



Public Support for Conspiratorial Thinking in Europe

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Research question

What are the factors that explain conspiratorial thinking among citizens in Europe?

- Focus on public opinion
- Rich literature: integrating explanations from different theories
- Cross country survey data from 10 European countries
- Conspiratorial thinking rather than support of a specific CT

Theoretical framework

(1) Lack of control

(2) Predispositions

(3) Situational triggers

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Theory: (1) lack of control

CTs as a remedy to regain some control, to cope, to have a simple explanation for (stressful, threatening) circumstances

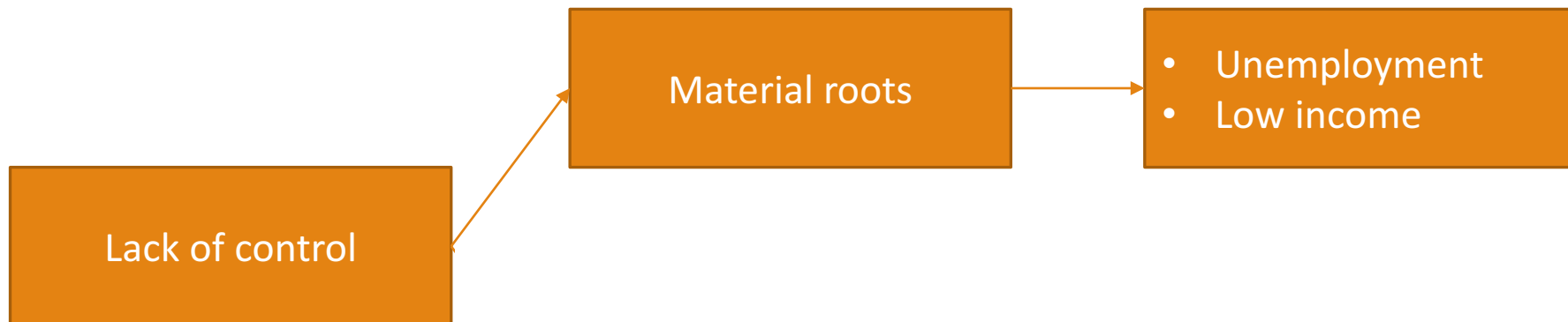
-> Douglas et al. 2019, Van Prooijen 2017, Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999, Goertzel 1994, Kramer 1994, Uscinski and Parent, 2014

Lack of control

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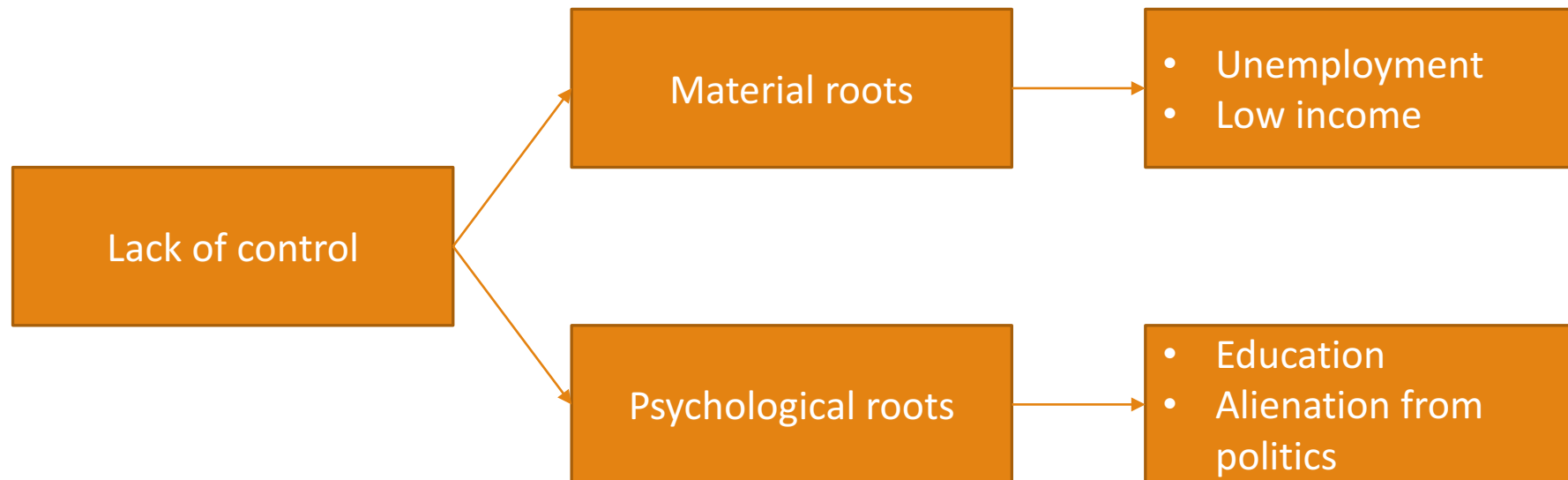
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Theory: (2) predispositions

Role of trust: world as place where others work against each other? (Oliver & Wood, 2014, Mancosu et al., 2017 vs. Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999, Goertzel, 1994)

Ideology: authoritarianism correlated with support for CTs (Richey, 2017, Grzesiak-Feldman and Irzycka, 2009), extreme positions also linked to support for CTs (e.g. Krouwel et al., 2017)

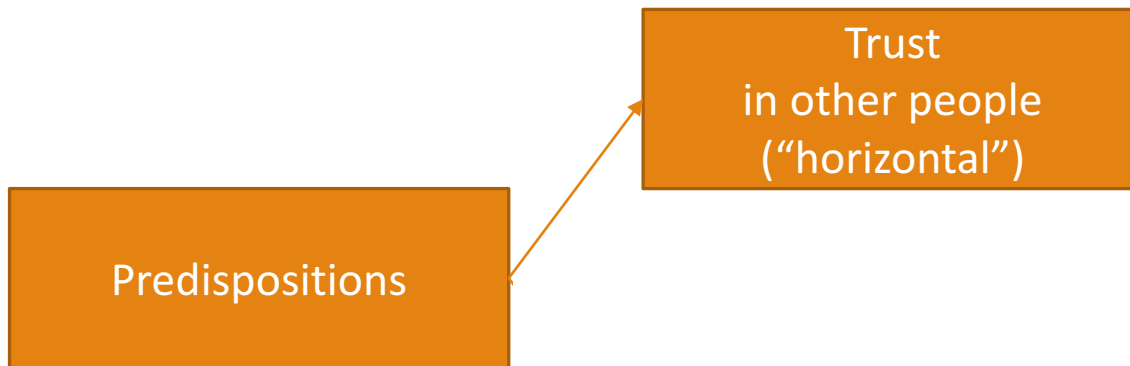


Predispositions

Theory: (2) predispositions

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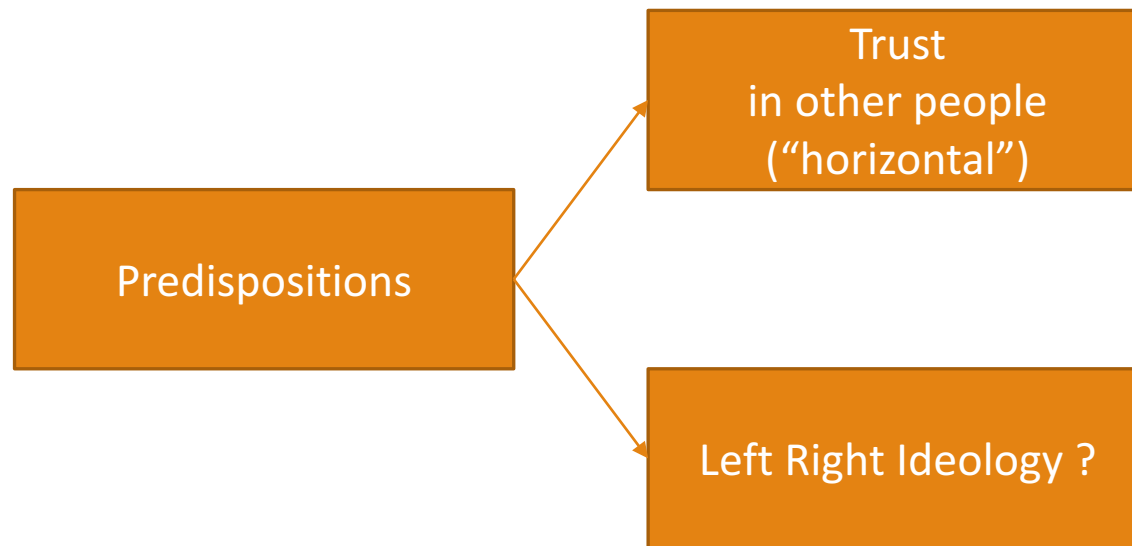
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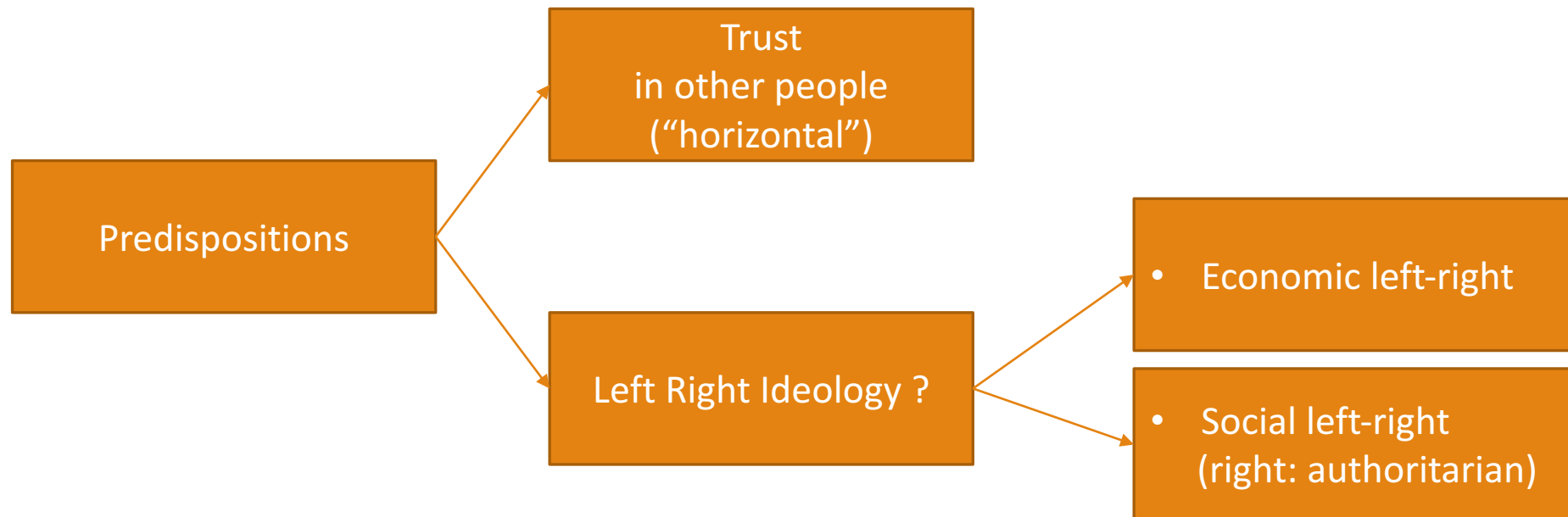
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Theory: (3) situational triggers

