efficacy, and .84 for national identification. The CFAs support the statistical distinctiveness of our constructs (see Appendix for the complete results).

Results

Preliminary Analyses and Manipulation Check

Again, we performed statistical analysis in SPSS and Mplus. Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 5. Participants in both conditions did not differ regarding age, gender, or political party preferences. We compared mean values using a two-tailed *t*-test for independent samples of both conditions on the ILI-SF to test whether our manipulation was successful. As intended, the results revealed that participants in the high IL condition ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 0.85$, $n = 94$) rated the leader higher on the ILI-SF than participants in the low IL condition ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 0.98$, $n = 96$; $t(188) = -22.94$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-3.32, -2.79]; Cohen's $d = 3.33$).

Hypotheses Testing

We used a two-tailed *t*-test for independent samples to test whether the two conditions differed regarding conspiracy beliefs (i.e., H1). The results indicated that participants in the high IL condition ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.22$, $n = 94$) did not report fewer conspiracy beliefs than those in the low IL condition ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.23$, $n = 96$; $t(188) = -1.44$, $p = .151$, 95% CI [-0.61, 0.09], Cohen's $d = -0.21$). Accordingly, there was no causal support for H1.

As in Study 1, we performed parallel mediation analysis with latent variables and the maximum likelihood parameter estimation with robust standard errors (MLR) to test the indirect effect of identity leadership on conspiracy beliefs via external political efficacy (H2)

and national identification (H3).[4] Again, we allowed external political efficacy and national identification to covary and controlled for participants' party preferences by including dummy-coded variables for every political party. The mediation model had satisfactory model fits (χ^2 = 174.40, *df* = 122, *p* = .001, *scaling correction factor* MLR = 1.05; CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [0.03; 0.06], SRMR = .06), and in what follows, we present the unstandardized results (Figure 3 presents the standardized results). The total effect of identity leadership on conspiracy beliefs was not significant (γ = .08, *SE* = .09, *z* = 0.92, *p* = .358, 95% CI [-0.09, 0.24]). Nevertheless, identity leadership was indirectly related to conspiracy beliefs via external political efficacy (indirect effect = -.14, *SE* = .07, *z* = -2.06, *p* = .039, 95% CI [-0.26, -0.01]). In particular, identity leadership predicted external political efficacy (γ = .21, *SE* = .06, *z* = 3.70, *p* < .001, 95% CI [0.10, 0.32]), which, in turn, was negatively associated with conspiracy beliefs (γ = -.65, *SE* = .24, *z* = -2.65, *p* = .008, 95% CI [-1.22, -0.17]). These results support H2.

Furthermore, there was a non-significant indirect association between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs via national identification (indirect effect = -.01, *SE* = .02, *z* = -0.47, *p* = .641, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.02]). More specifically, identity leadership and national identification were unrelated (γ = .10, *SE* = .06, *z* = 1.63, *p* = .102, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.21]). Furthermore, national identification was not associated with conspiracy beliefs (γ = -.08, *SE* = .14, *z* = -0.53, *p* = .599, 95% CI [-0.36, 0.21]). Again, then, H3 was not supported. Finally, a positive direct effect of identity leadership on conspiracy beliefs remained (γ = .22, SE = .09, z = 2.37, *p* = .018, 95% CI [0.04, 0.40]).

[4] We performed two additional analyses that we present in the Supplementary Materials. First, we conducted the same analysis with conspiracy beliefs measured with the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire as outcome variable, which led to the same results. Second, we tested whether trust in the leader functions as a third mediator. The results revealed that trust did not mediate the relationship. Adding trust as a mediator did not change our main results.

The a priori power analysis was informed by the goal of detecting group differences. Accordingly, we conducted a sensitivity analysis to determine the effect size of the indirect relationship that could have been found with a sample size of $N = 190$ (power = 0.89 for the respective a and b paths, $\alpha = 0.05$; Faul et al., 2009). The results indicate that we were able to detect medium-sized effects ($f^2 = 0.05$; $f = 0.22$). The simulation results revealed a power of 0.99 to detect an indirect effect through external political efficacy and a power of 0.03 through national identification. Combined, the sensitivity and the simulation analysis indicate that the sample was sufficient to detect an indirect effect via external political efficacy ($f = 0.16$), but too small to detect an indirect effect via national identification ($f = 0.06$).

Discussion of Study 2

This study introduced a successful manipulation of identity leadership but this had no impact on participants' endorsement of conspiracy beliefs. Accordingly, there was no evidence of a causal relationship between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs. Nevertheless, in line with the findings of Study 1, there was an indirect association between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs via external political efficacy, but not via national identification. Again, then, there was some support for H2 but none for H3.

Although it improved on the correlational design of Study 1, this second study also had a number of limitations. First, it assessed general conspiracy beliefs, which has the advantage of being time- and context-independent and reducing the influence of ideologies (Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Nevertheless, this construct is considered relatively stable and, thus, might be difficult to alter in an online experiment (Imhoff, Bertlich et al., 2022). Second, the real-time German political context may render our results susceptible to the influence of uncontrolled contextual factors (e.g., specific headlines or news about politicians and scandals), which potentially preclude generalization to other countries. To address these issues, Study 3 assessed specific conspiracy beliefs involving a leader and tested our hypotheses in a fictitious setting (Bertin, 2024; Nera et al., 2024).

Study 3

Participants and Procedure

Study 3 was a preregistered online experiment (https://aspredicted.org/DKC_KFH) with two conditions and was conducted in April 2024. Based on the results of a prestudy[5], we predicted a required sample size of $N = 310$ participants to detect an effect $d = 0.32$ with a power of .80 (GPower; Difference between two independent means (two groups)). This sample size was also expected to be large enough to detect a medium-sized indirect effect with a power of .80 (Fritz & Mackinnon, 2007). We anticipated the need to exclude some participants due to low data quality and, thus, decided to oversample by approximately 15%. Accordingly, we recruited $N = 359$ participants via the online panel provider *Bilendi*, and participants received financial reimbursement for their participation. Consistent with the prior studies, the inclusion criteria were being of legal age, living in Germany, and speaking German fluently.

Of 359 initial responses, $n = 89$ participants failed the attention checks, and $n = 6$ were flagged on at least two of the preregistered quality criteria and were excluded from data analysis on this basis (exclusion from low IL condition: $n = 51$; high IL condition: $n = 44$). The final sample consisted of $N = 264$ participants (mean age = 47.92, $SD = 15.45$; 57.20% women). Again, we asked participants about their political party preferences, and controlled for this in the analysis (see Table 6).

