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## Belief in the Round Table Conspiracy and Political Division in Poland

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**Supplementary Materials:** Data [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



### Abstract

The functions of the conspiracy theory surrounding the '89 Round Table in present-day political life are discussed. In the online research conducted in 2018 on a representative sample of Polish citizens, we found that attitudes towards the Round Table are an important marker of the fundamental political division in Poland. Those who supported the current rule of PiS (with a nationalistic-authoritarian orientation) agreed with the '89 Round Table conspiracy theory, whereas those who supported the liberal opposition against PiS rejected the '89 Round Table conspiracy theory. Moreover, believers in the Round Table conspiracy appeared to trust politicians and justify the system to a higher degree than those who rejected this conspiracy theory. We also found that endorsement of the conspiracy theory of the '89 Round Table was significantly associated with the stability of voting preferences. Among those who voted for PiS, conspiracy theory believers formed a stable electorate, whereas among those who voted for parties with a liberal orientation, theory believers were likely to change their voting preferences. Thus, belief in the discussed conspiracy is not only a part of some ideological landscape but also has direct behavioral consequences. The social-psychological reasons for the growing popularity of the '89 Round Table conspiracy theory are discussed.

### Keywords

the Round Table conspiracy, voting preferences, trust, system justification



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Historical events may attract the attention of psychologists for a variety of reasons. One is an event itself; for instance, the Round Table Talks in Poland in 1989 are a fascinating example of an efficient negotiation process that allowed a seemingly intractable social conflict to be resolved and opened the gate to a peaceful transition to the new social/political reality. As such, it might be a very natural object of interest for researchers working on conflict resolution, negotiations, and the psychology of peace (see, e.g., Reykowski, 2020, this issue; Grzelak, 2020, this issue; see also Druckman, Bulska, & Jochemczyk, 2020, this issue).

However, historical events may be interesting for psychologists, because lay social representations of these events emerge as important conceptual frames for interpreting ongoing social/political processes and making political decisions (e.g., a decision to participate or not in elections, and, whom to support, if any). In our commentary we aim to show how fundamental political division between supporters of the ruling party in Poland (of nationalistic/authoritarian orientation) and of the liberal opposition is related to symbolic representations of the '89 Round Table. In particular, we would analyze the role of the conspiracy theory of the '89 Round Table, shared by the former group and rejected by the latter, in the present political discourse in Poland, as well as its role in voting preferences.

Janusz Reykowski (2020) partly addresses this issue at the end of his contribution, in the section on "Controversy Around the Round Table '89". He refers to the question of why the social developments after the '89 Round Table led us through a liberal democracy to a "non-liberal democracy" with authoritarian features, and, what the role of the '89 Round Table is in this process. He states the following:

*"In reality, the main enemies of the RT are right-wing politicians with strong authoritarian tendencies. This is the position of the current Polish government which is seeking to dismantle the most important democratic institutions in this country. The success of the right-wing populist party in Poland has nothing to do with the Round Table. It is related, on the one hand, to the great disappointment with economic reforms in Poland among many social groups. On the other hand, to wider processes that have developed in Europe and in many countries outside Europe." (p. 22).*

Towards the end of his paper, Janusz Reykowski concludes:

*"In sum, I want to suggest that the sharp criticisms of the RT process have two major socio-psychological reasons. The first one is the disappointment with its results among social groups who were bereft of advantages of the social change. In other words, it is due to the failure to include all of the population in the economic benefits of the new Poland. The second one is related to the concept of social life as the zero-sum game, where there is no room for negotiated agreements.*

*For politicians with such worldview criticism of the RT is convenient weapon in political battles – it serves the delegitimization of their rivals.” (p. 23).*

We will refer to the thesis of Janusz Reykowski in our analysis.

The 1989 Round Table may seem like a miracle: thanks to these talks, after 45 years of so called “real socialism” with a one-party political system and a centrally controlled economy, Poland made a sudden jump to liberal democracy and market economy. Furthermore, political sovereignty was immediately regained. While a variety of factors played an important role in fostering the delineated change, it is the shared opinion of historians, social philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, and journalists that the Round Table was a critical historical event in this process, cascading into a wave of similar changes across the whole of Eastern Europe (see, e.g., Ash, 1990; Bloom, 2013; Castle, 2003; Elster, 1996; Kennedy & Porter, 2000; Paczkowski, 2015; Skórzyński, 2009).

The Round Table Talks and their immediate results – (partly) free elections, the formation of a non-communist government, allowing the free movement of people abroad, and the introduction of market principles in the economy – were initially approached with great optimism and evaluated very positively by an overwhelming majority of Poles. However, from the very beginning, some Solidarity activists were reluctant to accept the idea of negotiating with communists or were even strongly against it. They had never accepted this way of handling Polish problems, expecting revolution instead of negotiated compromise between the communist government and Solidarity. This way of thinking probably sowed the seed for the future development of the conspiracy theory of the Polish 1989 Round Table.

