Populism and Conspiracy Theories: The Missionary Politics of Donald Trump

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Abstract

This article systematizes the literature on populism and conspiracy theories and lays the groundwork for a theoretical framework based on the emotional side of cognitive processes for understanding the mobilizational capacity of conspiratorial rhetoric by populist candidates. In it, the author argues that conspiratorial narratives can be used instrumentally by populist leaders as a means to mobilize their base of supporters. This can be achieved through two specific mechanisms: (1) the populist can demonize and delegitimize opponents, making it the imperative of voters to defeat them; (2) the populist can rally supporters by position themselves as a “defender of the people” who will restore order and “decency” to the country from the conspiring forces. To demonstrate these mechanisms empirically, the author follows the path of Donald Trump, an otherwise uncharismatic and wealthy New York City elitist who appealed to the populist current in American politics through the use of conspiracy theories, leading them on a journey of salvation to “take America back” from the forces of conspiracy.

Keywords: Populism, Conspiracy Theories, Donald Trump, Voter Behavior, Political Protest, Stop the Steal Movement

“A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents, and it is rapidly taking possession of the world. If not met and overthrown at once it forebodes terrible social convulsions, the destruction of civilization, or the establishment of an absolute despotism”.

-The National People’s Party Platform, 1892

“Our great civilization, here in America and across the civilized world has come upon a moment of reckoning. We’ve seen it in the United Kingdom, where they voted to liberate themselves from global government and global trade deal, and global immigration deals that have destroyed their sovereignty and have destroyed many of those nations. But, the central base of world political power is right here in America, and it is our corrupt political establishment that is the greatest power behind the efforts at radical globalization and the disenfranchisement of working people. Their financial resources are virtually unlimited, their political resources are unlimited, their media resources are unmatched, and most importantly, the depths of their immorality is absolutely unlimited. They will allow radical Islamic terrorists to enter our country by the thousands. They will allow the great Trojan horse -- and I don't want people looking back in a hundred years and 200 years and have that story be told about us because we were led by inept, incompetent and corrupt people like Barack Obama and like Hillary Clinton.”

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Introduction

As with research on the new populist parties, the literature surrounding misinformation, conspiracy theories, and “fake news” has gathered momentum over the past decade to account for the seemingly large proliferation of alternative narratives in today’s liberal democracies. The role of conspiracism in populist movements is a topic that is often mentioned in passing in the populist literature, yet hardly researched. Judging by the omission of the topic from the Cambridge Handbook of Populism (Kaltwasser, et al., 2017), for example, the link between the two has largely been ignored. Yet, when we observe the actions of populist movements today, the image of conspiring elites motivates much of the behavior of populist movements around the world.

This study intends to develop a formal theory for understanding the prominence of conspiratorial ideation among populist movements as well as the functions they serve in populist movements, by pulling from the literature on the role of affect in political behavior, the various conceptualizations of populism, and the sociological and psychological literature on conspiracism. In brief, I argue that the existence of conspiracism in populist movements cannot be fully understood without taking into account the role of emotions, intuition, common sense, which serve as the basis for the support for the leader. As the point of departure, I point to two mechanisms common to populist movements that serve to “attract” conspiratorial ways of thinking: (1) The cohesion of the populist worldview and those of conspiracy theories, which both imply a group of “elites” or “enemies of the people” that are destroying the people’s way of life; (2) The emotional side of the leader-follower dynamic in populist movements which corresponds to conspiracist cognitive patterns. In terms of their function, conspiracy theories serve certain mobilizational purposes that benefit the populist movement; (1) by “Othering” political opponents, and attributing blame to an “evil”, or “conspiring” cohort of elitists, supporters of the populist feel a sense of urgency in the struggle between the two opposing forces that must be defeated in order to save the “heartland”; (2) by positioning oneself as being opposed to the plotting “enemies of the people”, the populist leader demonstrates a kind of populist authenticity that ‘proves’ their support for the ‘good people’ in the showdown against the evil elites.

Consequently, this framework is helpful in explaining why conspiracy theories are useful tools for overcoming the collective action problem to mobilizing people to vote, participate in political protests, or any other social movement activity. This study takes the case of the ‘Stop the Steal’ protests that erupted during the 2020 Presidential Election as a demonstration of the theoretical framework.

Populism and Conspiracy Theories

The rise of populist parties in the West has generally coincided with the loosely defined “post-truth” era in which misinformation, conspiracy theories, and “alternative facts” reign. Many of these same parties and

2 Due to the fact that “populism” remains a very contested term in academia today (as well as employed carelessly and pejoratively in broader society), it is important to properly conceptualize it so as to “cast the net” over the proper political actors for analysis. Conceptually speaking, “populism”, can best be described using the ideational approach as a “thin-centered ideology which considers society to be divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite”, and believes that politics should be the expression of the volonté générale”
Prospects of fruitful inter-group dialog” (Franks, who “engenders mentality” the exhibit fundamentalism decreases which “quasi-religious in the by conspiracists targeting who a and politics, the in the interest is the sake more relevant the is of for scientist, for alleged A individuals that are from hidden of goal This unlawful perceived core be that conspiracy study this in considers a van a conspiracy as “low” which culture both relationship forged (Weyland, charismatic a necessarily scholars other not important factors (Mudde, 2004). While ultimately, the ideational approach is best suited to the conceptualization of populism at its core, this does not necessarily exclude other important factors mentioned by other scholars such as the unmediated and uninstitutionalized relationship forged between a charismatic populist and their followers (Weyland, 2001) as well as their tendency to flaunt the “low” culture and desecrate the “high” culture (Ostiguy, 2017), both of which stress the importance of identity creation.

