

Conspiracy Theories and Populism: Analyzing the Trumpian Embrace of Conspiracy Narratives as a Political Instrument

35. Országos Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia

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2022-3

Lezárás dátuma: 2023. 01. 10.

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I. Introduction

On August 30, 2022, Donald Trump shared 18 different posts promoting the QAnon conspiracy theory (CT) on *Truth Social*, the website created by the Trump Media & Technology Group after Trump was banned from *Twitter* in the wake of the Capitol riot on January 6, 2021. A few weeks later, he posted a picture of himself edited with the phrases “The Storm is Coming,” “WWG1WGA,”¹ and a Q lapel pin (Gilbert, “Trump Has Officially,” “Trump’s Not Even”). These were not the only times Trump has acknowledged Q: the misinformation monitoring group *NewsGuard* found multiple instances of him actively boosting the movement. Between April and August of 2022, he shared the posts of 30 different QAnon accounts who not only had 772,000 followers cumulatively, but now had their messages broadcast to Trump’s 3.8 million followers, as well (“Misinformation Monitor”). With his announcement on November 15, 2020 that he would run for president in the 2024 elections (Orr et al.), it is not unreasonable to suspect that conspiracy theories will be at the forefront of Trump’s agenda.

Donald Trump’s embrace of CTs is not a new event. He openly reiterated conspiracy narratives during his presidential campaign, when he was in office, and as he lost the 2020 election. This study was written as the Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol gathered information about the storming of the Capitol and the election fraud claims that sparked disorder. With hundreds now either convicted or awaiting trial (Select Committee 2), the question remains: how to explain the belief that the election was invalid? What motivated voters to march to the Capitol? How have the politics of Donald Trump affected people’s belief in conspiracies? And finally, will the norm in American politics change? This study proposes that conspiracy theories served as instruments for Trump’s populist politics. It aims to show that the characteristics and bases of CTs and populism are similar, making conspiracies useful tools for populist politicians. Studying this correlation is important, as the politicizing of CTs, the study establishes, leads to polarization, a loss of trust in media and political institutions, the questioning of democratic norms, and, in extreme cases, the embrace of political violence. The study sets out to outline the utility of CTs for populists in general terms, making the findings applicable to populists globally. Then, the specific characteristics of American society and Trump’s politics are analyzed, to provide an explanation for contemporary events in the United States, specifically the January 6 attack. The

¹ “Where we go one, we go all.” An expression of solidarity among believers of Q (Aliapoulos et al. 3).

objective of the research is to explain why the embrace of conspiracies made Trump attractive for his voter base.

II. Methodology

This study is divided into two parts. First, definitions are synthesized for populism and CTs, emphasizing their non-partisan, Manichean, anti-status quo nature. In the case of populism, the works of Michael Oswald et al. and Andrew Arato are consulted. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism* Oswald et al. take a global approach to outlining populism, serving as an adequate basis for the development of a broad, not US-specific understanding of the phenomenon. Arato, who is a leading scholar of the relationship between populism and democracy, underlines the transition failures of post-Soviet populist states, impelling this study to ask: what similar societal or political failure is at play in the US that facilitates populist politicians? To define CTs, Richard Hofstadter's work is combined with that of Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, as well as Julien Giry and Pranvera Tika, who all emphasize different aspects of conspiracy thinking, together providing a comprehensive overview.

Next, the three major factors that make people likely to believe in conspiracies (psychology and socioeconomics, the spirit of age and communications culture, and national history) are outlined. An interdisciplinary approach is required to understand CTs, therefore, findings of psychologists, political scientists, sociologists, and historians are considered. Turning to populism, it is shown that its argumentative structure and audience resembles that of CTs. By outlining these two phenomena, the aim is to prove that CTs and populism are highly correlated, and that the embrace of CTs by a populist politician is not unusual. Rather, it is a politically advantageous endeavor that, with the rise of populist politicians across the globe, is to—and has already—become the norm for gaining and keeping voters.

Donald Trump serves as a case study of a distinctly American style of right-wing populist conspiracy thinking. The second part of the study examines his rhetoric on *Twitter*, linking his style of politics to January 6, QAnon, and Christian nationalism. Using the *Trump Twitter Archive* database that collects all of Trump's tweets from 2009 up to his banning in 2021, the most important characteristics of his rhetoric are revealed: anti-establishment sentiments, positioning himself to be "for the people," and the dismissal of rhetorical norms. Examining 6 key terms and a total of 4,292 search results, it is shown that his politics on *Twitter* legitimized the expression of previously fringe opinions, fueling such movements as the QAnon conspiracy theory. Trump's pseudo-religious role in QAnon is discussed, as it emphasizes the

political utility of CTs for populist politicians. Lastly, the negative consequences of conspiracy and populist thinking are highlighted: polarization, the rewriting of political standards and the acceptance of political violence.

III. An Overview of Key Terms

III. 1. Populism

Populism is an elusive concept because of its adaptability. At its core, it maintains that society is made up of two groups, the corrupt elites and the morally good people, and politics is shaped by the clash between them. The sole defender of the people, as the voice of grievances, is the populist leader (Molloy). Oswald et al. argue that populism can be studied through different theoretical frameworks, for example as a political strategy, a discursive method, or a socio-cultural approach to the relationship between the people and elites (6-9). Most of these schemas overlap, envisioning populism as a form of political activity, attitude, or discourse without a fixed belief system; a skeleton, that is fleshed out according to the doctrines of the politics that utilizes it. Therefore, it can be attached to left-leaning, as well as right-leaning ideologies (Bugaric and Kuhelj 22; Tushnet 382). Not only is populism unspecific in its ideological content, many suggest that it is also, despite common belief, capable of taking on a democratic form. Political sociologist Frank A. Stengel, for example, argues against the characterization of populism as inherently anti-democratic, noting that not taking into account the particular manifestation of populism (left/right, moderate/radical, or authoritarian/democratic) conceals important differences between the policies of actors such as Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, or Marie Le Pen (445). Historically, as well, certain populist-backed programs have proven to be democratic, for example, the New Deal in the 1930s (Bugaric 390). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that practices that claim to be for the benefit of the people (i.e. based on popular demand) are not necessarily populist (Molloy), and that the generalization inherent to populism is innately dogmatic, and, as shown in later chapters, deepens political polarization by vilifying a part of society.

Despite the opacity of populism, its study requires a clear framework through which analysis of political actors is possible. Oswald et al. outline populism along the following nine attributes: it is 1) anti-status quo, 2) based on the dualism of the people and the elite, 3) it represents the (perceived) disenfranchised, 4) simplifies issues and events, and 5) offers simple solutions. It 6) is against mediated politics, 7) is anti-pluralist, 8) projects onto an out-group, and 9) works within democratic boundaries (22). Arato writes that within populism: 1) the

people become empty signifiers for “heterogeneous demands and grievances,” 2) a part of the population stands for the whole, 3) a “frontier of antagonism” is constructed, 4) unity is based on an identification with a strong leader, 5) there is an “insistence on a strong notion of politics,” and 6) (somewhat) competitive elections are upheld (1107). While similar for the most part, both definitions introduce novel characteristics that examined together will provide a complex picture of Trump’s politics in later chapters.