The content of this theory is quite simple: It is a claim that the Round Table Talks were arranged by communists (on the governmental side) and traitors from Solidarity, which were secret communist agents (on the democratic opposition side), with the ultimate goal of preserving the interests of communist elites and their supporters in the new system. According to this theory, the real purpose of the talks was hidden to the broad public. Also, an important element of this view was the belief that Lech Wałęsa, a great leader of the Solidarity movement, was in reality a puppet of the communist secret service.

Three decades after the Round Table, popularity of this conspiracy theory seems to grow rather than fade, particularly among supporters of the current nationalistic government with strong authoritarian inclinations (which manifest in PiS<sup>1</sup>’ systematic efforts to destroy the three-partition of power and the check-and-balance principle, in a clear attempt to subordinate the whole legal system to the ruling party<sup>2</sup>). To understand why the idea of the Round Table’s conspiracy appears to be gaining increasing support, one might be reminded about the gross disappointment with liberal economic reforms

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1) PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Law and Justice) is the ruling party in Poland since 2015.

2) See, e.g., European Commission (2019a, 2019b), Rankin (2019) and Sadurski (2019).

introduced immediately after the new, Solidarity-backed government had been formed (see the Discussion). In an attempt to give meaning to such developments, as well as to regain a sense of personal control over social reality, people might have been increasingly prone to believe that the 1989 Round Table was a hoax, and that they were the victims of collusion between the elites on both sides of the Round Table.

Already in the 21st century, the theory of the Round Table conspiracy had been incorporated into the ideological system of historical justifications for PiS; pretending to be the only legitimate heirs of Solidarity, PiS politicians portrayed themselves as the single “truly patriotic” force on the Polish political scene, defenders of Polish national interests and identity, with strong ties to the Catholic Church as its key ingredient. As soon as PiS came to power in the 2015 general elections, the right-wing leaning press, as well as public TV and radio (now under direct political control of the ruling party) made an orchestrated effort to undermine the positive view of the Round Table, portraying it as a giant conspiracy. Importantly, the state Institute of National Memory – hand-in-hand with some governmental plans – looked for any evidence they could find for “anti-patriotic” conspiracies (e.g., they intensely searched for any evidence that Smoleńsk’s plane catastrophe in 2010 in Russia, in which the Polish president Lech Kaczyński and 95 top politicians in Poland lost their lives, was due to a conspiracy between Polish and Russian political leaders). The search was also about the alleged role of Lech Wałęsa as a secret collaborator of the political police during the communist period.

The present research examined the role of the conspiracy theory of the 1989 Round Table in the current political discourse in Polish society. The research was conducted during the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historical Round Table (in February 2018). In the final part of this commentary we will discuss the hypothetical reasons for the conspiracy beliefs emergence, analyzing its psychological and political underpinnings.

In addition to diagnosing attitudes toward the ’89 Round Table among supporters and critics of the present regime, our research also had some theoretical aims. The first addressed the role of conspiracy ideation in attitudes toward the social system and those in power. Social-psychological research typically reveals that people who believe in conspiracies do not trust those in power and show a low level of system justification (see, e.g., Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; Einstein & Glick, 2015; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Kim & Cao, 2016). Powerless people are likely to assume that people in power – with considerable resources and free from direct social control – tend to engage in secret, illegal/morally doubtful activities that serve their interests at the expense of the common good. Obviously, such an interpretation makes “ordinary people” likely to endorse a variety of conspiracy theories about those who enjoy power.

The problem is that the discussed research ignores the natural political process in democratic society, that is to say, the fact that “ordinary people” have real influence on who gets to have power. They might do that by voting in favor of the party as well as by engaging in other forms of activity (such as participation in manifestations, signing

petitions, and encouraging other people to vote for the party they prefer). Importantly, as a consequence of free elections, they may find themselves among those who supported the winners or the losers.

If a conspiracy-theory-driven political party wins an election, its supporters would be more inclined to justify the system and to trust the ruling politicians, while – at the same time – still endorsing the conspiracy theories. Furthermore, such conspiracy theories, shared among the winners, would start to function as narratives legitimizing the ruling party. To examine this possibility, the measures of trusting people in power as well as system justification were included in the questionnaire.

The second theoretical aim of the study was to examine how believing in a power-legitimizing conspiracy theory (exemplified by the theory of the Round Table conspiracy) is related to stability of political preferences among those who either support or are against the ruling party. To evaluate the role of such conspiracy beliefs in voting, an index of the stability of such preferences was developed (see the Method section).

To summarize, the reported study addresses three issues. First, we ask whether the conspiracy theory of the 1989 Round Table is a relatively isolated belief, or if it is closely interconnected with other conspiracy beliefs forming a system of ideological justifications for the present political power (PiS). Second, we ask whether beliefs in the Round Table conspiracy are related to stability of voting preferences. The third question addresses the issue of the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and attitudes toward people in power. So far, research has revealed that conspiracy seekers tend to show a generalized distrust toward those in power and low system justification. An interesting question arises as to what happens when conspiracy theories become legitimizing myths for the ruling party. Would the discussed relationships survive, or undergo a reversal?