3 The definition I utilize for a “conspiracy theory” in this study is van Prooijen’s (2018) which considers a conspiracy theory to be a “belief that a number of actors join together in secret agreement, in order to achieve a hidden goal which is perceived to be unlawful or malevolent”. This assumes that the belief has a number of core components that differentiate from other similar beliefs. There must be; (1) Non-random connections or correlations between events that are not coincidental (patterns); (2) The belief that intelligent actors are responsible (agency); (3) A group of individuals who collaborate together (coalitions); (4) Hostile or malevolent intentions (hostility); (5) The alleged remains a secret to the broader public (secrecy). While the general content of the conspiracy theory is not of interest for the sake of what is “true”, for the social scientist, what is more relevant is the study of the implausible, and for the study of politics, the ways in which these beliefs become the object of a movement that attempts to gain power by targeting the conspiracists who have a pathological predisposition to believe in them sans evidence and who exhibit a “quasi-religious mentality” which “engenders uncompromising fundamentalism that decreases the prospects of fruitful inter-group dialog” (Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer, 2013).
mechanism to simplify the complexities of the rapidly changing American society in ways that rendered it possible for common citizens to understand: a binary in which the evildoers had “betrayed” the common people.

Similarly, Juan and Evita Perón used the narrative of the savior and the conspiracy to great effect during their speeches to masses of descamisados to mobilize them at pivotal moments (Vassiliou, 2017). Juxtaposed to the blind trust placed in the image of Juan Perón was the conspiracy of the Oligarquia against Perón, and as an extension, against the people. Any opponents to the Peróns’ leadership were identified as being a part of the oligarchs who collaborated with the forces of “imperialism” and “capitalism”. According to Eva Perón’s own admission, the image of the oligarch was not to be meant literally, but to equate to all enemies of the people:

“And let it be clear, that when I speak of oligarchy I mean all those who in 1946 opposed Perón: conservatives, radicals, socialists, and communists” (Perón, 1982, pp. 213-4).

On the whole, a number of scholars have found that conspiracy theories are much more prominent the further one goes to the right of the political spectrum. Priester (2012) and Wodak (2015) consider conspiracism to be a core component of radical right-wing populism. In Kubát and Mejstřík’s (2020) survey of populist parties in Europe, they found that all ten populist radical right parties included in the study had strong conspiracist tendencies among them. Populists such as Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán are clear examples of a worldview that is constructed around the constant threat of a conspiracy from enemies of the people. This is due in part to the far right’s ideological emphasis on a manichean worldview, division of society into strict in-groups and out-groups, and authoritarianism as a core ideological component to the populist radical right worldview, which tend to be stronger predictors of conspiracism (van Prooijen, 2018).

That is not to say that conspiracism is non-existent outside of the far right. In Venezuela, the charismatic Hugo Chavez was known for promoting the belief that the Punto Fijo gathering in 1958 to promote democracy in the country had been a conspiracy by a cabal of elites to impose a tyranny on the hard-working Venezuelan people (Andrade, 2019). In Italy, Mancosu, Vassallo, and Vezzoni (2017) show that belief in a number of common conspiracy theories is predictive of support for not only the far right Lega Nord and Fratelli d’Italia, but also the center-right populist party Forza Italia led by Silvio Berlusconi and the non-ideological, yet strongly populist Five Star Movement. After the collapse of the Italian party system following the Tangentopoli scandals, Berlusconi would regularly speak of communist conspiracies among the opposition to oust him from power (Friedman, 2015, pp. 87-110), and referred to the judges that presided over his corruption trials as the “red togas” and “communists”. Slovakia’s Robert Fico, leader of the social populist SMER - Social Democracy has resorted to similar conspiratorial narratives as Viktor Orban involving the image of the “meddling” George Soros to explain why Andrej Kiska called for changes in the government following the slaying of a journalist. Stoica (2017) and Vassiliou (2017) have posited that ultimately, it is impossible to be populist without the belief in a conspiracy of some shape or form. Thalman (2019) and Uscinski (2019) have both considered individuals on both the left and the right to be equally susceptible to become immersed in conspiracism, while psychologists van Prooijen, Krouwel, and Pollet (2015) has demonstrated through testing that both poles demonstrate a higher tendency to believe in them.
There are problems with this generalization, however. The existence of an immoral, corrupt, or disingenuous establishment does not necessarily imply that they conspire against the people. In the United States, coastal liberal elites are often the subject of conspiracy theories, however, the broader argument made by cultural conservatives is that these upper-class elites are out of touch with the people of the “fly-over” states and seek to impose cultural values on them that the people are not prepared to accept. On the left, criticism of the elite is usually in the form of economic grievances and systemic economic interest which do not necessarily imply the existence of a conspiracy. There are clear examples where the narrative of conspiracy does not play a strong role whatsoever as can be seen in the case of Podemos. Thus, while conspiracy theories are more prominent, on the whole, among populist movements, and are more likely to find their way into the rhetoric of populist leadership, they are not an immutable characteristic of populism, but a tendency (Taggart, 2019). The most reasonable relationship between the two has been expressed by Bergmann and Butter (2020) who claim that “conspiracy theories are a non-necessary element of populist discourses”.

