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Change by (almost) all means: The role of conspiracy mentality in predicting support for social change among the political left and right

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Abstract

Right-wing movements across the globe call for system-changing actions. This development contradicts the typically assumed resistance to change among the political right. Many of these movements use conspiracist rhetoric and, thus, we reasoned that conspiracy mentality might be associated with the striving for system change—especially on the political right. In four cross-sectional studies in Germany (one nationally quota-balanced, one preregistered; total $N = 1539$) we found that high conspiracy mentality was related to support for social change among the right and to support for reactionary social change among the left. Support for change among those high in conspiracy mentality was diminished when elected representatives (vs the population) were thought to drive social change. These results suggest that both right wingers and left wingers high in conspiracy mentality support change in ways that are seemingly incompatible with their political orientation.

KEYWORDS
conspiracy belief, conspiracy mentality, political orientation, social change

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent years, right-wing groups attacked democratically elected representatives and institutions in several countries. This includes contesting the legitimacy of election results in the United States and Brazil, culminating in the storming of parliament or government buildings by supporters of the outgoing (right-wing) presidents. These right-wing movements share a strong desire for social and political change, which is contrary to the traditional psychological view of right wingers *opposing* social change. This inconsistency might go back to another factor shared by all of these movements: conspiracist ideation plays a central role in the rhetoric and worldview promoted by their leading figures. Conspiracist ideation, in turn, has been linked to calling for a change of the status quo. Hence, the conspiracist rhetoric might explain why the supporters of the (right-wing) presidents protested—much more so than their political orientation would suggest.

Research so far has not studied the relation between left-wing versus right-wing political orientation, conspiracy beliefs and the striving for social change. Addressing this gap, we examined whether conspiracy mentality would qualify the association between political orientation and people's support for (certain types of) social change. In doing so, we made a novel contribution to research on political ideology and conspiracy beliefs more generally by testing the interplay of the two—which have mostly been examined separately so far—as well as its boundary conditions. In this way, we followed a recent call to investigate both concepts jointly (Uscinski et al., 2021).

1.1 | The (complex) relationship between political orientation and social change

Political orientation plays a pivotal role in the literature on social change (e.g., Becker, 2020; Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Jost et al., 2003b). According to influential work in the field of political psychology, people on the political left tend to strive for social change whereas those on the right prefer to preserve the status quo (Jost et al., 2003b). This alleged difference between the left and right is attributed to different psychological motives underlying the respective political orientation: compared to those on the political left, right wingers are seemingly less tolerant of ambiguity, show lower openness to experience and have a heightened need for cognitive closure (Jost et al., 2003b; but see van Hiel et al., 2010, 2016). These findings are commonly interpreted as a sign for a generalized tendency to support social change among the political left and a general resistance to change among the political right (e.g., Jost et al., 2003b, 2004, 2008)—no matter what kind of change is at stake. However, the empirical evidence for this generalized assumption is ambiguous.

First, several researchers have contested the idea of political orientation being unequivocally linked to attitudes towards change bringing up historical (and contemporary) examples of right-wing (left-wing) movements supporting (rejecting) change (for a detailed discussion, see Becker, 2020; Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Jost, 2017; Jost et al., 2003a). In this context, the idea of *reactionary* social change (i.e., reversing social trends and returning to the status ante; Proch et al., 2019) has been suggested as a form of change that might be supported by the political right, but not the political left (Becker, 2020; Thomas & Osborne, 2022). Studies testing this prediction led to inconsistent findings (Liekefett & Becker, 2022; Proch et al., 2019) but raise the possibility that people on both ends of the political spectrum strive for social change if it allows them to achieve their desired outcome on a socio-political issue.

Second, it has been argued that measures of (the rejection of) social change are often conflated with ideological content (Proch et al., 2019; van Hiel et al., 2016). Most prominently, for instance, the right-wing authoritarianism scale (Altemeyer, 1998)—which is often interpreted as capturing rejection of social change (e.g., Duckitt, 2001; Jost et al., 2003b; Yilmaz & Saribay, 2018)—asks for concrete policies that have a clear ideological leaning (e.g., diminishing minority rights). These measures are, therefore, far from capturing a generalized tendency to support or reject social change.

If support for social change was assessed in a way that neither refers to a specific issue nor indicates a specific direction of change, participants should be able to project their own understanding of change into the questions. In this case, most people would probably interpret it in the sense of progressive change as this seems to be the default understanding (Becker, 2020; Jost et al., 2009)—which should then yield stronger support among the political left than the right. Moreover, lay people share the impression that the political left supports change (and the right rejects it; Proch et al., 2019). Thus, left wingers (right wingers) could indicate higher (lower) support for non-specified social change to confirm their self-concept. In any case, the relationship between political orientation and support for social change might not be as straightforward as is often assumed and potential moderators have yet to be investigated.

1.2 | (How) does conspiracy mentality shape support for change among the left and right?

People who believe in conspiracy theories adhere to explanations for societal events that allege secret plots carried out by powerful groups with bad intentions (e.g., Douglas et al., 2017). Conspiracy mentality denotes the general propensity to believe in conspiracy theories and is characterized by prejudice against (political) elites and authorities as well as the questioning existing power structures in society (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Belief in conspiracy theories has been linked to lower institutional trust (Pummerer, Böhm et al., 2022) and reduced norm adherence (Pummerer, 2022). For instance, belief in conspiracy theories predicts lower endorsement of mundane prosocial norms (e.g., not talking during a movie; Pummerer, Ditrich et al., 2022), less compliance with health guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic (van Mulukom et al., 2022), an increased readiness to perform non-normative political actions such as committing a violent attack on a person in power (Imhoff et al., 2021) and other forms of violent extremism (Jolley & Paterson, 2020; Obaidi et al., 2022; Rottweiler & Gill, 2022) and rejection of the current political system (Pantazi et al., 2022; Papaioannou et al., 2023a). Belief in conspiracy theories can also be the result of the experience of low political control, for example due to political defeat (Imhoff et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022), which should be strongly related to a striving for (political) change in order to improve the status quo.