## The Research

### Method

#### Participants

The survey was conducted in February 2018, with an emulated representative sample recruited through the Polish online panel company, Ariadna. There were  $N = 610$  participants in total (335 men and 275 women, with ages ranging from 19 to 83 years,  $M_{\text{age}} = 39.3$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.6$ ). Stratified quota sampling (based on Polish voivodships) was used during data collection. Post-stratification weights based on gender, age, place of residence, and occupation were created and used to adjust the sample to more closely resemble the Polish population.

## Measures

Participants were presented with a list of statements that addressed various popular beliefs about Polish politics and were asked to what extent they endorsed each of the beliefs. Items developed by the authors or not published elsewhere in English are listed in Table A.1 in the Appendix.

## Beliefs About the Round Table

Endorsement of the Round Table conspiracy was measured with a 5-item scale with excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ). Similarly, a positive view of the Round Table was measured with a 5-item scale with good reliability ( $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ). Finally, attitudes towards Lech Wałęsa – a key person during the Round Table – were measured with 4 items (2 presenting him as a secret communist agent and 2 – reversely coded – referring to a positive role of Wałęsa) with good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .86$ ,  $M = 2.59$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). In all these cases, participants rated to what extent they agreed with each item on a 5-point scale from 1 – *Definitely disagree* to 5 – *Definitely agree*. All scales were developed by the authors; see Table A.1 in the Appendix for exact wording.

## Conspiracy Beliefs

Belief in Jewish conspiracy was measured with a 6-item scale, e.g., *Jews act in a secret way* ( $\alpha = .95$ ,  $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) by Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, and Wójcik (2013). Conspiracy mentality was measured with 5 items, e.g., *Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about* ( $\alpha = .84$ ,  $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) by Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripannah, and Imhoff (2013). Participants rated to what extent they agreed with a statement from both scales with a 5-point scale (1 – *Definitely disagree*, 5 – *Definitely agree*). Additionally, endorsement of the conspiracy theory about the Smoleńsk catastrophe was measured with 2 items ( $\alpha = .88$ ,  $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.77$ ) by Soral and Grzesiak-Feldman (2015). In this case a 7-point rating scale (1 – *Definitely disagree*, 7 – *Definitely agree*) was used.

## Political Attitudes

Participants declared which of the Polish political parties they had voted for in the election of 2015, and separately, which of the parties they would vote for in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Furthermore, level of trust towards the current Polish government was measured with a 4-item scale ( $\alpha = .95$ ,  $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ) developed by the authors. Finally, level of system justification was measured with a 3-item scale, e.g., *The Polish political system operates as it should* ( $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) taken from the original scale developed by Kay and Jost (2003); for Polish adaptation, see Cichońska, Winiewski, Bilewicz, Bukowski, and Jost (2015). Participants rated their trust in the government using a 7-point scale (1 – *Definitely disagree*, 7 – *Definitely agree*) and

rated items referring to system justification using a 5-point scale (1 – *Definitely disagree*, 5 – *Definitely agree*).

## Results

### The Conspiracy Syndrome

Merely looking at the correlations between various beliefs about Polish politics reveals that such beliefs may form of a broader conspiracy-based syndrome (see Table 1). Participants who endorsed the Round Table conspiracy theory held more negative attitudes towards the role of the Round Table in the Polish transformation and towards Lech Wałęsa, seen as a secret collaborator of communists. Furthermore, those who were in favor of the Round Table conspiracy theory, endorsed to greater extents other conspiracy beliefs: the Jewish conspiracy theory and the Smoleńsk conspiracy theory. Such strong correlations between various beliefs provide support for the existence of a broader ideological syndrome. Such a network of connections is functional as it enhances the durability of this ideology. Each of its parts supports other claims (i.e., *it is true because...*), and even if some of the parts are refuted the whole structure may still hold (i.e., *it may not be true, but...*).

Table 1

*Bayesian Correlations Between Various Beliefs About Polish Politics and Its Correlations With Conspiracy Mentality*

Measures	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. RT conspiracy	–	-.43*	.67*	.58*	.59*	.39*
2. Positive view of RT		–	-.58*	-.16	-.36*	.11
3. Wałęsa as an agent			–	.46*	.62*	.02
4. Jewish conspiracy				–	.37*	.41*
5. Smoleńsk conspiracy					–	.03
6. Conspiracy mentality						–

Note. RT = Round Table. The analysis assumes that the noise is distributed according to Student *t* (not Normal) distribution; this accounts for potential outliers.

\*Correlations are credibly different from small (see regions of practical equivalence, Kruschke, 2014).