III. 2. Conspiracy Theories

Similar to populism, CTs are often characterized negatively. It is usually presupposed that CTs are untrue, or that they are based on irrationality. However, this is not always the case. Simply put, conspiracy theories “are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (Douglas et al., “Understanding Conspiracy Theories” 4). Conspiracy theories have no inherent truth value: the fundamental difference between conspiracies (the secret machinations of people) and conspiracy theories (speculations about these machinations) is their perception as reinforced by “properly constituted epistemic authorities” (Uscinski and Parent 33). That is, if actors such as the government, journalists, or scholars determine that a theory is true, it will turn from a conspiracy theory into a conspiracy (for instance, the Watergate scandal) (Uscinski and Parent 33).

Although preconceptions need to be put aside for an unbiased study of CTs, making value judgements is not necessarily unheard of. Hofstadter's seminal essay, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” borrows a clinical term with largely negative connotations—although not using it in its medical sense—to describe the conspiracy thinking of American public figures, deliberately emphasizing its harmful nature. Hofstadter's work is a cornerstone for political scientists and social psychologists alike, as it provides a novel interpretation of conspiracy thinking as being centered around a feeling of persecution of a culture, nation, or group. It argues that the idea inherent in CTs is that history is set into motion by a global network of conspiracies. It is only the paranoid spokesperson, as Hofstadter calls them, who is able to warn audiences of the oncoming danger brought forth by the conspiring evil forces who, being outside the flow of history, shape events according to their own immoral will (3-5). Hofstadter’s work is an extensive description of conspiracy thinking, but some have pushed back against the pathologizing of CTs (Butter and Knight 33-4). Therefore, while some define CTs as “paranoid-fueled beliefs about groups of evildoers [based on] nonrational—and, in some cases, archetypal—thought patterns that have remained free of analysis from a more logical

secondary process-thinking perspective” (Kline 42), others state that CTs “are at their core about power: who has it and what do they do with it when no one can see” (Uscinski 48). That is, while some scholars focus on truth value and underlying psychological tendencies, others emphasize sociopolitics and the (perceived) power structures that fashion CTs.

Because CTs have different forms, reaches, and lifespans, explanations of them are often ad hoc and limited (Uscinski and Parent 10). A common definition, shared by Uscinski and Parent in their book *American Conspiracy Theories*, is that a CT is “an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good” (32). Giry and Tika provide the following key features for CTs in the *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*: 1) the fear of (yet) unproven possibilities, 2) thinking of power structures as shaped by secrecy, 3) the claim that these secret machinations are harmful to society, 4) the dualism of “us” and “them,” and 5) the disregard of coincidence and randomness as shaping factors of events, and the assumption of intentionality (114). In addition, two more features are to be highlighted in this study: the centrality of a spokesperson (as argued by Hofstadter), and the tendency to give simple explanations for complex world events.

CTs can differ significantly in their content, focusing on anything from specific historical events, to large-scale sociopolitical issues (Oliver and Wood 953). Here, the focus will remain on general tendencies of conspiracy thinking as it relates to Donald Trump and his voters. While a multitude of factors might affect conspiracy thinking—for example, anti-vaccination feelings likely reflect people’s relationships with the health care system and the pharmaceutical industry, and Birther conspiracies are likely racially motivated—, this study aims to prove that there are some underlying reasons that make individuals or communities more likely to accept conspiracy narratives.

III. 3. Comparing Definitions

POPULISM		CONSPIRACY THEORIES	
<i>Features unique to populism</i>	<i>Shared features</i>		<i>Features unique to CTs</i>
A part stands for the whole Anti-pluralist Keeps to the boundaries of democracy	Dualism between the “people” and “elites”	Dualism between an in-and out-group	Fear of (yet) unproven possibilities
	Homogeneity	Homogeneity	
	Antagonistic, dynamic, and purposeful out-group	Disregard of randomness, assumption of intentionality	
	Deprived in-group	Secret machinations harming society	
	Anti-status quo	Power structures shaped by secret plots	
	Strong, unifying leader	Paranoid spokesperson	
	Offering simple solutions	Offering simple solutions	

Table 1: Similarities between populism and CTs

Table 1 synthesizes the characteristics outlined in the previous subchapters, underlining the overlap between the two phenomena. CTs and populism both operate on the Manichean assumption that society is made up of two homogenous groups, where the morally corrupt elites are actively working to harm the good people. The Otherness of the elites is emphasized and given threatening characteristics, positioning the group to be actively harmful in its immorality. The status quo is the result of the secret workings of these out-groups, therefore both narratives are strongly anti-establishment. Moreover, for both, the existence of a strong leader is crucial, as they embody the struggle for morality, gaining a quasi-messianic role as the protector of the people. In their simplification of societal problems, they provide straightforward solutions for complex problems: the (conspiring) elites need to be removed from power for the salvation of the community.

IV. Belief in Conspiracies and Attraction to Populism

As established, populism and CTs share a number of characteristics. This chapter aims to show that there is an overlap between those who are likely to believe in CTs and supporters of Donald Trump’s populism, as well, through the examination of psychology, feelings of political alienation, and levels of income and education. While the study emphasizes that CTs

are non-partisan, this chapter finds that certain characteristics of Trump's voters make them prone to be attracted to conspiracy narratives.

CTs provide a framework through which people can reconcile contradictory information with their preexisting ideas about the world (Douglas et al., "The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories" 538-9). The underlying cognitive process that makes people seek coherence in their ideas is called cognitive dissonance, a concept first developed by the social psychologist Leon Festinger. Festinger proposed that when human beings are presented with information that is inconsistent with their worldview, they experience psychological stress, i.e. cognitive dissonance. To alleviate this negative feeling, people either rationalize the received information, or they search for alternate facts that are consistent with their worldview, while actively avoiding those that are not (1-3). The inclination to favor information that reinforces one's beliefs is called confirmation bias, and this study postulates that it is a behavior closely related to conspiracy thinking. When people turn away from mainstream media and search for alternate narratives that explain world events, they are displaying this tendency.

Cognitive dissonance is something most, if not all, humans experience. It is well researched that individuals are more likely to deem sources credible that are in line with their views, and are prone to attribute negative bias to sources that disagree with them. Negative perceptions also arise when an issue is highly politicized or controversial. A 1985 study found that unbiased reporting on the 1982 Beirut Massacre was perceived as biased by both pro-Israeli and pro-Arab study participants (Metzger et al. 8-9). This shows that perceptions of trustworthiness are extremely subjective. And avoiding certain news outlets is not a partisan phenomenon: conservatives and liberals alike are more favorable toward information that is in line with their own views (Frimer et al.). Nonetheless, the majority of people do not believe, for example, that Barack Obama is a Muslim, or that the 2020 elections were rigged in favor of the Democratic Party. It follows then, that there must be supplementary circumstances or traits that make certain people more likely to be conspiracists. Especially so, as studies have found that those who believe in one CT are more likely to believe in others, as well (Jolley et al.). As with many aspects of this study, there is a wide array of opinions among scholars on how to approach the question: who believes in CTs and why?