Taken together, these findings corroborate recent theorizing that highlights the subversive component of the belief in conspiracy theories and its potential to stimulate striving for social change (Federico, 2022; Sternisko et al., 2020). Although rejection of the status quo is almost a definitional feature of conspiracy mentality, the relationship between conspiracy mentality and support for different types of social change has not been tested directly yet. Other than for political orientation, there is no reason to assume that conspiracy mentality would be primarily related to either progressive or reactionary change. Rather it seems plausible that those high in conspiracy mentality would support change in either direction if it allows them to move away from the status quo and, thus, to improve the situation according to their view. At the same time, this does not imply that high conspiracy mentality is associated with support for change under all circumstances as we will outline in more detail below.

The central question of this research—inspired by the current real-world examples mentioned at the outset—is whether conspiracy mentality qualifies the association between political orientation and support for social change. Notably, conspiracy mentality is at best mildly associated with political orientation (Imhoff et al., 2022; van der Linden et al., 2021). Generally, conspiracy mentality has been conceptualized as a political attitude that is independent of other political attitudes such as right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, which both locate people on an ideological spectrum

from left to right (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). This conceptualization is echoed in recent theorizing in political science that postulates an anti-establishment orientation, which is orthogonal to political orientation on the left–right dimension and that is marked by conspiracy beliefs (Enders et al., 2022; Uscinski et al., 2021). Thus, testing for an interaction between political orientation and conspiracy mentality is possible.

Is there also a reason to assume that they interact? Recently, Federico (2022) argued that conspiracy beliefs '[…] may allow individuals whose politics otherwise incline them to support the status quo to violently resist established authority in the name of imposing their own ideal social order.' This would imply that right wingers might support social change if their conspiracy mentality is high, which could serve as an explanation for the real-world examples of right-wing movements mentioned above aiming to violently enforce social change. This is line with recent findings showing that those with strong conspiracy beliefs are less constrained by their political orientation and follow traditional ideological principles and positions of either left or right to a lesser degree (Enders, 2019; Uscinski & Olivella, 2017). With regard to support for social change this could mean that those with a strong conspiracy mentality would even support types of social change that are seemingly incompatible with their political orientation.

When the direction of change is not specified, it is likely that people interpret it as progressive and that it is thus more strongly supported by those on the political left. The readiness for social change among those high in conspiracy mentality, however, could also drive right wingers to deviate from their tendency to resist (progressive) social change. Thus, one could predict that higher conspiracy mentality is positively related to support for social change, especially among those with a more right wing political orientation—Hypothesis 1 (H1).

However, when it comes to reactionary change in particular, the relationship between political orientation and support for change might be reversed (as outlined above). In this case, conspiracy mentality might contribute more to support for social change among the left than the right. In other words, higher conspiracy mentality should be positively related to support for reactionary social change, especially among those with a more left-wing political orientation—Hypothesis 2 (H2).

1.3 | Does conspiracy mentality predict change by all means?

If high conspiracy mentality was indeed related to support for change in either direction (i.e., progressive and reactionary), the question arises whether there are types of change that even those high in conspiracy mentality would reject. For both conspiracy mentality and political orientation there is reason to assume that their relationship with support for social change depends on who is seen as a driving force behind change. Moreover, the source of change might also have an effect on the interplay between conspiracy mentality and political orientation.

Irrespective of the direction of change (i.e., progressive or reactionary), at least two different societal actors are possible sources of social change: the *population* (e.g., via protests or referenda) and *elected representatives* (e.g., via the parliamentary process). As outlined above, conspiracy mentality comprises the tendency to challenge existing power structures in society and to distrust authorities (Imhoff et al., 2018; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). In line with this notion, previous research has shown that conspiracy mentality is related to a preference for direct democracy and rejection of representative democracy (Pantazi et al., 2022). Therefore, those high in conspiracy mentality are likely to support social change that is driven by the population but are unlikely to do so when change is driven by elected representatives.

How could political orientation relate to preferences for certain sources of change? Those on the left strive for social equality and, thus, the absence of social hierarchies, whereas social dominance orientation (i.e., a preference for hierarchies in intergroup relations; Pratto et al., 1994) is more pronounced on the right (Duckitt, 2001). Thus, it could be the case that right wingers in general prefer change driven by elected representatives compared to population-driven change, whereas the opposite might apply to left wingers.

The crucial question is whether and how these general preferences would qualify the interaction between conspiracy mentality and political orientation predicted earlier (i.e., Hypothesis 1). The preference for direct democracy and the rejection of representative democracy among those high in conspiracy mentality might also dominate the effect for people with a more right-wing political orientation. Alternatively, the preference for change driven by elected representatives rather than population-driven change among right wingers might also dominate the pattern in case of social change motivated by conspiracy beliefs. Against this backdrop, we derived two competing hypotheses.

Hypothesis 3a. (H3a): Higher conspiracy mentality is positively related to support for social change among participants with a more right-wing political orientation, if change is driven by the population (vs elected representatives).

Hypothesis 3b. (H3b): Higher conspiracy mentality is positively related to support for social change among participants with a more right-wing political orientation, if change is driven by elected representatives (vs the population).

1.4 | The current research

The current research sought to shed light on the interplay between conspiracy mentality, political orientation and different types of social change. More precisely, our aim was to test the predictions that higher conspiracy mentality is positively related to support for (non-specified) social change especially among those with a more-right wing political orientation (H1) and to support for reactionary change especially among those with a more left-wing political orientation (H2). We also wanted to examine whether the interaction predicted in H1 would be more pronounced when change was driven by the population (H3a) or by elected representatives (H3b).

We conducted four cross-sectional studies. Studies 1 and 2 examined whether conspiracy mentality was positively related to support

for social change (with no direction specified) especially among those with a more right-wing political orientation (H1). Study 1 focused on support for social change without mentioning a specific topic, whereas Study 2 was situated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Study 3 followed a similar logic but tested whether conspiracy mentality would predict higher support for reactionary change even (and probably even stronger) among the political left (H2). Study 4 was designed to test whether conspiracy-induced support for social change among the political right depended on the source of change (i.e., population or elected representatives) and, thus, whether conspiracy mentality or political orientation would dominate people's preferences for certain types of social change (H3a and H3b).

Studies 1 to 3 were parts of data collections that primarily served to investigate unrelated research questions. The measures central to the current research questions were only included for exploratory purposes. Thus, it was not originally planned to test Hypotheses 1 and 2 and these hypotheses were not preregistered. This is different for Study 4, for which we preregistered Hypotheses 3a and 3b. For the sake of consistency, we applied the exclusion criteria preregistered for Study 4 to all remaining studies. That is, participants were excluded if they (1) indicated that they did not speak German fluently, (2) indicated that they studied psychology, (3) indicated that they had answered the survey multiple times, (4) did not pass both attention check items (if applicable) and (5) were identified as statistical outliers in the main analysis based on studentized deleted residuals (i.e., absolute SDR > 2.59 in the main analysis). All participants gave informed consent prior to their participation in the studies. We have reported all manipulations and measures used in the studies. All data and analysis codes are publicly available via PsychArchives (code: https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.13057, data: https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.13056).