Such links between various parts may be explained by the following: some participants of the Round Table were known to have a Jewish origin, thus the entire Round Table might be part of a more general conspiracy; the current political and economic situation is still unjust because of how the Round Table was arranged; the Smoleńsk assassination was motivated by strivings to keep the Round Table elites and remove those threatening the established order. Altogether, such beliefs form a network (or syndrome) that characterize those who perceive the former political regime (ruled by Platforma Obywatelska,

the major force of anti-PiS liberal opposition at the moment the study was conducted) as based on fraud and injustice. Such individuals are thus attracted to, and at the same time influenced by, politicians who promote similar beliefs.

## Political Preferences and Endorsement of Conspiracy Beliefs

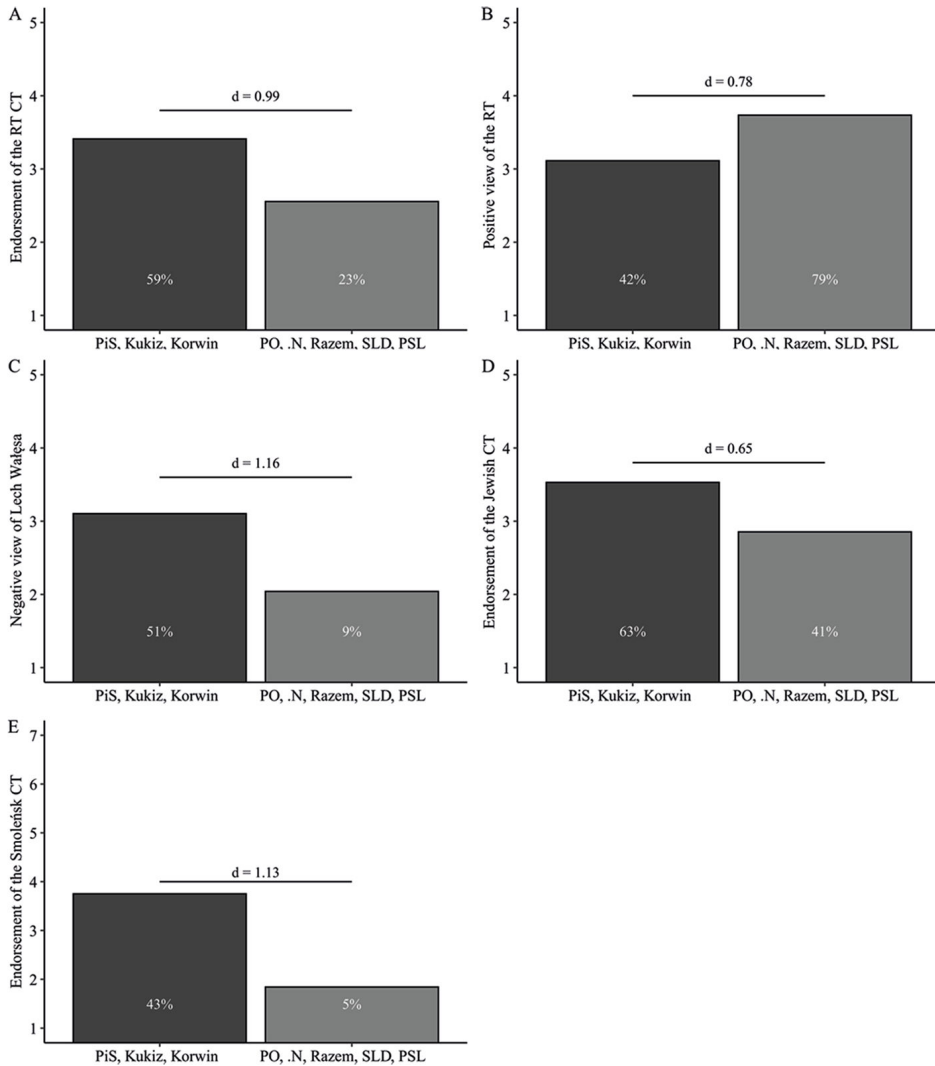
By directly comparing the mean endorsement of the described beliefs, one can see to what extent they characterize supporters of parties competing on the political scene (see Figure 1). One group of parties (here for simplicity referred as *nationalistic*) is represented primarily by the now ruling nationalistic-authoritarian party, PiS, but also by others such as Kukiz '15 (aiming at a complete change of the political system and abandoning political parties) or Korwin (promoting extreme neo-liberal economic solutions together with an ultra-conservative worldview). Among other features, they share a skeptical attitude toward European integration as well as toward liberal democracy, and express more or less open support for the strong-arm régime. The aims of these parties are at odds with the aims of what is now a *liberal opposition* (such parties as PO, Nowoczesna, SLD, RAZEM, or PSL), which focuses on soft changes, defends the division of power and individual freedoms, and presents consistent support for liberal democracy. Accordingly, the Round Table conspiracy theory was endorsed by almost 60 percent of supporters of the *nationalistic* parties, whereas it was endorsed by only 23 percent of supporters of the *liberal opposition*. Similarly, 63 percent and 43 percent of *nationalistic* parties' supporters endorsed the Jewish conspiracy theory and Smoleńsk conspiracy theory, respectively. In contrast, among *liberal opposition* voters these proportions were significantly lower (41 percent and 5 percent, respectively).

