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Birtherism, Benghazi and QAnon: Why Conspiracy Theories Pose a Threat to American Democracy

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Class of 2020

In partial fulfilment of the DePauw University Honor Scholar
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I. Introduction

The truth, oddly enough, has always been a debatable notion. Individuals are influenced by their friends and family to adopt a set of beliefs about their reality. Although this is normal on an individual or small group basis, how does truth affect society at large? Throughout history, examples of questioning the truth, reality, and individuals' own beliefs have often taken the form of conspiracy theories.

From conspiracy theories about John F. Kennedy's assassination, to the moon landing, to aliens and lizard people, these theories have taken many forms and vary in their depth and believability. However, one type of conspiracy theory that has become popular recently are conspiracy theories that surround political figures, systems and parties. Political conspiracy theories have been popular in the past, but they have only recently made their way into mainstream news and media, shedding light on the growing distrust in government (Rainie & Perrin, 2019).

The growing popularity and spread of conspiracy theories is best exemplified by our current President Donald Trump. Trump has promoted conspiracy theories over 1,700 times in tweets that he has published since his inauguration, each of these tweets are then retweeted by many of the President's millions of followers, causing a massive spread of conspiracy theories (Shear et al., 2019). With a president who often promotes conspiracy theories, it leads one to think of the impact this has on the public. Along with Trump's promotion of conspiratorial thinking, there have been many conspiracy theories that began on various online forums and social media platforms in the past couple decades (Zaitchik, 2010). This work aims to show how these conspiracy theories can be more threatening than one may originally have thought.

In 2016, the United States was categorized as a “flawed democracy.” The Independent referred to the single factor of continued erosion of trust in government and elected officials as a possible cause for the re-categorization of the U.S. from a “full” to “flawed” democracy. I believe that although not the sole reason, conspiracy theories could have played a part in the “erosion of trust in government” element that The Independent mentions in their analysis of democracy in the United States (Agerholm, 2018). Conspiracy theories often proliferate false information among the general public and in turn create a sense of mass paranoia and doubt, usually directed at government officials (Hofstadter, 1964). With conspiracy theories come the questioning of political institutions and the spread of these theories may correlate with a more intense outcome of ‘eroded trust.’ The main focus of this thesis will be to assist in answering the question: are conspiracy theories harmful to democracy in the United States?

In order to show a connection between conspiracy theories and a lack of trust in government, I will closely analyze three major conspiracy theories. These three case studies should be thought of as tools that will help to show how conspiracy theories exacerbate declining trust in government and subsequently threaten American democracy. This correlation is supported by opinion polls, specifically those that analyze belief in conspiracy theories and one’s level of trust in government.

In order to give a concise summary of the thesis, I will briefly outline the three conspiracy theories that will be the main focus of the work. The first conspiracy theory is birtherism, specifically in the case of former President Barack Obama, who was accused by many of being born outside of the United States. This conspiracy theory is a useful example of how individuals may be willing to accept information even without solid proof, which is often

the case with conspiracy theories. However, there are two other reasons as to why individuals believed this conspiracy, even after Obama's birth certificate was publicized. First, the claim, had it been true, would have made Obama an illegitimate president. Therefore, those who did not support Obama or his policies would likely have been more inclined to believe a conspiracy theory that would undermine his candidacy as president. Second, birtherism is often associated with racism, which is another factor that may have led individuals to support birther claims. If individuals are racist toward our first Black president, they may be more inclined to believe in this conspiracy theory, as people tend to believe claims that they hope or want to be true (Heshmat, 2015). This work will further analyze the roles of politics, racism and the media surrounding the birther movement claims against former President Barack Obama.

Second, I will be analyzing conspiracy theories surrounding the 2012 attack on American officials that took place in Benghazi, Libya. These conspiracy theories mainly revolve around allegations that the U.S. government was withholding information that could have prevented the attack and consequently the loss of several lives. These conspiracy theories are useful when indicating a lack of trust between the general public and the federal government. Throughout this paper, I will further elaborate on these theories and how they came about, as well as the mass paranoia and doubt they may have provoked.

Not only has public trust and satisfaction in government declined in recent years, but so has trust in news media (Brenan, 2019b). Many conspiracy theories have become so popular that they are covered by large media outlets. Further, mass media has also fallen victim to a handful of popular conspiracy theories. One of the most prominent conspiracy theories that attacks the media is that it serves the government as a means of mind control (Out of Shadows, 2020).

Considering this, the question of how conspiracy theories become so popular through the internet and social media platforms will be further explained throughout this work.

The third and final case study analyzes the QAnon conspiracy theory. QAnon is a meta-conspiracy theory, composed of many smaller conspiracy theories, that thrives on public forums such as 8chan and 4chan. In short, QAnon believes there is a “deep state” that is actively working against current President Donald Trump in a variety of ways (Carter, 2018). QAnon conspiracy theories range from accusing highly-ranked officials of the Democratic party of their involvement in a child sex ring to also recently accusing Oprah Winfrey of illegal activity (Ecarma, 2020). Not only has QAnon created a meta-conspiracy, but the anonymous creator has also amassed somewhat of a following, with people rallying in support of the anonymous user at Trump rallies, wearing “Q” t-shirts and holding “Q” signs.

The case studies I will use are critical in explaining the connection between conspiracy theories, trust in government, and exacerbated deterioration of American democracy. I will first define conspiracy theories in order to give a framework of how to think about these theories when addressing the three case studies in detail, then will define democracy in the context of the United States and finally move on to the three case studies. After analyzing the case studies, I will explain how they contribute to the deterioration of our democratic values and processes in the United States.

a. Defining Conspiracy Theories

In order to accurately determine the effects of political conspiracy theories, one must understand the defining factors of this term. One of the best ways to do so is to refer to expert opinions on the long term debate over what the term “conspiracy theory” really means and how

that definition can be further implemented in research. In order to accomplish an academic analysis of the definition of political conspiracy theories, I will look to two prominent academics in this field: Mark Fenster and Richard Hofstadter. Although both of these academics contribute substantial arguments in the field of conspiracy theories, it is critical to understand the context in which their arguments were made as opposed to the context of the argument made in this work. Both Fenster and Hofstadter wrote during the pre-Trump era, when conspiracy theories were still at the outskirts of society. Fenster gives a more modern take on conspiracy theories than Hofstadter, but nonetheless is still historically contextualized in the pre-Trump era. This work is intended to take a current look at conspiracy theories as they become more mainstream in the midst of the Trump era. This work provides context for the arguments of both Fenster and Hofstadter in modern day.

Mark Fenster discusses his definition of conspiracy theories in simple terms as, “the conviction that a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order or some part thereof,” (Fenster, 1999). Fenster also says that there is a, “relationship between conspiracy theory and the populist underpinnings of American politics,” (Fenster, 1999). This notion is still applicable today, as this work will later elaborate on the parallels between the recent QAnon meta-conspiracy and the populist “us-versus-them” mentality (Ziblatt & Levitsky, 2018). Fenster furthers the relationship between conspiracy theories and American politics by explaining two interpretations of academic debate surrounding this issue. The first labels conspiracy theorists as “nuts” and political extremists who constantly question the intentions of the government and the state of democracy in the United States. The second argument is that conspiracy theory has come to “predominate American political culture,”

(Fenster, 1999). The first implies that conspiracy theorists are often on the margins of society, with ideas that are too far-fetched for the average person to believe, while the second places conspiracy theorists at the forefront of modern political culture. This argument leads Fenster to claim, “they-or is it we?-- are all conspiracy theorists now,” (Fenster, 1999).

There are multiple types of conspiracy theories and Fenster divides them into five different types, all of which have one commonality. The commonality is, “each concerns an alleged truth hidden by and damaging to an existing order,” (Fenster, 1999). Some of the conspiracy theories he compared were based in fact, some of them were political or religious based conspiracy theories, and some were considered a “cultural phenomenon,” (Fenster, 1999). However, they each “present[ed] a narrative of heroic investigation,” (Fenster, 1999). To elaborate, this commonality can be seen when conspiracy theorists believe they have uncovered a great truth or are saving the public from some type of evil that is either present in the government or another entity. Fenster’s ability to compare various types of conspiracy theories and to produce a commonality between them all leads one to question what classifies as an example of a conspiracy theory? As previously stated, this work will analyze three different conspiracy theories--birtherism, Benghazi and QAnon--in-depth. This commonality will likely apply to the three aforementioned conspiracy theories; however, in these cases it will be critical to recall the commonalities of uncovering truth and heroism that are often affiliated with conspiracy theories.

While Fenster offers a strong definition of conspiracy theories, Richard Hofstadter arguably laid the foundation for academic debate surrounding this topic. Although Hofstadter takes a more historical look at conspiracy theories, his contribution to the debate is the pathology concept. According to Fenster, Hofstadter is closely associated with this concept which

discusses, “political extremism and populist fear of conspiracy” (Fenster, 1999). Hofstadter’s argument in his work, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, shows his psychological examination of the influence of conspiracy theories in American politics. Hofstadter claims that conspiracy theories often lead to unhealthy engagement in politics and usually include “claims made by marginal groups and individuals that can threaten the pluralist consensus of American democracy,” (Hofstadter, 1964). The frightening aspect of both Hofstadter and Fenster’s definitions is that the determined “pathological thinker” or “conspiracy nut” will become mainstream. Hofstadter elaborates by saying that the “conspiracy nut” has already become mainstream, or it “at least afflicts some large, powerful segment of the population,” (Hofstadter, 1964).