After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to either the low IL condition (-1) or high IL condition (+1) and introduced to the political and societal life of the fictitious city of Tagoona and the city's mayor Taiki. Their task was to imagine themselves as citizens living in Tagoona. Tagoona was said to be a large city with a nearby

[5] The prestudy used the same identity leadership manipulation as in Study 3. However, instead of measuring external political efficacy and national identification, we measured two psychological needs – autonomy and relatedness. In short, identity leadership affected conspiracy beliefs involving the leader, and this relationship was mediated by autonomy but not by relatedness. Full results are presented in the Supplementary Materials.

forest that its citizens use as a recreational destination. However, Tagoona was reported to be in financial trouble, and the mayor was said to have decided to re-establish economic security by clearing the forest to make space for an energy company (that will bring jobs to Tagoona). In both conditions, the mayor acted against the will of the citizens by accepting the energy company's offer. However, in the high IL condition, the mayor engaged in identity leadership, whereas in the low IL condition, he did not. Moreover, we ensured that the manipulation captured all four identity leadership dimensions, and that these varied across the two conditions: (1) prototypicality (the mayor was said to attach importance to being part of the community — or not); (2) advancement (the mayor was said to participate in community meetings to engage with and support citizens — or not); (3) entrepreneurship (the mayor was said to have rebranded the city in cooperation with citizens — or not); (4) impresarioship (the mayor was said to promote and participate in public events — or not). The full manipulation is presented in the Appendix.

After reading the experimental manipulation, participants were asked to describe the mayor's leadership in a few sentences and then to respond to three attention checks (e.g., "What is the name of the city?"). As a manipulation check, participants rated the mayor on the ILI-SF (Steffens et al., 2014) and then went on to complete the remaining scales. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were fully debriefed.

Measures[6]

Specific Conspiracy Beliefs Involving the Leader

We formulated three items based on Douglas and Sutton's (2023) definition of conspiracy theories (e.g., "The mayor of Tagoona carefully keeps relevant and important

[6] Additional measures: Internal political efficacy, general conspiracy beliefs.

information secret from citizens."). Participants indicated their agreement with these items on scales ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*). McDonald's ω was .87.

Shared social identification (within the city of Tagoona)

Shared social identification was measured with four items adapted from Doosje et al. (1995). Participants indicated their agreement with those statements on a 5-point Likert scale. McDonald's ω was .90.

We assessed identity leadership (of the mayor), external political efficacy, and national identification as in Studies 1 and 2. McDonald's ω was .86. for identity leadership and .91 for external political efficacy. All items are presented in the Appendix. The results of a CFA established that the constructs were statistically independent (see Appendix).

Results

Preliminary Analyses and Manipulation Check

Our analysis was identical to that of Study 2. We established that the randomization was successful in so far as participants in both conditions did not differ in terms of age, gender, or political party preference. The manipulation check (two-tailed *t*-test for independent samples) indicated that the manipulation was successful such that participants in the high IL condition rated the mayor's identity leadership to be higher ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.18$, $n = 135$) than participants in the low IL condition ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.13$, $n = 129$), $t(262) = -15.20$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-2.45, -1.89]; Cohen's $d = -1.87$). Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 7.

Hypotheses Testing[7]

We performed a two-tailed *t*-test for independent samples to test whether the manipulation also affected beliefs in conspiracy beliefs involving the leader (i.e., H1).

[7] We additionally measured general conspiracy beliefs (as in Study 2) and performed the same analysis. Individuals in the high IL condition reported fewer conspiracy beliefs than those in the low IL condition. Nevertheless, there was no indirect effect via external political efficacy or shared social identification. Complete results are presented in the Supplementary Materials.

Participants in the high IL condition reported fewer conspiracy beliefs involving the leader (M = 2.78, SD = 1.53, n = 135) than those in the low IL condition (M = 4.25, SD = 1.41, n = 129, $t(262) = 8.10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.11, 1.83]; Cohen's d = 1.00). Accordingly, H1 was supported.

To test H2 and H3, we performed mediation analysis with latent variables (and MLR estimation) by regressing conspiracy beliefs involving the leader on external political efficacy, shared social identification, and the experimental condition. We then regressed external political efficacy and shared social identification on the experimental condition. We constrained insignificant residual variances to zero[8].

The mediation model had a good model fit (χ^2 = 138.84, df = 79, $p < .001$, *scaling correction factor* MLR = 1.05; CFI = .97, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .05, 90% CI [0.04; 0.07], SRMR = .03). The total effect was significant (γ = -0.80, SE = .09, z = -8.58, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-0.98, -0.61]). Consistent with H2, identity leadership was indirectly related to conspiracy beliefs involving the leader via external political efficacy (indirect effect = -0.54, SE = 0.20, z = -2.69, p = .007, 95% CI [-0.94, -0.15]). In particular, identity leadership predicted external political efficacy (γ = 1.08, SE = .05, z = 19.97, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.98, 1.19]), which, in turn, was negatively related to conspiracy beliefs (γ = -0.50, SE = .18, z = -2.72, p = .006, 95% CI [-0.86, -0.14]). Again, though, H3 was not supported as there was no indirect effect of identity leadership on conspiracy beliefs involving the leader via shared social identification (indirect effect = -0.003, SD = 0.03, z = -0.09, p = 0.928, 95% CI [-0.06, 0.05]). So while identity leadership predicted shared social identification (γ = .19, SE = .04, z = 4.30, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.28]), shared social identification was not associated with conspiracy beliefs (γ = -0.014, SE = .15, z = -0.09, p = .928, 95% CI [-0.31, 0.28]). The standardized results are presented in Figure 4.

[8] Note that this was not done in Studies 1 and 2, as all residual variances were significant.

We conducted a sensitivity analysis to determine the maximum indirect effect size that could have been found with a sample size of $N = 264$. The results indicate that we were able to detect medium-sized effects of $f^2 = 0.04$ ($f = 0.20$). Furthermore, we also conducted a simulation analysis and determined a power of 0.94 for the indirect effect via external political efficacy and a power of 0.04 for the indirect effect via shared social identification. Again, then, the study should have been sufficiently powered to detect the indirect effects via external political efficacy ($f = 0.42$), but not via shared social identification ($f = 0.05$).

Discussion of Study 3

This study conceptually replicated the findings from Study 1, but this time in an experimental context. Supporting H1, the identity leadership manipulation had a causal impact on participants' endorsement of leader-related conspiracy beliefs. Again, there was also support for H2 (but not H3) insofar as the relationship between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs was mediated by external political efficacy, but not by shared social identification.