The literature on conspiracy theories suggests that conspiracy believers are more likely to blame the system (Crocker et al., 1999), to distrust the authorities (Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012), and to express prejudice against high-power status groups (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). It is thus essential to examine whether all this holds when a party, aiming to challenge the *status quo*, takes power: whether conspiracy believers will still be distrustful of the system, or will they trust the government and justify the system.

To answer this question, two Bayesian multiple regression analyses were conducted separately for trust in the current government and for system justification. In both analyses the outcome variables were regressed on conspiracy mentality and on endorsement of the Round Table conspiracy theory. Both conspiracy mentality and endorsement of the Round Table conspiracy theory explained  $R^2 = .35$ , 95% CI [.30, .40] of the variance of trust in the current government and  $R^2 = .19$ , 95% CI [.14, .24] of the variance of system justification. The analyses revealed that conspiracy mentality predicted lower trust in the current government,  $\beta = -.22$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95% CI [-.28, -.15], and lower justification of the political system in Poland,  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $SE = .04$ , 95% CI [-.35, -.20]. However, the same analyses revealed that participants who endorsed the conspiracy theory of the Round



Table were more likely to trust the current government,  $\beta = .61$ ,  $SE = .03$ , 95% CI [.54, .68], and to justify the Polish political system,  $\beta = .42$ ,  $SE = .04$ , 95% CI [.35, .50].



**Figure 1.** Endorsement of the Round Table conspiracy theory (A), positive view of the Round Table (B), negative view of Lech Wałęsa as a communist agent (C), endorsement of the Jewish conspiracy theory (D), and Smoleńsk conspiracy theory (E) among voters the *liberal opposition vs. nationalistic parties*.  $d =$  Cohen's  $d$ , i.e., standardized difference of the means. Percent values refer to the proportion of participants with values above the mid-point of the scale.

Overall, while individuals with high levels of conspiracy mentality were more distrustful towards the authorities and more likely to blame the system, those individuals who endorsed the particular conspiracy theory – the Round Table conspiracy theory – were more supportive of the current government and more positive toward the Polish political system.

## How Belief in the Round Table Conspiracy Affects Stability of Preferences Among Pro- and Anti-Pis Electorate

Because the Round Table conspiracy theory was reliably related to the level of trust in the government, it can also influence the stability of political preferences and affect future voting decisions. To examine such a possibility, a simple indicator of the stability of political preferences was construed. Each participant of the survey was asked to disclose his or her political decision in the election of 2015, and after that a similar question was asked about their current political preferences. Identical responses to both questions were coded as 1 = stable political preferences, whereas different responses were coded as 0 = unstable preferences. A Bayesian logistic regression analysis with such an indicator regressed on the level of endorsement of the Round Table conspiracy theory, and previous voting decisions (*liberal opposition* parties, *nationalistic* parties, or non-voting participants), revealed a reliable interaction of both predictors (the model with interaction was  $BF = 115$  more likely than the model without interaction); see Figure 2. The non-voting participants declared a similar future voting decision irrespective of whether they endorsed the Round Table conspiracy theory or not, that is, the relationship between endorsement of the Round Table conspiracy theory and stability of preferences was close to 0,  $b_{\text{logit}} = 0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.24$ , 95% CI [-0.43, 0.52]. Among participants who voted in 2015 for one of the *liberal* parties, those endorsing the Round Table conspiracy theory were more likely to change their past decision than those not endorsing such a belief,  $b_{\text{logit}} = -0.31$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ , 95% CI [-0.57, -0.05]. Finally, among participants who voted in 2015 for one of the *nationalistic* parties, endorsement of the Round Table conspiracy theory was a reliable positive predictor of stability of political preferences,  $b_{\text{logit}} = 0.51$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ , 95% CI [0.18, 0.85]. Among participants highly endorsing the Round Table conspiracy theory and voting for one of the *nationalistic* parties, the probability of voting for the same party again was higher than 80 percent. Contrarily, among participants voting for one of the *nationalistic* parties, but not endorsing the Round Table conspiracy theory, the probability of the same vote in future elections was less than 50 percent. In sum, this analysis revealed that the Round Table conspiracy theory might not only attract individuals to extremist parties but also cements these preferences once such parties take power.