2 | STUDY 1

We used the dataset of Study 1 to test, for the first time, whether higher conspiracy mentality predicts support for social change especially among those with a more right-wing political orientation. We operationalized support for social change independent of any concrete socio-political issue in the form of a generalized attitude. The questionnaire also contained a measure of generalized intentions to engage in collective action—a means of social change (Becker, 2020; Thomas & Osborne, 2022). We tested Hypothesis 1 based on both these indicators for social change.

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Design and participants

The study design was correlational. For a first test of the idea, we aimed at a sample size of 150 and managed to recruit 145 German adults via Clickworker. Six of them were excluded because they did not fulfil our inclusion criteria ($n = 2$ indicated that they had answered the survey multiple times, $n = 1$ indicated that he or she studied psychology, $n = 3$ were identified as statistical outliers). The demographics of the remaining $N = 139$ participants are displayed in Table 1. With a sample of this size, we would be able to detect a small-to-medium effect ($f^2 = .06$) in a multiple regression analysis testing for R^2 increase by one out of three predictors with a power of .80, $\alpha = .05$. Participants received 1.60 euros as compensation for completing the whole study package.

2.1.2 | Procedure and measures

A complete list of measures is available in the Supporting Information. Below we only report the measures relevant to the current research question. Correlations between the main measures and their internal consistencies are reported in Table 2.

Conspiracy mentality was measured with the 12-item scale developed by Imhoff and Bruder (2014), which has good psychometric properties and is well validated in the German context. Sample items include 'Those at the top do whatever they want' or 'Politicians and other leaders are nothing but the string puppets of powers operating in the background' (from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *fully agree*; $M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.24$).

We used a one-item self-placement measure of *political orientation* (from 1 = *left* to 7 = *right*; $M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.12$), which is efficient, intuitive and frequently used in psychology (Imhoff et al., 2022; Jost et al., 2009). Here and in the following studies higher values indicate a more right-wing political orientation.

We developed a scale that measures *support for social change* irrespective of concrete topics or ideological content. This scale comprised six items, for instance, 'We need far-reaching reforms of our social system' or 'Our social order needs to change dramatically' (from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *fully agree*; $M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.00$). We assumed that this would allow participants to project their own understanding of social change into the items.

Collective action intentions were assessed with a seven-item scale adapted from Schmitt et al. (2019)—focusing only on legal (i.e., normative) behaviours. As in case of support for change, we did not specify the issue these intentions referred to but left that open to participants asking 'How likely would you be to show the following behaviours if it were a political issue where you are dissatisfied with the current situation?' Sample items include 'I would join a group that advocates the issue' or 'I would participate in political demonstrations or protest to support the issue' (from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *fully agree*; $M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.44$).

2.2 | Results

2.2.1 | Support for social change

To test whether conspiracy mentality and political orientation interacted in predicting support for social change (H3a), we conducted

TABLE 1 Number of participants and demographic information across the four studies.

	N	Gender	Age *M* (*SD*)	Age range
Study 1	139	54 Female, 85 male	38.30 (11.62)	18–69
Study 2	388	172 Female, 214 male, 2 other	29.74 (9.72)	18–74
Study 3	595	300 Female, 295 male	18–29: 107 30–39: 92 40–49: 119 50–59: 114 60+: 163	-
Study 4	417	159 Female, 255 male, 3 other	39.63 (12.25)	18–72

Note: In Study 3, age was assessed as a categorical variable due to the requirements of the panel provider.

TABLE 2 Correlations between measures and internal consistencies in Study 1 ($N = 139$).

	Conspiracy mentality (CM)	Political orientation (PO)	Support for social change (SC)	Collective action intentions (CA)
CM	$\alpha = .92$	.19*	.31***	.06
PO		-	−.22**	−.08
SC			$\alpha = .87$	.21*
CA				$\alpha = .91$

Note: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. Higher scores for political orientation represent a more right-wing orientation.

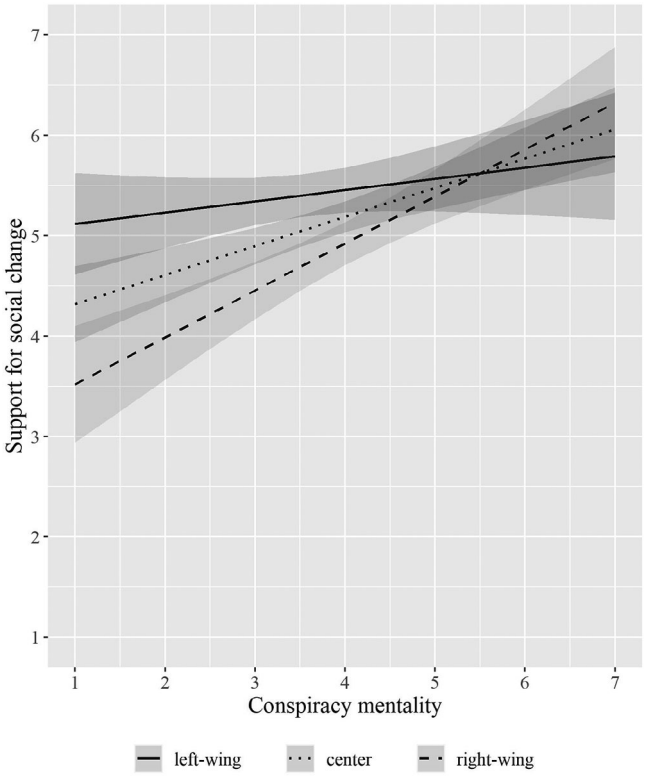

FIGURE 1 Support for social change as a function of political orientation and conspiracy mentality (Study 1: $N = 139$). Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

a multiple regression analysis. Mean-centred conspiracy mentality, mean-centred political orientation and their interaction were included as predictors of support for social change. Conspiracy mentality was positively related to support for social change, *B* (unstandardised regression coefficient) = 0.29, *SE* = 0.06, 95% CI [0.17, 0.41], $t(135) = 4.65$, $p < .001$, $r = .37$. Political orientation (with higher scores indicating a more right-wing political orientation) was negatively related to support for social change, $B = -0.27$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [−0.41, −0.13], $t(135) = -3.91$, $p < .001$, $r = -.32$. Most importantly, these main effects were qualified by an interaction of conspiracy mentality and political orientation, $B = 0.16$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.27], $t(135) = 2.79$, $p = .006$, $r = .23$ (see Figure 1). In line with Hypothesis 1, higher conspiracy mentality predicted more support for social change among those with a right-wing political orientation (i.e., +1*SD*), $B = 0.47$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.29, 0.64], $t(135) = 5.24$, $p < .001$, $r = .41$, whereas this was not the case among the political left (i.e., −1*SD*), $B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.29], $t(135) = 1.26$, $p = .210$, $r = .11$.