As was previously mentioned, at the core of the populist worldview is the basic binary division of society into the corrupt “elite” and the pure and virtuous “people” (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 1995; Urbinati, 2019). The ideational approach to populism goes further in emphasizing the necessarily moral dimension placed on both the conception of the people and the elite; the elite are not simply divided from the people through economic or political interests, different belief systems, or opinions. Instead, they are morally bankrupt, disingenuous, or evil (Mudde 2004). The people and the elite are not strictly defined categories as each can be defined and redefined based upon the imagined community the populist seeks to attract to their movement and attack and constantly use this discursive construction as a rhetorical device (Mudde, 2004). It is for this reason that Laclau (2005) famously referred to concepts as ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ to be “empty signifiers” which were constantly subject to a struggle for meaning. In a similar manner, conspiracy theories also target powerful forces in our societies (Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Castanho Silva et al., 2017) whether they be political elites, government bureaucracies, rich capitalists, multinational corporations, or international organizations, and define their relationship to the common person through the prism of manichaeism; a struggle between good and evil (Bergmann, 2018; Hauwaert, 2012; Yla-Antilla, 2018). It is these core components of anti-elitism and manichaeism that permits the merger of the two beliefs into a cohesive whole. Fenster (2008) has argued that all conspiracy theories hold an implicitly “populist core”. This coherence permits for the theoretical merger of the two into a narrative that alleges one’s establishment opponents to be engaged in a secret plot against the populist leader and their followers.

**Bounded Rationality and the Emotional Correlates of Political Behavior**

The study of political behavior based on the belief conspiracy theories presumes a theory that moves beyond the confines of the original rational choice theory. As both research from scholars of populism and conspiracism have demonstrated, the choices that are made based on these beliefs and attitudes are heavily mediated by extra-rational psychological mechanisms such anger, distrust, uncertainty and

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4 It should be mentioned that it goes without saying that belief in conspiracy theories is not limited to populists. Political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists have all touched on a wide-range of factors that lead people to believe in them (van Prooijen, 2018), though, research on populism has found that the two very often come hand-in-hand (Bergmann, 2018).
resentment. Populism is inextricably linked to the emotional side of the human consciousness, so much so that political science scholars are brought to question their long devotion to the idea of the fully rational individual (Cossarini and Vallespin, 2019).\(^5\) Even in the economic sciences, where rational choice first gained prominence, theorists are now arguing that rationality is more “bounded” than originally believed (Jones, 1999). Affect, among other things, directs the individual towards sets of choices. How else could one explain the strong support for populist candidates based on the belief in strange conspiracy theories such as “birtherism” (Sawyer, 2021), the belief in various partisan-related conspiracy theories that explain election losses through motivated reasoning, or the demonization of out-groups based on fantastical characteristics? Previous work has demonstrated that feelings of racial resentment and apocalyptic sentiments played a large cognitive role among believers of birtherism (Jardina and Traugott, 2019; Sawyer, 2021). While rational choice has been helpful in explaining political behaviour on its most basic level, through notions of preferences and utility, emotions often have larger explanatory power for populist politics. Canovan (1999) noticed that populist politics cannot exist without a sense of “heightened emotions” for the leader and their movement. Taggart (2000) has spoken of the mythical “heartland” that commonly appears in populist discourses and from which supporters draw feelings of nostalgia and a desire to return to the “good old days”.

Anger is an emotion commonly found in populist supporters. As populists argue that the core democratic foundation of popular sovereignty has been usurped from the people by the establishment, appeals to anger, outrage, and feelings of injustice are primary mechanisms (Laclau, 1977; Laraña et al., 1994) for mobilizing citizens with grievances for political activity such as voting (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza, 2020; Vasilopoulou and Wagner, 2017; Vasilopoulos, et al., 2018) and demonstrations (Anduiza, Guinjoan, and Rico, 2019). Unlike interpersonal distrust and dissatisfaction are feelings that can lead to apathy, anger as an emotion has an activating character due to its “moral” character (Skitka and Bauman, 2008; Skitka, Hanson, and Wisneski, 2017; Van Zomeren, Postmes and Spears, 2008; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, 2009; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2010), that helps to activate the “latent” stereotypes of citizens (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza, 2017). The conspiracist component of populist movements elicits these feelings of injustice due to the understanding that they have been personally “wronged” or “harmed” by powerful establishment forces. Experimental methods have demonstrated that belief in certain political conspiracy theories can lead the individual to refocus their activity towards more anti-systemic behavior. While a number of studies have shown that belief in conspiracy theories can lead to heightened feelings of distrust towards the government (Kim and Cao, 2016) and increased apathy to the political process (Uscinski and Parent, 2014), Imhoff, Dieterle, and Lamberty’s (2021) experiment on conspiracism and forms of political engagement demonstrate that conspiratorial beliefs can decrease normative political engagement, such as voting, protesting, and joining a political party and increase non-normative forms of political engagement, such as refusing to pay taxes, committing acts of property damage and physical violence, and engaging in illegal activity. Jolley and Paterson (2020) have shown in their study on the 5G network conspiracy theories that belief in conspiracy theories leads the individual to become angry at the state and consequently, demonstrate a higher tendency to commit violent acts, with the strongest tendencies observed among those that exhibit significant cases of paranoia. Finally, Hameleers’ (2020) study of populist attitudes and conspiracism in a Dutch sample of respondents

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\(^5\) In political science, this reversal back towards an emphasis on emotions has been dubbed the “affective turn” (Stets and Turner, 2006; Clough and Halley, 2007; Cossarini and Vallespin, 2019).
demonstrates the combination of both populist and conspiracist narratives led the treatment group to exhibit higher populist attitudes than either the populist or conspiracist conditions by themselves. In the literature on extremism, conspiracy theories have been described as a “radicalisation multiplier” (Bartlett, and Miller, 2010), though, as the aforementioned studies demonstrate, they can also have a radicalizing effect on everyday citizens as well.6