General Discussion

Across three studies using different designs, we tested whether political identity leaders can mitigate citizens' conspiracy beliefs by addressing existential and social needs. The results of Studies 1 and 3 supported our primary hypothesis that identity leadership is negatively related to conspiracy beliefs (H1). Moreover, the experimental findings of Study 3 suggest that identity leaders can reduce people's belief in specific conspiracy theories that involve those same leaders. Accordingly, it appears that when citizens perceive political leaders to be engaging in identity leadership, they view them as ingroup members and are less likely to associate them with conspiratorial activities. These results are consistent with previous research indicating that conspiratorial activities are more commonly ascribed to those who are perceived to be outgroup members (Smallpage et al., 2017).

At the same time, these results also suggest ways to mitigate conspiracy beliefs. Hitherto, research has predominantly focused on various individual- and country-level predictors of conspiracy beliefs and designed interventions to reduce them on this basis (Douglas et al., 2023; O'Mahony et al., 2023). However, only a few studies have considered the impact of leadership on conspiracy beliefs (e.g., van Prooijen & de Vries, 2016). The present research addresses this lacuna by showing that people are less likely to engage in conspiracy beliefs when they share a social identity with those in power (Robertson et al., 2022). More specifically, it suggests that political leaders who are seen to represent and advance their country and its citizens can reduce conspiracy beliefs among their followers.

Beyond this, our research also provides some support for a theory-based model of *how* identity leadership can mitigate conspiracy beliefs. Specifically, there was evidence that it does this by helping to satisfy perceivers' existential need for a sense of external political efficacy. This result suggests that individuals who perceive their political leaders as engaging in identity leadership are more likely to feel that those leaders share their concerns and represent them in national politics. It follows that identity leadership is one way to counteract disillusionment with politics, which often flows from a sense that politicians are acting primarily in their own interests or the interests of a small elite ingroup rather than in the interests of citizens' (Fiske & Durante, 2014; Reicher & Haslam, 2017). In practical terms, the causal findings of Study 3 suggest that (identity) leadership is particularly effective in reducing or strengthening specific conspiracy beliefs involving the leader in question via external political efficacy.

In much the same vein, our studies show that political identity leaders can help to keep followers 'on the rails' to the extent that they put (and are perceived to put) the group (i.e., the country they lead) at the center of their leadership and to help followers answer existential questions about the meaning of the group — questions such as "What do *we* stand for?", "What do *we* want to achieve?" and "How can *we* do this?" (Haslam et al., 2025). Consistent

with these ideas, the present research aligns with evidence from previous studies that citizens' experience of low political control and political alienation correlates with conspiracy beliefs (Biddlestone et al., 2025; Bruder et al., 2013; Douglas et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, across all studies, we found no support for the prediction that the association between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs would be mediated by national identification. In particular, we did not find the expected association between national identification and conspiracy beliefs, whereas prior research found such an association, albeit a weak one (Biddlestone et al., 2025; Cichocka et al., 2016). Cichocka et al. (2016) reported that positive aspects of group memberships are linked to lower conspiracy beliefs when negative dimensions, such as collective narcissism, are controlled for in the analyses. In our studies, we did not specifically account for the coexistence of positive and negative dimensions of national identification, which likely explains the small regression weights of the b paths, as those opposing dimensions should cancel each other out. This conceptual ambiguity might also explain the limited indirect effect of national identification. An additional explanation for these nonsignificant results may be the different foci of national identification, external political efficacy, and identity leadership. Whereas national identification is citizen-centered, reflecting individuals' relationship with their country, external political efficacy and identity leadership are leadership-centered, capturing perceptions of political leaders' responsiveness and commitment to the country. Further underscoring the importance of identity leadership, our findings suggest that a person's own identification with their country may be less important for combating conspiracy beliefs than them perceiving political leaders to be genuinely committed to the country's well-being, to be advancing its interests, and to be representing its citizens' voices. However, it is worth noting that the sample sizes across all three studies were too small to completely rule out an indirect effect via national identification.

It is noteworthy too that in all three studies, the direct and indirect relationships between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs still held when controlling for party voting intentions, even though voting intentions and political orientation are strong correlates of conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff, Zimmer et al., 2022). Our results thus suggest that party affiliation is not an insurmountable barrier to non-conspiratorial theorizing and that effective political identity leaders can dissuade people from embracing conspiracy beliefs even when they do not share party affiliation with them (Livingstone et al., 2020).

Future Research

Beyond providing some initial support for two of our three hypotheses, the present research also lays the groundwork for future research to explore the links between political identity, leadership, and conspiracy beliefs in greater depth. In particular, four lines of inquiry seem likely to be particularly fertile. The first of these concerns the ways in which identity leaders might not only mitigate conspiracy theories but also promote them. In the present research, we hypothesized that there would be a negative relationship between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs because members of the German government — including the Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the time of data collection — clearly sought to distance themselves from conspiracy theories. For instance, they shared information about detecting and dealing with conspiracy theories, fake news, and misinformation (Bundesregierung, 2020). Nevertheless, identity leadership has sometimes been observed to center on content that serves very different ends (Frenzel et al., 2022; Reicher & Haslam, 2017). Accordingly, there could be a positive correlation between political identity leadership and conspiracy theorizing in contexts where citizens are in thrall to an identity leader who endorses conspiracy theories (e.g., as seen in the US when former US President Donald Trump aligned himself with the QAnon conspiracy; Nguyen, 2020, December 7, Ren et al., 2022). Along related lines, populist leaders have been observed to consolidate their leadership by encouraging conspiracy thinking that demonizes the actions of supposedly evil and malicious

outgroups and/or by presenting themselves as victims of those outgroups (Pirro & Taggart, 2023). Indeed, one mechanism through which they successfully distribute conspiracy beliefs among their loyal followership is through identity fusion processes that create a sense of perceived union between followers and the respective leader (Moniz & Swann, 2025). Accordingly, future studies should examine whether and how political identity leadership can sometimes leverage conspiratorial content to consolidate followers' support and their appetite for that content.

Second, there would be value in future research exploring the possibility of reverse causality between identity leadership and conspiracy theorizing. That is, as well as (certain forms of) identity leadership helping to reduce people's enthusiasm for conspiracy theories, so too a person's interest in steering clear of conspiracy theories might lead them to follow those leaders who engage in (certain forms of) identity leadership — just as an attraction to conspiracy theorizing might fuel enthusiasm for other forms of identity leadership (Enders et al., 2022). Along these lines, Green et al. (2023) found that people with a strong conspiracy mindset evaluated a politician who favored conspiracy theories more positively than one who did not. More generally, then, there would seem to be value in the research that explores the dynamic interplay between the conspiratorial content of identity and forms of identity leadership that either vitalize or vitiate this content.