2.2.2 | Collective Action Intentions

To see whether conspiracy mentality and political orientation would also interact in terms of behavioural intentions (reflecting support for population-based change), we conducted another multiple regression analysis with collective action intentions as outcome variable. Neither conspiracy mentality, $B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [−0.10, 0.29], $t(135) = 0.95$, $p = .346$, $r = .08$, nor political orientation, $B = -0.13$, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI [−0.35, 0.09], $t(135) = -1.21$, $p = .230$, $r = -.10$, had a main effect in this analysis. However, there was an interaction between the two variables, $B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.39], $t(135) = 2.28$, $p = .024$, $r = .19$ (see Figure 2). Conspiracy mentality predicted collective action intentions among right-wing participants, $B = 0.33$, $SE = 0.14$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.61], $t(135) = 2.29$, $p = .024$, $r = .19$, but not among the politically left, $B = -0.14$, $SE = 0.14$, 95% CI [−0.42, 0.14], $t(135) = -0.97$, $p = .334$, $r = -.08$.

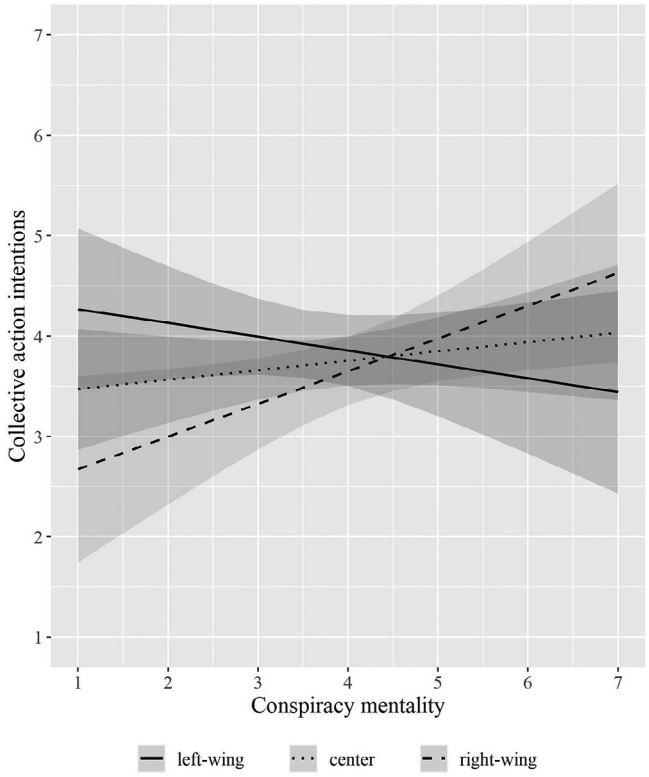

FIGURE 2 Collective action intentions as a function of political orientation and conspiracy mentality (Study 1: $N = 139$). Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

2.3 | Discussion

The results of Study 1 confirm that conspiracy mentality was strongly related to support for social change, whereas those with a more right-wing political orientation tended to reject social change. Crucially, however, when conspiracy mentality was high, even right-wing participants supported social change, which supports Hypothesis 1. In addition, we found that this conspiracy-driven support for change among the right (but not the left) was even reflected in normative collective action intentions. This finding adds to previous research that links belief in conspiracy theories to collective action intentions but yielded somewhat inconsistent findings with regard to normative versus non-normative forms of collective action (Gkinopoulos & Mari, 2022; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). In addition, it might be carefully interpreted as a sign that right wingers with a strong conspiracy mentality support population-based social change. This question will be examined in more detail in Study 4. Taken together, our results confirm that right-wing political orientation is not always related to resistance to change and support for the status quo. Rather it seems that right wingers support change (and even want to take action for the underlying cause), when their conspiracy mentality is high. We sought to replicate the main finding in another highly powered study in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 | STUDY 2

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Design and participants

Again, the study had a correlational design. This time we aimed at a sample size of 400 to be able to estimate stable correlations. Overall, 399 German adults completed our survey on Prolific and received £1.40 for their participation in the whole study package. We excluded 11 participants who did not fulfil our inclusion criteria ($n = 2$ psychology students, $n = 3$ who did not speak German fluently, $n = 6$ statistical outliers), which left us with a final sample of $N = 388$ (for demographics, see Table 1). This sample size would allow us to detect a small effect ($f^2 = .02$) in a multiple regression analysis testing for R^2 increase by one out of three predictors with a power of .80, $\alpha = .05$.

3.1.2 | Procedure and measures

As was the case for Study 1, the current study was part of a larger data collection that served a different purpose. Before participants responded to the relevant measures, a manipulation that was unrelated to the current research took place. This manipulation did, however, not moderate the results reported below (for a detailed description, see Supporting Information).

Conspiracy mentality ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.20$; $\alpha = .92$) and *political orientation* ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.20$) were measured as in Study 1. These two variables were mildly correlated such that higher conspiracy mentality predicted a more right-wing political orientation, $r(388) = .17$, $p = .001$. The measure of *support for social change* was slightly adapted to the larger context of the study package. To this end, the items were rephrased in terms of social change as a response to the current COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., 'We need far-reaching reforms of our social system to master future crises more easily' or 'We need to learn our lessons from the Corona crisis, even if this means changing our social order dramatically'; from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 9 = *fully agree*; $M = 6.98$, $SD = 1.24$; $\alpha = .82$). Notably, however, the items still referred to social change without specifying the direction or means of the change.