Belief in conspiracy theories and support for populist candidates also increase due to several similar contextual conditions. Fast-paced social, economic, and cultural changes associated with the transition to post-industrial society have been cited as a major catalyst for the current populist wave in the West (Mickenberg, 2013). A common theme among this literature is that grievances associated with economic decline or socio-cultural transformations to distrust the institutions of society and sympathize with populist messaging that attempts to rally the “losers” of such changes to revolt against them (Mickenberg, 2013; Mudde, 2004). Psychological studies have pointed to a number of “demand” factors related to social alienation and insecurity rendering the individual to be more likely to believe in conspiracy theories: feelings of economic or social insecurity (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Goertzel, 1994; Volkan, 1985), cynicism, and dissatisfaction with the status quo as being relevant predictors (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart, 2015; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Furnham, 2010; Volkan, 1985). Similarly, conspiracism and support for radical right-wing populism has been found among those who exhibit fear of foreigners, losing national autonomy, traditions, and values, losing one’s job to migrants, and perceived threats to their “nation” (Pels, 2012; Van Prooijen and Van Dijk, 2014; Van Prooijen and Van Lange, 2014). In an effort to better understand why voters support politicians that endorse conspiracy theories, Radnitz and Hsiao (2020) show that situational anxiety from living through sudden, short-term threatening events in society, such as a pandemic, that lead to a sense of a loss of control and heightened anxiety can lead voters to support conspiracist politicians. During these crises, individuals often feel the need for an “enemy” to blame for their misfortunes which can be more effective at regulating stress than attempting to cope with uncontrollable social forces (Rothschild, et al., 2012). For their part, conspiracy theories arise from feelings of uncertainty in individuals that occur during times of precarity or insecurity and the individual’s need to provide an explanation for the unsettling phenomenon (van Prooijen, 2018). This permits human beings to see the world with perfect order, clarity, and predictability and handle the gap between the unknown and certain contradictions between known “facts” and the individual’s worldview. Conspiracy theories in the populist movement, thus, can have the effect of simplifying these complex changes in society in a way that explains their perceived deprivation and redirects their anger at a simple scapegoat. As with the trope of the “elite”, the narrative of the conspiracy succeed in translating and encapsulating the demands of a people who see themselves as disenfranchised, marginalized, or oppressed into a concept or catch-all term that oversimplifies the political terrain, focusing on one or several individuals to be at fault, and fills it with highly emotional content, rendering it appealing to the common person.

This mistrust of mainstream political institutions (Rooduijn, 2016) and dissatisfaction with the state of democracy (Kaltwasser and Hauwaert, 2020; Rooduijn, van der Brug, and de Lange, 2016) are among the most common correlates of populist voters. The result is that the relationship between the populist

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6 This consequence of conspiracism is something that Hofstadter (2008[1956]) picked up on in his works. The constant threat of conspiracy leads the individual to become uncompromising in their beliefs as the political arena increasingly becomes seen in ‘apocalyptic terms’, through the lens of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, and drives them to seek the total defeat or elimination of the conspiring forces.
leader and their supporters becomes based on its total opposite; the leader is seen as the last vestige of democracy in a world turned upside-down by the establishment with the trust endowed in them resembling a faith-based belief. For the supporter, the leader can do no wrong (Urbinati, 2019). The relationship becomes one that is not conducive to public accountability as trust and love of the leader are sufficient to disregard any flaws. This can clearly be observed in the case of seemingly “impure” politicians from elite backgrounds such as Donald Trump and Silvio Berlusconi who have both known their share of political, business, and personal controversies while in office, yet receive almost blind support from their followers. Similar relationships between mistrust in governing bodies or the mainstream media can be observed in those with conspiratorial beliefs (Algan, et al. 2017; Fuchs, 2018; Jylha, Strimling, and Rydgren, 2019; Krasodomski-Jones, 2019). This corresponds to a logic of, “if they’ve done it” before, they’ll do it again”, leading to conspiratorial narratives to become more believable.

In terms of argumentative strategies, populists have a tendency to exhibit what Saurette and Gunster (2011) call epistemological populism, which places value on the common sense of the common people and eschews the knowledge of political leaders, media analysis, and experts. Further research has demonstrated that this is indeed a commonality in populist discourse (Cramer, 2016; Hawkins, 2010; Hofstadter, 2008 [1964]; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Wodak, 2015). For example, in their study of the 2016 presidential election, Oliver and Rahn (2016) found that Donald Trump was more likely to use appeals to “common sense” in his rhetoric than other candidates. With these claims, it is argued that the knowledge of the experts is invalid because they are ‘out-of-touch’ with the needs of the common people and lack access to the practical knowledge of everyday life, leading them to claim that the people have “had enough” of experts telling them what to do. Conspiracy theories often form from this kind of knowledge when they are based on folk-wisdom: various notions of common sense, feelings, identity, or sentiments of anti-intellectualism. For example, the defense of the conspiracy theory that global warming is a “hoax” is that on a given day the weather is cold, or snowy, and thus demonstrates “evidence” to the contrary. This is often augmented by counter-knowledge, or the use of “scientific” language and defense of perceived empirical “truths”. Among populist networks, this often involves “proving” the criminality of immigrants or minorities through anecdotal cases, cherry-picking data points to “disprove” climate science, or use of “rationality” to point out the disingenuousness of the establishment. Belief in conspiracy theories is often directly related to these intuitive and commonsensical notions; many individuals who believe in more than a few conspiracy theories, or those that are fantastical in nature, are believed to have “monological belief systems” that do not “engage in dialogue with their context” (Goertzel, 1994). The presumption is that they have “closed” minds wherein each belief serves as evidence for another, and instead of searching for factual evidence to test their beliefs, they resort to ideological arguments. This can be observed in the fact that the more conspiracy theories an individual believes in, the more likely they are to accept another one if proposed to them, as well as their tendency to believe in several conspiracy theories that contradict each other (Wood, et al., 2011), due to the intuitive feeling that “something is up”.