Third, previous research has shown that social identity can be a prerequisite for (personal) control, suggesting that the proposed mechanisms via external political efficacy and national identification are not independent, and might even form a sequential process (Fritsche, 2022; Fritsche et al., 2013). In line with this, external political efficacy and national identification were (weakly) related to each other in all three studies (as can be seen from Tables 2, 5 and 7). However, the design of the present studies did not allow us to explore this potential relationship properly because we only had two measurement points in Study 1. Accordingly, it would be useful to explore this interdependence in more detail in future

research by conducting longitudinal studies that test the sequential mediation of the link between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs via national identification and external political efficacy.

Finally, we noted above that support for H2 over H3 might reflect the fact that external political efficacy and national identification have different foci. Whereas external political efficacy refers to politicians' behavior and thus is more closely aligned with conspiracy beliefs by definition, national identification captures the individual's relationship with their country (and thus, by definition, has no exclusive leadership or political focus). Accordingly, it would be useful for future studies to explore the role of other social mechanisms that are less individual-focused but which nevertheless pertain to social reality within a country (e.g., perceived social cohesion, procedural justice, or polarization — constructs that are evidently related to conspiracy beliefs; Frenzel et al., 2025; Hartz et al., 2025; van Prooijen, 2018).

Strengths and Limitations

The main strength of the present research is that we tested our hypotheses using both correlational (Study 1) and experimental designs (Studies 2 and 3). Furthermore, it is important to note that we manipulated only the independent variable (i.e., identity leadership) in the experiments, but not the respective mediators (i.e., external political efficacy and national identification). As a result, we could not provide a full causal test of the proposed mediation chain. Future studies might thus consider manipulating identity leadership and the respective mediating factors to provide more compelling evidence for the proposed underlying mechanisms (Spencer et al., 2005).

Moreover, all studies were conducted in Germany, and Studies 1 and 2 referred specifically to German politics. The social and political situation in Germany has been tense in recent years due to multiple crises (the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the climate crisis), with a decline in social cohesion and observed hostility between different

political camps (Boehnke et al., 2024; Rothers, 2025). These circumstances may have had a negative impact on both national identification and external political efficacy and to the extent that these circumstances interact with identity leadership in predicting either national identification or external political efficacy (i.e., a moderation effect), this clearly limits our ability to generalize our findings to other political and social contexts. Conducting similar studies in other countries and contexts would clearly increase our confidence in the capacity of our theorizing to generalize to other countries and other political contexts. To properly tease out the role of hypothesized mediators, there would also be value in testing our model over at least three measurement points.

Furthermore, we did not directly test the relationships between social and existential needs and social identity and external political efficacy. Nevertheless, prior studies suggest that social identity serves to fulfil social needs (Greenaway et al., 2016), and emerging evidence indicates that a lack of control is associated with lower levels of external political efficacy (Iqbal et al., 2024). Finally, although the measure of external political effectiveness is economic (which was particularly important for Study 1), it has been criticized for its superficiality (Zapko-Willmes & Peter, 2024), and we encourage future research to undertake a more in-depth measurement of the construct. Related to the previous point, we also used the same measures for external political efficacy and national identification across all three studies, and this poses a risk of common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To establish the robustness of our results, it would therefore make sense for future studies to assess external political efficacy and national identification using different measures. Finally, we acknowledge that Studies 1 – 3 were not sufficiently powered to fully rule out an indirect relationship between identity leadership and conspiracy beliefs via national identification. Accordingly, future research should assess external political efficacy and national identification with alternative measures, and where possible, separate the measurement of

mediators and outcomes. Finally, future studies should be conducted with larger samples, using our results as a base for effect-size estimation.

Conclusion

Beliefs in conspiracy theories are, at least in part, a result of the thwarting of social and existential needs (Douglas et al., 2019). In the present research, we explored the idea that enthusiasm for such beliefs might be dampened by political identity leadership that satisfies these needs. Speaking to the particular importance of leadership satisfying existential needs, we found evidence across three studies that political identity leadership was associated with citizens having a stronger sense of political efficacy, and that this was associated with them being less willing to endorse conspiracy theories. In this, the studies speak to the crucial role that politicians and other leaders play in the cultivation of conspiracy beliefs and also make the case for further programmatic research to explore these issues more closely. Indeed, this is a research agenda that we are keen to pursue in the interest not only of better understanding the spread of conspiracy theories but also of being in a better position to contain that spread.

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Figure 1

Pathways through which identity leaders impact conspiracy beliefs of their citizens