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Support for social change

We used the same analysis strategy as in Study 1. Replicating the previous results, the multiple regression analysis revealed main effects of both conspiracy mentality, $B = 0.30$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.39], $t(384) = 6.11$, $p < .001$, $r = .30$ and political orientation, $B = -0.36$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [−0.46, −0.26], $t(384) = -7.20$, $p < .001$, $r = -.34$. Crucially, these main effects were again qualified by an interaction

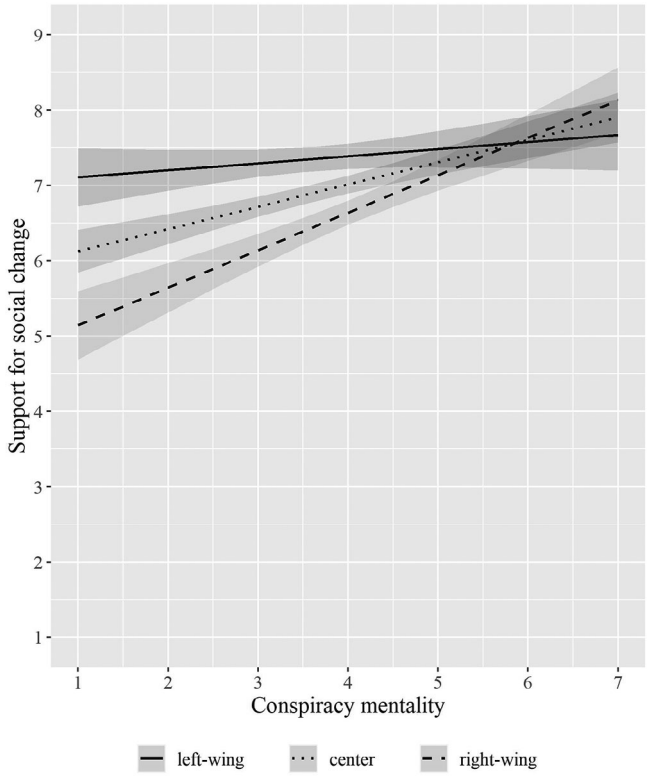

FIGURE 3 Support for social change as a function of political orientation and conspiracy mentality (Study 2: $N = 388$). Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

between the two variables, $B = 0.17$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.25], $t(384) = 4.13$, $p < .001$, $r = .21$ (see Figure 3). Supporting Hypothesis 1, conspiracy mentality was positively related to support for social change among the politically right, $B = 0.50$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [0.36, 0.64], $t(384) = 7.07$, $p < .001$, $r = .34$, but not among the left, $B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI [−0.04, 0.23], $t(384) = 1.39$, $p = .166$, $r = .07$.

3.2.2 | Discussion

Replicating the results of Study 1, we found that conspiracy mentality predicted support for social change especially among the political right, which is in line with Hypothesis 1. In Study 2, this pattern occurred for social change as response to a currently ongoing crisis, namely the COVID-19 pandemic and, thus, adds to the previous findings, which did not specify a concrete cause for social change. Taken together, these results demonstrate that conspiracy mentality and political orientation jointly contribute to the striving for social change. In both studies, people on the political right supported social change (only) when their conspiracy mentality was high, whereas those on the political left were generally high in support for social change.

Both studies used a (novel) measure of support for social change, which (unlike previous studies) did not ask for support regarding a specific policy or issue. This way, we aimed to find out more about people's general tendency to support social change without limiting it to a certain content or direction. Necessarily, this operationalization leaves open which goal people assume to guide the social change. Given the high levels of support for social change among the left, it might be that (if not specified) that change is generally understood as *progressive* change. In order to predetermine a certain direction of change and to expand our reasoning to a type of change that should usually be rejected by the political left, we examined support for *reactionary* change in Study 3. More precisely, we tested Hypothesis 2 that higher conspiracy mentality is positively related to support for reactionary social change, even among the political left.

4 | STUDY 3

4.1 | Method

4.1.1 | Design and participants

As the previous studies, this study had a correlational design. A total number of 599 participants recruited by the panel provider Gapfish completed our survey and were paid according to the regulations of the panel provider. The sample size was increased compared to the previous studies to be able to generate a sample that is nationally quota-balanced for the German population with respect to age and gender. We excluded four statistical outliers in our main analysis, leaving a final sample of $N = 595$ (for demographics, see Table 1). With this sample size we were able to detect a small effect ($f^2 = .02$) in a multiple regression analysis testing for R^2 increase by one out of three predictors with a power of .95, $\alpha = .05$.

4.1.2 | Procedure and measures

As for the previous studies, Study 3 was part of a larger data collection that was unrelated to the current research. As in Study 2, there was an experimental manipulation that preceded the measures of the current study. This manipulation did not moderate the results reported below, however (for a detailed description, see Supporting Information).

Conspiracy mentality ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.35$; $\alpha = .92$) and *political orientation* ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.17$) were assessed with the same measures as in the preceding studies. As before, these two variables were only slightly correlated, $r(595) = .15$, $p < .001$. To measure *support for reactionary change* we created three items that always clearly implied social change towards a *status ante* and towards valuing traditions and conventions. Notably, the items did not refer to any specific policies contrary to other measures of reactionary change that led to inconsistent findings (e.g., Liekefett & Becker, 2022; Proch et al., 2019). The items were 'To solve the problems of our society, we should return to the original ideas of our constitution', 'Our social order should once again be more strongly oriented toward traditional values' and 'As a society, we should go back to doing things the way we used to do them' (from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *fully agree*; $M = 4.41$, $SD = 1.54$; $\alpha = .84$).