Being on losing side in elections: Uscinski and Parent, 2014; also Edelson, 2017, Czech, 2017

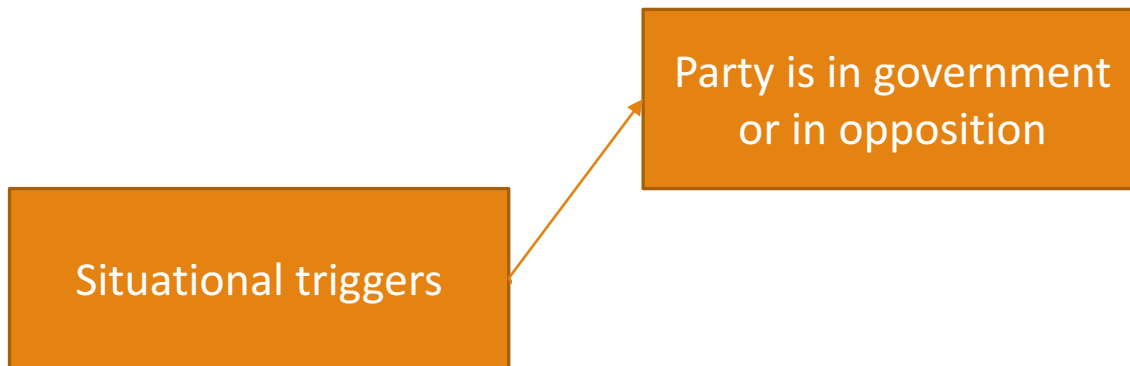
Media consumption & role of internet: internet increased the spread of false information and conspiracy theories (e.g. Berinsky 2012, Mancosu et al 2017)

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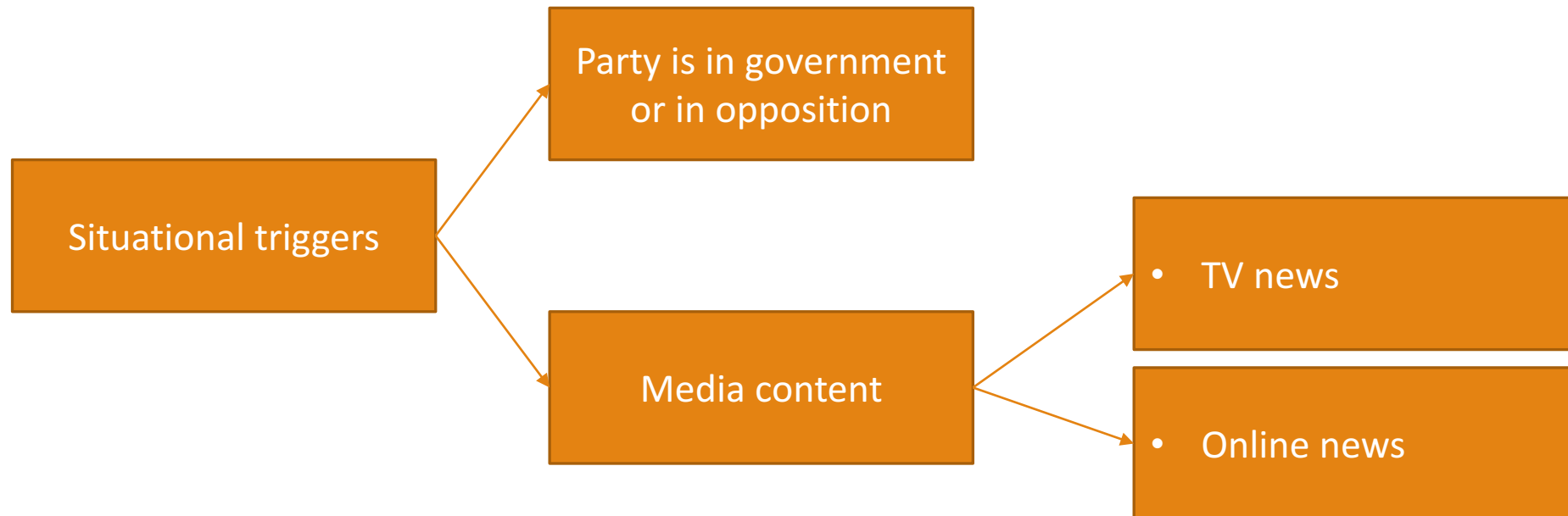
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Data

- Horizon2020 project EUENGAGE
- Public opinion survey with 11600 respondents from 10 countries conducted in 2017 by Kantar (→ Eurobarometer)
- Online, probability samples that reflect the populations (weighting), 1100/country
- 10 countries that cover variation across Europe:
 - West: France, Germany, UK, NL
 - South: Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain
 - East: Poland, Czech Republic



Measuring conspiratorial thinking

- No measures for a specific conspiracy theory but support for conspiratorial thinking
- Six statements
 - Statements introduced by McClosky and Chong (1985) as indicators of “paranoid tendencies”
 - Used in conspiracy theory survey literature as measures for conspiratorial predispositions by Uscinski et al. (2016), Uscinski and Olivella (2017), Klofstad et al. (2019)

Measuring conspiratorial thinking

Strongly agree/ Somewhat agree/ Somewhat disagree/ Strongly disagree/ Don't know

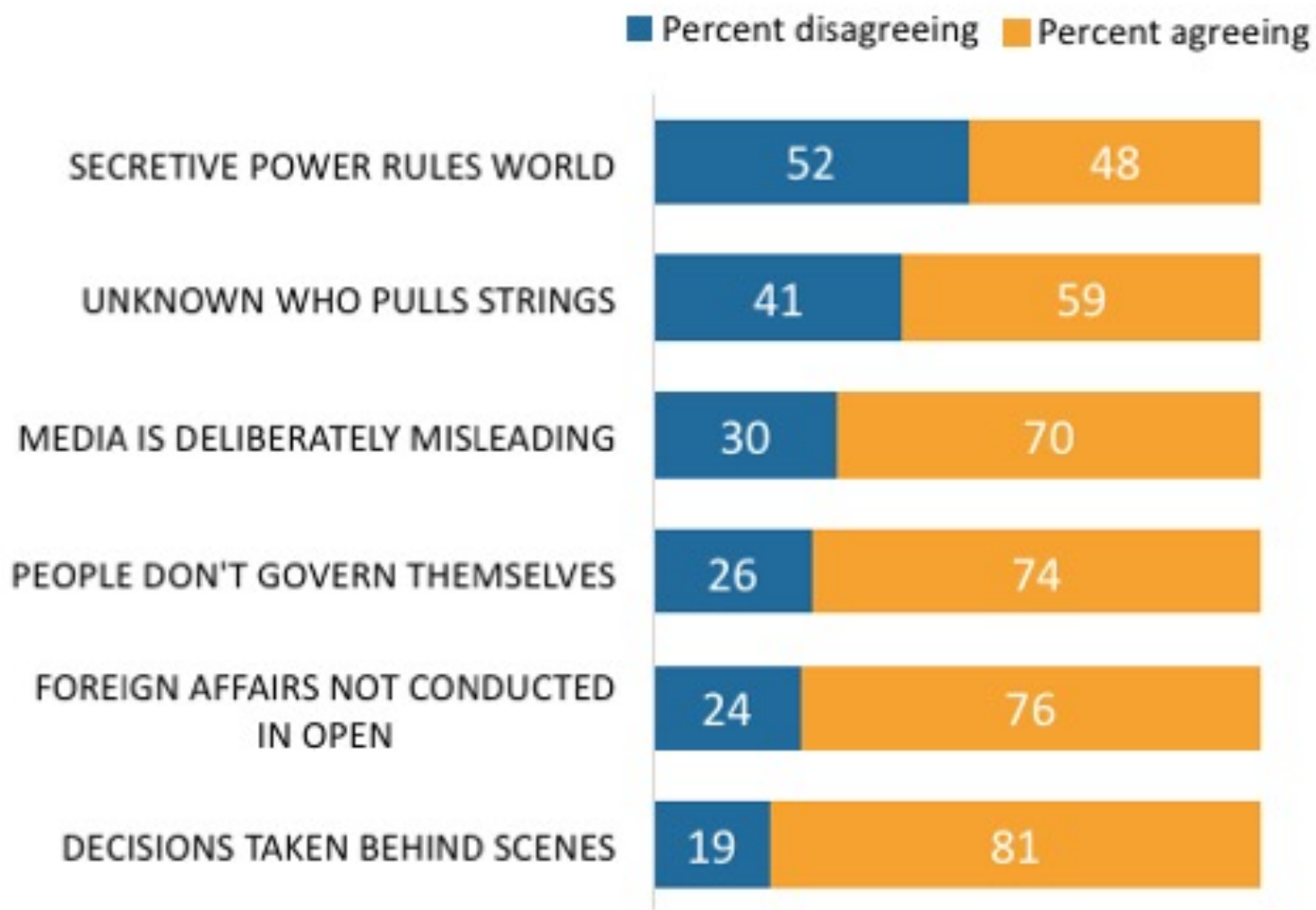
1. We would be much better off now if our **foreign affairs** were conducted out in the open, for all to see, rather than secretly
2. Most of the news we get from the **press and the radio is deliberately** slanted to mislead us
3. I often feel that the really important matters are **decided behind the scenes**, by people we never even hear about
4. The people think they **govern themselves**, but they really **don't**
5. A secretive power **elite with a globalist agenda** is conspiring to eventually rule the world through an authoritarian world government, or **New World Order**
6. Actually, it is not the government that runs the country: **we don't know who pulls the strings**