Hofstadter’s argument is essentially that conspiracy theories are usually pathological and often lead to widespread paranoia; however, this is countered by another argument from Fenster. Fenster says that of course individuals will believe conspiracy theories, as two integral parts of the foundation of the United States government are secrecy and power dynamics (Fenster, 1999). Due to these integral parts of government in the U.S., individuals are likely to have their suspicions about government conduct concerning an event or individual. This is why Fenster argues that conspiracy theories are not always founded in a pathological, crazy or paranoid idea. In fact, the government creates situations where these theories are likely to arise. It is important to note this clear distinction between Fenster’s political based argument and Hofstadter’s psychological based argument in regards to conspiracy theories.

After briefly discussing both Fenster and Hofstadter’s takes on conspiracy theories, I would like to draw my own conclusions about their definitions. Although Hofstadter’s definition

and explanation of conspiracy theory phenomena was the beginning of academic debate on this topic, I do believe he got a few things wrong. I would dismiss the claim that both Fenster and Hofstadter talk about, that modern conspiracy theorists are “nutjobs” or “political extremists.” This claim no longer holds true as conspiracy theories begin to infiltrate mainstream media, political rallies and even the agendas’ of public officials. This work will elaborate further on the idea that there is no need to label the “classic” conspiracy theorist, but rather that conspiracy theorists can be quite normal, level-headed individuals. The term “normal” is tricky, but in this work it is defined as the average, working American who has intermediate political knowledge. Many of these individuals who live “normal” lives believe in conspiracy theories or come to believe in political conspiracy theories. An example of this is Jenny McCarthy, a famous actress with a decently-sized fanbase, who does not believe in vaccinating her children. Although to some this may seem as though McCarthy is “nuts,” it is likely that if one did not know that she opposed vaccination science, one would not categorize her as a conspiracy theorist (Einbinder, 2019).

There are a plethora of examples similar to McCarthy, such as Senator Jim Inhofe, who adamantly denies climate change science (Barrett, 2015). Anti-vaxxers and climate change deniers have the commonality of doubting strong scientific evidence, but even further, the individuals who believe in these conspiracy theories see themselves fighting against an evil and emerging heroic, as Fenster says (Fenster, 1999). For McCarthy, the evil is the possibility of her children becoming autistic due to a vaccination and for Inhofe, it is the thought that other issues are more important, or that climate changes will expand the influence of the government and aid socialist policies in the country. In both examples, Fenster’s commonality between conspiracy

theories holds true and I plan to apply this commonality to the three conspiracy theories I will further analyze in this paper.

Another integral notion when discussing conspiracy theories is threat to democracy. Hofstadter argues that conspiracy theories can contribute to a pathological threat to democracy; however, Fenster disagrees with this notion. Fenster states, “Even if it [conspiracy theory] *can* constitute a pathological threat to democracy, then, conspiracy theory does not necessarily do so,” (Fenster, 1999). Fenster furthers his argument by saying that although we *prefer* rational thinking and less divisiveness when it comes to politics, this does not mean conspiracy theories that do not offer rational thinking or logical arguments pose a threat to our preferences. Fenster, unlike Hofstadter, says that conspiracy theories do not pose a threat to political discourse, but actually may be a “necessary part of capitalism and democracy,” (Fenster, 1999). Fenster essentially says that one has the right to question the government, even in the form of conspiratorial thinking and that this may actually help democracy flourish, while Hofstadter says the opposite. In short, there are two sides to the argument; one that believes conspiracy theories are good for democracy and the other that sees these theories as threats to democracy. This particular argument is where Hofstadter and Fenster differ greatly, the former believes conspiracy theories do pose a threat to rational thinking and argumentation in political discourse, while the other believes conspiracy theory may be a necessary aspect of democracy.

b. Perception of Conspiracy Theories

The previous section offers two main definitions of conspiracy theories, as well as examples of different types of conspiracy theories and whether these theories threaten the climate of political discourse in the United States. To further an argument from Fenster, it is crucial to view conspiracy theory through the lens of political beliefs. Fenster argues that defining conspiracy theories as a set of political beliefs allows one to analyze the theory in a more normative sense, one that simply labeling pathological or extremist cannot achieve (Fenster, 1999).

The way one defines politics is inherent in understanding how one analyzes the sociological effects of conspiracy theories in politics. Hofstadter often looked at politics as symbolic, “Since these studies have to do with our political culture as a whole... they are more centrally concerned with the symbolic aspect of politics than with the formation of institutions and the distribution of power,” (Fenster, 1999). In other words, and as Fenster reiterates, Hofstadter’s interpretation of politics and the public’s involvement in politics was driven by the ability of the public to lead political discourse at any given time, through “appropriating, reshaping and ‘working’ on the political,” (Fenster, 1999).

Academics have criticized Hofstadter’s argument because of its simplicity; however, he certainly led other academics into considering the threat of conspiracy theories in American politics. Hofstadter’s work began the conversation in this realm of research and certainly contributed to one lens of analysis that could be useful when researching conspiracy theories. Now that two principal definitions of conspiracy theories have been established, and the

framework for how one defines politics--either as a set of beliefs or as a form of paranoia--has been clarified, this paper will move on to another section. The subsequent section determines how conspiracy theories will be viewed throughout the rest of this work and adopts some of the arguments from Fenster as well as establishes the original argument of this work.

For the purposes of my research, I will side with some of Fenster's arguments and his definition of conspiracy theories for a few reasons. First, I agree with Fenster in the sense that Hofstadter's explanation of conspiracy theories, although valuable, is too simplistic for a full analysis of the factors that contribute to the start and spread of political conspiracy theories. Since Fenster's argument is a bit more modern, I believe it will be more applicable to the conspiracy theories that I analyze, many of which include technology as a means of proliferating conspiracy theories and are set within the modern political climate. Although I will be using a number of Fenster's arguments and definitions, I will be arguing in opposition to Fenster's claim that conspiracy theories do not threaten political discourse. I will be arguing that conspiracy theories do threaten political discourse and as a result, the spread and normalization of conspiracy theories also pose a threat to the democratic values and processes in the United States.

Considering this, I do not intend to frame conspiracy theorists as "nuts" or "extremists" throughout this work. The conspiracy theories that I will further analyze throughout this thesis will contain components of the classic conspiracy "nut"; however, I would like to frame these beliefs as rational because many of these beliefs come from lack of transparency in government, as Fenster argued (Fenster, 1999). Influences such as lack of transparency, distrust in government officials and political polarization have all widened the gap between political

parties, and subsequently created an influx of fringe movements, which is why I will be framing the thought process of those who believe these conspiracy theories as rational.

It is also important to keep in mind that conspiracy theorists exist on a spectrum or continuum. Some conspiracy theorists are invested in theories that support unfounded claims and seem to be completely irrational. Other conspiracy theorists are rational and logical in their thinking. In other words, some conspiracy theories have more “evidence” than others, which makes it easier for one to rationalize the theory itself. Some conspiracy theories are used as evidence for others. For example, the uncovering of the CIA’s MKUltra project, where human subjects were used in various mind control experiments, is one example of how other conspiracy theories about the intentions of the CIA may be more rational due to this past wrongdoing (Editors, 2017). This false rationalization often leads conspiracy theorists to cite one another as credible sources. However, some conspiracy theories, such as the simulation theory, which claims our reality is actually a simulation and that we are being controlled, have absolutely no prior knowledge or influence that would make it rational to believe (Thomas, 2019). It is important that throughout this work one places belief in conspiracy theories on a spectrum, as there are many different levels of conspiracy theory belief as well as a plethora of motives for dismissing or believing in a specific conspiracy theory.

Despite the misunderstanding of how conspiracy theories are portrayed, it is necessary to view individuals mainly as rational thinkers. The sociological and psychological causes that lead one to believe in fringe conspiracy theories will be elaborated on further in this work.

There are many factors that influence the beginning and the spread of conspiracy theories. These include, but are not limited to: groupthink, political psychology, polarization and

technology. It is critical to keep in mind that this work will not take into account all of the factors that influence an individual to believe in a conspiracy theory. However, this work will focus on the *main* contributors that are consistent amongst various conspiracy believers and theories. The following section will debate the definition of democracy and answer the question that was briefly posed prior: do conspiracy theories negatively affect democracy in the United States, or are they a necessary part of democracy and healthy political discourse?

c. Defining Democracy

As Political Scientist Robert Dahl says, “‘democracy’ has meant different things to different people at different times and places,” (Dahl, 1998). This poses a challenge to how democracy should and will be defined throughout this work. Considering there are various perceptions of democracy, it will become clear which democratic processes and values will be prioritized in this work and will act as the framework in which the following conspiracy theories will be analyzed. Dahl argues that there are five criteria that must be met in order to classify a democratic process. These are as follows: effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda and inclusion of adults (Dahl, 1998).