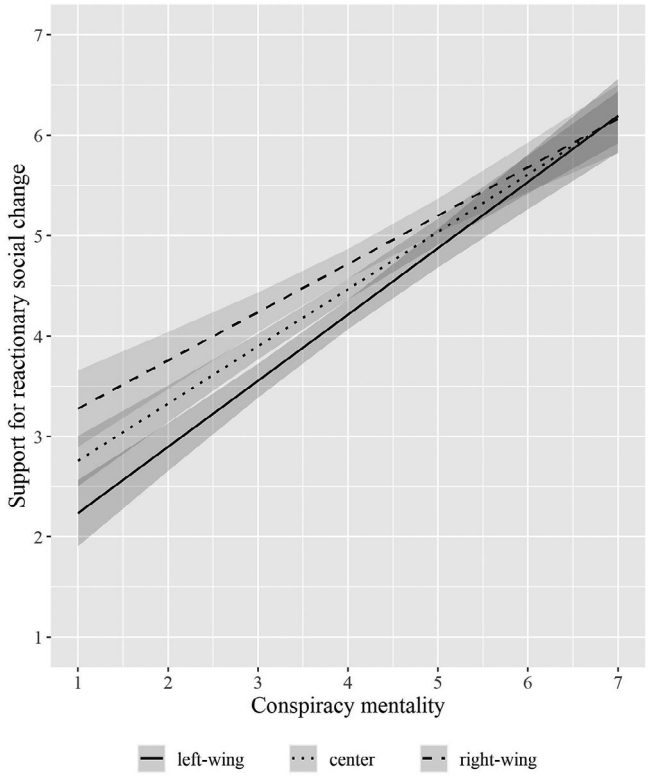

FIGURE 4 Support for reactionary social change as a function of political orientation and conspiracy mentality (Study 3: $N = 595$). Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

4.2 | Results

4.2.1 | Support for reactionary social change

The analysis followed the same procedure as in Studies 1 and 2. The multiple regression analysis revealed main effects of both conspiracy mentality, $B = 0.57$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CI [0.49, 0.65], $t(591) = 14.47$, $p < .001$, $r = .51$, and political orientation, $B = 0.22$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.31], $t(591) = 4.83$, $p < .001$, $r = .20$. That is, higher conspiracy mentality as well as a more right-wing political orientation predicted more support for reactionary change. In line with Hypothesis 2, there was an interaction of conspiracy mentality and political orientation, $B = -0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [−0.14, −0.01], $t(591) = -2.34$, $p = .020$, $r = -.10$ (see Figure 4). Resolving this interaction showed that conspiracy mentality predicted support for reactionary social change to a larger extent among left-wing participants, $B = 0.66$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.56, 0.77], $t(591) = 12.30$, $p < .001$, $r = .45$, in comparison with those on the political right, $B = 0.48$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.37, 0.59], $t(591) = 8.58$, $p < .001$, $r = .33$.

4.2.2 | Discussion

The findings of Study 3 further support the idea that, if their conspiracy mentality is high, people support types of social change that are seemingly incompatible with their political orientation. We extended the findings of Studies 1 and 2 that showed such an effect on the political right. In Study 3, even people who located themselves at the very left end of the political spectrum were willing to support reactionary social change (i.e., change towards a *status ante* and towards more traditional values), if their conspiracy mentality was high. Given the very abstract nature of our measure, it is not clear what those on the left would envision such a reactionary change to look like at the policy level. However, as far as we are aware, this is the first study demonstrating that those on the political left can also be in favour of reactionary social change under certain circumstances. Furthermore, our studies also lend support to the idea that right wingers are not against social change in general but that there are some types of social change (i.e., reactionary change) that are supported by individuals on the political right. Taken together, this means that people with a strong conspiracy mentality tend to go beyond the tendencies usually associated with their political orientation. Study 4 served to clarify whether high conspiracy mentality would overrule all preferences regarding social change that are usually associated with political orientation—this time focussing on the source rather than the direction of social change.

5 | STUDY 4

In this study, we differentiated between social change that is driven by the population or by elected representatives. We based our predictions on the findings of Study 1 and 2 that conspiracy mentality predicted more support for social change among the politically right. Following up on this, we wanted to test the boundaries of this effect. Would it be more pronounced when change is driven by the population (Hypothesis 3a) or when it is driven by elected representatives (Hypothesis 3b)? Study 4, thus, examined whether conspiracy mentality or political orientation would dominate people's attitude towards social change.

5.1 | Method

5.1.1 | Design and participants

Participants were allocated randomly to one of the two experimental conditions (source of change: population vs elected representatives). Two continuous predictors (conspiracy mentality and political orientation) were included. Participants were recruited via Clickworker and received 1.50 euros for their participation in this study plus an unrelated pre-test. Study 4 was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/d8jb8.pdf). Our a priori power analysis revealed that 395 participants would be needed in order to find a small effect ($f^2 = .02$) in a multiple regression analysis testing for a R^2 increase by one of seven predictors with a power of .80, $\alpha = .05$. To have a buffer for potential exclusions, we recruited 444 German adults, of whom we had to exclude 27 (partly overlapping: $n = 4$ failed both attention check items, $n = 16$ indicated that they had completed the study multiple times, $n = 4$ indicated that they did not speak German fluently, $n = 1$ was a psychology student,

TABLE 3 Item wording of support for social change measures used in Study 4 and internal consistencies per condition.

Source of change	Internal consistency	Item wording (response scale from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *fully agree*)
Population ($n = 210$)	$\alpha = .76$	1. If the population perceives undesirable developments in our social system, these should be corrected. 2. Changes in our social system should be achieved through direct citizen participation. 3. Social changes must emerge from the population. 4. Binding referenda should be held on system-changing measures. 5. Only citizens are able to bring about changes that help solve social problems.
Elected representatives ($n = 207$)	$\alpha = .66$	1. If the government perceives undesirable developments in our social system, these should be corrected. 2. Changes to our social system should be achieved through a parliamentary process. 3. Social change must emerge from within state institutions. 4. Elected members of parliament should decide on system-changing measures. 5. Only state institutions are able to bring about changes that help solve social problems.
Total sample	$\alpha = .70$	

$n = 7$ were statistical outliers). Thus, our final sample of $N = 417$ (for demographics, see Table 1) exceeded the anticipated number slightly.

5.1.2 | Procedure and measures

We measured *conspiracy mentality* ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.33$; $\alpha = .94$) and *political orientation* ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.18$) as before. These variables were moderately correlated: higher conspiracy mentality predicted a more right-wing political orientation, $r(417) = .27$, $p < .001$.

To manipulate the *source of change*, we created two versions of our measure of *support for social change* and, depending on the experimental condition, showed only one of them to participants. By varying the items between rather than within participants (or using population versus elected representatives as opposing poles of one scale), we were able to retrieve participants' absolute support for social change initiated by either of the two sources. In this way we ruled out the possibility that participants gave their answers only in comparison with the other source of change (e.g., those high in conspiracy mentality only refuting social change initiated by elected representatives when population-based change was available as alternative). The five items were based on those used in Studies 1 and 2 but included the source of change. Other than that, they were identical across conditions (see Table 3; aggregated $M = 4.89$, $SD = 0.95$).