Some cite other psychological factors as predetermines for an attraction to conspiracy narratives. In their study, J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood hypothesize that it is not only that conspiracy theorists are receptive of speculation about unseen forces shaping events, but they are also likely to be enticed by melodrama (954). Karen M. Douglas et al., on the other hand,

call attention to cognitive factors. First, those who look for patterns in life, as well as those who have a high esteem of their own understanding of complex world events, are more likely to believe in CTs. Second, there are epistemic reasons, most importantly the want for certainty in beliefs, for conspiracism. (This point closely resembles the cognitive dissonance argument outlined earlier). Third, existential, and fourth, social factors, such as desiring security, and the maintenance of a positive understanding of the in-group make people drawn to CTs (“The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories”; “Understanding Conspiracy Theories” 6-10).

Attitudes regarding one’s in-group are particularly important when it comes to CTs. Studies have found that those who live in countries that exhibit a higher rate of collective(/national) narcissism, that is, who believe that their own group is exceptional and deserves recognition, were more likely to spread CTs related to COVID-19 (Hughes and Machan; Sternisko et al.).² Turning to the United States, a tendency for collective narcissism—or belief in American exceptionalism—is evident. As of 2021, 53% of Americans agreed that “the world would be much better off if more countries adopted American values and the American way of life,” along with 73% believing “that the US has always been a force for good in the world” (Cox). The Pew Research Center has found that 44% of Americans deem the US military to be “the best,” and another 34% “above average.” Around 12% and 39%, respectively, find the standard of living to be “the best” or “above average,” and around 68% in total think that US entertainment products fall in these two categories. However, there are important differences when it comes to the age, income, and party affiliation of those surveyed: older, more affluent Republicans are more likely to have positive views on America. In general, Republicans are less critical of the standard of living, the health care system, and the military (“Americans differ from”). These numbers indicate considerable rates of national narcissism. Even so, it would be hasty to conclude that conservative Americans, as a whole, are more prone to believe in CTs than other groups. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that conspiracy beliefs are present on both ends of the political spectrum, just as populism is. The relationship between political orientation and CTs is curvilinear: conspiracy theories can be found on both the far-right and the far-left, and the further “out” one gets, the more likely they will be to believe in CTs. There are multiple explanations for this: both the far-right and the far-left conceptualize the world in Manichean terms, they are more likely to reject ideas that differ from

² However, in case of the pandemic, other factors might also have been at play in the spread of CTs, from attitudes toward the public health sector to individualism.

their own, and they are likely to feel politically powerless or unrepresented, which correlates with conspiracy (and populist) beliefs (Imhoff et al. 392-3). The aforementioned figures and psychological factors are to be taken as components of a conspiracist mindset. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that those with stronger social identities are more likely to show signs of positive confirmation bias toward their own in-group and negative bias toward out-groups (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 118). This means that communities that poll higher on belief in exceptionalism might be more likely to accept narratives that vilify out-groups while glamorizing the in-group. This is exactly what populist ideologies and CTs do.

Besides psychology, the social setting of the individual is important: feeling threatened by or powerless because of outside forces makes one likely to believe in CTs. Political alienation and lack of trust in the government can also exacerbate the spread of CTs. A 2021 study found higher rates of conspiracy thinking in countries with a lower democracy index, higher unemployment rates, and higher levels of perceived corruption (Cordonier et al.). Heated debates over cultural issues, such as questions of national identity, LGBT rights, and immigration also worsen polarization (Gidron et al. 42-3). America, as studies have shown, is becoming polarized at a remarkable rate, even more so than other Western democracies. Both affective polarization (the dislike for those supporting opposing views) and ideological polarization are on the rise, with voters moving away from the “center” in opinions (Boxell et al.; Draca; Iyengar). Effects of polarization are highly debated: while some argue that higher polarization leads to lessened political participation, decreased trust in government, and legislative gridlocks, others have found that polarization can lead to greater coherence in the policies of parties, higher voter turnouts (such as in the case of the 2004 elections) (Layman et al. 100-3), and, in the case of right-wing voters, more non-electoral participation in politics (Pirro and Portos 576-7). Still, scholars agree that overall, polarization leads to high levels of negative feelings and conflict between groups, which make people feel anxious and underrepresented in politics when the opposing party holds office. Low social trust in out-groups and political trust in institutions, as a result of polarization, pushes voters toward populism, as it engages critically with the status quo. Those dissatisfied with politics are decisive audiences for populist politicians (Keefer et al. 2; 10). Alienation, resulting from polarization, therefore, is a key component in both conspiracy thinking and populist voting.

Other sociological factors are also important: studies have found that people with lower income and education levels are more likely to accept conspiracy narratives. Education is crucial in the study of CTs, as it helps develop skills for navigating the vast amount of

information people are faced with every day: media literacy is key to being able to determine what narratives are true or false (Douglas et al., “Understanding Conspiracy Theories” 10). Those with a lower education were more likely to vote Republican both in the 2016 and 2020 general elections, as well as in the 2018 midterm elections. According to the Pew Research Center, 51 and 56% of those with a high school education or less voted for Trump in 2016 and 2020, respectively, while only 29 and 32% of postgraduate votes were cast for him in the same years (“Behind Biden’s 2020 Victory”). These figures show that Trump’s audience was one that was more prone to be receptive of CTs. Therefore, the utilization of such narratives was a logical choice on his part.

Less educated and lower-income individuals who do not possess the skillset to navigate the modernized labor market, often called economical left-behinds, often marginalized and unrepresented in society. Besides conspiracists, their feelings of inequality are instrumentalized by populists too, through a so-called “politics of resentment.” Euroscepticism, for example, found support among these left-behind groups, placing blame for the decline of low-skilled workers’ living standards on immigrants and the European Union. Left-behinds are more likely to support protectionist economic policies, as well as nativism. They also place a strong emphasis on preserving their homogenous cultural identities (Abts and Baute 40). Feelings of threat, associated with social resentment and populism, are central in CTs, as well. The perceived vulnerability of left-behinds that pushes these groups toward populist politicians, might at the same time make them attracted to CTs. Donald Trump utilized all these factors: for example, his trade war was deeply protectionist, arguing the primacy of US interests (“Trade Wars”). But it was not only economic dissatisfaction that pushed voters toward him: identity and racial integration were just as, if not more important issues in voting (Noland). Nativism was central in Trump’s response to COVID-19: referring to it as the “Chinese virus,” placing blame on the competing nation, and banning Muslims from entering the country appealed to those valuing cultural homogeneity (Kleinfeld and Dickas).