Each of the five criteria can be expanded upon. Effective participation can be further explained as individuals having the ability and “equal and effective” opportunity to make their views known on certain policies (Dahl, 1998). Voting equality demands every member has an “equal and effective” opportunity to vote and that all votes are counted equally. Enlightened understanding can further be understood as “equal and effective” opportunities for learning about all policy options and their consequences. Control of the agenda means democracy gives

individuals the ability to decide what is on the policy and political agenda. This means that policies are always open and can change. Finally, inclusion of adults simply states that, “adult permanent residents should have the full rights of citizens that are implied by the first four criteria,” (Dahl, 1998). These five criteria give a brief understanding of what a democratic process implies. However, there are a multitude of other reasons as to why democracy has become so popular. As Dahl answers in his work *On Democracy*, “why democracy?” is a common question.

Dahl answers this question with ten advantages of democracy. The first of these ten reasons is that democracy can often prevent cruel government intentions and does not allow for an individual to hold all the power, but rather allows for power to be distributed among leaders and constituents. Further, citizens are granted many more rights under a democratic framework as opposed to other types of government, which inherently protects the interests of individuals. Third, Dahl states that, “only a democratic government can provide maximum opportunity for persons to exercise the freedom of self-determination,” or, in other words, have the freedom to express themselves in a variety of ways (Dahl, 1998). Next, democratic institutions and governments are seen as morally responsible as opposed to governments with a single non-democratic ruler that oftentimes deprives individuals of basic human rights in order to obtain absolute power. Fifth, Dahl says democracy allows humans to develop “more fully” than any other alternative. Democratic governments also promote political equality, usually do not fight against one another in wars, and are oftentimes more prosperous than their nondemocratic counterparts (Dahl, 1998).

Dahl's definition is important within the academic debate over defining democracy; however, there are other scholars who have studied the definition of democracy as well as possible threats to democracy. Following Dahl's definition, this work will look at Arend Lijphart and his work, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, as well as Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky and their work, *How Democracies Die*.

Dahl's definition certainly entails a variety of aspects that can help identify and explain democracy. However, Lijphart adds a few critical components of democracy that would be useful to the academic debate over the definition of democracy. Lijphart says that democracy is essentially interchangeable with Dahl's notion of "polyarchy," or the process of democratization that includes participation of many leaders (Keman, 2015). Further, Lijphart offers a definition of democracy when he writes, "it is not a system of government that fully embodies all democratic ideals, but one that approximates them to a reasonable degree," (Lijphart, 1977). Lijphart also expands his definition to political stability, stating that a stable democratic regime has a high probability of remaining democratic, with a low level of civil violence. Lijphart's work focuses more on consociational democracy, that is, power sharing within democracy (Lipjhart, 1977).

Lijphart's contribution to the definition of democracy and the notion of political stability and how it contributes to the strength of a democratic regime, is invaluable to the debate. Further, it is striking that Lijphart makes the argument that democratic ideals may be approximated, but are not fully embodied within democratic regimes. The discrepancies between Lijphart and Dahl's definitions of democracy truly show different perspectives regarding the concept of democracy and how it may be an ever-changing concept. However, it can be argued

that Lijphart and Dahl do agree that there are some ideals that would always be present within a democratic regime.

That being said, it is critical to recognize that certain aspects of democracy may not be implemented in the same way or as strongly in all democracies. This leads to the important differentiation between types of democracies. Although there are various types of democracies that are implemented as political systems in countries around the world, this next section will focus on one type of democracy that will be critical throughout this work, as it will be a part of the framework in which democracy in the United States is analyzed through. This type of democracy is called liberal democracy.

d. Liberal Democracy

To introduce liberal democracy, it is simplest to explain the fundamental beliefs of liberalism and compare and contrast these beliefs with the above definition(s) of democracy. Liberalism is explained in simplest terms as a political philosophy that believes politics and political institutions should act as entities that facilitate free choice of the individual (Redhead & Hood, 2017). This aspect is critical when understanding liberalism, as liberalism is all about freedom of the individual. This idea is the main crux of liberalism; however, this individual freedom is understood with limitations. Examples of limitations could include the idea that individuals cannot act freely if they are harming others. Despite its limitations, liberalism aims to give the individual as much freedom to express themselves as possible.

As Fenster argues, conspiracy theories may be a critical part of democracy, as they give individuals the ability to question events, their government and more (Fenster, 1999). However,

as will be shown later in this work, many conspiracy theories can cause harm to others, whether that is social, psychological or physical harm. Despite the argument presented in this work, it is important to recognize the argument that believes conspiracy theories are beneficial in democracy and how that argument fits in with the idea of liberalism.

Now that the counterargument has been established and the main concept of liberalism has been made clear, it is useful to cross-examine the aforementioned notions of liberalism and democracy. Democratic decision making is an aspect of democracy that overlaps with liberalism in both a positive and negative way. On one hand, the democratic election process allows individuals to vote as equals. However, democratic decision-making risks tyranny of the majority, allowing for illiberal suppression for individuals to express their personal and political beliefs (Whelan, 2018). Democracy and liberalism both prioritize political equality as well as human rights and political rights. The two also have similar foundations, with both liberal and political equality extending to the individual under the framework of democracy and liberalism.

Moreover, there are basic freedoms in democracy that align with the beliefs of liberalism. These include, but are not limited to: freedom of speech and press, freedom of association, personal rights and privacy (Redhead & Hood, 2017). When reading the conspiracy theories that are analyzed in this work, one should think of them within the context of a liberal democracy in order to see how conspiracy theories can act as a threat to some of the most critical components of both liberalism and democracy.

Finally, we need to know what is harmful to democracy. The following part of this section on democracy will summarize the main arguments from Ziblatt and Levitsky in their book, *How Democracies Die*. The co-authors believe that the ‘erosion of norms’ is the greatest

threat to democracy today (Ziblatt & Levitsky, 2018a). Throughout their book, Ziblatt and Levitsky focus on key authoritarian behaviors that show the beginning of the deterioration of a democracy. The behaviors are: rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game, denial of the legitimacy of political opponents, toleration or encouragement of violence and readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents, including media (Ziblatt & Levitsky, 2018a). The co-authors also wrote an opinion article in *The Guardian*, which reiterated their focus on “mutual toleration” and “institutional forbearance,” two norms that they argue have been chipped away since the last year of the Obama presidency (Ziblatt & Levitsky, 2018b). The co-authors define mutual toleration as, “the understanding that competing parties accept one another as legitimate rivals,” and institutional forbearance as, “the idea that politicians should exercise restraint in deploying their institutional prerogatives,” (Ziblatt & Levitsky, 2018b). Although the two argue that many of these values have been undermined during Trump’s presidency, they do make it clear that President Trump is not going to single-handedly ruin democracy in the United States, but that he has set a precedent of failing to follow democratic norms, which may lead to exacerbated erosion of democratic norms in the future. One of the most prominent norms that Trump fails to follow is his consistent spreading of conspiracy theories on social media, which leads to the spread of misinformation among the public, yet another example of how conspiracy theories can lead to the erosion of democratic norms.

Considering the above discussion of democracy, it is imperative to understand the most critical parts of democracy and also the threats to democracy. While reading this work, one should prioritize liberal values of expression of free choice by the individual, as well as the democratic value of political equality. Further, we consider a more recent notion that has been a

core value of democracy: trust in government. Trust in government is the most important variable of this framework to keep in mind. Finally, one should read this work through the lens of Ziblatt and Levitsky, where the beginning of the end of democracy lies in the erosion of democratic values (Ziblatt & Levitsky, 2018a). From the debate above and for the purposes of this research, it is critical for one to follow the framework aforementioned in order to clearly see how conspiracy theories do, in fact, offer a threat to democracy.

II. Birtherism

Conspiracy theories contribute to mass paranoia and can also occasionally cause countries to take an isolationist approach to international policy, as seen in the common theme of anti-immigration, specifically in the United States. Hofstadter discusses this notion of isolationism and fear of immigration, which has been a prevalent fear in the United States for decades. Hofstadter writes, “the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others,” (Hofstadter, 1964). Sometimes, conspiratorial thinking is aimed at a group of individuals that seemingly pose a “threat” to another group of people, which means political conspiracy theories do not always have to be aimed at a political party or figure, but rather they can be used to push forward a policy agenda, as exemplified by anti-immigrant legislation.

When Hofstadter discusses that the paranoid style can be directed, “against a nation, a culture [or] a way of life,” one begins to see how mass paranoia, which usually results from

conspiracy theories, can legitimately influence policy decisions. We even see this example in modern times under the Trump Administration. President Donald Trump has created a narrative that is not based in fact but rather on the over-exaggeration of individual cases and specific circumstances. A prime example of this type of thinking is when Trump labeled Hispanics as “rapists and murderers,” (Jacobs, 2018). Trump’s claims subsequently caused mass paranoia in the United States, which was certainly unwarranted as only a small percentage of those seeking asylum in the United States from other countries could even be considered dangerous. Further, the notion that immigrants cause more crimes than natural born citizens has not been supported by recent research (Ousey & Kubrin, 2018). However, Trump’s remarks made it sound as though a large percentage of those seeking asylum posed a threat. This shows how conspiracy theories and misinformation exacerbate already existing racial tensions in the United States and how they can be used as blanket assumptions for groups of people, as well as aid in causing mass paranoia within a country.

Many of these conspiracy theories are driven by racism, as shown in particular with the birther conspiracy theory that targeted former President Barack Obama. In order to expand on the blatant racism that is a result of mass paranoia targeted at minority groups, the next section will briefly explain white identity politics and race relations in the United States.

a. Birtherism and Race Relation Theory

The statement “President Barack Obama was born in the United States” has not always been, and still is not, considered an inarguable fact by some individuals. Although many may see

the aforementioned statement as a fact, the birtherism movement challenged the claim that Barack Obama was born in the United States.