5.2 | Results

5.2.1 | Support for social change

To test whether the relationship between conspiracy mentality and political orientation would be moderated by the source of change (H3a and H3b), we conducted a multiple linear regression analysis. The source of change was effect-coded (+1 population, −1 elected representatives), and conspiracy mentality and political orientation were mean-centred. All three variables' main effects and the resulting interaction effects were included as predictors of support for social change. First, there was a main effect of source of change, $B = 0.16$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.25], $t(409) = 3.49$, $p = .001$, $r = .17$, demonstrating that, on average, people were more likely to support change when it was driven by the population ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 0.98$) compared to elected representatives ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.89$). Second, there was a main effect of conspiracy mentality, $B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.16], $t(409) = 2.60$, $p = .010$, $r = .13$, showing that higher conspiracy mentality was generally related to more support for social change. These two main effects were qualified by an interaction between conspiracy mentality and source of change, $B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.14, 0.27], $t(409) = 6.09$, $p < .001$, $r = .29$ (see Figure 5). Conspiracy mentality was positively related to support for social change initiated by the population, $B = 0.30$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.39], $t(409) = 6.43$, $p < .001$, whereas it was negatively related to support for social change initiated by elected representatives, $B = -0.12$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI [−0.22, −0.02], $t(409) = -2.37$, $p = .018$, $r = -.12$. Contrary to both H3a and H3b, however, there was no three-way interaction between conspiracy mentality, political orientation and source of change, $B = 0.04$, SE = 0.03, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.09], $t(409) = 1.34$, $p = .182$ (see Figure S1 in the Supporting Information). None of the other effects were significant; in all cases $|t| < 0.32$, all $p > .752$.

5.2.2 | Discussion

Study 4 revealed that support for social change driven by the population was strongly related to conspiracy mentality, whereas the opposite was true for social change driven by elected representatives. This is in line with previous research showing a preference for direct democracy and a rejection of representative democracy among those high in conspiracy mentality (Pantazi et al., 2022) and it fits the general resentment of political elites among those with a strong conspiracy mentality (Imhoff et al., 2018; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). It is striking that this result held irrespective of participants' political orientation (which had no effect in this study at all). One might have suspected that change initiated by elected representatives is supported more strongly among the political right, because it mirrors established status differences in society and social dominance orientation is a crucial

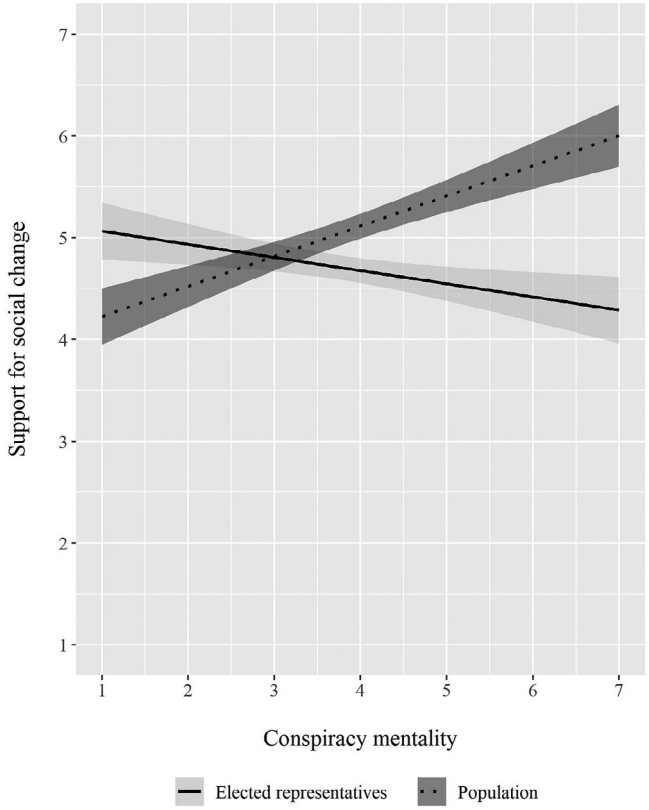

FIGURE 5 Support for social change as a function of source of change (elected representatives vs population) and conspiracy mentality (Study 4: $N = 417$). Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

feature of a right-wing political orientation (Duckitt, 2001; Jost et al., 2009). The lack of a three-way interaction and, thus, support for either H3a or H3b, indicates that conspiracy mentality is more important than political orientation when it comes to predicting support for certain sources of change.

In sum, the findings reveal that there are boundaries to the support for social change among those high in conspiracy mentality. As soon as elected representatives—those who are potentially seen as part of a conspiracy—are the driving force behind social change, the general mistrust against (political) elites shows through leading to a rejection of social change. These results suggest that conspiracy mentality is not related to support for change of any kind but rather those high in conspiracy mentality are sensitive to the assumed source of change.

6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current research yielded valuable insights into the relationships between conspiracy mentality, political orientation and support for social change. In line with Hypothesis 1, we found that right wingers supported social change (not specifying a direction) when their conspiracy mentality was high (Studies 1 and 2). Likewise, and in line with Hypothesis 2, we found that left wingers supported even reactionary social change when their conspiracy mentality was high (Study 3). Thus, we demonstrated that conspiracy mentality predicts support for types of social change that are seemingly incompatible with people's political orientation. In a similar vein, it has recently been shown that conspiracy beliefs are the common ground of left and right wingers protesting side by side against governmental measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany (Liekefett et al., 2023). In addition, support for population-based social change increased with higher levels of conspiracy mentality (but irrespective of political orientation; Study 4). These findings together show that conspiracy mentality largely contributes to the striving for social change, which ties in with recent theorizing (Federico, 2022; Sternisko et al., 2020). However, there are boundaries to this relationship: support for social change among those high in conspiracy mentality diminishes when it is initiated by elected representatives (Study 4). This is in line with the fact that conspiracy mentality is related to distrust in authorities (Imhoff et al., 2018; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014) and a preference for direct over representative democracy (Pantazi et al., 2022). Against Hypotheses 3a and 3b, we did not find that political orientation moderated this effect. This result indicates that those high in conspiracy mentality do not simply support any kind of social change but that they are sensitive to the driving force behind change.