Psychological and sociological factors affecting media consumption and information processing have significant effects on both conspiracy thinking and voting preferences. Both populism and CTs rely on alienated, less educated voters who are more susceptible to cognitive dissonance, as well as narratives about secret plots. It is important to highlight that unemployment and perceived inequality, two conditions closely related to lower levels of education, affect rates of political polarization, as well (Gidron et al. 44). This means that constituents of conspiracism and populism reinforce each other, creating a spiral of political

disorder. However, other factors also influence conspiracy theories. The next chapters discuss the significance of post-truth argumentation, and the history of CTs in the United States with the aim of outlining how the larger spirit of age might affect the way people engage with CTs. An argument is made that while the spread of conspiracies is accelerated by social media, it is the larger post-truth social milieu and a significant historical precedent that makes conspiracy theories prevalent today.

V. Why Are Conspiracies Spreading?

V. 1. The Role of Social Media

Surprisingly, many researchers argue that the perceived boom in CTs over the last decade or so is simply that: a perception. In reality, they find, conspiracy websites are small in number, and are outweighed in popularity by mainstream news websites. Furthermore, there is no proof that people were less likely to believe in CTs before the advent of the internet (Douglas et al., “Understanding Conspiracy Theories” 12). Nevertheless, it must be noted that the studies from which these conclusions are drawn, are from 2014 and 2018. Since then, several events, especially the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have shown that conspiracies are proliferated on a large scale online. Indeed, a 2020 internal report at *Facebook* found that thousands of groups existed with millions of members supporting QAnon, and the site, *NBC* claims, has been central in spreading conspiracy theories (Sen and Zadrozny).

Certain aspects of social media lend themselves to the creation of opinion bubbles: the ability to decide who to follow on *Twitter* or what group to join on *Facebook* allows people to only seek out views that align with theirs, eliminating their cognitive dissonance. Further, the widespread use of algorithms that recommend content that the user might like—to maximize the time spent on the website—, has made it easy to only be exposed to the same talking points (Clarke 10). Listening to only one side of any argument leads to polarization and a gradual shift to the radical fringes (Timmer et al.). At the same time, the existence of opinion bubbles does not necessarily mean that people see zero opinions that are opposed to theirs. In truth, as a report on US media consumption habits finds, “it is virtually impossible to live in an ideological bubble. Most Americans rely on an array of outlets . . . for political news. And many consistent conservatives and liberals hear dissenting political views in their everyday lives” (Mitchell et al.). At the same time, conservatives are more likely to get their news from a single source (47% of them watch only *Fox News*), they express higher levels of distrust toward mainstream news sources, and are more likely to hear similar opinions to theirs on *Facebook*. In contrast, liberals

visit a larger pool of news sources and are more likely to trust mainstream news outlets. Simultaneously, they are prone to end friendships on-and offline because of differences in political views (Mitchell et al.), suggesting that their affective polarization is significant. People's views are asymmetrically affected by exposure to biased information: a study found those who held negative attitudes toward issues of diversity (e.g. providing support for refugees) were more likely to have unfavorable views on diversity after selective exposure, while those with more positive attitudes did not have more favorable beliefs after the experiment (De keersmaecker and Schmid). This suggests that negative attitudes spiral, and continued exposure to rhetoric that vilifies a part of society will reinforce negative views of individuals.

V. 2. Arguing in a Post-Truth Era

In the study, “Post-Presumption Argumentation and the Post-Truth World: on the Conspiracy Rhetoric of Donald Trump,” Ryan Neville-Shepard argues that “Donald Trump—both as a candidate and president—has crafted a notion of post-presumption argumentation . . . that undercuts the presumption of veracity, undermines faith in institutions that give presumptions force, and rejects deliberation as a communal goal” (175). Post-presumption argumentation, Neville-Shepard writes, is a feature of a post-truth world where the lines between true and false are muddled. In such a world, opinions are “liberated” from factuality: they are legitimate even if not backed by evidence. As a consequence, previously held conventions on how to argue become void and “language becomes purely strategic” (176). Presumption, the acceptance that there exists some truth that serves as the starting point for arguments, disappears (176-8). Instead of factuality, particularly in politics, it is authenticity—the ability to convince the audience of the speaker's credibility—that becomes central (Montgomery 619-25). This change in argumentation, Neville-Shepard points out, is what serves as a fertile ground for conspiracy theories. CTs are excellent examples for post-presumption argumentation: they not only question base-level truths, but by shifting the burden of proof onto the other side, they create closed systems of claims that are impossible to dispute with the usual tools of debate (Neville-Shepard 180). No matter what evidence is provided to disprove a CT, it is easily dismissed as part of the conspiracy itself.

Indeed, changing the views of individuals caught in this closed system of self-reinforcement with simple fact checking is challenging (Kauk et al. 15), as their entire argumentative mode differs from the norm. As a matter of fact, opinions differ on the effectiveness of fact checking in general, with some citing it effective (Porter and Wood; Walter

et al.), while others warning that it can have backward effects: in certain cases, people can end up more certain of CTs after “corrective” efforts (Nyhan et al.). In addition, the fact that those who consume fakes news are less likely to trust mainstream media outlets contributes to the difficulty of disproving their beliefs with facts (Kauk et al. 15).

There has been an observable decline in trust in mainstream media over the past years (Brenan), leading many to turn to news outlets spreading misinformation. This creates a twofold problem for democracies: first, it might mobilize extremist groups (as it did in the case of the January 6 attack), and second, it might lead to cynicism, making people less likely to participate in politics (Ognyanova et al. 2-3). Furthermore, the radical change in argumentation described by Neville-Shepard challenges democratic norms of political communication. By internalizing the loss of veracity in the post-truth world, the public accepts this new “culture where strategic discourse aimed at producing political victory is seen as the most valued form of communication” (Neville-Shepard 181). Closely related is the undermining of the authority of public institutions (Neville-Shepard 176-81). Official narratives and expert analyses become contested, giving way to folk narratives: this fits into a larger trend of anti-elitism, which is crucial in the study of the intersection of CTs and populism. It is important to note, however, that it is not only contemporary events that influence conspiracy thinking. In the following, the deep seated American tradition of conspiracism is outlined, in order to contextualize current events.

VI. A History of Conspiracy Theories in the United States

Although one might be inclined to interpret the recent proliferation of conspiracy theories online as a sign that conspiracy thinking is a contemporary phenomenon, as Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas write in their study, “Conspiracy Theories as Part of History: The Role of Societal Crisis Situations,” there is evidence that conspiracism has been part of human life as early—and probably even earlier—as the era of the Roman Empire (326). This chapter aims to outline the history of conspiracy theories in the United States, showing that narratives about threatening out-groups have always characterized American thinking, reinforcing the existence of what Hofstadter called the paranoid style.