Figure 1. Populism and Common Sense
The proliferation of the Internet as a source for daily news has democratized the diffusion of information and flattened the playing field for anyone to speak to millions of people, spreading alternative narratives to those in the mainstream political life and competing for audiences with large corporate outlets (Bessi and Quattrociocchi, 2015). With the monopoly on information diffusion held by traditional media outlets, political elites, and knowledge experts broken, the flow of information has transitioned to a strictly hierarchical structure (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) dominated by journalists, politicians, experts, and news editors to the production of knowledge collectively through a synergy of people over the Internet. Due to this, conspiracy theories and misinformation have ballooned over the past decade due in part to their diffusion through these networks (Bessi and Quattrociocchi, 2015; Stempel, Hargrove, and Stempel, 2007), rendering it difficult to counteract as gatekeepers no longer mediate information flow and the audience has more opportunities to interact with said information than before. Another such problem is the existence of “echo-chambers” which feed one’s existing worldview and move them into an ideological bubble divorced from other viewpoints, which results in a reinforcing of their worldview through “confirmation bias” (Bessi and Quattrociocchi, 2015; Mocanu, et al., 2015; Bessi, et al., 2015). Online populist media often serves as the gateway for such knowledge claims that can effectively bypass the traditional gatekeepers in the mainstream media. Such social networks and news outlets serve to foster the co-production of the concept of the “true people”, collect evidence that “proves” the danger of foreigners and minorities, and demonstrates the corruption and disingenuousness of the establishment (Kramer 2017; McLamore and Ulug 2020), serving a “self-socializing” function into the populist worldview (Kramer, 2017). Belief in these narratives have shown to be significant predictors of support for populist candidates, such as the Alternative für Germany (Zimmerman and Kohring, 2020). In unison, these communities can disregard the comments, actions or interpretations of political opponents as
deception and refute statistical analyses with a sleight of hand as “obfuscation by complexity” (Kramer 2017). In McLamore and Ulug’s (2020) study of the subreddit r/The_Donald, their quantitative content analysis demonstrated that much of the online discourse focused on perceived liberal hypocrisies, ignorance, control of the education system, and liberals as being evil. One common argument was that liberals refer to “science” only when it supports their “political agenda” whereas mentions of conspiracies perpetrated by Democrats, political leftists, and George Soros were also prominent. These networks help to provide conspiracist communities with it’s “quasi-religious” character that reinforces group identity by rehearsing answers to shared questions, anticipating critiques from outsiders, denigrating the “conspirators”, reinforcing the fear and anxiety of the “Other”, and proposing a path to redemption for believers (Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer, 2013). An extreme example of this is the QAnon community that waits for signs (“Q-drops”) from an online prophet, interpret the meaning of each message and search for “evidence” to support such claims in unison, make predictions about future events, use slogans and symbols to reinforce group identity, and participate in political events collectively, all in order to resist the satanic forces of their alleged conspiracy.

The Function of Conspiracy Theories for Populist Movements

Whether it is through tweeting (Kramer 2017), mass rallies, interactive online platforms, or “going to the people”, the constant interaction with the people is common to populist politicians and serves as the source of its strength in the political realm in so far as it provides them with cultural authenticity. This “permanent campaigning” helps the leader to retain a consistent connection to the people and reaffirm their identity with them (Urbinati 2019). Ostiguy (2017) and Moffitt (2019) have shown the tendency of populists to emphasize the “low” end of the high-low socio-cultural axis that emphasizes passionate and colorful language to appeal to supporters, appeals to “common sense” notions, and exhibits “bad manners” that disrupts the accepted norms on political performance, all of which makes supporters of the populist develop emotional attachments to the leader who they consider to be “one of us”. Another feature of the populist’s performative repertoire is what Moffitt (2019) refers to as the “performance of crisis” which plays on the distrust of and anger at establishment politics as well as the fear of the Other by passionately dramatizing a situation in which the people are believed to be under threat.

Often, this has come in the form of conspiratorial narratives. Fenster (2008), refers to conspiracy theories as a “populist theory of power” that allows the powerless a simplified means to expose the powerful and attempt to redistribute these power relations. As with populism’s Manichean division of society between the loosely defined “people” and “establishment”, conspiracy theories easily fit within this ideological framework to provide the individual with an easily understandable narrative with which to criticize and “Other” the establishment and counter the “regime of truth”. Implicit in the conspiratorial beliefs is a search for a more transparent society. “Weaving” these narratives, as described in Zuquete’s conceptualization of “Missionary Politics” permits a populist leader to rally a core group of supporters to their side. Zuquete defines Missionary Politics as:

“.. a characteristic form of political religion that has at its center a charismatic leader who leads a chosen people gathered into a moral community struggling against all-powerful and conspiratorial enemies, and engaged in a mission toward redemption and salvation” (Zuquete, 2008).
The merging of populist attitudes and conspiratorial narratives which allege a secret conspiracy by establishment figures against “the good people” can lead to a relationship that becomes “quasi-religious” in character. In lieu of a simple “manipulation” of the marginalized or unsophisticated masses by a “demagogic” leader, the role of the “conspiracy” aids in the symbolic construction of a “semi-religious dimension” to the movement with a heroic martyr for the cause of the people and a collective mission to stamp out evil. In Zúquete’s (2008) work on Venezuela’s charismatic populist, Hugo Chavez, the proposition that the political establishment was collaborating with foreign imperialists to remove Chavez from power to return the people to a state of misery, helped foster a relationship characterized by a charismatic populist leader who uses the narrative involving forces of evil to lead the “chosen people” on “missions of salvation” against the political establishment. The image of the evil conspiring elite serves to give the bond between the leader and their supporters intensity that permits them to be mobilized for “heroic missions” through the voting booth or through protests (Weyland 2017). By attacking “enemies of the people”, and confronting the “counter-church” of political opponents (Vassiliou 2017), the leader not only demonizes their opponents in such a way that leads their supporters not only to hate, but also develop a sense of urgency which necessitates their political defeat. At the same time, the image of the authentic populist “defender of the people, who is “at the same time the expression, guide and ‘savior’ of the people” (Taguieff 2007, p. 10), endows himself with saint-like characteristics. These moralized notions of politics have been shown to lead people to forsake material gains, oppose compromises with competitors, and punish those politicians who do (Ryan, 2016), providing the populist with a core constituency that they can mobilize against opponents.