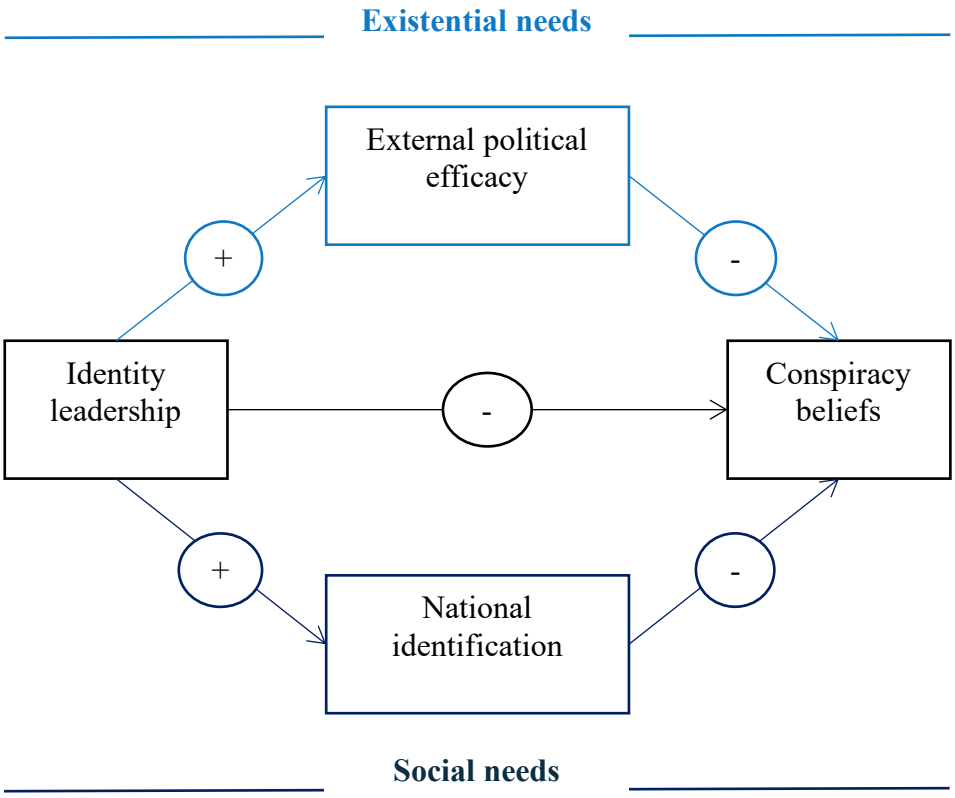
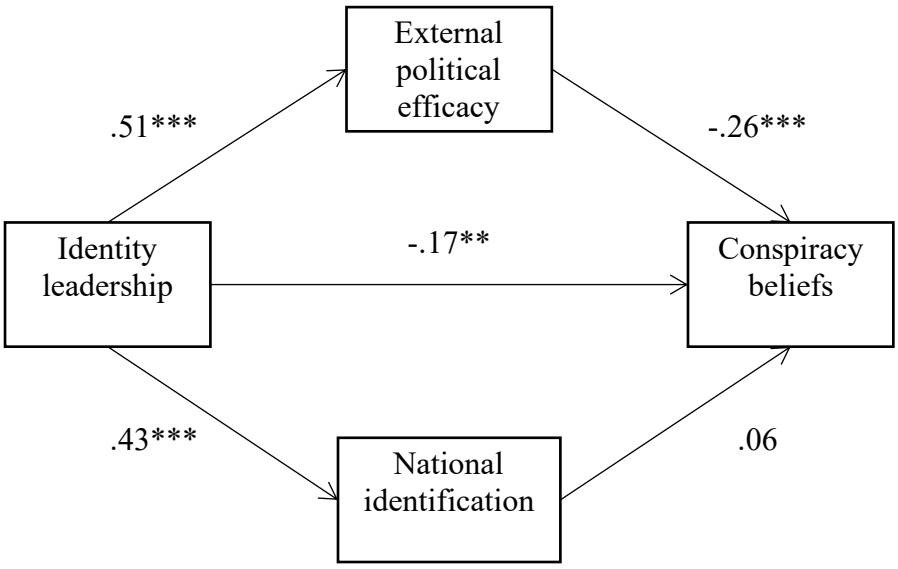


Figure 2

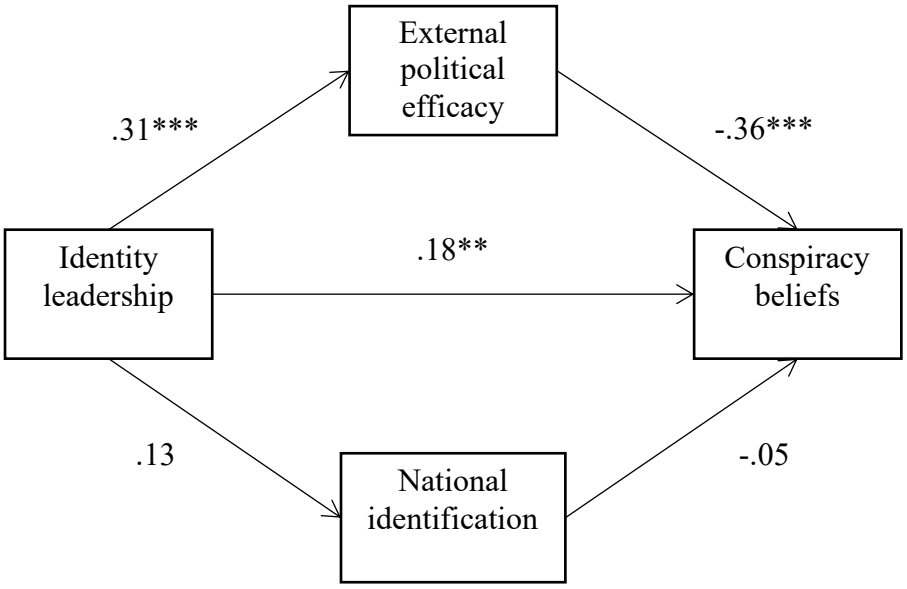
Standardized results of the structural equation model (Study 1)



Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Figure 3

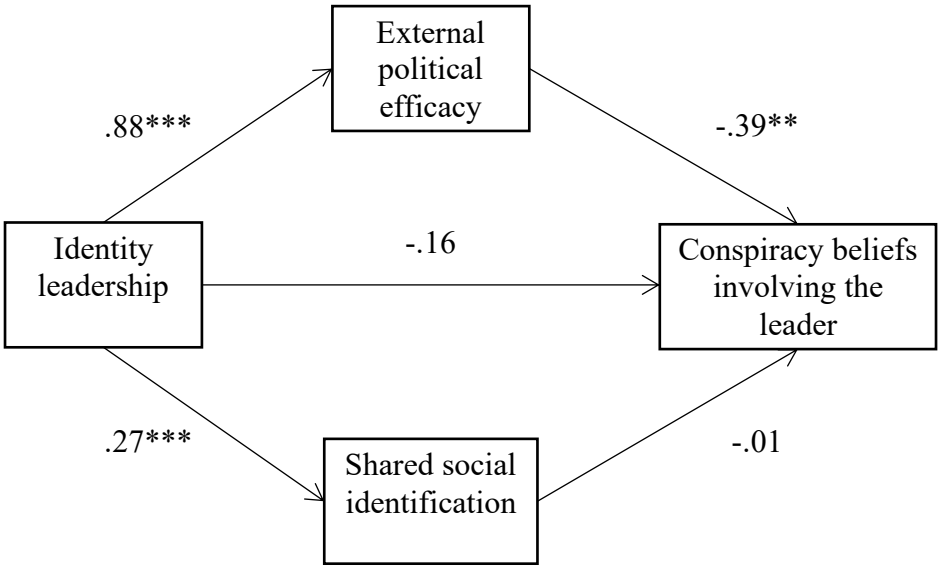
Standardized results of the structural equation model (Study 2)



Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Figure 4

Standardized results of the structural equation model (Study 3)



Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 1

Participants' party preferences (Study 1)

Political Party	*n*	%
CDU/CSU	263	16.10
SPD	386	23.60
BÜNDNIS 90/ DIE GRÜNEN	267	16.30
Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	170	10.40
Die Linke	111	6.80
FDP	144	8.80
Other	294	18.00

Table 2

Means (M), standard deviations (SD), skewness (SK), and kurtosis (Rku) of all variables (Study 1)

Construct	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*SK*	*Rku*	1	2	3
1 Identity leadership	1635	4.02	1.55	-0.25	-0.06			
2 Conspiracy beliefs	1011	5.60	2.23	1.49	-2.73	-.34***		
3 External political efficacy	1011	2.40	1.00	0.28	-5.24	.49***	-.37***	
4 National identification	1011	3.80	0.83	-0.96	4.73	.44***	-.10**	.20***

Note. The skewness and kurtosis values are z-standardized.