US history has seen examples of CTs from the time the first settlers came to the continent as Puritans worried that Spanish and French Catholics sought to destroy their colonies. Later, fear sparked that Native Americans or enslaved black people would revolt against the white colonists. In the 17th century, hundreds of cases of witchcraft were reviewed,

many ending with the murder of the women accused. During the American Revolution, it was the British government, while in the Civil War the opposing side that was accused of plotting to overtake the government. In the 19th century, conspiracies focused on Catholics and European immigrants. The Know Nothing Party was a prominent voice of the anti-Catholic feelings of the era, disseminating conspiracy filled propaganda, such as the claim that Catholic priests were sexual predators preying on children.³ After World War I it was the expansion of the federal government, and after World War II the alleged Communist presence in the US that roused those susceptible to conspiracy thinking (Clarke 7; Goldberg 2; Olmstead 286-9).

The death of John F. Kennedy in 1963 brought forth a new wave of conspiracies, some of which are embraced even today (Olmstead 290). While somewhat diminishing in popularity since the 1990s, when about 90% of Americans believed something other than the official account of JFK's death (Clarke 10), related conspiracies still score high in polls. In 2003, around 75% of Americans believed that more than one man was responsible for the assassination. 37% speculated that the Mafia, 34% that the CIA, and 19% that Lyndon B. Johnson was involved in Kennedy's death (Saad). By 2013, belief in the theory that Lee Harvey Oswald had co-conspirators has declined, but was still at a significant 61%, with 13-13% citing the Mafia and the federal government, and 7% the CIA to be involved in the assassination (Swift). The Watergate scandal and Richard Nixon's efforts to conceal CIA involvement in the surveillance operations were next to disrupt American society. Other cases where the CIA or the FBI worked in secret—spying on anti-war protesters or the women's liberation movement, tracking Martin Luther King, Jr.'s phone calls, or cooperating with the Mafia in an effort to kill Fidel Castro—, made many Americans begin to speculate about government plots to damage civil liberties. Then, in the 1980s, belief in the CIA was rocked by another scandal: the Iran-Contra affair. The fact that many of the high-ranking officials responsible for the backdoor deals were either pardoned by George H. W. Bush, or had their charges dropped on technicalities was seen as further proof by conspiracy theorists that the federal government was run by malevolent actors who did not follow the laws of the nation (Olmstead 292-5).

³ The end of the 1800s also saw a surge in anti-Semitic CTs across the globe. The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a forged document “proving” Jewish people plotted to control the world, was diffused, for example, by Henry Ford in the US (Goldberg 7-8). Due to the immense scope and contemporary reach of anti-Semitic CTs, an account of their change over time will not be given here.

The Watergate and the Iran-Contra scandals highlight the complex relationship between official accounts and CTs. On the one hand, they reveal that describing CTs as inherently false is wrong. As evidenced, official accounts of events can be misleading or outright untrue at times. This is why it is important, as previously stated, to adhere to the use of a definition of CTs that makes no value-judgements about the theories themselves, as well as to emphasize that CTs are, primarily, alternatives for official narratives, and are not necessarily senseless. In addition, the two cases explain why some would be distrustful of government narratives: it is reasonable to suspect foul play when there has been a precedent for it in the past. Indeed, by the 1990s, many conspiracies had become mainstream: from the AIDS crisis and claims that it was transferrable via skin-to-skin contact or that it was created by the government to target black neighborhoods, to the alleged CIA involvement in cocaine smuggling into the US, conspiracy thinking affected a wide scope of American public life (Goldberg 11). After the terrorist attacks of 2001, conspiracies blossomed with new fervor (Olmstead 295), with the official account of events becoming contested on all grounds. People speculated, for example, that the Bush administration had a part in orchestrating the attack, or that the plane crashes did not happen at all, and footage shown of them was simply a product of editing (Fenster 240-1). Even years after the attacks, in 2016, two surveys found, respectively, that over 50% of Americans believed the government was hiding information related to 9/11 from the public, and that 17% of Democrats and 15% of Republicans believed that the US government “probably” or “definitely” took part in planning the attack (Graff). These figures prove that belief in CTs is not a partisan phenomenon.

It is clear from these events, that conspiracy thinking is not a contemporary phenomenon. CTs have deep roots in American society, and have changed significantly over time with the historical context. The in-group and out-group distinction has been a substantial part of American self-articulation throughout history, from the distancing of the settlers from Europeans and Native Americans, to the othering of Catholics against the Puritan backdrop of society. Over time, the definitions of the in-and out-groups have changed. With the gradual integration of Catholics into mainstream society in the 1900s (Appleby 135), and the War on Terrorism after 9/11, the face of the religious Other became the Muslim community. Similarly, deep-state conspiracies have distant roots in the history of the country, as well. Fears that political institutions would grow too powerful against civilians are echoed in, for example, the Pizzagate and QAnon conspiracies.

As Garrett M. Graff argues in an article for *The Wall Street Journal*, 9/11 was the first chapter in a new age of CTs where social media is key in spreading misinformation. However, it is not the last. “Some of what once seemed novel about the 9/11 conspiracy theories,” Graff writes, “is now depressingly familiar. . . . The 9/11 conspiracy movement has proven persistent and pervasive without support from mainstream news organizations or political leaders. That suggests something ominous about some of its successors, including the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory.” Indeed, the role of social media, as opposed to mainstream news sources, as this paper has argued, is crucial when it comes to conspiracy theories. And, as Graff aptly points out, the landscape has changed significantly, as political leaders now embrace CTs. Graff mentions U.S. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, who has openly endorsed Pizzagate, QAnon, and white genocide CTs. Since the publishing of the article, the US has seen a midterm election where a total of 291 politicians who questioned or outright denied the results of the 2020 elections ran for office (admittedly with little success in many key states) (Blanco et al.). What is more, an ex-president himself reiterated election subversion narratives. If 9/11 CTs were able to blossom without mainstream political support, CTs that a (past) president endorses are sure to be even more widespread. The next chapter aims to illustrate Donald Trump’s unique role in the spread of CTs.

VII. Contemporary Conspiracy Theories and the Populism of Donald Trump

Donald Trump embraced a wide array of conspiracy theories. For example, before he ran for office, he questioned the birthplace of Barack Obama, but he reiterated deep state conspiracies, as well (McIntire). The role of social media in the proliferation of CTs has been discussed in previous chapters. Even so, the novelty of the highest office in the United States acknowledging and adopting these narratives must also not be understated. This chapter outlines the most important features of Trumpian conspiracism and populism, revealing the significant overlap between the two. Through an analysis of Trump’s tweets, his self-articulation as an anti-establishment candidate is discussed. The chapter argues that Trump ran on an anti-status quo platform that positioned him as the “people’s” candidate, and that his anti-elite stance was imbued with quasi-religious narratives about evil groups preying on the people, making him a conspiracist populist politician.