Despite serving as President of the United States for two terms, some individuals still argued that the past president was not born in America. The skepticism surrounding Barack Obama's birth origins is deemed "birtherism," by which individuals who question the origins of the past president are deemed "birthers" (Drop & Nyhan, 2016). This conspiracy theory is one of many examples that fall under fringe political movements and racism in America, two broader topics that will be examined throughout this section of the work. Throughout the close analysis of the birtherism conspiracy theory, this section will begin with a brief historical recount of racism and xenophobia in the United States, as well as an understanding of how political ideology and party affiliation may influence one's belief in the aforementioned statement.

In order to contextualize the birtherism conspiracy regarding former president Barack Obama, one can look to Hofstadter's historical recount of ethnic, religious and racial conspiracy theories. Hofstadter writes,

"In the history of the United States one finds it, for example, in the anti-Masonic movement, the nativist and anti-Catholic movement, in certain spokesmen for abolitionism who regarded the United States as being in the grip of a slaveholders' conspiracy, in many writers alarmed by mormonism, in some Greenback and Populist writers who constructed a great conspiracy of international bankers, in the exposure of a munitions makers' conspiracy of the First World War, in the popular left-wing press, in the contemporary American right wing, and on both sides of the race controversy today, among White Citizens Councils and Black Muslims," (Hofstadter, 1964)

Hofstadter discusses xenophobia and racism in the above quotation, implying the fear and isolation that is also present in the birther conspiracy against Obama (Hofstadter, 1964).

However, there is new scholarship on racism and race relations that can be applied to past xenophobic conspiracy theories or the current birther conspiracy theory.

Birther claims, not only those about Obama, but about the origins of any individual, are racist claims. These claims are racist because birtherism inherently questions the origins of an individual, usually someone of a minority race, assuming that they simply cannot be natural born citizens of the United States. This is prominently shown in the birther conspiracy with Obama and sheds light on racial tensions in America.

To many, these birther accusations are unwarranted, especially after a birth certificate is published. However, the birther conspiracy leads to an overarching race relation theory in political science that is studied in Ashley Jardina's work, *White Identity Politics*. This theory is applicable to not only the Birtherism conspiracy, but also conspiracy theories like QAnon, which will be analyzed later in the work. In Jardina's work, she writes how whites will become the minority race in the United States by 2043 (Jardina, 2019). For many white people, even those who see their white race as a critical part of their identity, this fact is neither surprising nor fear-invoking. On the other hand, there are some whites who believe in white supremacy and white nationalism, that are absolutely terrified by this projected demographic change (Jardina, 2019). While the majority of whites do not fall into this extremist category, it certainly lends to a hypothesis as to why alt-right fringe movements are suddenly becoming more prevalent in the sense that they have gained more attention in the media (MacFarquhar & Goldman, 2020). When analyzing Jardina's findings, one can see that some, specifically those who take pride in their white racial identity or are white supremacists, would see Obama as a threat. An individual who is different from the stereotypical white male presidents we have had can be seen as threatening

to a white supremacist voter. This led to birther claims which undermined the eligibility of President Obama's campaign and status, an attack on what some whites saw as a threat to America and their individual identities.

b. Racism in America and The Beginning of The Birther movement

Birther claims against Obama were completely unfounded, as President Obama proved his citizenship through providing his birth certificate to the public, which clearly stated he was born in Hawaii (Silverleib, 2011). The accusation that President Obama was born outside of the U.S. is an example of xenophobia and racism that accompanies the birther conspiracy theory. A second example similar to this comes again from current President Donald Trump, who told multiple congresswomen of color to "go back to where they came from" when these women were, in fact, American citizens (Quilantan & Cohen, 2019). This mimics birtherism because it is again an example of someone publicly questioning where an individual is from in order to demean them. These types of conspiracy theories shed light on the larger problem of racism in the United States, which is rooted in the history of our nation.

One may ask why people make these types of accusations, especially when they are against someone who is seated in arguably the most powerful position in the world, President of the United States. Unfortunately, the answer to this question is different for each individual. Some are motivated by blatant racism, others by pure ignorance.

In an article from *Vox*, the author writes that considering Obama was a Black man, with a different background from any other candidates, as well as the middle name Hussein, he was bound to be criticized by racist opponents (Lopez, 2017). The same article cites that conspiracy

theories about Obama being born elsewhere, as well as his status as a “secret muslim” were circulating at the time and continue to circulate. From a sociopolitical standpoint, one can see that this is a form of “othering,” which is defined by Colleen MacQuarrie in SAGE Journals as, “the term used to communicate instances of perpetuating prejudice, discrimination, and injustice either through deliberate or ignorant means,” (MacQuarrie, 2010). The birther conspiracy is a prime example of othering, as the assumption that on the basis of Obama’s race, individuals spoke out with allegations that he was born outside of the United States. As mentioned prior, Donald Trump has been cited as one of the most prominent birthers of the time. Even after President Obama published his official birth certificate, Trump tweeted, “An 'extremely credible source' has called my office and told me that @BarackObama's birth certificate is a fraud,” (Prokop, 2016). This is a clear example of the type of accusations that birther conspiracy theorists were making towards former President Obama.

c. The Influence of The Media

One of the common themes throughout this work will be the influence of the media and the impact the media has on the proliferation of political conspiracy theories. The birtherism conspiracy is a prime example of how the media can reinforce one’s beliefs and also how the media can exacerbate the spread of “fake news.” For context, Pew Research Center evaluated Americans’ trust in 30 news sources and surprisingly, there was a correlation between trust in media and one’s political party, similar to how political parties were correlated to whether or not an individual believed Obama was or was not born in the United States (Clinton & Roush, 2016).

The Pew survey found that Democrats trust more than distrust 22 of the 30 media sources, while Republicans distrust more than trust 20 of the 30 news sources (Jurkowitz et al, 2020).

Democrats express more trust of most news sources asked about; Republicans express more distrust

Number of sources more trusted and more distrusted for political and election news, among 30 asked about

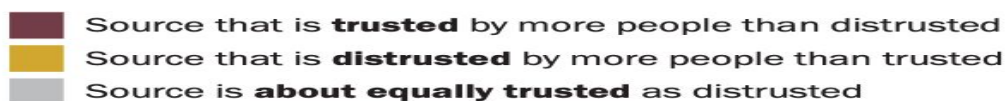
30 SOURCES:



Democrats trust
more than distrust
22 sources



Republicans distrust
more than trust 20
sources



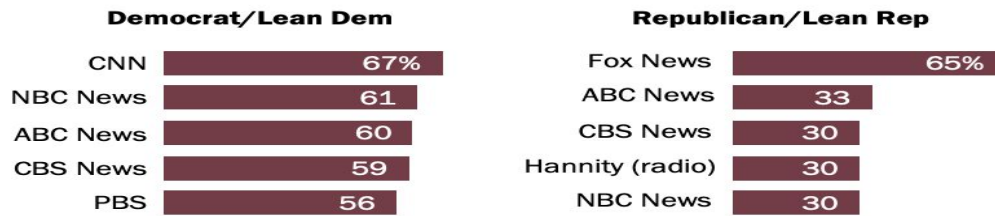
Note: Partisans include leaners.

Figure 1: Democrats trust more than distrust 22 of listed sources, while Republicans distrust more than trust 20 of listed sources. (Source: Pew Research Center)

This is critical to acknowledge, especially in the context of the birther conspiracy because many conservative news outlets made claims that Obama was born outside of the U.S. and aired Donald Trump talking about this issue on their channels. Furthermore, the study found that Republicans trusted Fox News more than any other source, a source that promoted Trump's birtherism (Jurkowitz et al, 2020).

Republicans place trust in one source, Fox News, far more than any other ...

% who trust each source for political and election news (first 5 shown)



... and rely on Fox News far more for political news

% who got political and election news from each source in the past week (first 5 shown)



Note: Order of outlets does not necessarily indicate statistically significant differences.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 29-Nov. 11, 2019.

"U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2: News sources that are preferred, based on one's political identification. (Source: Pew Research Center)

Although it is unlikely for an individual to read or view both conservative and liberal news media, the Republican leaning, conservative, media certainly reinforced the conspiracy theory about the origins of former president Obama. For this reason, media influence should not be ignored in regards to the birther conspiracy. This also brings into question the state of our democracy. If our media, often deemed a pillar of democracy, is causing greater polarization in the U.S. and is producing fake news or promoting conspiracy theories, is our democracy in danger? The following section will attempt to answer this question, which is the focus of this work.

d. Who Are The Birthers?

It is also critical to look to those at the forefront of the birther conspiracy against Obama. Current President Donald J. Trump was one of the loudest voices who questioned where President Obama was born. When individuals, such as Trump, publicly make racist comments, such as: telling congresswomen of color to “go back to where they came from” when these women were, in fact, American citizens and calling Latinx immigrants “rapists” and “murderers,” one begins to notice that this rhetoric is rooted in something more than ignorance, such as pure hatred and fear (Jardina, 2019). One cannot analyze birther conspiracy theories in-depth without addressing racism, as discussed prior. However, another concerning factor of the birtherism conspiracy is disregard for truth and fact. Some individuals continue to believe that the former president was born outside of the United States, even after Trump retracted his statements against Obama and Obama published an official birth certificate showing he was born in Hawaii (Silverleib, 2011). The interesting facet regarding disregard of fact or truth is that there is a correlation between political parties and the likelihood that one will believe Obama was born in the United States, as will be shown by research from Pew Research Center. In the following section, this paper will analyze two polls that show Republicans were more likely to believe that Obama was born elsewhere, while Democrats were more likely to believe Obama was born in the United States.