From these theoretical premises, the function of conspiratorial rhetoric, thus, is two-fold; 1) conspiracy theories merge with the anti-elitist dimension of populism to demonize, “Other”, and attribute blame to political opponents by depicting the political establishment, elitists, and minority groups as not simply illegitimate or immoral political actors, but evil, amoral, and threatening. This narrative makes one move from feeling “dispossessed” in one’s own country to a sense of urgency, an intensification of the conflict to a point where the survival of the country, the nation, or the “good people” are at stake. The notion that the opposition is “evil” renders supporters uncompromising in their mission to struggle against political opponents and willing to use any means necessary to do so. Franks, Bangerter, and Bauer’s (2013) conception of the “quasi-religious mentality” places special emphasis on conspiracy theories framed as a conflicts that risk “sacred cultural values” such as freedoms, religious beliefs, or cultural traditions as a key ingredient for motivating intense commitment towards collective action; 2) By positioning oneself as opposed to the conspiring “enemies of the people”, the populist leader uses this narrative to demonstrate populist authenticity as being “on the side of the people” in this epic showdown. The “defender of the people” can become a force that common people can rally behind to struggle against powerful conspiring forces. In this respect, conspiratorial narratives can serve an important communicative function for promoting relevant “demand” factors necessary for the support for populist

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7 I should emphasize that this theory does not claim that the leader “manipulates” their followers, as past populist scholars have argued, by using conspiracy theories. When referring to an “instrumental value” for conspiratorial rhetoric, I refer to the influence that the populist leader, in whom the people place their trust, has in molding their content, redirecting towards certain actors and institutions, and amplifying their message at certain key moments in public discourse. Many conspiracy theories are produced and maintained among communities of believers, activists, “spin-doctors”, that co-produce narratives together. By demonstrating that the populist leader is an authentic “true believer”, the leader can “tap into” already existing conspiracist communities and “crowd source” narratives with a hive mind of loyalists who are willing to develop the alleged conspiracy for them.
candidates and provide a solution to the collective action problem when attempting to mobilize their support in the political arena.

**The 2020 Election and the “Mission” to “Stop the Steal”**

While the allegations of voter fraud were the initial catalyst for the Stop the Steal movement, Donald Trump had been regularly priming his supporters for this “mission of salvation” against the Washington “establishment” through his ritualized campaign rallies, constant identification of conspiring enemies, and speaking directly with them through social media throughout his term in office. Throughout the Trump presidency, conspiracy theories about the ‘establishment’, such as birtherism (Sawyer, 2021), the myriad of anti-Clinton (Sawyer, 2020) and George Soros conspiracy theories, and the handful of ‘deep state’ narratives, were constantly being produced, reproduced, and transformed by Trump and his network of followers, allowing Trump to “tap” into conspiracist communities and rally their support without publicly endorsing them. Over the past four years of his term, for example, Trump and his campaign have retweeted many of the accounts of conspiratorially-minded supporters, such as those that believe in the far right QAnon conspiracy theory, and made less-than-subtle attempts to appeal to them through imagery (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Eric Trump and the Qanon Tweet, Summer 2020**

During the 2020 Presidential Election, an unprecedented amount of protest action occurred among supporters of President Donald Trump who refused to accept the results of the election. According to them, the election had been “stolen” due to intentional attempts by the members of the Democratic Party to commit electoral fraud resulting in a mass mobilization of angry Trump voters under the banner of “Stop the Steal”. While the claims are numerous, and the perceived plots involve many different political figures, the original claims of voter fraud originate with Donald Trump himself. During the 2016 Presidential Election, for example, Trump repeatedly claimed that the election was “rigged” against him
and when asked whether he would accept the results if he lost, Trump responded: “I’ll keep you in suspense” (Collinson, 20 Oct 2016). Trump repeated these claims in the run-up to the 2020 Presidential Election in a number of tweets and interviews. According to Trump, the issue of mail-in voting, which was to be put into practice in a number of states to prevent long lines on election day in the midst of a pandemic, was one that would lead to massive voter fraud. Again, in an interview with Fox News anchor Chris Wallace, Trump refused to commit to a peaceful transition of power stating that the only way he could possible to lose the election would be if the election were “rigged” against him (Beer, 24 Sept, 2020). Table 1 in the Appendix demonstrates the amount of trust that Trump voters had in the vote counting, election officials, and voting by mail prior to the general election. As the election progressed and the states began slowly counting the votes, it became readily apparent that Joe Biden would come out as the victor in most essential swing states. Instead of accepting defeat, Donald Trump and his movement began to claim that the election had been fraudulent. Late in the night, Donald Trump sent out a tweet claiming that the election had been “stolen” without providing any evidence. At a press conference two days earlier, he repeated the claims, implying that the votes were being counted later than usual were fraudulent (C-SPAN, 2020, Nov 5). Online viral posts that demonstrated “empirical evidence” of the alleged fraud, such as a widely shared ‘Michigan voting map’ that showed 100% of the votes going to Biden at one point (and was subsequently retweeted by Trump’s official Twitter account), served as actionable information that ‘proved’ that many allegations and intuitive feelings about the establishment in the eyes of many supporters. Popular mobilization of the supporters of the sitting President started taking place, claiming that the election had been “rigged” against them and that the election results should be overturned (See Table A.2 in the Appendix). 