Deep state conspiracies are inherently anti-establishment, as they postulate that the current system is run by shadowy figures. The rejection of Washington elites was a central part

of Trump's campaign. For example, in March, 2020, Trump called the State Department the "Deep State Department" during a press conference (LaFrance). Trump's tweets are reliable indicators of his anti-establishment feelings. Between May 4, 2009 and January 8, 2021, Trump has shared a total of 56,571 posts. Out of a total of 87 tweets containing the word *establishment*, 84 are negative or critical in tone (2 are somewhat neutral, and 1 does not refer to the status quo). Out of the 87, 10 tweets contain some form of the words *failed*, *failing*, or *corrupt*. While these numbers are not enormous, they are worthwhile to consider. First, many of Trump's attacks on the establishment were non-partisan: he criticized Democrats and Republicans both, especially during his first run for presidency. For example, in 2015 he retweeted "We can't take 8 years of Hilary or 8 years of establishment GOP!!! We need Trump!!,"⁴ and on March 7, 2016 he shared "We cannot let the failing REPUBLICAN ESTABLISHMENT, who could not stop Obama (twice), ruin the MOVEMENT with millions of \$'s in false ads!"

An analysis of his tweets that contain some variation of the word *corrupt* (e.g. corrupt, corruption, or corrupted) reveals that out of 507 of them, 62 contain some form of the word *Democrat*, 47 some form of the word *election*, 6 the word *Washington*, and 7 the word *establishment*. Out of these, 2 contain both the word *establishment* and *Washington*, and 1 both *election* and *Washington*. 96 of the 507 tweets contained some form of the word *politic*. Trump's condemnation of Washington politics is clear from these figures. It is also revealed by his frequent use of the word *swamp* to describe the status quo. In 2020 alone, Trump tweeted the word around once every one and a half weeks, 38 times in total, often as part of the slogan "Drain the Swamp." On February 12, he shared simply the phrase, three days later writing: "DRAIN THE SWAMP! We want bad people out of our government!" The first post was retweeted almost 20,000 times, while the second amassed 26,300 retweets. These numbers show the high engagement Trump's controversial messages generate. While it is true that many might retweet or quote-tweet his posts to show their disagreement with its contents, their engagement nonetheless spreads Trump's narratives about American politics. Furthermore, the fact that the first tweet mentioned has received 123,700 and the second over 160,000 likes shows that there is a significant number of receptive ears for Trump's messages.

Donald Trump's indictment of the status quo often converged with his disdain for mainstream media. Indeed, many of his tweets containing the word *establishment* also feature

⁴ For individual tweets, no in-text citations will be provided to avoid repetition. All tweets, unless otherwise indicated, can be found in the Works Cited in alphabetical order.

the words *media* or *news*. Out of the 2,002 total tweets with some form of the word *news*, almost half, 984, also contain some form of the word *fake*. As previously highlighted, trust in mainstream institutions is a key both in the case of political polarization and selective exposure to information. Undermining the legitimacy of some news sources and orienting his followers toward others, Trump actively encouraged the formation of opinion bubbles. As discussed, institutional mistrust is a strong motivator for both populist voting and belief in CTs. An important aspect of this phenomenon is underlined by Davide Angelucci and Davide Vittori in their study “Are All Populist Voters the Same? Institutional Distrust and the Five Star Movement in Italy.” Examining Italian populist voters, the authors find that they remain distrustful of political institutions even when their representatives gain offices. That is, the election of populist politicians who promise to “change the system” has no normalizing effect on the voting population. Disillusioned voters remain dissatisfied, and the perception of political institutions does not improve (Angelucci and Vittori 321-2). This explains, in part, why Trump’s rhetoric remained strongly anti-establishment even when he was in office as president.

Other aspects of Trump’s politics further reinforced his anti-elite stance: his rhetorical style, particularly when referring to his political opponents, such as current President Joe Biden or former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Out of Trump’s 771 tweets with the word *Joe*, 199 contain the phrase *Sleepy Joe*. Of the 887 tweets with the name *Hillary*, more than a third, 366, contain the adjective *crooked*. By breaking with rhetorical norms and adopting an unconventional, blunt style of speech, Donald Trump legitimized his position as the politician of “the people” (Ostiguy and Roberts 25-7). This legitimacy, as seen in the chapter on post-truth politics, is crucial for building a voter base. Moreover, low agreeableness and higher levels of narcissism and Machiavellianism in a politician’s (perceived) personality are attractive to voters with populist attitudes (Nai). “Harsher and more uncompromising personalities” (Nai 6) appeal to populist voters, meaning that Trump’s brash rhetoric, and his claim to be the one to unveil the corruption of Washington was likely appealing to those attracted to populism. Showing his commitment to the people as opposed to the elites, a day before the 2020 elections he tweeted: “The Depraved Swamp have been trying to stop me—because they know I don’t answer to THEM—I answer only to YOU. Together, we will defeat the corrupt establishment, we will DETHRONE the failed political class, we will drain the Washington Swamp & we will SAVE THE AMERICAN DREAM!” A few hours later he continued: “If I don’t sound like a typical Washington politician, it’s because I’m NOT a politician. If I don’t always play by the

rules of the Washington Establishment, it's because I was elected to fight for YOU, harder than anyone ever has before!"

Trump also used ambiguity and hearsay to catastrophize events in order to gain political ground (Neville-Shepard 183-4). The tweet "If you want your children to inherit the blessings that generations of Americans have fought and died to secure—then we must devote everything we have toward victory in 2020. Only this way, can we save the America we love—and drain the Washington Swamp once and for all!," posted on January 29, 2020, shows the apocalyptic nature of populist narratives. Metaphors are central in shaping how we understand the world. In *Metaphors We Live By*, cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson show that conceptual metaphors provide frameworks through which complex, abstract ideas (such as emotions) can be understood. The study "Language of Persuasion: Analysis of Conceptual Metaphors in Political Discourse" explains how politicians utilize conceptual metaphors to interpret complex problems, appeal to emotions, and shape public opinion. Metaphors, in short, help politicians deliver their message to crowds. But conceptual metaphors are self-reinforcing. The metaphors people use to understand the world simultaneously construct individuals' notions of phenomena. That is, the metaphors politicians use are determined by their understanding of topics, but at the same time, the metaphors themselves shape this understanding (Lapka 89). When conceptualizing politics as an ongoing conflict for the future of the nation and its citizens, the corruptness of Washington becomes an evil that threatens the very existence of the people that Trump positions himself to represent. Politics, then, is not simply about gaining office, but a war for the survival of the nation. Moreover, emphasizing the differences between the "good" and "evil," and casting members of the out-group as immoral and villainous negates the possibility for cooperation, which leads to antagonistic feelings between different political groups, deepening polarization. In Trump's populism, his position as the "people's politician" combined with the apocalyptic Manicheism of conspiracy theories.

Narratives about "depraved" figures controlling the top offices of Washington are in line with deep state conspiracy theories. By enabling such narratives, Trump has embraced fringe opinions, giving them previously unrealized political capital. A 2019 investigation by *The New York Times* has shown that in the period between his taking office and November 2019 at least 145 of Trump's 11,000 tweets were retweeted from conspiracy or extremist accounts. Additionally, at the minimum, 23,000 accounts following him on *Twitter* had some reference to QAnon in their profile. Out of the 47 accounts he followed at the time, many followed

conspiracy accounts, meaning that Trump was very likely exposed to CTs via, for example, his son, Donald Trump Jr. who frequently retweeted white nationalists. Additionally, Trump himself retweeted the now-suspended neo-Nazi account @WhiteGenocideTM, and has platformed multiple Pizzagate conspiracists (McIntire et al.). The subversion of previously accepted norms of politics came to a head on January 6, 2021 with the attack of the US Capitol.