Republicans continue to believe this conspiracy at a much higher rate than Democrats. Further, according to an NBCNEWS|SurveyMonkey survey, “political knowledge” does not have a great impact on whether or not someone is likely to believe this conspiracy theory. For example, the survey reports only a couple percent difference between low political knowledge

and high political knowledge Republicans, with the largest percentage of Republicans responding “Disagree” to the statement “Barack Obama was born in the United States.”

e. Polarization and Party Affiliation

A correlation between party affiliation and belief or denial of the statement, “Barack Obama was born in the United States,” has been observed in a poll from NBC News and Survey Monkey (Clinton & Roush 2016). The poll results show that Republicans are much more likely to disagree with the aforementioned statement than Democrats. The graph below shows how varied answers to this question are depending on the political party one affiliates with.

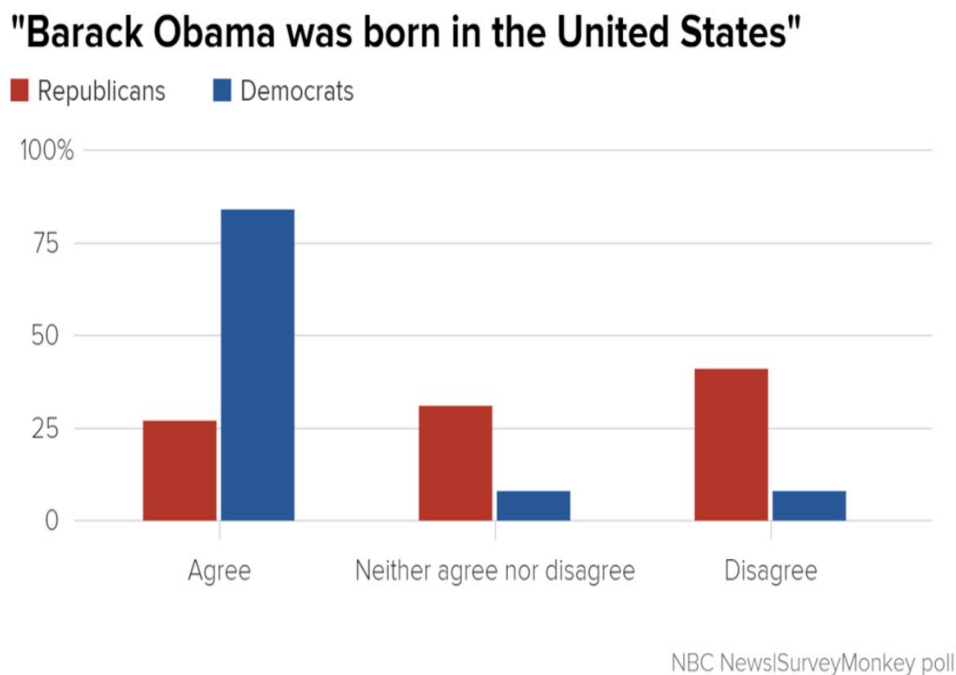


Figure 1: Responses to the statement, “Barack Obama was born in the United States,” by political party. (Source: NBCNews|SurveyMonkey)

According to the article from NBC News, “more than eight in 10 Democrats agreed with the claim, far more Republicans disagreed with the statement (41 percent) than agreed with it (27

percent),” (Clinton & Roush, 2016). Although the political partisan divide in response to this question is clear, the distinction between which Republicans were agreeing or disagreeing with the statement was not as clear. The article elaborates on the distinction between low political knowledge Republicans and high political knowledge Republicans. Political knowledge was determined by the following:

Political knowledge questions consisted of two multiple choice questions ((1) “Is the federal budget deficit—the amount by which the government’s spending exceeds the amount of money it collects—now bigger, about the same, or smaller than it was during most of the 1990s?” and (2) “On which of the following does the federal government currently spend the least?”) and one open-ended question (“For how many years is a United States Senator elected—that is, how many years are there in one full term of office for a U.S. Senator?”) (Clinton & Roush, 2016)

As a result of the questions used to determine an individuals’ political knowledge, little discrepancy was shown between the two groups, as shown below (Clinton & Roush, 2016).

"Barack Obama was born in the United States"

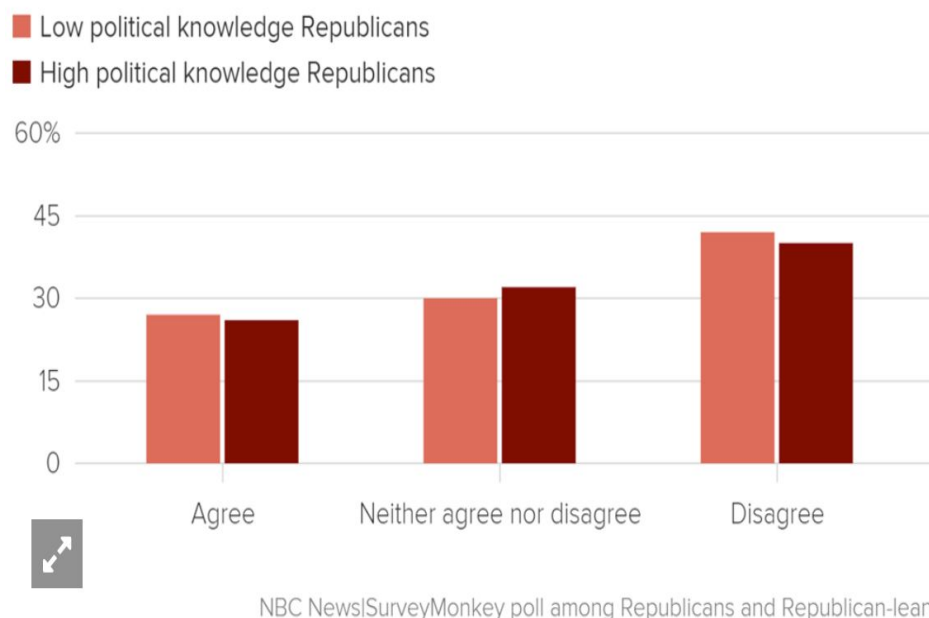


Figure 2: The graph compares answers to “Barack Obama was born in the United States,” between Republicans with low political knowledge and Republicans with high political knowledge. (Source: NBCNews|SurveyMonkey)

As shown, political knowledge was not a critical variable when deciphering between Republican answers to the proposed statement. However, the poll from NBC and Survey Monkey is not the only source that confirms Republicans were much more likely to doubt President Obama was a natural born citizen of the United States.

Levitsky and Ziblatt also cite a poll from Fox News that found, “37 percent of Republicans believed that President Obama was not born in the United States, and 63 percent said they had some doubts about his origins,” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018a). The authors elaborate more on their findings, as they cite a CNN/ORC poll that 43 percent of Republicans believed President Obama was a Muslim (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018a). In addition to this, a majority of Republicans believed Obama favored Muslim interests over those of other religions, according to a *Newsweek* poll (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018a).

This type of political movement is what Levitsky and Ziblatt cite as being a threat to democracy. They specifically discuss how the birther movement reached, “the upper ranks of the Republican Party,” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018a). The birther movement exacerbated an already polarized two-party system in the United States. “Rising partisan intolerance thus led to an erosion of institutional forbearance during the Obama years,” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018a). When partisan intolerance begins to infiltrate democratic institutions, our democracy is threatened. High ranking members of a political party acting as conspiracy theorists can also threaten our democratic norms and processes in America. The birther movement is what Levitsky and Ziblatt use to begin their further analysis on “norm-breaking,” exemplified by both Republicans and Democrats.

f. Conclusion

Despite the partisanship and polarization shown concerning birther conspiracy theories, there were certain voices that were louder than others, telling the American people that Obama's birth certificate was a fraud and that he certainly was not born in the United States. Arguably, the loudest voice of them all was current President Donald Trump's. A story by CNN published in 2016 writes, "Donald Trump's birther days are finally over," (Kreig, 2016). However, from 2011 on, Trump made claims that placed doubt in people's minds that Obama was born elsewhere. The *New York Times* reported in 2016 that at one time Trump said, "I'm starting to think that he [Obama] was not born here," (Barbaro, 2016). Even though Trump was not an authority figure at the time, he was a celebrity that was making outrageous claims that were further exacerbated by the media, as mentioned. From 2011-2016, Trump was seen as the individual leading the birther movement. His narrative changed, however, during the 2016 presidential election against Hillary Clinton, whom he ended up blaming for beginning the birther conspiracy against Obama. Trump tweeted on Sept. 22, 2015, "Just remember, the birther movement was started by Hillary Clinton in 2008. She was all in!" (Prokop, 2016). Hillary Clinton did not promote the birther conspiracy at all, which led Trump to make these allegations without any solid evidence. This further exacerbated party polarization and led to misinformation about Clinton and her campaign.