Descriptive statistics

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CONSPIRATORIAL THINKING IN EUROPE

Averages across 10 countries, weighted results

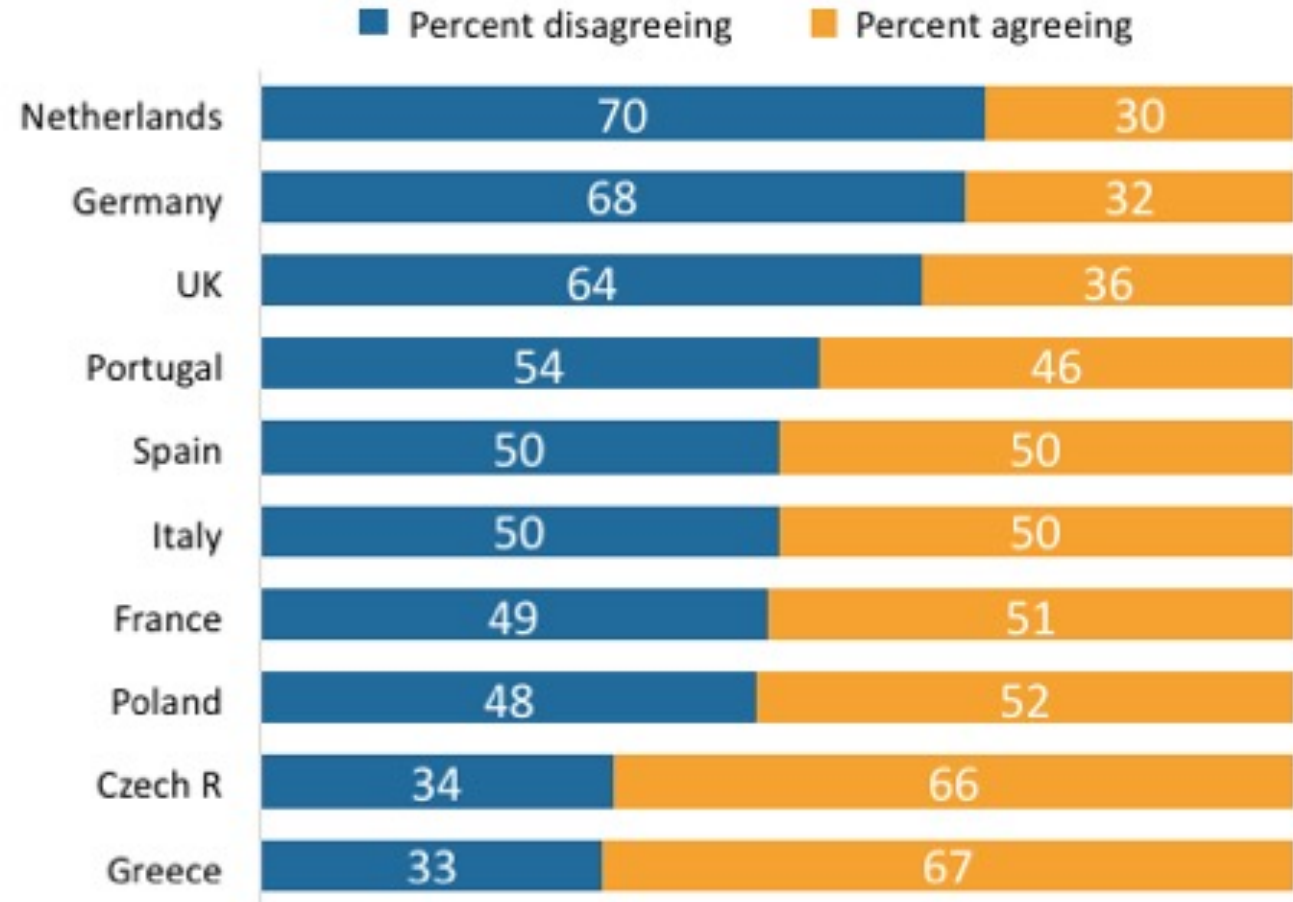


Online survey conducted for the Horizon2020 project EUENGAGE by Kantar in 2017. Probability sample, DK excluded, missing to 100 due to rounding. www.florianstoeckel.eu

Descriptive
statistics:
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QUESTION: "A SECRETIVE POWER ELITE WITH A GLOBALIST AGENDA IS CONSPIRING TO EVENTUALLY RULE THE WORLD THROUGH AN AUTHORITARIAN WORLD GOVERNMENT, OR NEW WORLD ORDER"



Weighted results. Online survey conducted for the Horizon2020 project EUENGAGE by Kantar in 2017. Probability sample, DK excluded, missing to 100 due to rounding.
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Results

DV is conspiratorial thinking,
index based on 6 items, rescaled to range 0-100

OLS REGRESSION, ACCOUNTING FOR COUNTRY CLUSTERS,
COUNTRY DUMMIES; N1= 11616, N2=10, ADJ. R-SQU.= 0.26

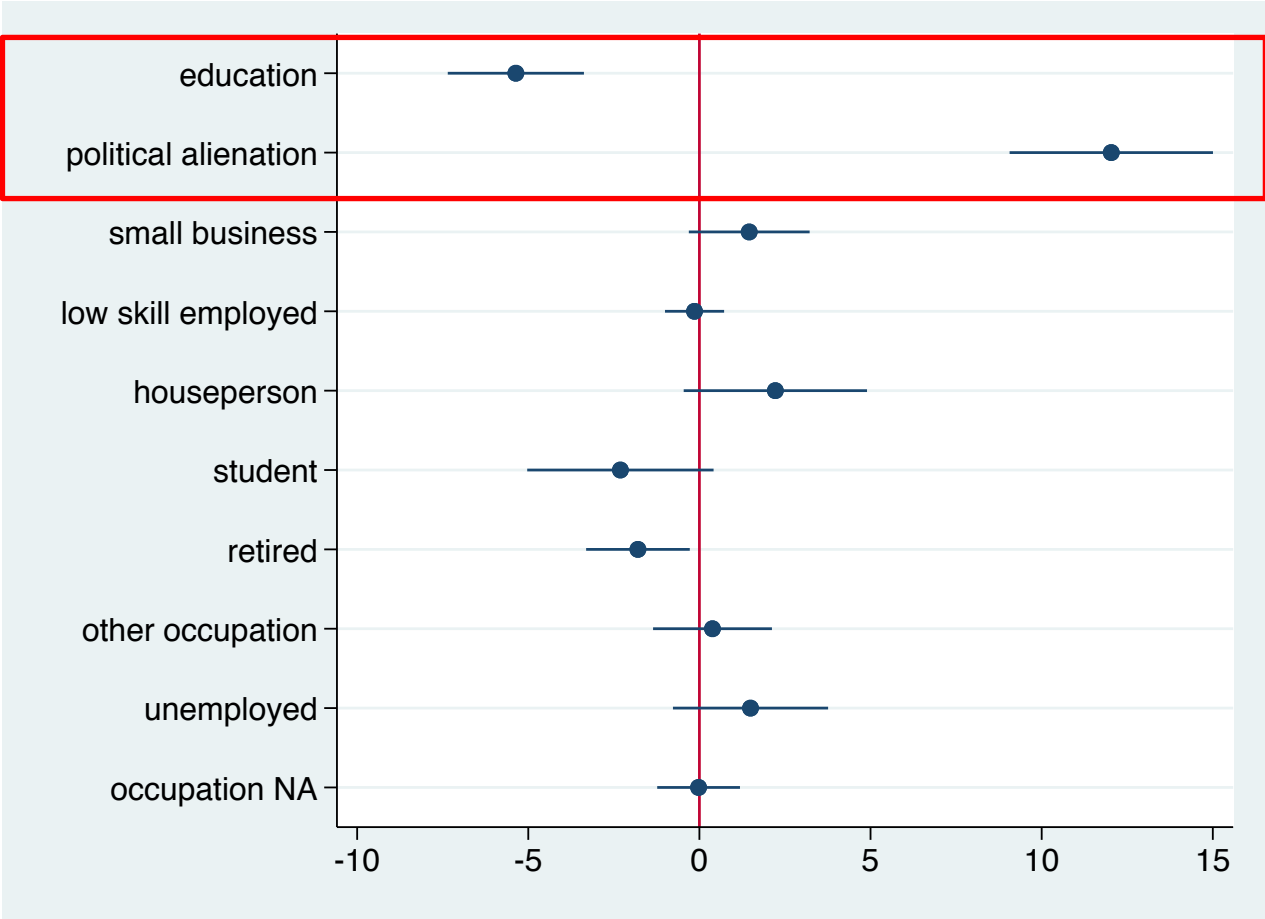
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Results: (1) lack of control