From here, the narratives involving election fraud started evolving and in some cases, bordering on the fantastical. Rudy Giuliani, the head of Trump’s legal team started making unsubstantiated claims about votes being counted in Germany, where the manufacturers of the voting machines’ headquarters are located, where affiliates of the late-Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez count them (Farhi and Izadi, 2020). Legal attorney for the Trump campaign Sidney Powell promoted the idea that the programs called Hammer and Scorecard used in a supercomputer to count were systematically switching votes from Trump to Biden (Fichera and Spencer, 13 November, 2020), claiming that the CIA knew about the problem but did nothing about it (Leibovich, 8 Dec 2020).

The conspiracy theory came to full fruition during the November 19th press conference when Sidney Powell, now a prominent spokesperson for the Trump campaign on right-wing media outlets, claimed that the voting machines created by Dominion Voting Systems ran an algorithm in machines all over the country that would flip a percentage of the vote from Trump to Biden (Peters and Feuer, 8 Dec 2020). The alleged perpetrators of this conspiracy was Cuba, Venezuela, the Clinton Foundation, George Soros, and Antifa. In later interviews, Powell further elaborated the machines had been designed to be hacked for use in the Venezuelan elections under Chavez and further added that other conspiracies had taken place

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8 While the line between what is a conspiracy theory and what is an actual conspiracy is a rather thin line, hinging on the criteria of whether the alleged conspiracy remains a secret kept from the broader public, no evidence has yet to be presented for any of the allegations brought forth by Trump or his lawyers leading the belief of and advocacy for these allegations to remain within the domain of unproven conspiracy theories. When Trump’s legal team challenged the results in several states, each subsequent recount validated the initial results and all 50 legal challenges ended up being decided against Donald Trump. When Pennsylvania Republicans appealed to the US Supreme Court, now with a conservative majority, to overturn Biden’s victory in the state, the Supreme Court unanimously decided against hearing the case (Liptak, 8 Dec 2020).
involving “dead people” voting and fraudulent paper ballots being counted in the final vote tally. These basic claims were then amplified by far-right news outlets such as One America News Network (OANN), Newsmax, and Fox News as well as a few Trump loyalists. According to the conservative narratives under Trump, each of these figures have served as bogeymen for right-wing voters, with Cuba and Venezuela representing the classic specter of socialism, the Clinton family and philanthropist George Soros representing the unpatriotic liberal elitists who secretly influence major events, and fund Antifa who serve as their foot soldiers. Given these sinister figures that have appeared in other conspiracy theories among the American right over the years, the belief is that they would unleash a series of radical change in the country should the Democrats come to power.

The “stolen election” narrative told by Donald Trump and his surrogates falls within a long line of claims by opposition parties that the results of the elections were illegitimate. In polarized societies such as the modern day United States, scholars of conspiracy theories have noted that ideologies tend to coalesce around the contours of political identification. In other words, Democrats and Republicans both tend to have their own conspiracy theory beliefs that are unique to their side of the political spectrum which function to malign the other side (Smallpage, Enders, Uscinski, 2017). Conspiracy theories associated with partisanship are more likely to appear during times of elections according to Uscinski and Parent’s (2014, p. 130) conspiracy theories are for “losers” theory as a way of coming to terms with the loss and to encourage further mobilization while in the opposition. While certain cohorts of Republican voters may be more likely to support this narrative, polling has shown that a large majority of voters who identify as Republicans consistently believe that the election was illegitimate (Data For Progress/Vox, 11 Jan, 2021). Following the election loss, an estimated 88% of Republicans polled by YouGov believed that “Biden did not legitimately win the election” (Frankovic, 20 Nov, 2020).

However, the Republican Party as a whole was not the sole audience for this conspiratorial narrative. In order for Trump to successfully overturn the results of the election, he would need to be able to mobilize his base of loyal supporters who hold much more populist attitudes (Tucker, et al., 2019), are more distrustful of the government, more authoritarian (Inglehart and Norris 2019), and more susceptible to conspiracy theories such as Birtherism (Sawyer, 2020; 2021), the Deep State (Hellinger, 2019), and Qanon (Bruce, 2020). Psychologists have found that these indicators tend to be highly predictive of individuals with conspiratorial attitudes about the world as the extent to which one identifies heavily with a specific in-group and distinguishes themselves from other out-groups leads them to manufacture mechanisms that explain the demise of the “good” in-group in the form of conspiratorial narratives (van Prooijen, 2018). This is clearly the case with the populist radical right which combines core ideological tenants of authoritarianism, nativism, and populism, thus making the formation of in-groups and out-groups based on certain socio-cultural markers of a higher importance in constructing their identity (Geden, 2005; Mudde, 2007; Pelinka, 2005).

Thus, for many “true believers” in Donald Trump and his mission to up-end Washington politics and return the country to “the people”, the alleged conspiracy surrounding voter fraud was perceived as more than an apparent power-grab by conspiring Democrats, but an attempt by evil liberal elites to destroy everything the Trump movement stood for, including some of the “sacred values” of the American way of life. For many of them, the belief that the election was unjustly “stolen” served as justification for the

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9 Prominent examples in the past decade include the conspiracy theories surrounding ACORN voter fraud, Birtherism, and Russiagate.
Trump supporters to take to the streets in protest, organizing in cities where votes were being recounted, and commit to using violence to overturn the results of the election. The consequence of this narrative about the election was a massive mobilization of supporters in support of overturning the results of the election. Figure 2 shows the initial outbreak of protests around the country as the voting slowly turned in favor of Trump’s opponent Joe Biden.