*$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3

Named identity leaders in the low and high identity leadership condition (Study 2)

	Condition	
	High Identity Leadership	Low Identity Leadership
Politician	*n*	*n*
Annalena Baerbock	6	4
Robert Habeck	10	1
Willy Brandt	4	0
Martin Sonneborn	1	0
Angela Merkel	45	7
Olaf Scholz	3	22
Frank-Walter Steinmeier	3	1
Sven Lehmann	1	0
Kevin Kühnert	1	0
Helmut Schmidt	4	0
Karl Marx	1	0
Otto von Bismarck	1	0
Karl Lauterbach	3	3
Sarah Wagenknecht	2	0
Joschka Fischer	1	0
Richard von Weizsäcker	1	0
Gerhard Schröder	2	5
Christian Lindner	2	18
Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg	1	0
Claudia Roth	1	0
Boris Palmer	1	0
Cem Özdemir	1	0
Adolf Hitler	0	4
Frauke Petry	0	1
Friedrich Merz	0	7
Armin Laschet	0	6
Jens Spahn	0	4
Phillip Amthor	0	2
Alexander Dobrindt	0	1
Andreas Scheuer	0	2
Markus Söder	0	2
Björn Höcke	0	1
Alice Weidel	0	1
Tino Chrupalla	0	1
Stephan Weil	0	1
Alexander Gauland	0	1
Christian Lüth	0	1

Table 4

Participants' party preferences (Study 2)

Political Party	*n*	%
CDU/CSU	18	9.50
SPD	29	15.3
BÜNDNIS 90/ DIE GRÜNEN	93	48.9
Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	4	2.10
Die Linke	30	15.80
FDP	16	8.40

Table 5

Means (M), standard deviations (SD), skewness (SK), kurtosis (Rku), and correlations between all variables (Study 2, N = 190)

	M	*SD*	*SK*	*Rku*	1	2	3
1 Identity leadership	4.06	1.79	-0.43	-3.59			
2 Conspiracy beliefs	2.74	1.23	2.99	-2.37	-.03		
3 External political efficacy	2.63	0.72	-0.11	-0.99	.30***	-.30***	
4 National identification	3.71	0.72	-3.35	0.06	.23**	-.16*	.29***

Note. The skewness and kurtosis values are z-standardized.

*$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 6

Participants' party preferences (Study 3)

Political Party	*n*	%
CDU/CSU	67	25.4
SPD	43	16.3
BÜNDNIS 90/ DIE GRÜNEN	42	15.9
Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	34	12.9
Die Linke	13	4.9
FDP	11	4.2
Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW)	12	4.5
Other	24	9.1

Table 7

Means (M), standard deviations (SD), skewness (SK), kurtosis (Rku), and correlations between all variables (Study 3, N = 264)

	M	*SD*	*SK*	*Rku*	1	2	3
1 Identity leadership	4.13	1.58	-0.37	-3.17			
2 Specific conspiracy beliefs	3.50	1.65	1.80	-2.90	-.62***		
3 External political efficacy	2.93	1.49	-0.42	-5.09	.83***	-.53***	
4 Shared social identification	3.90	0.75	-2.93	0.13	.31**	-.15*	.33***

Note. The skewness and kurtosis values are z-standardized.

*$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Appendix

Ethical Approval

All studies were conducted in line with the ethical guidelines of the German Psychological Association and the Declaration of Helsinki. The institution where the research was conducted only requires ethical approval when physical or mental impairment is expected or the data is not collected anonymously, which was the case in all three studies. However, Study 1 was part of a larger research project, which was approved by the ethics commission of the seventh author's institution (Approval no: 3419). Furthermore, we decided to obtain ethical approval for Study 2 as we manipulated identity leadership with real-life politicians. Study 2 was approved by the ethics commission of the second and last author's institution (Approval no: 2022-52).

Study 1

Additional measures

Identification with family, friends, neighbourhood, Europe, and humankind; changes in social identification with family, friends, neighbourhood, Europe, and humankind since 2020; social support; covid-related collective self-efficacy; covid-related self-efficacy; need to belong; life satisfaction; cognitive closure; perspective taking; political participation; change in political participation since 2020; authoritarianism; political cynicism; internal political efficacy; trust in the leader; comparison between Olaf Scholz and Angela Merkel regarding identity leadership and trust; nationalism; perceived threat for oneself and other social groups (i.e., family and friends, neighbourhood, fellow citizens, European citizens, humankind); perceived threat by other social groups (i.e., family and friends, neighbourhood, fellow citizens, European citizens, humankind); physical symptoms; stress, loneliness and isolation; identification with Ukrainian citizens; helping behaviour for Ukrainians during the war; friends and family from Russia or Ukraine; handling of COVID-19 health measurements; intention to get COVID-19 booster and wearing masks in public; personal experiences with

COVID-19 (i.e., infection, severity of symptoms, death of an acquaintance); demographic information (i.e., parenthood, job status, zip code, state of residence, country of residence). The following constructs measured in this research project were already published in [anonymized for review]: family identification, identification with friends, neighbourhood identification, country identification, identification with Europe, identification with humankind, loneliness, stress, and physical symptoms (all assessed at Time 1). The constructs need to belong (Time 1), perspective taking (Time 1), cognitive closure (Time 1), and change in identification with different groups (Time 2) are used in another publication by [anonymized for review]. However, the constructs analyzed in Study 1 have not been published yet and have not been used in previous analyses.

Items List

Identity Leadership

- The Chancellor is a model member of Germany.
- The Chancellor is a defender of Germany's interests.
- The Chancellor creates a feeling of cohesion in our country.
- The Chancellor is creating structures that are useful for our country.

External Political Efficacy

- Politicians strive to keep in close touch with the people.
- Politicians care about what ordinary people think.

National Identification

- I identify with the people in my country.
- I see myself as part of my country.
- I feel connected to the people in my country.
- I am glad to live in my country.