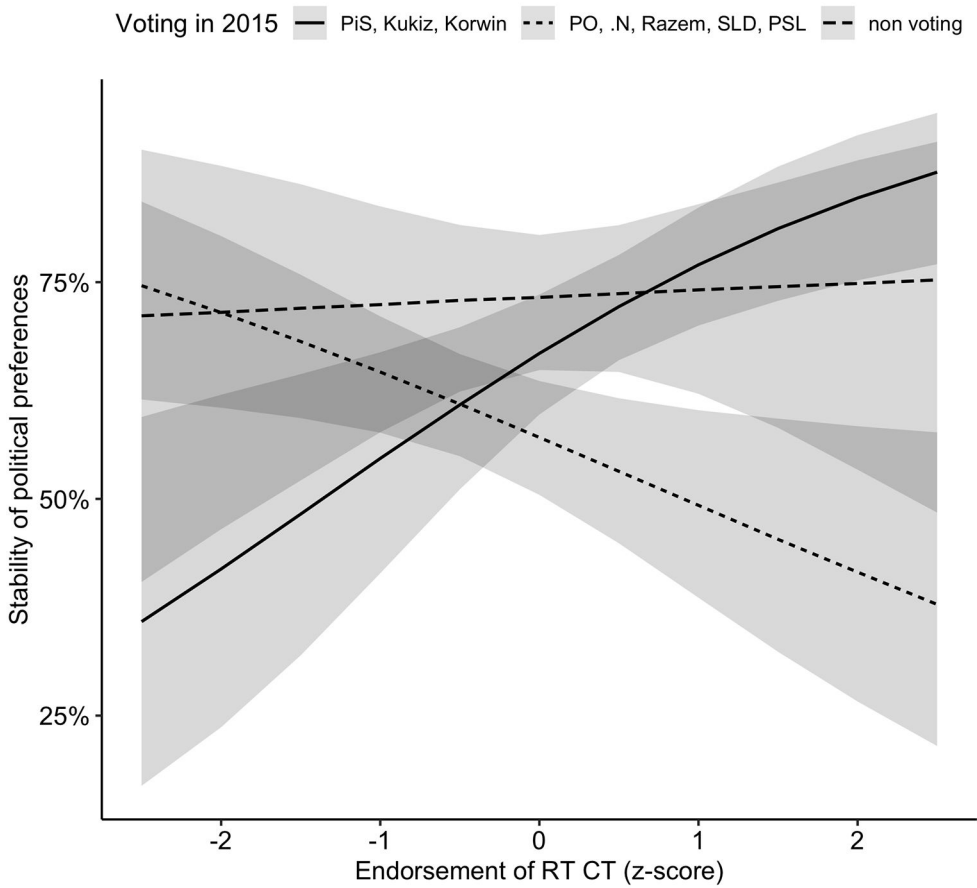


Figure 2. Stability of political preferences and endorsement of the Round Table conspiracy theory among supporters of mainstream parties, extremist parties, and non-voting participants. Gray areas refer to 95% credible regions.

## Discussion

The reviewed results of the survey show that the conspiracy view of the 1989 Round Table is part of a syndrome of conspiracy beliefs about the not very distant past of Polish political history, correlated with belief in Jewish conspiracy. As shown by findings for the stability of voting preferences, belief in the Round Table conspiracy might affect future decisions about which party to choose in the next elections. For those who have voted for nationalistic parties in the last elections in 2015, it appeared that the more they believed in the '89 Round Table conspiracy, the more likely it is that they would declare voting again for PiS in the upcoming elections. However, for those who voted

for liberal parties in the last elections, the more they believed in the '89 Round Table conspiracy, the more likely it is that they would change their political preferences in the upcoming elections (to non-voting or to voting for nationalistic parties). Thus, the discussed conspiracy belief appears to be a real predictor of behavioral intentions such as voting.

Before we turn to the discussion of the Round Table conspiracy's origins, let us briefly comment on the role of the Jewish conspiracy belief. The fact that the latter theory is a part of the whole ideological syndrome might indicate that those who tend to believe in the existence of worldwide conspiracies behind broadly defined political life (including, in addition to politics, finance, economy, and mass media) are probably more prone to develop other, more specific conspiracy theories.

An interesting question arises as to why and how it happened that the image of the Polish Round Table – one of the most positive collective experiences in modern Polish history, a triumph of reason and, at the same time, a human striving for freedom – evolved, for part of Polish society, into an awful plot between communists and renegades from Solidarity.

The first, and perhaps the most important reason was already mentioned earlier in the introduction. The '89 Round Table led to an unprecedented victory by Solidarity, and soon, after the negotiations were over, parliamentary elections took place in June 1989, and the first non-communist government in Eastern Europe was formed in September 1989. It should be noted that the late '80s was a time of great economic crisis in Poland, so expectations of positive change were enormous. However deep free-market economic reforms introduced by the new government appeared to be very harsh, leading to a sudden rise in unemployment and a loss of sense of security on a large scale; this appeared particularly painful for older and less educated people, mostly employed in state-owned companies.

Suddenly, for millions, the future appeared to be uncertain and threatening, calling into question the ability of people to exercise personal control over their lives (of course, other people – younger, more daring, better educated, coming from bigger cities, etc. – capitalized on this situation, frequently opening private businesses or going abroad to work in rich countries of the West). We know from the general psychological literature that both psychological threat and lack of control are potent psychological forces promoting not only political conservatism (e.g., Thórisdóttir & Jost, 2011), but also fostering conspiracy interpretations of social reality (e.g., Kofta, Soral, & Bilewicz, 2020). Thus, the disappointment of millions of Poles with harsh economic reforms introduced immediately by the Solidarity-backed government in 1989, and continued later on, might have been one of the most important reasons for the development of the black legend of the '89 Round Table as a great conspiracy. Even if the first massive frustration was overcome due to steady economic development, the collective memory of a harsh systemic transition remained. Moreover, the division between those who gained and those who lost probably

grew further instead of being mitigated. According to the most recent analyses, Poland now has the highest degree of economic inequalities in the European Union<sup>3</sup>.