Birtherism; however, was not the only conspiracy theory that concerned a presidential candidate. The next section will analyze conspiracy theories surrounding the 2012 Benghazi attack and Hillary Clinton's emails, another theory that was used as a tactic by Trump and members of the Republican Party to undermine Clinton and target prominent leaders of the

Democratic Party. In the next section, it is important to keep in mind the prior themes of polarization, trust in government and the possible threat that conspiracy theories can create in regards to democracy. These conspiracy theories show the growing political polarization between parties that has been present for decades.

III. Benghazi

Four Americans were killed in Benghazi, Libya after the United States had increased its presence in Libya as a result of its failing government. The attack on an American consulate took place in September of 2012 and four Americans were killed: Ambassador Chris Stevens, State Department employee Sean Smith, and CIA security contractors Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty (Beauchamp, 2015). Although the attack may seem straightforward, there was much debate about whether the attack was considered terrorism, what the cause of the attack was and how former President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton conducted themselves after the attack occurred. This section will give a brief summary of key events that caused controversy surrounding the attack, then the section will focus on various conspiracy theories that came about as a result of certain events and conduct.

After the attack occurred, the Obama Administration stated that the attack was a result of a nearby mob who was protesting an anti-Islamic film. However, this was later determined to be incorrect after an investigation by the CIA, which concluded that the tragedy was a result of a premeditated militant group who targeted the four Americans (Beauchamp, 2015). The allegation that the attack happened spontaneously, and the later determination that the attack was an intentional terrorist attack brought about the question of whether or not the attack could have

been prevented (CNN Editorial Research, 2020). This was one of the main reasons as to why many Americans questioned former President Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's intentions. Both Obama and Clinton were under great scrutiny for contradicting the categorization of the attack, which led to many accusations against them by Republican officials. The accusations were mainly about their alleged cover up of the situation and manipulation of facts to make it seem as though the administration did everything in its power to stop the attack (Beauchamp, 2015). Many thought the attack could have been prevented and that Obama and Clinton were covering up their wrongdoings, especially since it was discovered that the consulate was easily accessible and that there was a lack of police support in the initial response to the attack (Stephen, 2013). The allegations also were believable because many thought Clinton would run for president in the next election and that Clinton and Obama would not want their mistakes to ruin Clinton's chances of a successful presidential campaign. Clinton's conduct became most questionable when she used a private email server in place of her government email server. This led to public outrage that she could have been sharing confidential security information on an easily hackable server (CNN Editorial Research, 2020). Although this will be expanded upon shortly, these emails led to multiple investigations into Clinton's conduct, one of which was conducted by the FBI (Beauchamp, 2015). It was later determined that there was no confidential information shared on Clinton's private server, after hours of hearings by the Benghazi committee in 2015 (Herszenhorn, 2016).

Vox reports that the investigation into the Benghazi attack considered three central questions: "whether the Benghazi mission was sufficiently protected, whether the US failed to stop the attack when it could have, and whether the administration covered up the truth about the

attack's origins," (Beauchamp, 2015). The final question in the investigation is one that seemingly sparked many conspiracy theories: was the Obama Administration telling the truth? The potential failure of the Obama Administration made the American people question the state of international policy and political conduct in the United States. The aftermath of the attacks proved to be ammunition for the Republicans to use against Hillary Clinton throughout the 2016 presidential campaign.

Although there were many moving parts to the Benghazi conspiracy, Media Matters breaks down the myths and facts surrounding Benghazi. There were a variety of accusations against Clinton, from her using a private email server in violation of State Department procedures to her faking of illness in order to avoid testifying. Despite there being many different accusations against Clinton in regards to her conduct during and after the attack, this section of the work will focus on three main accusations: Clinton's conduct and email server, the use of diversionary tactics and altered documents (Suen & Kittel, 2016). Overall, these conspiracy theories show that there is a lack of trust in government, which will be shown further in the next subsection that analyzes conspiracy theories about the Benghazi attack, which led to multiple investigations and a subsequent hours long hearing.

a. Emails, Diversion Tactics and Altered Documents

The main conspiracy theories surrounding the Benghazi attack are aimed at Clinton's use of a private email server, diversion tactics to redirect the public's focus, Clinton faking health issues and documents that were altered by the government. The foundations of these conspiracy

theories, presented next, exhibit a blatant distrust surrounding the government's handling of the attack.

The first conspiracy theory in this section concerns diversion tactics. The first “myth” under this category, as mentioned by Media Matters, is “Clinton’s Mention of Controversial Anti-Islam Video Was A ‘Diversion Tactic’” (Suen & Kittel, 2016). This myth concerns Eric Bolling and Sean Hannity of Fox News attacking the Obama Administration for citing an anti-Islam film as the reason for the attack. Bolling called the anti-Islamic video that was claimed to be the reason for the attack “an obscure movie” and that “Clinton mind-numbingly doubled down on this diversion tactic today,” (Suen & Kittel, 2016). Further, Hannity said, “that ‘Clinton rant[ed] about a phantom movie that may or may not exist,’” (Kaplan, 2015). This is a prime example of how conspiracy theories and unfounded allegations can sway the media to act as partisan entities. In this case, news organizations proliferated misinformation to the public, which led many to believing that the intentions of the government were untrustworthy.

As mentioned prior, many did not trust the conduct surrounding the attack, as people believed Clinton and Obama were covering for one another. Clinton’s conduct and subsequent investigations and hearings were subsequently weaponized by Trump and the Republican party during the 2016 election, despite the Benghazi Committee concluding Clinton was not guilty of there was no misconduct (Herszenhorn, 2016).

Similarly, there was a minor conspiracy theory about Benghazi that concerned altered documents. The conspiracy is that, “Clinton’s State Department Scrubbed Key Benghazi Documents,” however, there is no proof that critical documents were scrubbed or altered (Suen & Kittel, 2016). Although it was proven in the hearings that documents were not altered, this is

similar to the diversion tactic conspiracy theory as it shows there can be great discrepancy between the media and factual evidence that is concluded within our democratic structures and processes, such as hearings and investigations.

A second conspiracy theory concerning the Benghazi attack is that, “Clinton Faked Health issues to delay testifying over [the Benghazi] attack,” (Suen & Kittel, 2016). This was seen in two prominent examples from Fox News, which reported that “Clinton Did a ‘Duck and Cover’ to get out of testifying to congress by claiming she had a concussion” and suggesting, “Clinton was faking ‘diplomatic illness’ to avoid testifying about Benghazi,” (Suen & Kittel, 2016). These claims show how misinformation can infiltrate the mainstream media and that it is now acceptable to allege various explanations for events, even without solid evidence. On the topic of lack of trust in government, these conspiracy theories would likely not exist if there was strong trust in government. This is also proven by the fact that governments often take conspiracy theories more seriously than one may think. Kathryn Olmsted expands on this idea in her book *Real Enemies*, she writes of conspiracy theories about Pearl Harbor, World War II and 9/11. Olmsted says, “In all of these cases, government officials took the conspiracy theory seriously enough to investigate it,” (Olmsted, 2019).

Finally, the most popular conspiracy theory, and one that was used against Clinton during her presidential campaign, was one that claimed she was receiving “classified” or “top secret” information on her private email server as a means to cover-up information about the attack (Beauchamp, 2016). However, this theory has since been debunked as none of the emails were marked as top secret or classified that she received on her personal email server (Herszenhorn, 2016). Although there may have been misconduct with using a private server for government

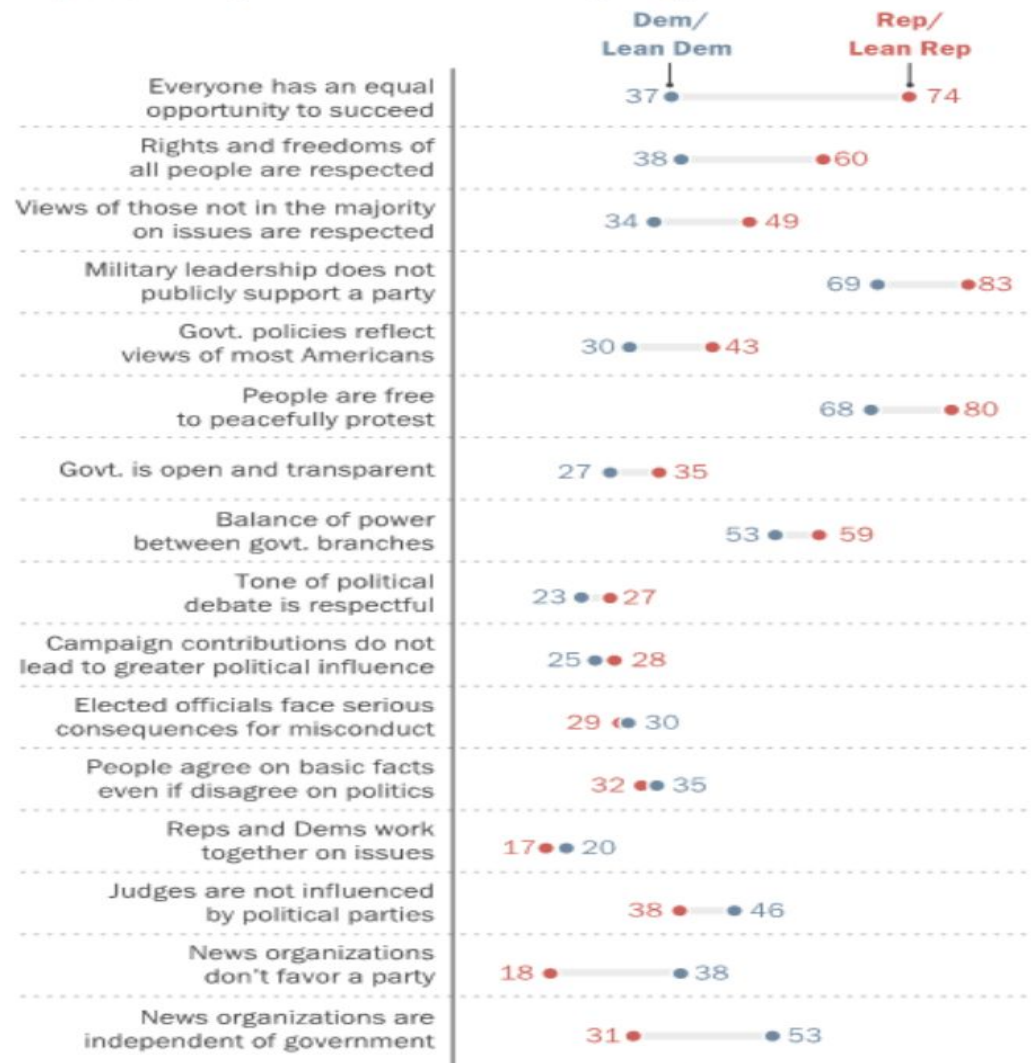
work, the previously mentioned conspiracy theories show that people are willing to believe similar theories in which there is no evidence to support them. In the next subsection under the umbrella of the Benghazi conspiracy theory, this work will dive deeper into why people believe conspiracy theories, even when there is evidence that proves those theories to be incorrect.