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Difference between someone with no education and much education

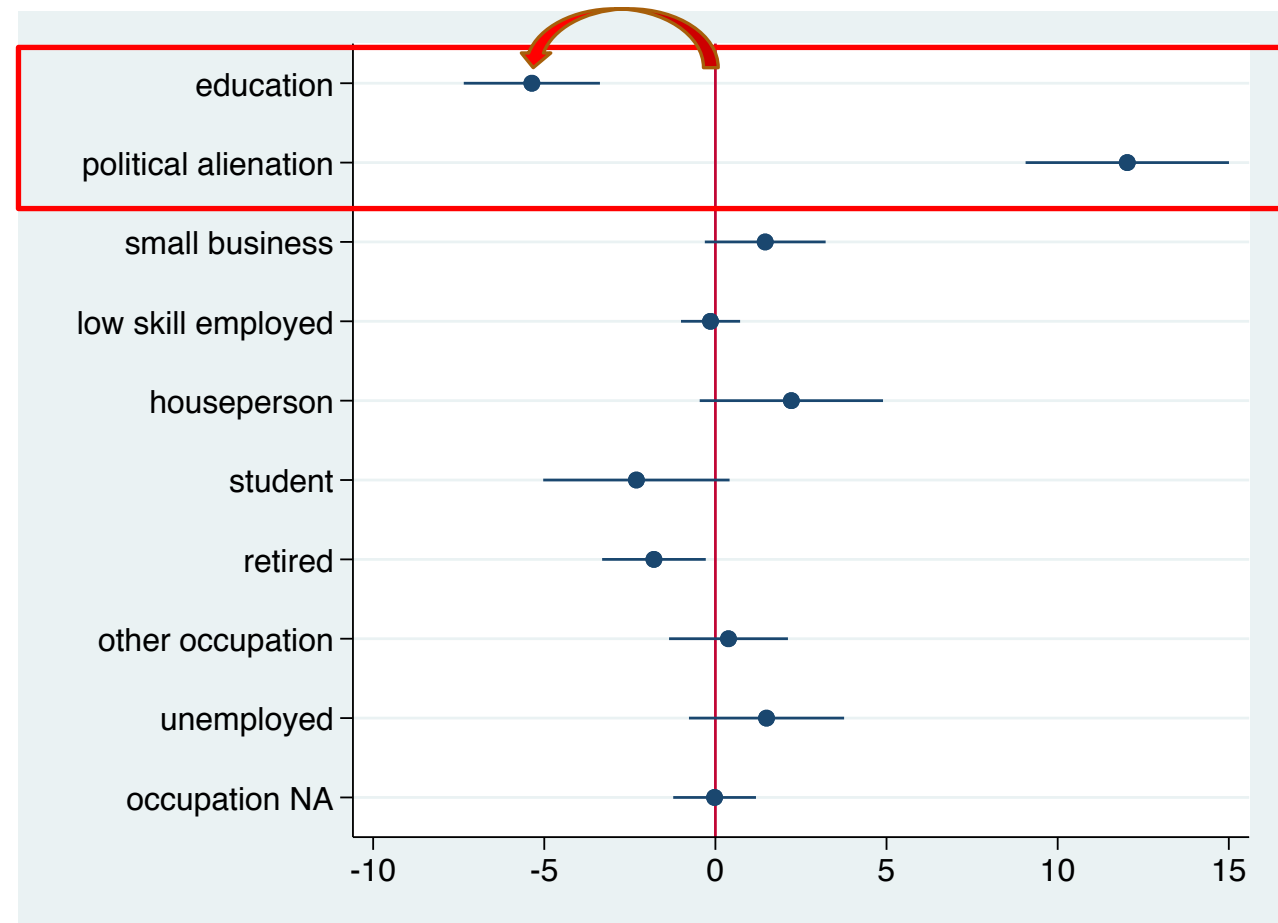
Conspiratorial thinking scale

0-100

Marginal effects of min-max change

Dots: effect

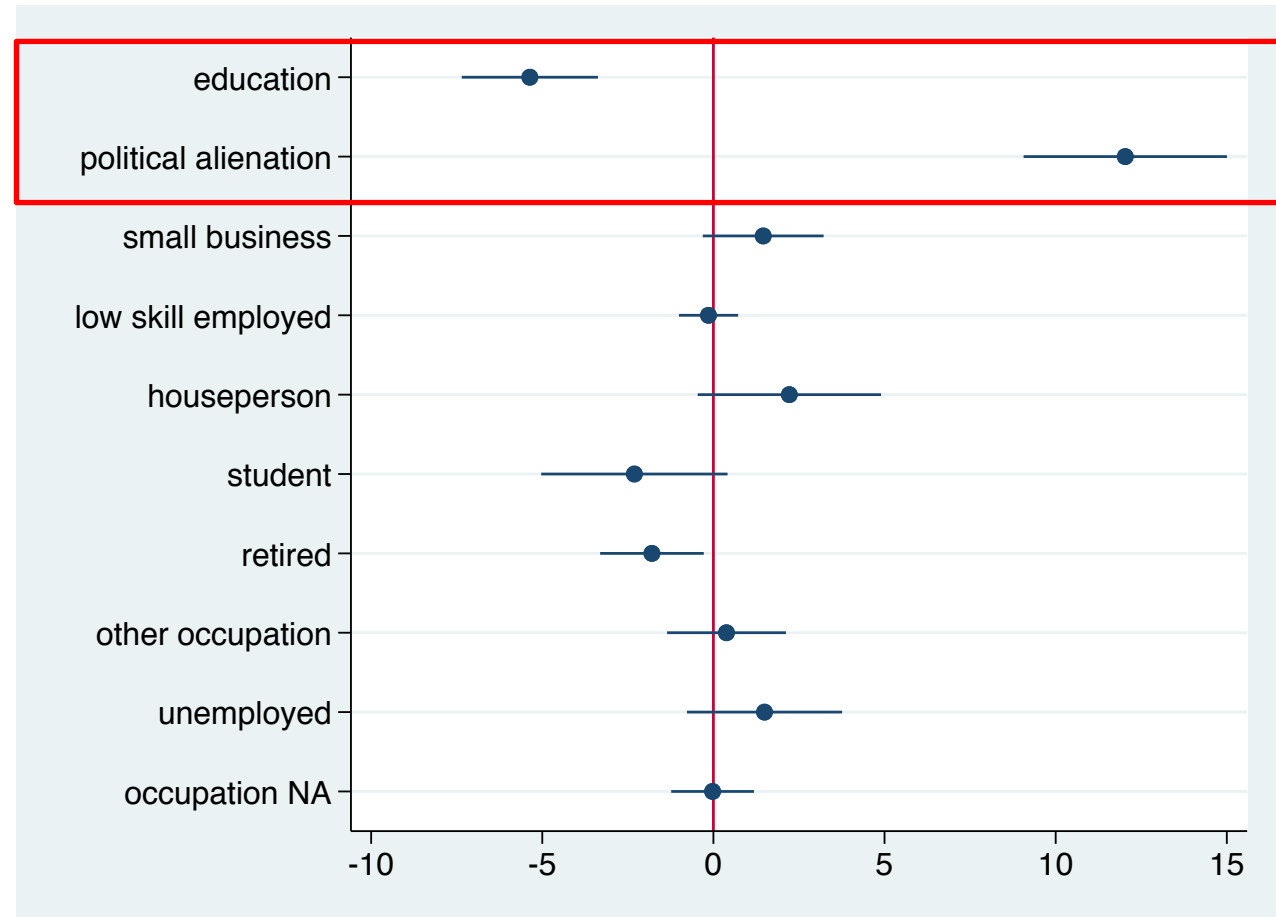
Lines: statistical significance



Results: (1) lack of control

Psychological roots:

education & pol. alienation have a strong effect

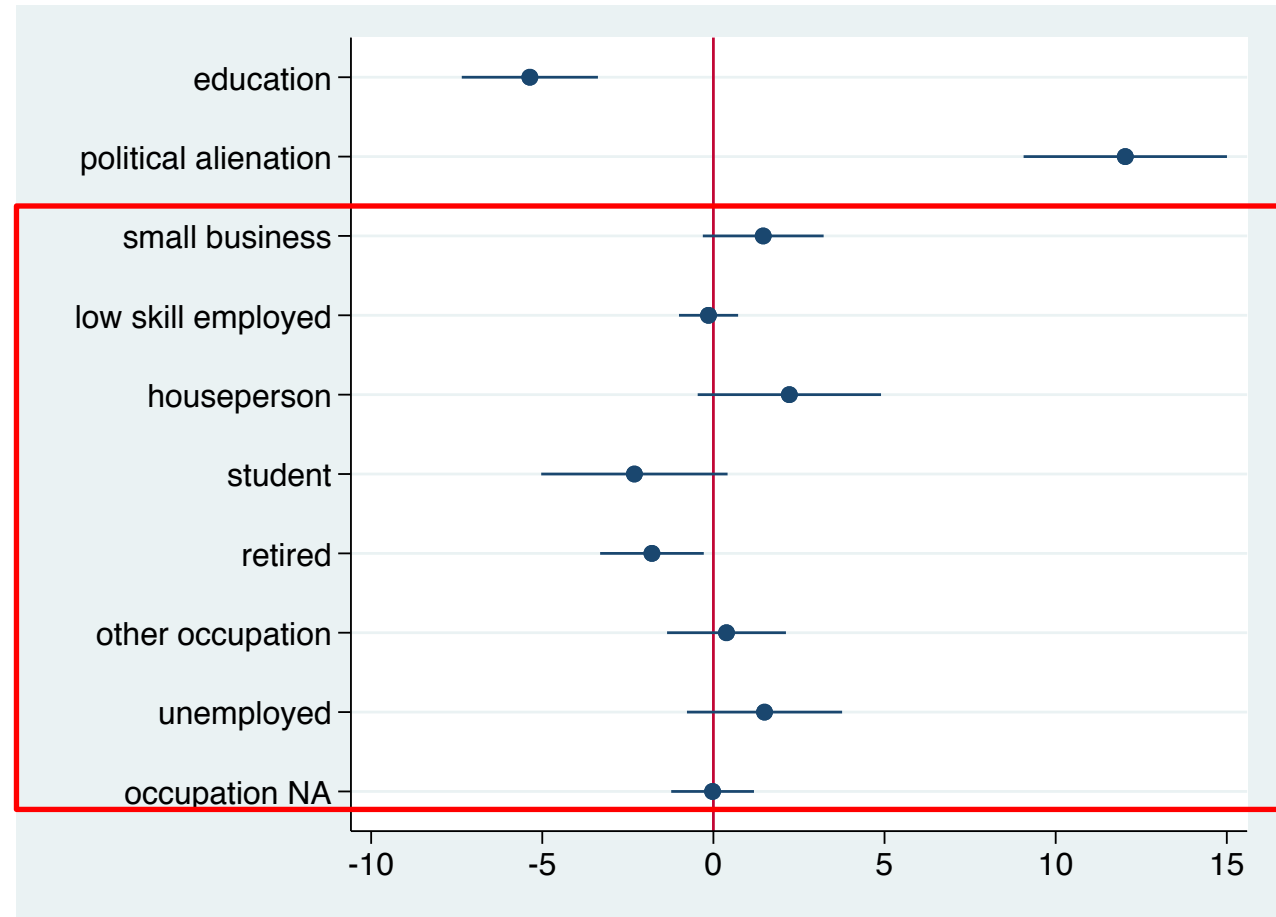


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Material roots of a lack of control:

Reference: employed individual

No effect (income: v. small effect)



Theoretical framework

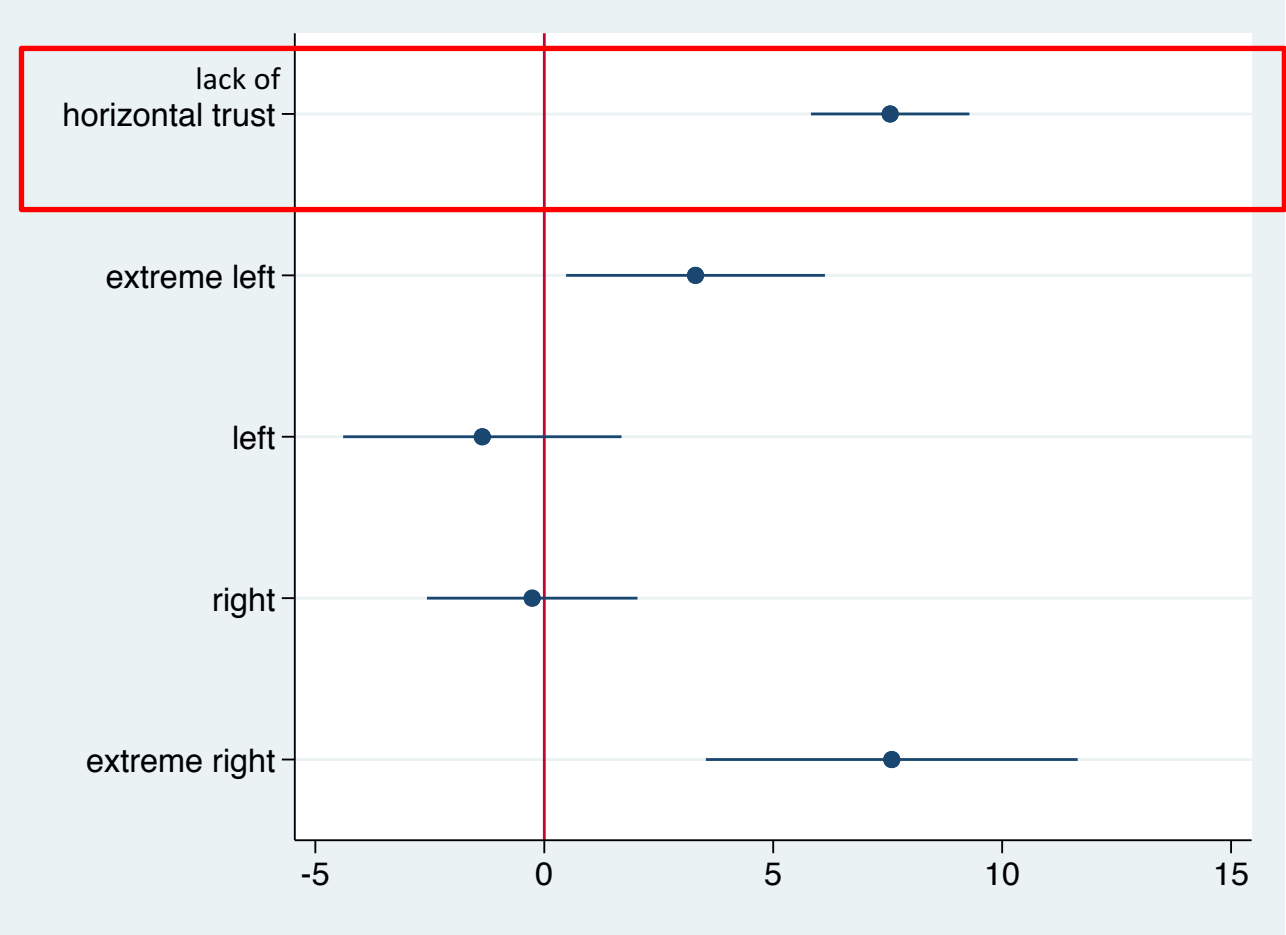
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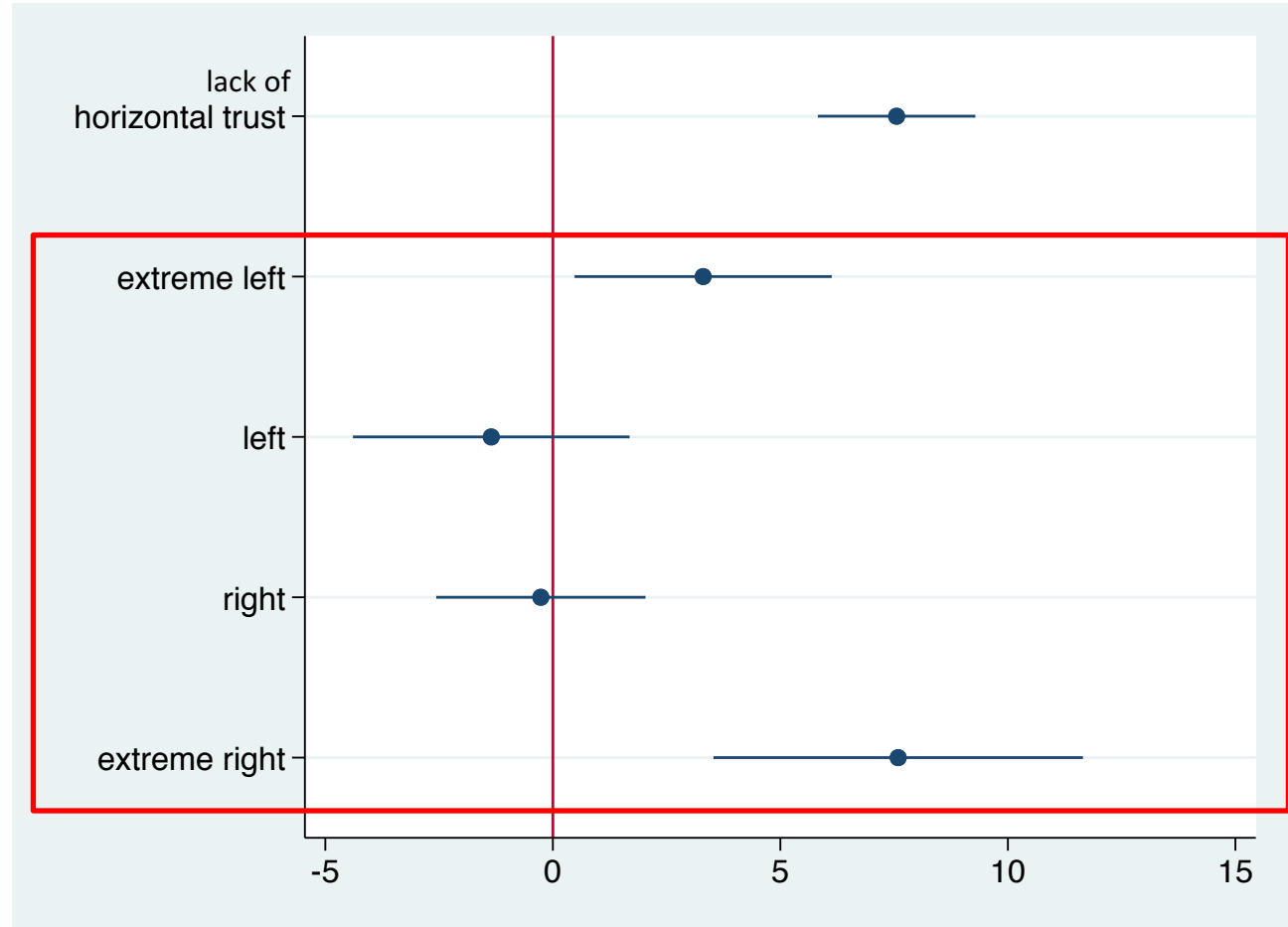
Horizontal trust: strong and significant