VIII. QAnon, January 6, and the Mythologizing of Donald Trump

Leading up to the events of January 6, Trump has shared his doubts about the legitimacy of the election multiple times, for example by asking leading questions with unverified claims: “Why haven’t they done signature verification in Fulton County, Georgia. Why haven’t they deducted all of the dead people who ‘voted’, illegals who voted, non Georgia residents who voted, and tens of thousands of others who voted illegally, from the final vote tally?” The week before January 6, he shared multiple tweets in support of the March for Trump. Initially, his tone was rousing, almost militant, urging people to show their concerns about the election. He tweeted, among others “The BIG Protest Rally in Washington, D.C., will take place at 11.00 A.M. on January 6th. Locational details to follow. StopTheSteal!,” “Washington is being inundated with people who don’t want to see an election victory stolen by emboldened Radical Left Democrats. Our Country has had enough, they won’t take it anymore! We hear you (and love you) from the Oval Office. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!,” and “I hope the Democrats, and even more importantly, the weak and ineffective RINO section of the Republican Party, are looking at the thousands of people pouring into D.C. They won’t stand for a landslide election victory to be stolen.” On the day of the march, in a now deleted tweet he roused protesters against Mike Pence, writing that he “didn’t have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth!” (Singman). However, by the afternoon, as events escalated, he became more peaceable, writing “Please support our Capitol Police and Law Enforcement. They are truly on the side of our Country. Stay peaceful!” and “I am asking for everyone at the U.S. Capitol to remain peaceful. No violence! Remember, WE are the Party of Law & Order – respect the Law and our great men and women in Blue. Thank you!”

One of the most iconic images of the Capitol attack was of the “QAnon shaman” with his fur hat and American flag painted face. The crowd on January 6 was full of other QAnon symbols, as well: from flags and T-shirts to signs declaring “Q sent me,” protesters showed that

one motivation behind their mobilizing was the conspiracy theory (Seidel 35). Indeed, the conspiracy is not as fringe as many would think: a 2020 survey found that 17% percent of the respondents believed that “a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media,” with another 37% saying they “did not know” if this statement was true or not. In addition, 39% of those asked believed in the existence of the deep state (Rose). The QAnon conspiracy emerged on *4chan* in 2017 when an anonymous poster shared claims about a vast network of Satanist pedophiles controlling politics across the globe. The whistleblower, who claimed to be an official with the highest, “Q level,” security clearance in the US government, asserted that it was only Donald Trump and his allies who were fighting these evil conspirators, trying to protect people’s freedom. The deep state conspiracy has since grown, with hundreds of new “leaks” from Q that his followers work hard to decode (Aliapoulios et al. 1-2). The conspiracy shares many features with the Pizzagate theory that surfaced in 2016 after the Democratic National Committee’s e-mails were made public online and conspiracy theorists took the messages to be related to a secret child trafficking ring. However, in the case of QAnon, two new figures become key: Q and Satan (Clarke 6-7).

QAnon, Adrienne LaFrance writes for *The Atlantic*, is a new American religion, with its own pseudo-theology, prophet, and believers. LaFrance shares that many QAnon followers she interviewed had expressed religiosity in their sentiments. “I feel God led me to Q. I really feel like God pushed me in this direction,” one person had said. Another person had felt that they could trust Trump because “he’s not part of the establishment.” Despite his unorthodox lifestyle, having divorced twice, many evangelicals in particular have embraced Trump as part of a divine plan. Indeed, religious people are an important base for Q, and for Donald Trump, as well. QAnon, LaFrance summarizes, is stimulated by:

paranoia and populism, but it is also propelled by religious faith. The language of evangelical Christianity has come to define the Q movement. . . . Does it matter that we do not know who Q is? The divine is always a mystery. Does it matter that basic aspects of Q’s teachings cannot be confirmed? The basic tenets of Christianity cannot be confirmed. Among the people of QAnon, faith remains absolute.

Religious archetypes are utilized all throughout the CT: Q acts as a prophet for the messianic figure of Trump. The fight between the morally corrupt elites and Trump’s followers takes on apocalyptic proportions and consequences, bringing salvation to America (Kline 46-7). QAnon is rich with millennialism: it prophesizes that the struggle between good and evil will end with “The Storm” when Trump will be victorious over evil forces (Robertson and

Amarasingam 8). Following, “The Great Awakening” will come, when Americans realize that they have been saved (Kline 46). There is a clear parallel between the Storm and the apocalyptic end times of the Bible. According to Robertson and Amarasingam “these teleological narratives all draw heavily from the well of Protestant premillennialism” (8). Trump is, then, not simply a president but part of a religious narrative. His role is central insofar as his proclamations lead his followers. His embrace of different conspiracy narratives serves as proof for believers of Q that they are right about the machinations of deep state actors in Washington. One tangible expression of this was in October of 2017, when Trump referenced “the calm before the storm,” telling inquiring journalists “[they’ll] find out” what it is. The ambiguous proclamation, along with the circular hand gesture Trump made right before, was interpreted by conspiracists as a reference to Q, fueling their belief that Donald Trump was working to unearth the corruption of Washington, just as Q had said (LaFrance).

This intertwining of CTs and religion explains why, besides QAnon believers, another group was highly present on January 6: Christian nationalists. Katherine Stewart highlights how a vast network of Christian nationalists disseminated conspiracies about the legitimacy of the vote by undermining the validity of news sources, on the one hand, and by creating a sense of panic among voters, on the other (11). Previously, attention has been drawn to psychological and sociological attributes of populist voters and CT believers, emphasizing the importance of so-called economical left-behinds. However, the religious identity of voters is also central in the study of populism and CTs. Bram Spruyt, Gil Keppens, and Filip Van Droogenbroeck discuss in “Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to It?” how for populists, the category of “the people” functions as an empty signifier, unifying multiple groups who feel that they are stigmatized or alienated (335-6). One crucial finding of their study is that it is not relative vulnerability or deprivation itself that motivates voters, but perceptions of disadvantage (344). Voters do not actually need to be in vulnerable positions in society to be attracted to populist politicians, it is enough if they feel themselves to be threatened. These findings show the connection between populism and CTs: populists are politically motivated to utilize narratives about threatening Others in order to gain votes, and conspiracy theories are excellent vehicles to deliver these narratives.