b. Decline of Trust in Government

The key argument of this work is that conspiracy theories are threatening American democracy. This notion has been supported through the collection of data by massive databases such as Pew Research Center and Gallup. This section discusses how conspiracy theories exacerbate existing partisan polarization and mistrust in government. I will then tie in the aforementioned conspiracy theories surrounding the Benghazi attack. The first facet of this argument is answering the question of what are the democratic values that are being threatened and how do conspiracy theories further aggravate this threat? In the figure below, Pew Research Center takes a look at several important democratic values and where the two members of major political parties stand in agreement or disagreement with how well the particular aspect is implemented in the United States. With criticism from both sides and further partisan polarization, it is difficult for democratic processes, such as lawmaking, to work effectively. There are a few of these values to focus on, namely, that rights and freedoms of all people are respected, the government is open and transparent, news organizations are independent of the government and news organizations do not favor a political party. These variables were chosen because they align with Dahl's definition of democracy and the academic debate surrounding democracy and liberalism in the United States.

Wide partisan gaps in views of some aspects of political system, criticism from both parties on others

% of ____ who say each describes the country *very/somewhat well* ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 29- Feb. 13, 2018.

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Figure 1: Shows what percentage of Democrats and Republicans believe that the listed aspects are implemented well/poorly in the United States. (Source: Pew Research Center, "The Public, the Political System and American Democracy," 2018)

The above figure shows that parties disagree about how well democratic values are implemented in the United States. It is important to look at the final two aspects of "news organizations don't favor a party" and "news organizations are independent of the government." These two aspects from the figure above show the discrepancy between Republicans and

Democrats and how the two view the implementation of these aspects in the United States. This is useful especially in the discussion of Benghazi and the role of the media in spreading conspiracy theories.

Although it is important to point out the partisan gap in the figure above, it is more useful to focus on the list of aspects that is provided. In the context of Benghazi conspiracy theories, one should draw their attention to the values of “Govt. is open and transparent” and, as mentioned, “news organizations don’t favor a party,” (“The Public, the Political System and American Democracy,” 2018).

The first of these values is that the government is open and transparent. Although Clinton and Obama could have been telling the truth about their conduct surrounding the Benghazi attacks, conspiracy theories created a sense of paranoia for some that then led to doubt about the administration’s trustworthiness and transparency during this time. Further, this value needs some clarification. There are certain aspects of government that should not be public knowledge, as the information could threaten United States security. However, possible misconduct that occurred before and after the Benghazi attack led many to believe that the government was not being open and transparent at the time. Mistrust in the government and doubt in this situation can be attributed in part to conspiracy theories, like the ones mentioned prior, as they created a new narrative that Clinton and Obama were covering up wrongdoings on their part, leading the public to believe their government was not open and transparent when the government very well could have been.

Next, one must focus on politicization of the news media. In the above chart, there is a wide gap between parties in agreeing or disagreeing with this statement. However, the media

coverage of the Benghazi attacks shows a clear partisan line. Conservative news outlets such as Fox News began and spread theories such as Clinton was faking her illness and the Republican Party continued to weaponize Clinton's use of her private email server during her presidential campaign. Although it has been proven after an investigation that there was no misconduct surrounding the Benghazi attack, conspiracy theories were still spread by the media, showing a clear partisan stance in what should be an apolitical industry.

Despite only focusing on a few of the 16 values listed in the graphic above, it shows how conspiracy theories are a part of the deterioration of democratic values in the United States ("The Public, the Political System and American Democracy," 2018). Conspiracy theories intensify the already present political polarization through their presence in the news and politicized media as well as further distrust in government.

Distrust in government can be seen clearly in the Benghazi conspiracy theories, as Americans were quick to question both President Obama and Hillary Clinton's conduct surrounding this political tragedy. Further, the trend of trust in government has been declining since the late 90's and early 2000's, according to research from Gallup, shown in the following figures. The two categories of problems, domestic and international, have similar trends and are both on the decline.

How much trust and confidence do you have in the agencies and departments of the federal government when it comes to carrying out the functions of the federal government -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?

	Great deal	Fair amount	Not very much	None at all	No opinion	Great deal/Fair amount
	%	%	%	%	%	%
2013	10	42	36	12	1	52

GALLUP

Figure 2: Shows trust in the federal government in carrying out its functions. (Source: Gallup, 2013).

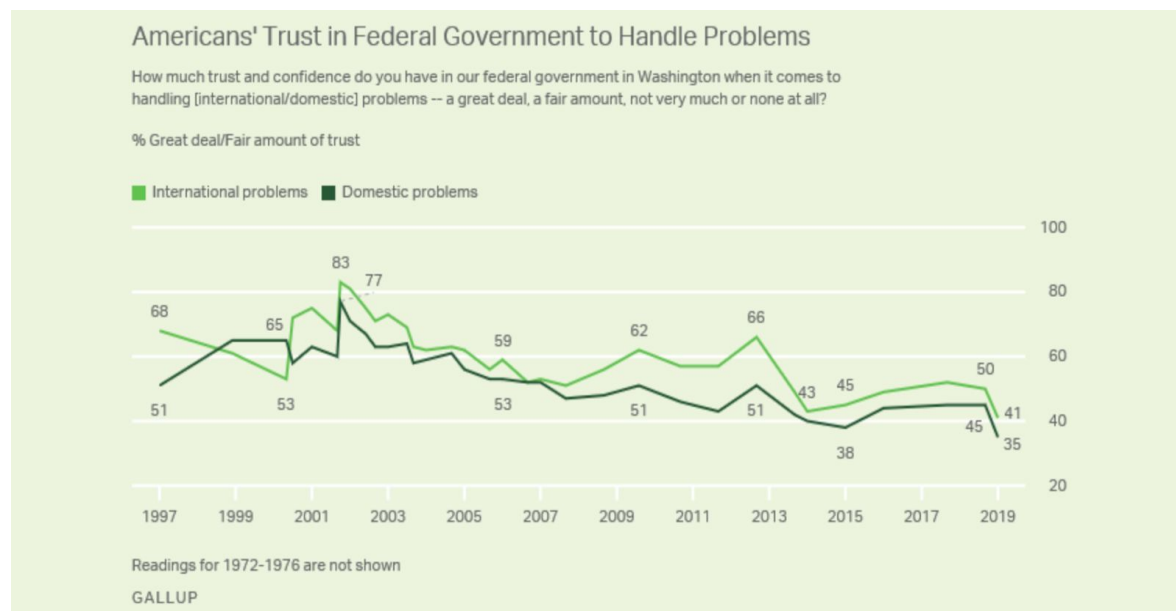


Figure 3: Shows Americans' trust in the federal government to handle international and domestic problems, with data from 1997-2019. (Source: Gallup: "Americans' Trust in Government to Handle Problems at New Low," Brennan 2019a).

The above graphics show a steady decline in trust in government, but one may wonder how conspiracy theories are relevant to this trend. Although there is no current research on the relationship, as trust in the federal government has steadily declined, reaching its lowest in 2019, the prevalence and popularity of conspiracy theories has increased, especially among

government officials. The relationship between the trends of these two variables could be grounds for future research. Also, it is important to recall that Dahl said one important facet of democracy is that it, “helps people to protect their own fundamental interests.” Does the mass paranoia that accompanies conspiracy theories help people to protect their own fundamental interests? In conclusion, it would not be beneficial for the public to constantly live in a state of paranoia about the government’s intentions. It is best to recognize the threat that decline in trust in government poses.