Results: (2) predispositions

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Ideology matters: extreme left & extreme right greater supporter exhibiting greater conspiratorial thinking

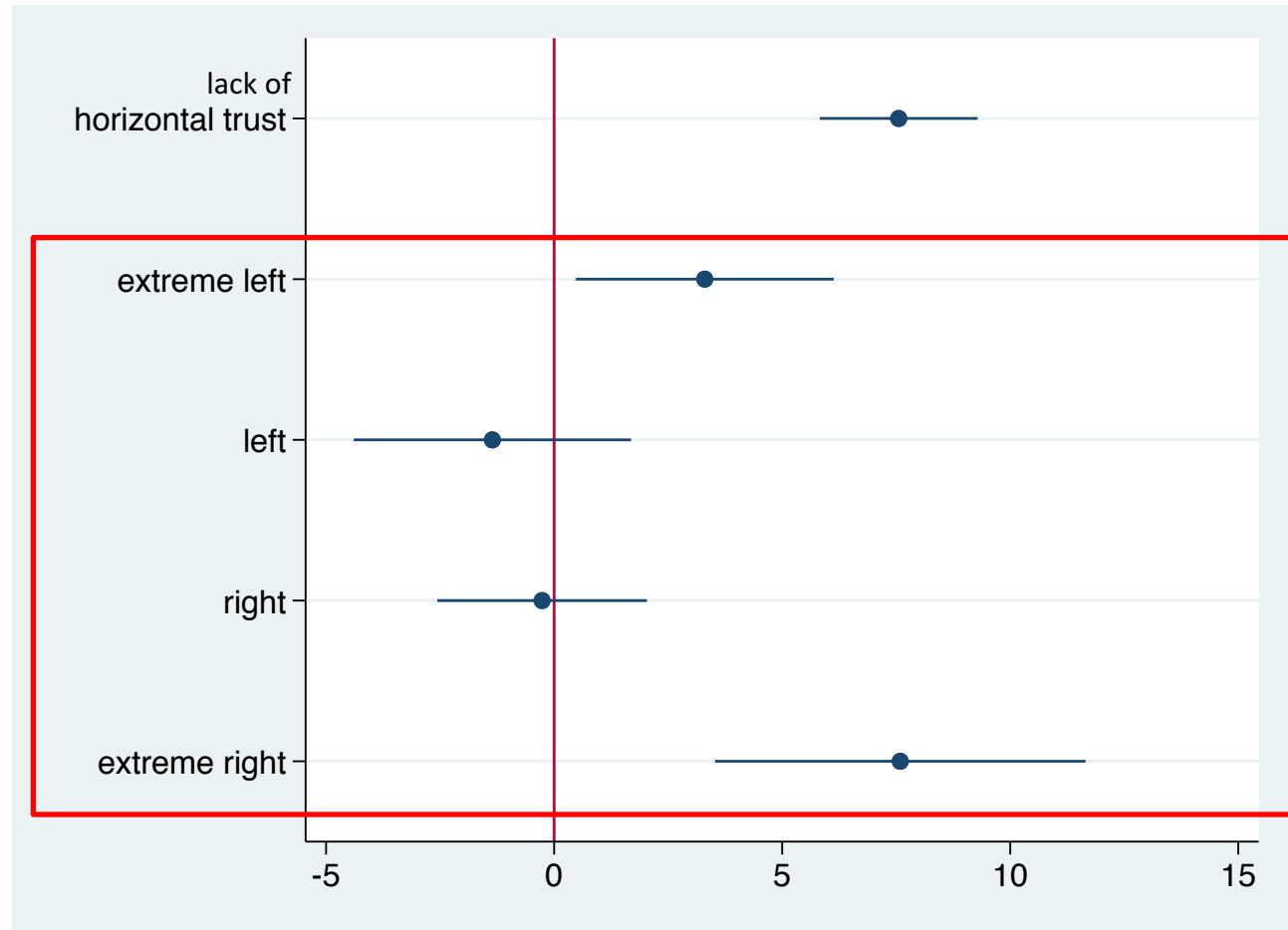


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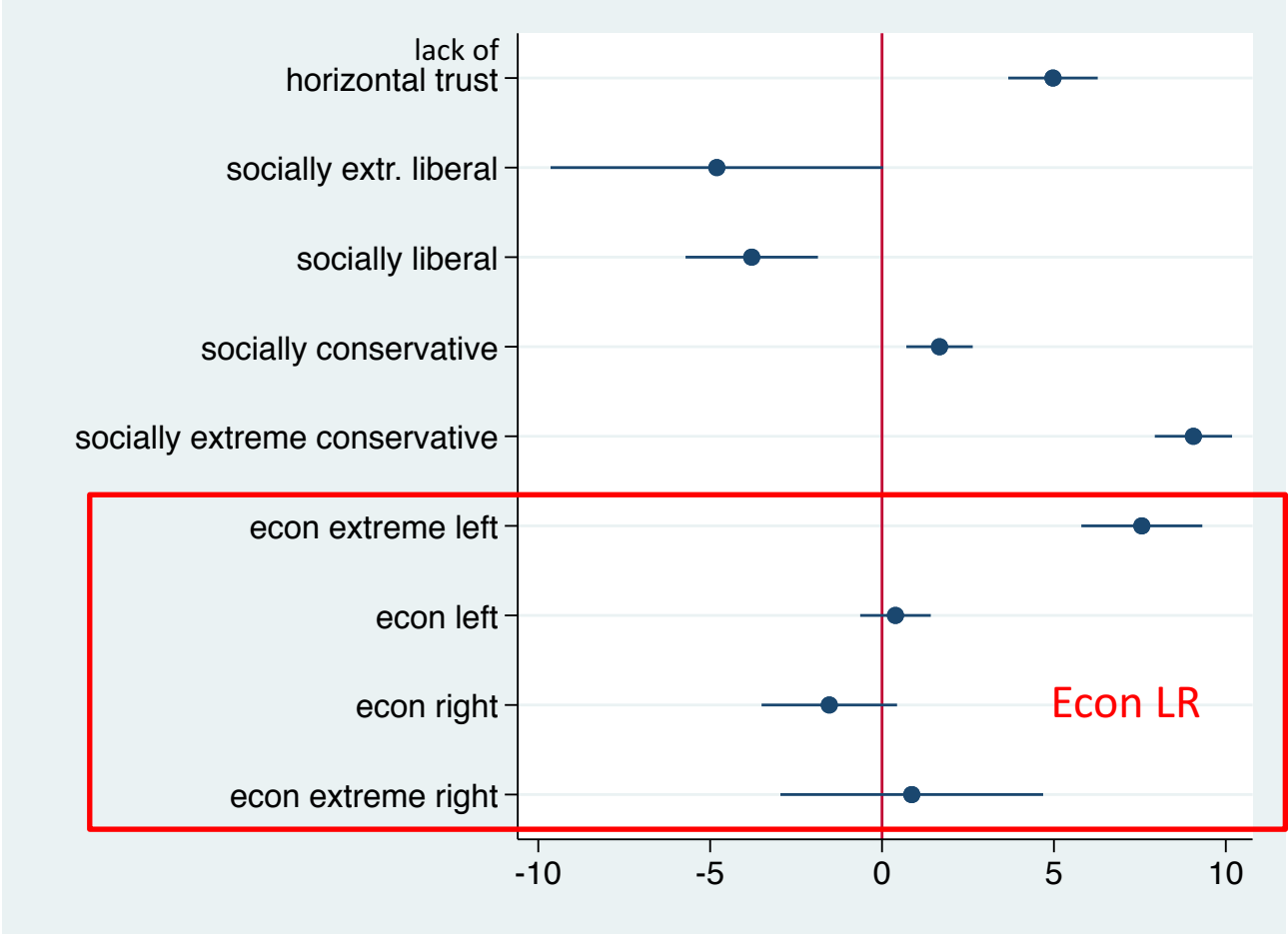
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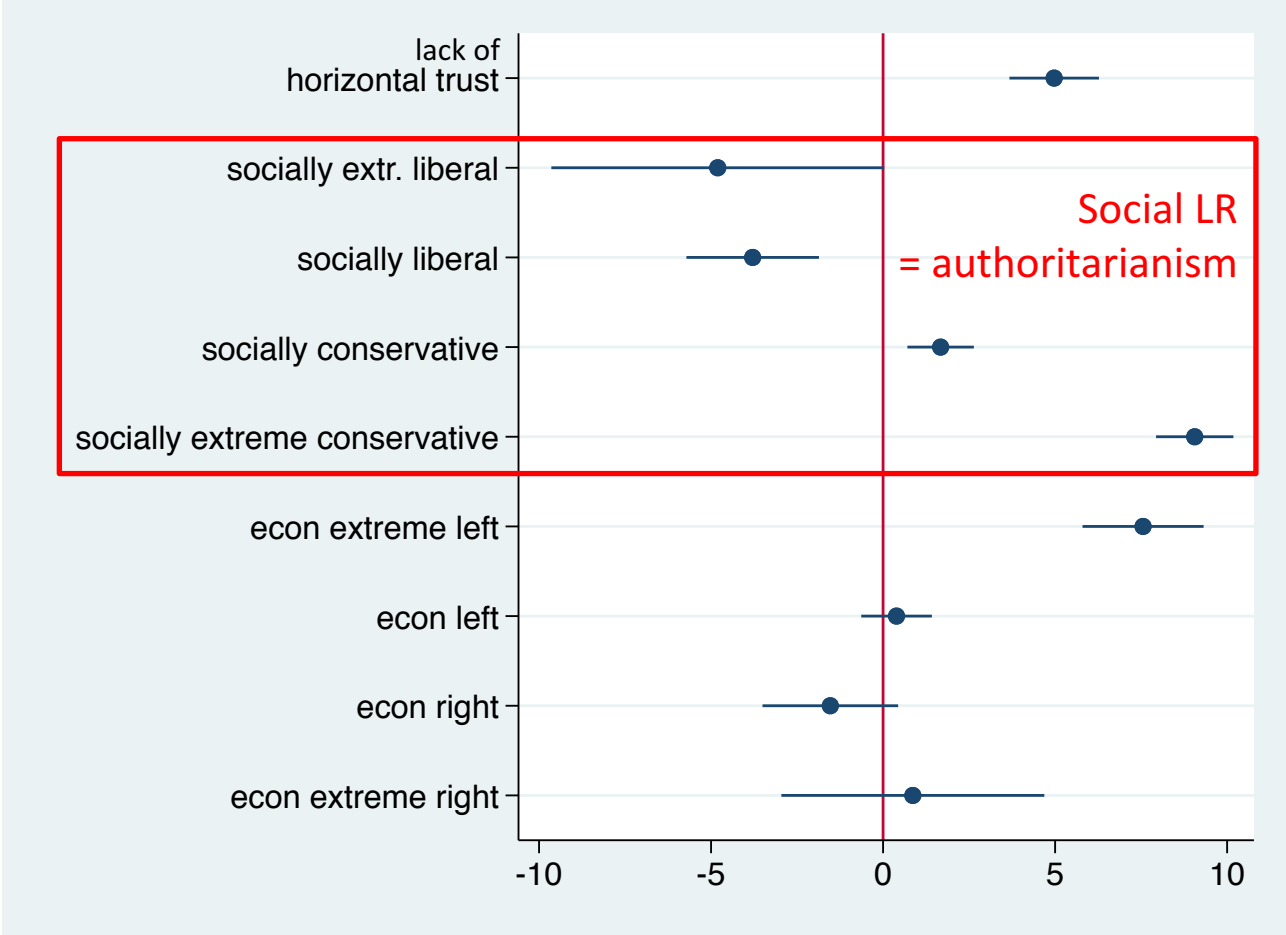
...but what happens when we differentiate between econ LR and social LR?