Figure 3. ‘Stop the Steal’ Protests during the Week of the Election

Source: Raleigh, et al. (2010). Note. The size of each circle denotes the number of events that took place in an area during this time period.

Conspiracy theories can often serve the purpose of a “bridging frame” that provide members of different political movements ground for collaboration and participation in each others’ movements (Dobratz and Waldner, 2016), something that could be observed in the “Stop the Steal” protests. While Trump supporters generally played a prominent role in the movement, a number of sub-groups typically considered to be a part of the Trump coalition were also present; Qanon believers, militia members, viewers of the far-right network One America News (OAN), anti-maskers, and members of the Proud Boys street gang all joined the protests around the country (Kishi, Stall, and Jones, 2020). Prominent conspiracist and social media influencer Alex Jones was also present. Most of these groups coalesced into a larger gathering in Washington D.C called the “Million MAGA March” on November 17th where they engaged in rioting and street battles with counter-protesters with at least four counter-protesters being stabbed. With thousands of conservatives gathered, far right ideologue Nick Fuentes led a call to action in support of Trump:

“As we gather here in Washington, D.C. for a second Million MAGA March, we’re done making promises. It has to happen now. We are going to destroy the GOP.” (Politico, 12 Dec, 2020).

Following the election, much of the activity of the Stop the Steal movement also centered around battleground states that Joe Biden narrowly won, such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Arizona, and where votes were being recounted (see Figure 3). In Georgia, Alex Jones and Nick Fuentes brought a
group of protesters to the Georgia Capitol building before the late-night deadline for recounting ballots on November 18th (Golding, 18 Nov 2020). On November 7th, over 500 Trump supporters protested by the state Capitol building (Johnson and Martinez, 7 Nov. 2020) and on November 8th, hundreds of protesters, some of whom were armed, protested Biden’s victory in the election in Phoenix, Arizona.

Figure 4. November 6 to December 31, 2020

Within the Republican elite, a large number of elected officials supported the reversal of the election results, either out of true belief in the rigging of the election or out of fear of the political consequences of not doing so. In the state of Pennsylvania, more than 60 Republican state representatives signed a letter disavowing the state’s election results as well as the certification process, and called on members of Congress to formally object to the voting (Roebuck and Lai, 2021). When the issue was put to a vote in Congress, a total of 147 Republicans, eight senators and 139 congressmen, voted their objections to the vote counting in Pennsylvania (Yourish, Buchanan, and Lu, Jan 7, 2021). The voting to object to the election results was stopped only after both houses went on recess and were escorted away by security due to the storming of the Capitol. Earlier in the day, a rally in support of Trump and his claims about the election was held in Washington D.C. where Trump told the crowd of people that they would go to the Capitol building in order to encourage the Republicans voting on the election results to vote to overturn the election results.

"You're the real people. You're the people that built this nation. You're not the people that tore down this nation… We will never give up. We will never concede. It doesn't happen. You don't concede when there's theft involved … Our country has had enough. We're not going to take it anymore" (Fins, 6 Jan 2021).
The result was the storming and looting of the Capitol building. Several officers were injured from scuffles with the rioters and at least one was bludgeoned to death from a fire extinguisher. Several rioters turned up with weapons, zip ties and body armor while a noose could also be found on the premises. Militia members were heavily represented in the crowd of people. An improvised explosive device was found in both the Capitol building and blocks away from the headquarters of the Republican Party.

**Conclusion**

The events of the 2020 Presidential election demonstrate the power of counter narratives to mobilize a movement to further one’s political aims. The conspiracy theory alleging massive election fraud in November served as a frame to mobilize many of Trump’s supporters, who for the past several years have been preconditioned to believing that the establishment forces are fundamentally corrupt, self-serving, and conspiring against the “good people”. The feelings of anger and injustice within the Trump protesters spurred political activity across the country in support of a candidate who was seen not simply as being their preferred choice for the presidency, but someone who was waging a war against the very forces that have been “destroying America” for the past several years. The capacity for mobilization can be demonstrated not only in the initial burst of energy, but also the sustained campaign to pressure election officials and elected representatives to support their cause. Finally, this conspiratorial narrative radicalized a core group of supporters to the point of rendering them willing to inflict violence on their political opponents.

**References**


Roebuck, J. and J. Lai. (2021). Trump and his allies tried to overturn Pennsylvania’s election results for two months. Here are the highlights.


Appendix

Figure A.1. Republican Turnout and Interest in QAnon

Table A.1. Pre-Election Belief in Unfair Voting Practices
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: ANES (2020)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Support Trump</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Angry about How Things are Going</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Distrust Washington</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Nervous</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Irritated</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Worried</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
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* **Note:** *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
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<td>0.487*** (0.062)</td>
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<td>1.534** (0.723)</td>
<td>0.1749</td>
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<th>Observations</th>
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<td>Multiple R-squared</td>
<td>0.5479</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIC</td>
<td>587.14</td>
<td>587.14</td>
<td>590.56</td>
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**Note.** The Figures for “Interest in Qanon” and “Interest in voter fraud” originate from Google Trends (2021). For this, the terms “WWG1WGA” and “voter fraud” were used to measure interest in the conspiracy theories. A number of studies have demonstrated the usefulness and accuracy of internet search data from Google (DiGrazia 2017b; Vosen and Schmidt, 2011) as well as for the study of conspiracy theories (DiGrazia, 2017a; Sawyer, 2020).

**Figure A.2. All ‘Stop the Steal’ Events**
Figure A.3. Number of ‘Stop the Steal’ Events over time

Figure A.4. ‘Stop the Steal’ Events on January 6th