Conspiracy Beliefs

- I think that many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about.
- I think that politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions.
- I think that government agencies closely monitor all citizens.
- I think that events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities.
- I think that there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

In Model 1, all constructs loaded on their *a priori* first-order latent factor. In Model 2, identity leadership and national identification loaded on one overall identity factor. All other items loaded on their *a priori* latent factor. In Model 3, all items loaded on the same factor. In Model 4, identity leadership and external political efficacy loaded on one political factor. All other items loaded on their *a priori* latent factor. We determined model fit based on the following model fit statistics: (1) Non-significant χ^2 ($p > .01$), (2) Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA < 0.08), (3) Standardized Root Mean Residual (SRMR <0.08), (4) Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI > 0.90), and (5) Comparative Fit Index (CFI > 0.90), and Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and Bayes Information Criterion (BIC) with lower values indicating a better model fit (Wang & Wang, 2019). The model fits are presented in Table 8. The results of the Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi-Square Difference Test (Satorra & Bentler, 2010) showed that Model 1 was superior to the alternative models, indicating the statistical independence of all constructs.

Table 8

Model fits and comparison of measurement models (Study 1)

							90% CI						
Model	X^2	*df*	*C*	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	LL	UL	SRMR	AIC	BIC	*Model comparison*	*SB-*ΔX^2	Δdf
Model 1	617.22***	84	1.17	0.945	0.931	0.062	0.058	0.067	0.051	55026.64	55302.07			
Model 2	2248.11***	87	1.22	0.775	0.729	0.123	0.119	0.128	0.120	57033.42	57292.65	vs. Model 1	771.20***	3
Model 3	4506.52***	90	1.24	0.541	0.465	0.173	0.169	0.177	0.189	59880.33	60123.36	vs. Model 1	2191.86***	6
Model 4	1216.12***	87	1.18	0.883	0.858	0.098	0.085	0.094	0.078	55729.44	55988.67	vs. Model 1	488,27***	3

Note. $\chi 2$ = Chi-square; *df* = degrees of freedom; c = scaling correction factor; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; LL = Lower Level; UL = Upper Level; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayes Information Criterion; SB-$\Delta X2$ Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi-Square Diff test; Δdf = difference degrees of freedom.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Study 2

Manipulation of Identity Leadership

Low Identity Leadership Condition. Leaders who engage in identity leadership create a sense of 'we-ness' in the groups they lead — a sense that 'We belong to the same group'. When leaders do identity leadership well, the people in their group have a sense that they share a social identity — for example, as a member of a community, a team or a country. This creates a strong sense of connection between leaders and those they lead — a sense that 'we are all in this together'. National leaders and other political leaders often engage in identity leadership. But not all leaders do this well. Some fail to create a sense of shared social identity among the citizens of their country and they are also seen as 'not one of us', and as someone who is 'not doing it for us'. Think about yourself as a German citizen and think of a national leader or politician (either today or in the past) who you think is bad at identity leadership.

Name a political leader: _____

Now, write one or two sentences about

… how this leader has failed to represent Germany — so that they were not 'one of us'.

… how this leader has failed to advance Germany — so that they have not 'done it for us'.

… how this leader has failed to create a sense of shared identity within Germany — so that they have not 'created a sense of us').

… how this leader has failed to create structures that bring people in Germany together — so that they have not 'made us matter'.

High Identity Leadership Condition. Leaders who engage in identity leadership create a sense of 'we-ness' in the groups they lead — a sense that 'We belong to the same group'. When leaders do identity leadership well, the people in their group have a sense that they share a social identity — for example, as a member of a community, a team or a country.

This creates a strong sense of connection between leaders and those they lead — a sense that ‘we are all in this together’. National leaders and other political leaders often engage in identity leadership. When they do this well, they create a sense of shared social identity among the citizens of their country and are also seen as ‘one of us’, who is ‘doing it for us’. Think about yourself as a German citizen and think of a national leader or politician (either today or in the past) who you think is good at identity leadership.

Name a political leader: _____

Now, write a one or two sentences about…

- … how this leader has represented Germany — so that they have been ‘one of us’.
- … how this leader has advanced Germany — so that they have ‘done it for us’.
- … how this leader has created a sense of shared identity within Germany — so that they have ‘created a sense of us’.
- … how this leader has created structures that bring people in Germany together — so that they have ‘made us matter’.

Item List

Identity Leadership

- This leader is a model member of Germany.
- This leader acts as a champion for Germany's interests.
- This leader creates a sense of cohesion within our country.
- This leader creates structures that are useful for our country.

External Political Efficacy

- Politicians strive to keep in close touch with the people.
- Politicians care about what ordinary people think.

National Identification

- I identify with the people in my country.
- I see myself as part of my country.
- I feel connected to the people in my country.
- I am glad to live in my country.

Conspiracy Beliefs

- The government or covert organizations are responsible for events that are unusual or unexplained.
- Many so called “coincidences” are in fact clues as to how things really happened.
- Some things that everyone accepts as true are in fact hoaxes created by people in power.
- Many situations or events can be explained by illegal or harmful acts by the government or other powerful people.
- The alternative explanations for important societal events are closer to the truth than the official story.
- Events throughout history are carefully planned and orchestrated by individuals for their own betterment.
- Events on the news may not have actually happened.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

We tested and compared the same four measurement models as in Study 1 and used the same model fit statistics. Table 9 shows the model fits and results of the Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi-Square Difference Test (Satorra & Bentler, 2010). Model 1, in which all items loaded onto their a priori latent factor, was superior to the alternative models.

Table 9

Model fits and comparison of measurement models (Study 2)

							90% CI							
Model	X^2	*df*	*C*	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	LL	UL	SRMR	AIC	BIC	*Model comparison*	*SB-*ΔX^2	Δdf
Model 1	190.95***	113	1.11	0.952	0.943	0.060	0.045	0.075	0.065	9212.36	9397.44			
Model 2	454.25***	116	1.12	0.739	0.758	0.124	0.112	0.136	0.124	9503.91	9679.25	vs. Model 1	198.31***	3
Model 3	1271.21***	119	1.13	0.296	0.196	0.226	0.215	0.237	0.261	10429.40	10595.00	vs. Model 1	812.73***	6
Model 4	257.30***	116	1.11	0.914	0.899	0.080	0.067	0.093	0.100	9280.17	9455.51	vs. Model 1	66.35***	3

Note. $\chi 2$ = Chi-square; *df* = degrees of freedom; c = scaling correction factor; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; LL = Lower Level; UL = Upper Level; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayes Information Criterion; SB-$\Delta X2$ Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi-Square Diff test; Δdf = difference degrees of freedom.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Study 3

Manipulation of Identity Leadership

Instruction. In this study, you will become a citizen of a fictional society living in Tagoona. Tagoona is a large city with 500,000 inhabitants that borders a large forest. The Tagoona Forest is a popular destination for residents of Tagoona to escape the hustle and bustle of the city. On the next page, you will learn more about this fictional city's societal life and politics.