Results: (2) predispositions



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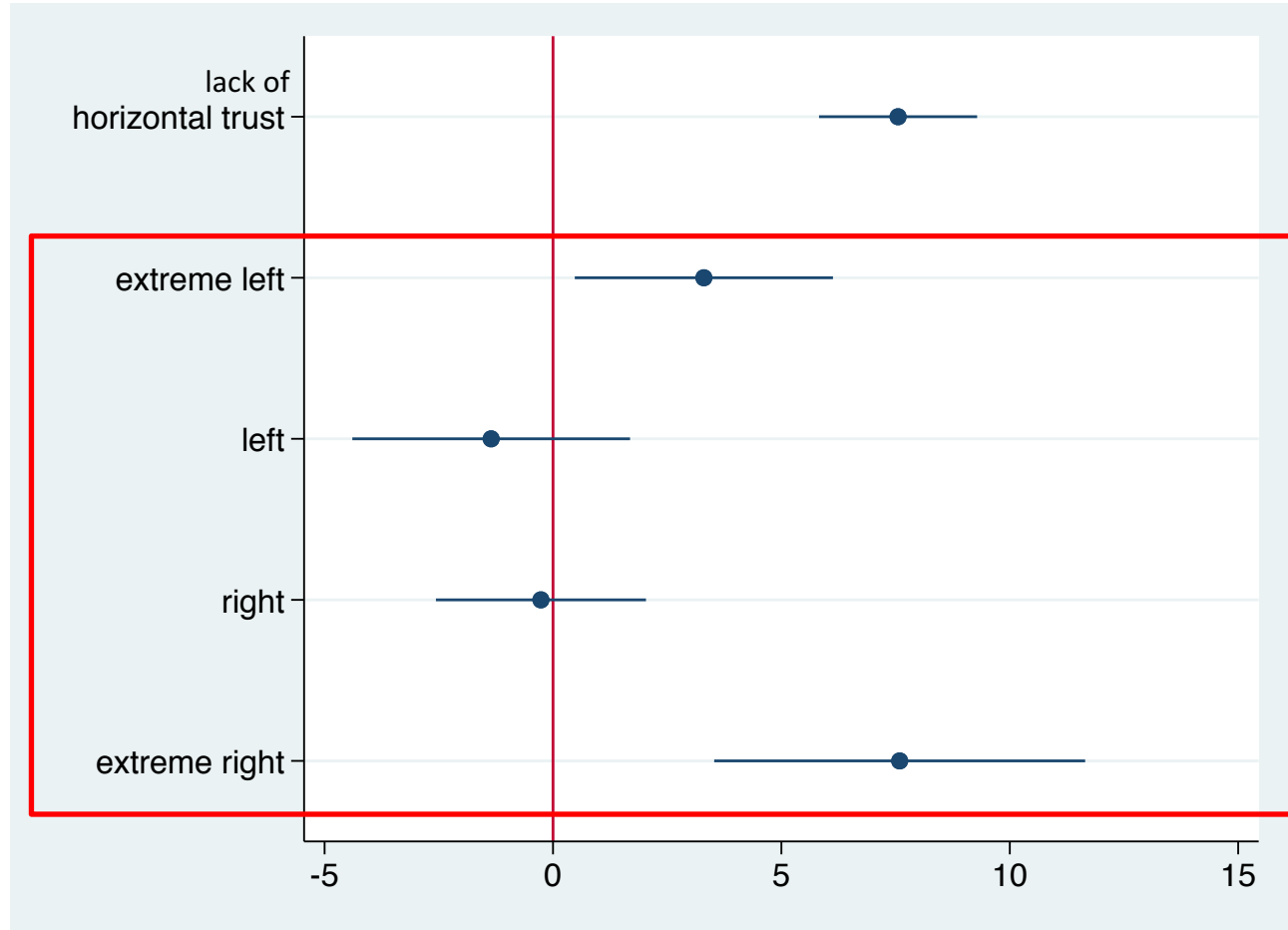


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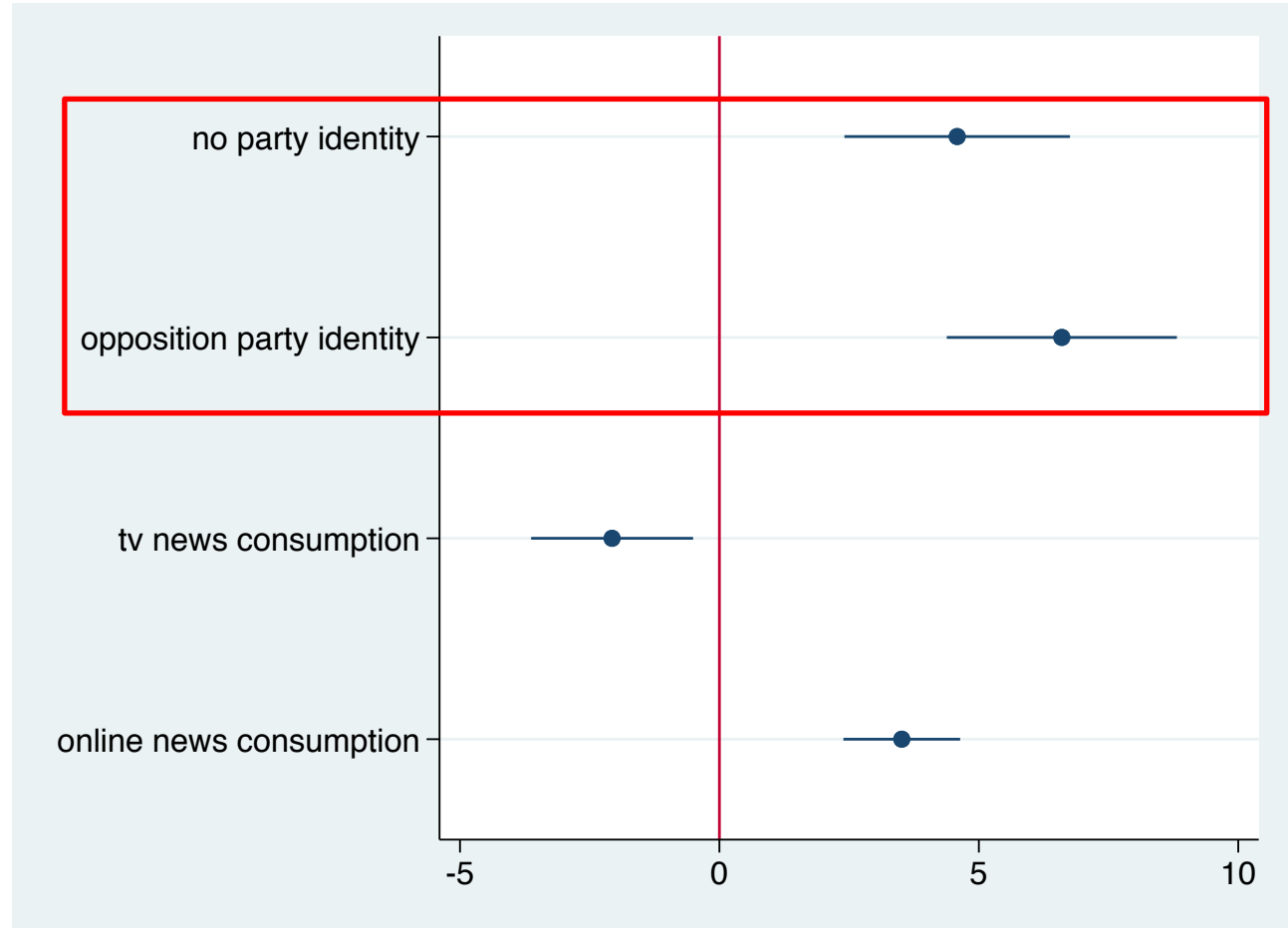
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Individuals who identify with party in opposition (and those without PID) exhibit greater conspiratorial thinking