Samuel L. Perry et al.’s study “Christian Nationalism, Perceived Anti-Christian Discrimination, and Prioritizing ‘Religious Freedom’ in the 2020 Presidential Election” highlights the prominence of persecution narratives among Christian nationalist groups. Christian nationalists, the authors argue, feel that their religious freedom is oppressed when

liberal policies are implemented in politics (for example, liberal abortion laws), and are likely to feel that they are negatively discriminated against in favor of LGBT individuals. However, the Christian nationalist argument for religious freedom often masks a wish to place Christianity in a privileged position. Indeed, Christian nationalists are much more likely to support the establishment of Christianity as a national religion (2-11). Studies have found that primarily these social issues determined voting preferences in the 2016 elections, and “feelings of cultural anxiety, or threats to ‘white Americans’ sense of dominant group status’ fueled [support] for Trump” (Baker et al. 274). Christian nationalists were particularly attracted to Trump’s hardline stances on abortion, the economy, his conservative nominations to the Supreme Court, and his commitment to religious freedom. In 2020, religious freedom was “extremely important” for over a quarter of Republicans (and only 8% of Democrats) (Perry et al. 2-11).

IX. The Consequences of CTs and of Trump’s Politics

One of the biggest novelties of populism is its destruction and reconstruction of the political field. Because its oversimplified view of good versus evil does not track onto conventional (left-right) ideological maps, its construction of political allies and foes disrupts previous understandings of the political axes. Indeed, Trump’s politics has divided the Republican Party to a free-market fundamentalist and a nativist, anti-establishment group, contesting the existence of a united conservative front in the United States (Ostiguy and Roberts 25-7). On the other hand, Trump’s rhetorical shift has undermined preexisting political norms, mainstreaming previously fringe CTs. Platforming theories such as QAnon, the Birther conspiracy, or the Great Replacement Theory (Saltman 51), he has legitimized antagonistic feelings in society, furthering political polarization.

Studies on radicalism and political violence highlight that antagonism toward political elites and ethnonational, religious, or political Others may lead to increased political support for the use of force. Feelings of threat, in particular, might lead to heightened support for violence in the political sphere. Islam radicals, for example, are more likely to support acts of terrorism if they feel that their religion is under threat (Armaly et al. 944-5). In a 2019 memo, the FBI classified QAnon as a “domestic-terror threat,” signaling the potential severity of CT belief (LaFrance). Nevertheless, as some point out, radical action from the QAnon movement is relatively small, which, if exaggerated and improperly handled, might lead to further anti-government feelings among right-wing conspiracists (Moskalenko and McCauley 142).

With the work of Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol coming to an end, it is worthwhile to study the future of conspiracy theories in the United States. As the *Final Report* of the Committee has shown, hundreds cited Trump as their reason for protesting the election results on January 6 (2-3). His role in the events is undeniable. Not only did Trump call his followers into action to march to the Capitol, he pressured Congress officials to limit electors' votes, as well as refusing to call in the National Guard once events escalated. The report highlights that many officials working alongside Trump to contest the results of the election admitted knowing that their actions were unlawful (4-7). Right-wing, white supremacist, anti-government, militant groups, such as the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters took primary role in escalating the situation (5; 55-8). Conspiracy theorists armed with the slogan "Stop the Steal" and far-right extremists united on January 6 in their support of Donald Trump (502). Public figures, such as Alex Jones and Nick Fuentes, who spread conspiracies about the election, were actively working toward the changing of election results by organizing and speaking at rallies across the country (503). "President Trump," the report claims, "tapped into this well of anti-government extremism" (521).

As a response to the majority Democrat Committee's findings, 5 House Republicans have published their "Report of Investigation: Security Failures at the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021," blaming Democrat leaders, particularly Nancy Pelosi, for the inadequate coordination of the Capitol security forces (Banks et al. 5). Their report speaks little of Trump's role in the events, focusing instead on the Speaker's misguided decisions related to the security of the Capitol because of the "optics" of the deployment of the National Guard in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests (Banks et al. 30), as well as the Capitol Police Board's submission to "political pressures from the Office of Speaker Pelosi" (Banks et al. 3). Whether it was Donald Trump or Nancy Pelosi who was mainly at fault for the deployment of adequate security measures, it is clearly the political fragmentation of society that was the underlying reason for the failure to act. In both cases, the interests of politicians were placed higher than the safety of democratic processes, actively endangering the workings of American politics.

X. Conclusion

This study aimed to show the complex relationship between populism and conspiracy theories, establishing that populists have embraced the use of CTs as political tools. By comparing their definitions and audiences, it has become clear that their similarity lies not only

in their base narratives of “the good people against the evil elites,” but in who they attract, as well. Factors that make one likely to accept conspiracy narratives, such as an aversion to cognitive dissonance, collective narcissism, alienation from the political system because of polarization, and lower education push voters to populism. While social media reinforces opinion bubbles through the enabling of confirmation bias, the overall rhetorical norms of an era are just as important in determining the legitimacy of arguments. In the current age of post-truth deliberation, only the perceived authenticity of claims matters, making it easier to spread false narratives. Moreover, there is an important historical precedent of conspiracy thinking showing the dependence of American self-articulation on in-and out-group distinctions.

Nonetheless, the embrace of CTs by high-ranking politicians, especially the President, has changed CTs. Analyzing Donald Trump's *Twitter* activity, his stance as the “people’s” politician, and brash, anti-establishment voice showed the populist nature of his politics. Moreover, the apocalypticism of many of his tweets underlined the quasi-religiosity of CTs, which is central in the case of QAnon and Christian nationalism, as well. For followers of Q, Trump is a messiah, bringing salvation to the people. For Christian nationalists, Trumps serves as a champion of Christianity in face of the US elites. Both groups were overrepresented at the January 6 Capitol attack, many from their group arriving directly because of the urging of Trump.

These findings indicate that CTs and populism are closely related phenomena, and the analysis of one is incomplete without the other. CTs, this study has found, are adequate instruments for populist politicians to deliver their Manichean narratives, especially in times of high polarization. In turn, CTs and populism themselves further polarization, leading to a spiral of populist conspiracy thinking.

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- . "DRAIN THE SWAMP!" 9 Febr. 2020, 8:54 p.m., twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1226595322174083072.
- . "DRAIN THE SWAMP! We want bad people out of our government!" 13 Febr. 2022, 3:10 p.m., twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1227958133550649346.
- . "I am asking for everyone..." 6 Jan. 2021, 9:13 p.m., twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1346912780700577792.
- . "If I don't sound like..." 2 Nov. 2020, 10:30 p.m., twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1323376918620758022.

- . “If you want your children...” 29 Jan. 2020, 2:41 p.m.,
twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1222333993892315137.
- . “I hope the Democrats...” 5 Jan. 2021, 11:12 p.m.,
twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1346580318745206785.
- . “Please support our Capitol Police...” 6 Jan. 2021, 8:38 p.m.,
twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1346904110969315332.
- . “The BIG Protest Rally...” 1 Jan. 2021, 8:53 p.m.,
twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1345095714687377418.
- . “The Depraved Swamp have been...” 2 Nov. 2020, 8:05 p.m.,
twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1323340413579726848.
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- . “Why haven’t they done...” 2 Jan. 2021, 5:20 p.m.,
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