In sum, the results of four studies highlight the pivotal role of conspiracy mentality when it comes to support for social change—both among the political left and right. At the same time, those high in conspiracy mentality do not strive for change by all means. Rather, they support population-based change (e.g., via referenda) but not change that is driven by elected representatives (i.e., parliaments or other state institutions). From a different angle, the current studies contribute to an ongoing discussion in political psychology about the centrality of resistance to (vs striving for) change for right-wing (vs left-wing) ideology (e.g., Greenberg & Jonas, 2003; Jost et al., 2003b). More precisely, we add conspiracy mentality to the list of potential moderators of the relationship between political orientation and support for social change (Liekefett & Becker, 2022; Proch et al., 2019), highlighting that it might be more complex than originally assumed.

6.1 | What kind of social change and how to achieve it?

Throughout the studies, our items measuring support for social change were relatively broad, because we wanted to go beyond previous measures that were bound to specific policies. Thus, we believe that our findings represent general tendencies. This kind of generalization, however, prevents us from providing any insights into what the envisaged social change would look like on a concrete level. We do not assume that our measures captured support for any kind of social change (i.e., change for the sake of change). Rather participants might have projected their own idea of change into the questions. In Studies 1 and 2, when no direction of change was specified, people by default might have thought about progressive social change as indicated by the high level of support among the political left. For the measure used

in Study 3, mentioning a return to traditional values (without specifying what these are) seemed to be enough to elicit support among the political right and rejection among the left (unless conspiracy mentality was high). Thus, even if the measures were rather abstract, they were obviously suitable to capture default preferences that are related to political orientation. On any of the used measures, those supporting change are likely to have had in mind an outcome that is an improvement of the situation according to their standards. What exactly this looked like is a matter of speculation based on the current studies.

Our findings also have important implications for literature on political ideology and social change, as current measures might be inflating the relation between right-wing political orientation and resistance to change when participants intuitively assume a specific type of change (i.e., progressive societal change) or by explicitly framing change in terms of a (progressive) policy. Our studies support the idea that right wingers are indeed open to change when it is framed as reactionary change.

Similarly, the means by which social change should be achieved were not central to our research. However, one could derive predictions from the existing literature. Conspiracy beliefs are related to non-normative political engagement (including willingness to use violence; Imhoff et al., 2021) and violent extremist intentions (Jolley & Paterson, 2020; Obaidi et al., 2022; Rottweiler & Gill, 2022). Thus, one might speculate that conspiracy mentality would not only increase the support for population-based change (Study 4) and normative forms of collective action (Study 1), but also more extreme means to initiate change. This is another question that future research should address.

6.2 | Limitations and outlook

Throughout the paper, we treated conspiracy mentality and political orientation as predictors and support for social change as outcome variable, although all variables were assessed cross-sectionally. We think this is justifiable, because the abstractness of the concepts implies a certain hierarchy (i.e., conspiracy mentality and political orientation as rather stable dispositions that are reflected in support for social change in a concrete situation). Nonetheless, the current studies by no means allow conclusions to be drawn regarding the causal relationships between these concepts. Indeed, we did not find any longitudinal effects of conspiracy mentality and political orientation after 6 months with the participants of Study 2 (for a cross-lagged panel analysis, see Table S1 in the Supporting Information). Given the stability of the two concepts, longer time lags might be necessary to detect any longitudinal effects. For the same reason, both conspiracy mentality and political orientation are hard to manipulate (but see Imhoff et al., 2021). Thus, identifying causal relationships proves to be a difficult endeavour. But even if no causal order could be identified, the results would still be interesting, because they shed light on the (in part surprising) patterns with which political orientation, conspiracy mentality and support for different forms of social change are related.

Second, one could criticize the measures we used to assess political orientation and support for social change. There is a long-standing debate on whether one-item measures should be used in general and specifically to measure political orientation. We acknowledge that political ideology is a multi-faceted construct that can be distinguished on several dimensions (e.g., referring to social or economic aspects). However, it has been shown that self-placement on the left-right continuum with one item strongly predicts voting behaviour and is highly comparable on an international level (for discussions, see Imhoff et al., 2022; Jost et al., 2009). Together with the obvious benefits of its high efficiency and face-validity, we deemed it appropriate to use this measure instead of a more fine-grained approach. Future studies could, for instance, also include participants' support for a certain political party to allow for a more detailed analysis of the role other factors like political control deprivation might play in this context. We created the social change measures in an ad hoc fashion for the purpose of this research and they did not undergo extensive pretesting or validation. However, the scales showed satisfying levels of internal consistency (one exception might be the elected representatives measure in Study 4 with $\alpha = .66$) and were also highly face valid. We think that our scales are a good addition to existing measures of support for social change on a merely issue-based level, but further research is needed to validate them.

Third, we collected data only within one country and generalizations to other national or cultural contexts might be difficult given the different political and societal situations. This criticism might be less valid with regard to the relationship between conspiracy mentality and political orientation which has been shown to be quite consistent across countries (Imhoff et al., 2022). For social change, we believe that the criticism would apply to a stronger extent to policy-specific items rather than the generalized attitudes we measured. Still, this is no guarantee that the results we found in Germany would hold across countries and future research should test these relationships elsewhere.

Finally, future research might have a closer look at the link between conspiracy mentality and populism when it comes to social change. Both concepts are an expression of anti-establishment orientation (Uscinski et al., 2021) and previous research found empirical evidence for the link between populist attitudes and conspiracy mentality (Papaioannou et al., 2023b). In line with this, we found a high correlation between conspiracy mentality and populist attitudes (measured for exploratory purposes in Study 1), $r(139) = .67$, $p < .001$ and populist attitudes qualified the relationship between political orientation and support for change (see Supporting Information) in the way conspiracy mentality did. Future research should examine similarities and differences between these concepts.

6.3 | CONCLUSION

The current research provides substantial evidence that conspiracy mentality plays a crucial role in predicting support for social change among the political left and right. When their conspiracy mentality was high, even right wingers supported social change and left wingers even supported reactionary social change. Irrespective of their political orientation, those high in conspiracy mentality supported population-based social change and rejected social change driven by elected

representatives. These findings contribute to our understanding of conspiracy mentality as potential driver of social change and illuminate the boundary conditions for the common theorizing that resistance to change is a decisive factor in distinguishing the political left from the right.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data and code are publicly accessible via PsychArchives (code: https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.13057, data: https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.13056).

ETHICS STATEMENT

The manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct as well as national ethical guidelines. The studies received ethical approval by the institutional ethics board of the Leibniz-Institut für Wissensmedien (Tübingen, Germany; LEK2019/001). All participants gave informed consent prior to their participation in the studies.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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