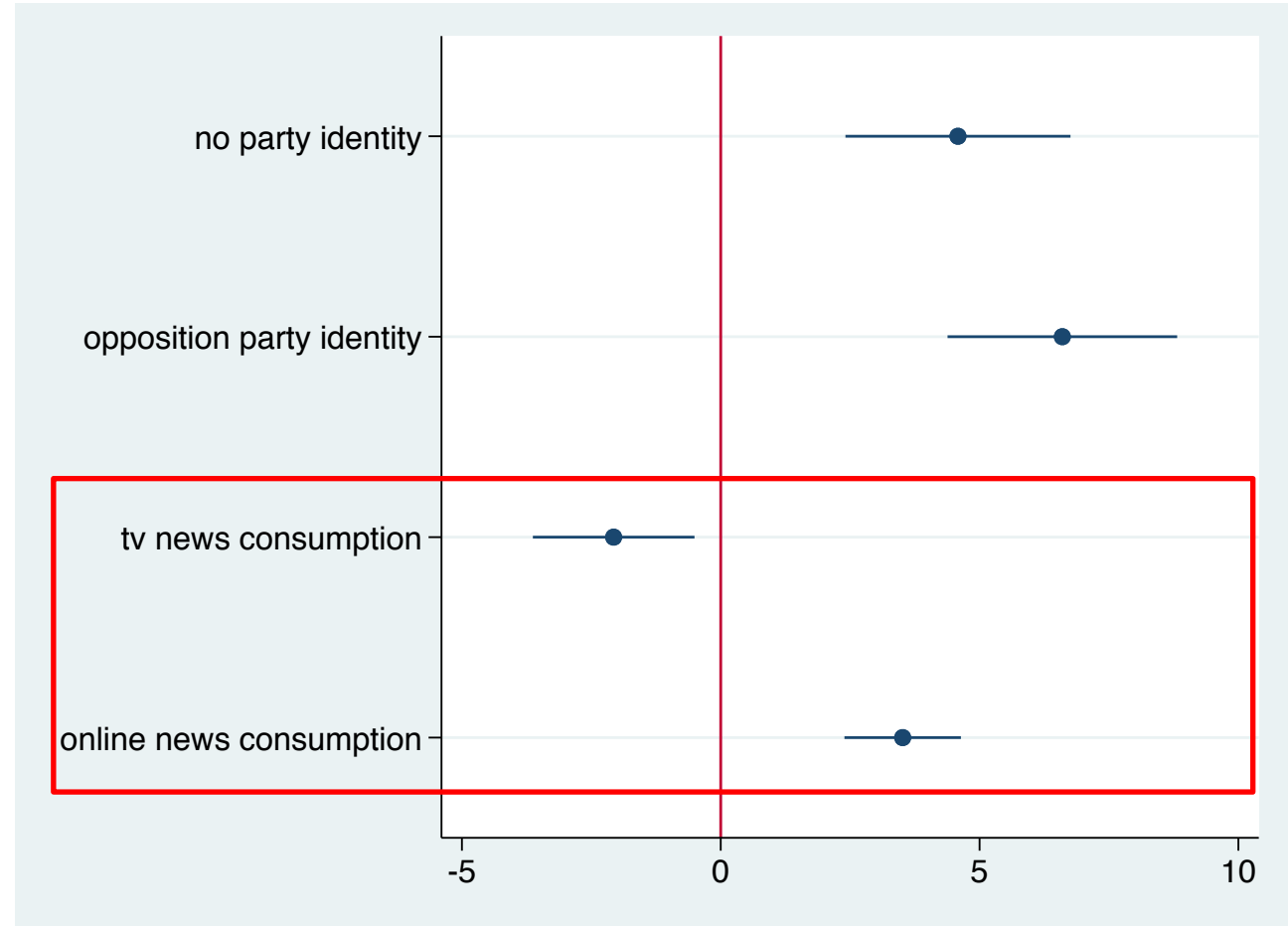
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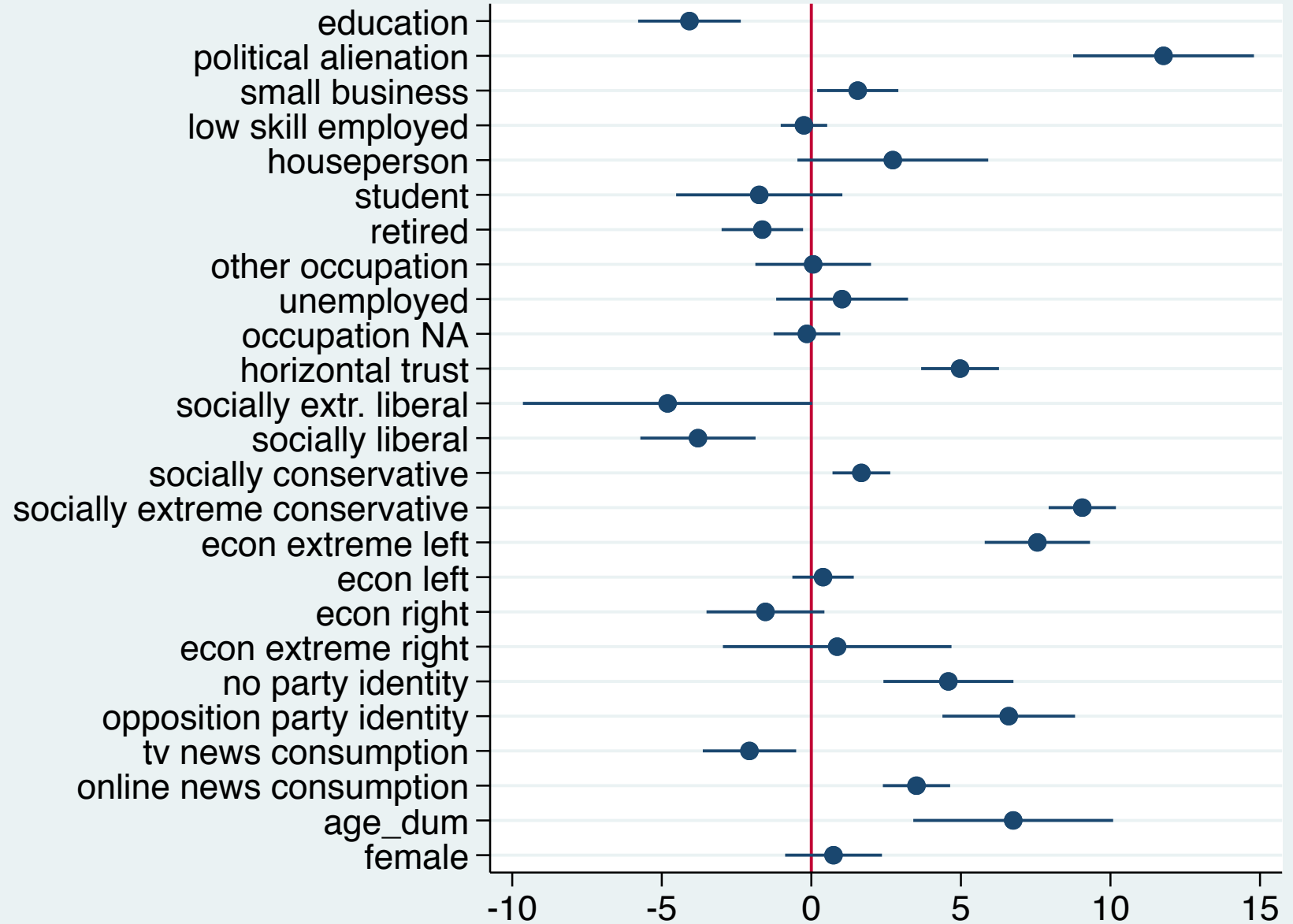
Media consumption:

TV news → less CT

Internet → More CT



Full model



Limitations & Conclusion

- Limitations:
 - Includes only a subset of approaches included
 - Country differences not taken into account
 - Qualitative research – e.g. focus groups – needed to complement quantitative results
- A perceived lack of control, predispositions, and situational triggers explain conspiratorial thinking in Europe
- Not just left-right ideology, but two dimensions of ideology matter
- Internet consumption is linked to support for CT while TV news consumption is not – what is the causal effect of the internet?



Thank you for your attention

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appendix

Independent variable measures

Econ left right: Redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor: fully in favour vs. fully opposed - Where would you place your views on this scale?

Social left right: QG7_3_new-QG7_5_new

Immigration in general will improve our culture with new ideas and customs - (What extent you agree or disagree with the following statements about the general impact of immigration on (OUR COUNTRY) and (NATIONALITY) people?)

Immigrants take jobs that (OUR COUNTRY) people do not want to take anymore. - (What extent you agree or disagree ... general impact of immigration on (OUR COUNTRY) and (NATIONALITY) people?) (Mass and BtoB only)

The religious practices of immigrants are a threat to the (NATIONALITY) way of life and its traditions. - (What extent you agree or disagree ... statements about the general impact of immigration on (OUR COUNTRY) and ...?)

Independent variable measures

Political alienation:

Sometimes politics is so complicated that I cannot understand what is really happening