Low Identity Leadership Condition. Imagine you are a citizen and part of the society of Tagoona. As you already know, Tagoona is a big city with about 500,000 citizens, which borders a big forest. The forest of Tagoona is a popular excursion destination for the citizens of Tagoona to escape the big city hustle and bustle. The city used to do much better financially. Therefore, the main goal of the city administration – the incumbent mayor Taiki and the city council – is the economic strengthening of the city. Even though Mayor Taiki grew up in Tagoona, he does not attach importance to being part of Tagoona's community. Primarily, he wants to do politics that move the city forward, which is much work. Hence, he has no time to participate in regular community meetings, street festivals, or sporting events. He thinks the regular exchange with the people of Tagoona is unnecessary because, at long last, he – in coordination with the city council – must make the decisions. To boost tourism in Tagoona, Mayor Taiki commissioned an advertising agency to design a new city coat of arms and slogan. The city's rebranding was successful, and Tagoona could record increased tourism. Last year, EnergyX - a big energy company - approached the mayor and presented the following offer: EnergyX would locate their most significant company location near Tagoona. However, most of the city's forest would have to be cleared for that. Mayor Taiki realized that this plan would have positive and negative outcomes for the development of his city. On the one hand, deforestation would significantly deteriorate the quality of life in Tagoona. On the other hand, the settlement of EnergyX would mean 1000 additional

workplaces for Tagoona. Aside from that, streets and historic buildings could be restored from the trade tax revenue. Mayor Taiki consulted with the city council for a long time. At long last, he decided to deforestation to strengthen the economic safety of Tagoona. This decision partly caused discontent among the citizens of Tagoona because not all of them could relate to this political decision and, therefore, felt overlooked.

High Identity Leadership Condition. Imagine you are a citizen and part of the society of Tagoona. As you already know, Tagoona is a big city with about 500,000 citizens, which borders a big forest. The forest of Tagoona is a popular excursion destination for the citizens of Tagoona to escape the big city hustle and bustle. The city used to do much better financially. Therefore, the main goal of the city administration – the incumbent mayor Taiki and the city council – is the economic strengthening of the city. Mayor Taiki grew up in Tagoona and is keen to have a close exchange with the citizens of his city. By participating in regular community meetings, he learns about what moves the citizens of his city and how he can stand up best for them. To him, being seen as part of the community is especially important. Therefore, he promotes the organization of street festivals and sporting events and participates regularly in those events. To boost tourism in Tagoona, the mayor designed a new city coat of arms and slogan with the citizens. The city's rebranding was successful, and Tagoona could record increased tourism. Additionally, this community project strengthened the communal spirit in Tagoona. Last year, EnergyX - a big energy company – approached the mayor and presented the following offer: EnergyX would locate their most significant company location near Tagoona. However, most of the city's forest would have to be cleared for that. Mayor Taiki used regular exchanges with the citizens of his city to inform them about the positive and negative aspects of the offer. On the one hand, deforestation would significantly deteriorate the quality of life in Tagoona. On the other hand, the settlement of EnergyX would mean 1000 additional workplaces for Tagoona. Aside from that, streets and historic buildings could be restored from the trade tax revenue. Mayor Taiki consulted with

the city council for a long time. At long last, he decided to deforestation to strengthen the economic safety of Tagoona. This decision partly caused discontent among the citizens of Tagoona. The mayor still hopes that the open exchange with the citizens led to a better understanding of his political decisions.

Item List

Identity leadership

- The mayor is a model member of Tagoona.
- The mayor acts as a champion for Tagoona's interests.
- The mayor creates a sense of cohesion within Tagoona.
- The mayor creates structures that are useful for Tagoona.

Shared social identification (within the city of Tagoona)

- The people of Tagoona identify with each other.
- The people of Tagoona see themselves as part of their city.
- The people of Tagoona feel connected to each other.
- The people of Tagoona are happy to live in their city.

External political efficacy

- Politicians strive to keep in close touch with the people.
- Politicians care about what ordinary people think.

Conspiracy Beliefs involving the Leader

- The mayor of Tagoona appears to be involved in questionable and opaque schemes.
- The mayor works with influential organizations that want to use Tagoona's resources for self-interest.
- The mayor of Tagoona carefully keeps relevant and important information secret from citizens.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

We performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ensure the statistical independence of all constructs. In Model 1, all constructs loaded on their *a priori* first-order latent factor. In Model 2, items to assess generic conspiracy beliefs and specific conspiracy beliefs loaded on one overall conspiracy factor. All other items loaded on their *a priori* latent factor. In Model 3, the items to measure identity leadership and shared social identification loaded on one overall identity factor. All other items loaded on their *a priori* latent factor. Model 4, all items loaded on one overall latent factor. In Model 5, identity leadership and external political efficacy loaded on one political factor. All other items loaded on their *a priori* latent factor. We used the same model fit statistics as in Studies 1 and 2 to determine model fit. The results of the Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi-Square Difference Test (Satorra & Bentler, 2010) showed that Model 1 was superior to the alternative models, indicating the statistical independence of all constructs (see Table 10).

Table 10

Model fits and comparison of measurement models (Study 3)

							90% CI							
Model	X^2	*df*	*C*	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	LL	UL	SRMR	AIC	BIC	*Model comparison*	*SB-ΔX²*	Δ*df*
Model 1	320.40***	160	1.16	0.948	0.938	0.062	0.052	0.071	0.042	15783.01	16033.32			
Model 2	605.54***	164	1.18	0.875	0.834	0.101	0.092	0.110	0.113	16119.70	16355.71	vs. Model 1	173.17***	4
Model 3	846.76***	164	1.17	0.779	0.744	0.126	0.117	0.134	0.108	16391.97	16627.98	vs. Model 1	394,30***	4
Model 4	1933.60***	170	1.22	0.429	0.361	0.198	0.190	0.206	0.212	17755.70	17970.26	vs. Model 1	911,62***	10
Model 5	345.95***	164	1.16	0.941	0.932	0.065	0.055	0.074	0.046	15806.81	16042.82	vs. Model 1	25.55***	4

Note. χ2 = Chi-square; df = degrees of freedom; c = scaling correction factor; CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; LL = Lower Level; UL = Upper Level; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; AIC = Akaike Information Criterion; BIC = Bayes Information Criterion; SB-ΔX2 Satorra-Bentler Scaled Chi-Square Diff test; Δdf = difference degrees of freedom.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

1

2