Other factors were also in operation. After the election defeat in 2008, PiS intensified attempts to regain power. Probably a crucial experience on the road to PiS's success was what happened on April 10th, 2010: a plane crashed in Smolensk (Russia) due to foggy weather conditions, with all passengers who were leading figures of the Polish political scene killed including the Polish president Lech Kaczyński, a representative of PiS (who is also the twin brother of the current leader of PiS- Jarosław Kaczyński). Since then, Polish society has been regularly confronted with a multitude of preposterous hypotheses propagated by leading politicians of PiS, suggesting a conspiracy behind the catastrophe. Polish authorities (Prime Minister Donald Tusk and other top representatives of the Civic Platform - Platforma Obywatelska, the ruling party at the time) were accused of being involved in secret plots with Russian authorities to kill the Polish President. Four years later, despite the lack of any objective evidence, about a quarter to a third of Polish respondents still believed in these conspiracies. Five years later, PiS gained power.

Presumably, due to the experience with the Smoleńsk conspiracy, PiS's politicians discovered the power of conspiracy narratives in political discourse, thereby encouraging them to propagate the conspiracy theory of the '89 Round Table as a part of a broader ideological project. In this "brave new world", the old leaders of Solidarity, who led the historical agreement with communists at the Round Table, were de-legitimized as renegades, whereas those who aspired to power and finally got it – that is, right-wing oriented, nationalistic politicians of PiS, also grown from the Solidarity stem – were presented as genuine, legitimate heirs of the "great patriotic tradition of Solidarity".

The last factor, presumably contributing to the development of the Round Table conspiracy theory, might lie in the Solidarity tradition, confronted with some specific procedural solutions introduced during negotiations. The proper negotiations were preceded and accompanied by the so called Magdalenka Meetings (see, e.g., Kofta & Leszczyński, 2019; see also Grzelak, 2020, this issue). During these meetings, a small group of leaders from both sides met to discuss the basic principles of the Round Table negotiations as well as design their organizations and monitor their progress. Among other things, at the Magdalenka, the priority for significant issues to be discussed during the official RT negotiations was decided upon. Also, the most controversial issues that were difficult to resolve at tables and sub-tables were debated (see, e.g., Reykowski, 2019).

This procedural solution, which was absolutely necessary to impose basic organizational frames on a very complex negotiation process (see Grzelak, 2020, this issue) – was later indicated as "proof" for tacit, secret plots behind the official façade of the Round Table talks. Solidarity members might have been particularly sensitive to this issue, because during the first, Great Solidarity in 1980, the talks with government representatives were

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3) See Blanchet, Chancel, and Gethin (2019).

open to the public (during the communist period, people learnt to distrust even one's own representatives). The idea of open, publicly accessible negotiations became an important part of the Solidarity culture (see in particular the comments of Andrzej Friszke, in *Kofta & Leszczyński, 2019*). So, the fact that some important steps in the Round Table negotiations were not achieved during the proper talks, but in fact at the Magdalenka meetings, might have created some suspicion amongst Solidarity members about the real intention of their representatives, thereby fueling conspiracy interpretations.

So, even if one agrees with Janusz Reykowski's opinion that the recent success of the right-wing populist party in Poland (with the authoritarian model of social order they apparently intend to impose) has nothing to do with the Round Table itself, nevertheless some features of the Round Table talks might have contributed to the development of the "black legend" of the Round Table as a plot by communists with Solidarity representatives. As mentioned earlier, the first was the fact that proper negotiations were preceded and accompanied by the Magdalenka meetings with the leaders of both sides, the details of which were not publicly available. Second, it was the Solidarity culture, creating expectations among Solidarity members that "everything should be discussed openly".

## Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we attempted to understand the functions of the conspiracy theory of the '89 Round Table in present-day political life. We found that attitudes towards the Round Table is now an important marker of the fundamental division in Polish society between those who support the present power (they agree with the Round Table conspiracy theory) and those who are against the present power (they see the '89 Round Table as one of the brightest moments in Polish history, paving the way to a democratic revolution and regaining Polish political sovereignty). Importantly, we also found that endorsement of this theory nowadays has profound consequences concerning the stability of voting preferences. Among the PiS's electorate, the theory believers form a consolidated, stable electorate, and among those who voted for parties with a liberal orientation, the theory believers are highly unstable supporters, who are likely to change their political preferences. This shows that the way in which people construe the representation of history might have a direct impact on their present political behavior. What one thinks about the past matters – to the extent that the meaning imposed on historical events appears to be directly related to the issue of group identification, political ideology, and the worldview shared by group members.

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**Data Availability:** A dataset for this study is freely available (see the [Supplementary Materials](#) section).

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## Supplementary Materials

The following Supplementary Materials are available via the PsychArchives repository (for access see Index of [Supplementary Materials](#) below):

1. Study dataset (Data)
2. Study codebook (Data code book)

### Index of Supplementary Materials

Kofta, M., & Soral, W. (2020). *Supplementary materials to "Belief in the Round Table conspiracy and political division in Poland"*. PsychOpen. <https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.2767>

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## Appendix

Table A.1

*Example Political Beliefs Used in the Survey (With Their English Translations)*

Polish version	English (translated) version
<b>Round Table conspiracy theory</b>	
1. Jedynym celem Okrągłego Stołu było utrzymanie wpływow skompromitowanych komunistycznych elit.	The sole aim of the Round Table was to maintain the influence of the compromised communist elites.
2. Tych najważniejszych ustaleń Okrągłego Stołu nigdy nie podano do publicznej wiadomości.	The most important agreements of the Round Table have never been revealed to the public.

Polish version	English (translated) version
3. Przebieg i wynik obrad Okrągłego Stołu był z góry ustalony.	The course and the result of the Round Table agreement were fixed in advance.
4. W Okrągłym Stole chodziło tylko o przekazanie władzy politykom namaszczonym przez władze komunistyczne.	The Round Table was solely about giving power to politicians that the communist government approved.
5. Ustalenia Okrągłego Stołu nic w Polsce nie zmieniły, chodziło jedynie o zachowanie pozorów.	The Round Table agreements have not changed anything in Poland, it was mere window-dressing.
<b>Lech Wałęsa as secret communist agent</b>	
1. Pomimo złożonej przeszłości oraz osobowości, Lech Wałęsa odegrał zdecydowanie pozytywną rolę w historii Polski.	Despite his complex past and personality, Lech Wałęsa definitely played a positive role in the history of Poland.
2. Lech Wałęsa był tajnym współpracownikiem SB, to kompletnie pogrąża go jako osobę i polityka.	Lech Wałęsa was a secret collaborator of the Communist Security Service, which completely discredits him as a politician and as a person.
3. Lech Wałęsa to bohater narodowy i jako bohaterowi należy mu się szacunek.	Lech Wałęsa is a national hero, and he should be respected.
4. Lech Wałęsa to oportunistą, który cały czas grał wyłącznie o własny interes.	Lech Wałęsa was an opportunist, who acted solely for his own interest.
<b>Positive view of the Round Table</b>	
1. Porozumienie Okrągłego Stołu doprowadziło do odzyskania przez Polskę suwerenności.	The Round Table agreement led Poland to regaining its sovereignty.
2. Rozmowy Okrągłego Stołu są dziś dla świata przykładem, jak można w drodze pokojowej przejść od totalitaryzmu do demokracji.	The Round Table agreements are a world renowned example of how, in a peaceful way, one can go from the totalitarian regime to democracy.
3. Dzięki Okrągłemu Stołowi, stało się możliwe szybkie przejście od socjalistycznej do nowoczesnej gospodarki rynkowej.	Thanks to the Round Table it was possible to swiftly transit from the socialist to modern market economy.
4. To, że jesteśmy dziś członkiem NATO i Unii Europejskiej, zawdzięczamy w decydującej mierze rozmowom Okrągłego Stołu.	We are now part of NATO and the European Union largely because of the Round Table agreements.
5. Dzięki porozumieniu Okrągłego Stołu wydarzył się cud: przestaliśmy być satelitą ZSRR i odzyskaliśmy niepodległość.	Thanks to the Round Table agreement a miracle happened: we were no longer a satellite of the USSR and we regained sovereignty.

Polish version	English (translated) version
<b>Conspiracy theory about the Smoleńsk catastrophe</b>	
1. Liczne przesłanki wskazują, że przyczyną katastrofy prezydenckiego samolotu pod Smoleńskiem był zamach.	Numerous premises indicate that the president's airplane crash near Smoleńsk was a result of assassination.
2. Katastrofa prezydenckiego samolotu pod Smoleńskiem to nieszczęśliwy wypadek.	The catastrophe of the Polish presidential plane near Smoleńsk was an unfortunate accident.
<b>Trust in the current Polish government</b>	
1. Politycy obecnie rządzącej partii to ludzie, którym można zaufać.	Politicians of the current ruling party can be trusted.
2. Wierzę, że politycy obecnie rządzącej partii dbają o interesy Polaków.	I believe that politicians of the current ruling party care for the interests of Poles.
3. Działania obecnie rządzącej partii przynoszą więcej dobrego niż złego.	Actions of the current ruling party bring more good than bad.
4. Bez wahania powierzył(a)bym swój los w ręce obecnie rządzącej partii.	Without a second thought I would entrust my fate to the current ruling party.

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