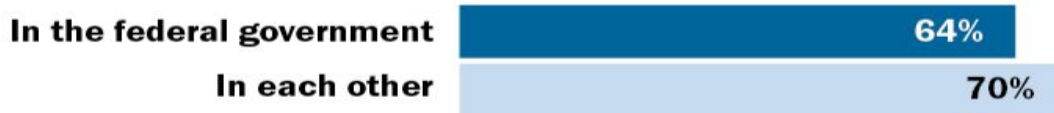
Although this data is not specific to the Benghazi conspiracy theories, it does shed light on a greater issue of mistrust. This leads not only to fear or paranoia regarding public officials and politicians, but could also make it more difficult to solve issues when parties in a democratic system are not easily trusted by the people to protect the interests of the country. When people question the ability of the government to carry out their duties, it is an indication that democracy is not strong, as referred to by the ‘erosion of norms’ idea from Ziblatt and Levitsky. The connection between distrust and the difficulty of problem-solving is shown below by another set of data from Pew (Rainie & Perrin, 2019).

Distrust makes problem-solving harder

% of adults who believe Americans' trust ____ has been shrinking



% of adults who believe Americans' low trust ____ makes it harder to solve problems



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.
"Trust and Distrust in America"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 4: Shows that distrust makes problem-solving more difficult. The above is an opinion survey on how Americans' believe trust in one another and the government has been shrinking. (Source: Pew Research Center, "Key findings about Americans' declining trust in government and each other." Rainie & Perrin, 2019.)

Figure 4 shows that American adults believe that both distrust in the federal government and in each other makes problem-solving more difficult. Now, distrust in the federal government and each other is held by a majority of Americans. How does this high level of distrust impede decision-making processes in the United States?

Bringing this all back to the Benghazi conspiracy theories, this paper will now look to the three main theories that were mentioned in the previous section and will use the data above to show the trends of distrust and threat to democracy that conspiracy theories can have.

c. The Impact of Benghazi Conspiracy Theories

The aforementioned conspiracy theories regarding the Benghazi attack impact democracy for a number of reasons. First, it is critical to recall the approaches of Hofstadter and Fenster and their understandings of conspiracy theories. Also, the trend of how conspiracy theories have moved from the fringe to the mainstream and that populist rhetoric is often present in conspiracy theories. Although Hofstadter sees conspiracy theories as a threat and Fenster does not, the two analyze the growth and proliferation of conspiracy theories in similar manners. The two discuss conspiracy theories as though they always are started by the overly-paranoid, overly-political layperson. Further, the two theorists take a “bottom-up” approach to the proliferation of conspiracy theories. Bottom-up in this context means that conspiracy theories are usually begun by the aforementioned “layperson” and usually do not infiltrate mainstream media. However, in recent years, there has been a surge in the reporting of conspiracy theories in the news, on social media and even in campaigns of lawmakers and government officials.

The concerning aspect of conspiracy theories today is that there is now a “top-down” pattern, with the individuals who begin the spread of conspiracy theories being top government officials, including current President Donald Trump. This is concerning because the government is supposed to be entrusted with proliferating accurate information to the public in order to build trust between government officials and the public. Instead, there has been a recent trend of pushing conspiracy theories, especially on social media, by those who are supposed to have the most power in the country. This in turn makes the public doubt and question the legitimacy of

the government, something that should not happen, especially in the United States, where we often claim our strong democratic values and institutions. Whereas Hofstadter and Fenster recognized that populist conspiracy theories worked from the bottom up, there is now both a “top-down” and “bottom-up” trend for conspiracy theories. With some theories beginning in online forums and being promoted by politicians at the “top” and subsequently being spread back down to the bottom. One should think of this trend as an endless loop between those who begin the theory and those who spread the theory to a new, more expansive audience.

With this, we see how the spread of conspiracy theories can affect one’s individual freedoms and rights; such as with birtherism. Birther conspiracy theories led to doubt in government officials and Benghazi further exacerbated the divide between the government and the public.

There are several examples of conspiracy theories proliferating on social media. Not only is there a website dedicated to QAnon, but our president, as aforementioned, has tweeted often about conspiracy theories. In fact, the New York Times reported that President Trump has promoted conspiracy theories in 1,710 of his tweets (Shear et al., 2019). To reiterate, one should think of Trump’s Twitter as an exchange between himself and his 78.6 million followers as an endless loop that serves to pick up conspiracy theories and proliferate them to a wider audience, an example of how both the “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches work together.

**No. of
tweets ... that**

5,889 attacked someone or something

4,876 praised someone or something

2,405 attacked Democrats

2,065 attacked investigations

2,026 praised President Trump

1,710 promoted conspiracy theories

1,308 attacked news organizations

851 attacked minority groups

758 praised or promoted Fox News and other
conservative media

570 attacked immigrants

453 attacked previous presidential
administrations

Figure 1: The above breaks down President Trump's tweets from most to least common types of tweets. (Source: Shear et al., *New York Times*, 2019)

d. How Do Conspiracy Theories Act as a Threat to Democracy?

Throughout this work I have argued that conspiracy theories are threatening democracy in the United States; however, it is important to address a common counterargument that is presented on this topic. The counterargument is free speech and the fact that conspiracy theories are a means of expressing oneself and their ability to question government leaders. But, this notion is not necessarily being argued against in this work. The response to the free speech argument is that in the three case studies presented in this work, government officials or media personnel have been involved in starting, proliferating or promoting various conspiracy theories, and this is where conspiracy theories become an issue. This work is not arguing that it is wrong to question the intentions of government, or other officials, industries or events. However, it is when sources of information are no longer reliable and proliferate misinformation to the public that conspiracy theories truly pose a threat.

To expand, one must recall the earlier argument of how conspiracy theories have changed in recent years. The prior argument states that conspiracy theories have ultimately moved out of the fringe sidelines of society and into the mainstream media and social media platforms. Not only have conspiracy theories changed in this sense, but they have also become more accusatory of our own government officials in recent years, as shown by the birtherism and Benghazi conspiracy theories. Kathryn Olmsted, author of *Real Enemies*, writes about this shift in conspiracy theories and argues that “American conspiracy theories underwent a fundamental transformation in the twentieth century,” (Olmsted, 2019). Olmsted also writes that, “No longer were conspiracy theorists chiefly concerned that alien forces were plotting to capture the federal

government; instead, they proposed that the federal government itself *was* the conspirator,” (Olmsted, 2019).

Considering this shift, conspiracy theories have seemingly transitioned from outlandish explanations for seemingly unexplainable events to targeting specifically the federal government and its intentions. Olmsted also elaborates on this by saying that “the institutionalized secrecy of the modern U.S. government” made people question the government’s conduct more, accusing the government of various wrongdoings and mistreatment (Olmsted, 2019). “These theories argued that government officials lied to citizens, dragged the peaceable american people into foolish wars, then spied on the oppressed opponents of war,” (Olmsted, 2019). Although Olmsted explains the transition that occurred concerning conspiracy theories, there is still the aspect of how these conspiracy theories, which are often aimed at the United States government, have been proliferated by President Trump and various news sources.

These factors contribute to mass paranoia and fear that is felt by the public, which ultimately leads to greater distrust in our government. For these reasons, conspiracy theories are threatening to our state of democracy in the U.S. and may continue to grow as a threat with the continued proliferation of these theories and the spread of misinformation.

IV. QAnon

In October of 2017, an anonymous user, Q, posted on an anonymous 4Chan message board entitled, “Calm Before the Storm,” where the user later revealed their identity as a highly ranked member of the United States government (Wong, 2018). The user said that their high government ranking meant they had top security clearance, and that they knew information about

numerous politicians and internal struggles that the government was facing. Specifically, Q said they knew, “the truth about a secret struggle for power involving Donald Trump, the ‘deep state’, Robert Mueller, the Clintons, pedophile rings, and other stuff,” (Wong, 2018). Although the creators of QAnon have since been discovered to be a, “Youtube video creator and two moderators of 4Chan,” Q still has maintained a following.

Since the initial posting in 2017, QAnon has amassed a large following of individuals, most of whom are Trump supporters, who sport “Q” signs and t-shirts at Trump’s rallies (Bank et al., 2018). Although it cannot be identified who exactly Q’s followers are, based on content and commentary on the internet and as seen at Trump rallies, one can conclude that there is overlap between Q followers and Trump supporters. To understand just how large the QAnon following has become, *The New York Times* reported that, “an app called ‘QDrops’ was among the 10 most downloaded paid iOS apps in the App Store,” (Bank et al., 2018). Further, “the QAnon.pub site was created in March 2018 [and] has quickly established an audience of over seven million visits a month, according to the web analytics company SimilarWeb,” (Bank et al., 2018).

Not only has QAnon amassed attention from many, but “Q” has also sent select individuals on “missions,” that are usually threatening to Q’s enemies or the “deep state.” A well-known example of Q’s missionaries is Matthew Wright, who went to the Hoover Dam in an armored vehicle, armed with an AR-15, in order to carry out a mission from Q. *HuffPost* reports that on the day Wright was arrested for his actions he “was acting as a soldier for ‘Q,’” (Campbell, 2018). This is only one example of how QAnon has moved from online to real life, which is alarming considering the aforementioned case. There have been more cases of crimes

that have been committed under Q's influence, such as a planned kidnapping, the murdering of a mob boss and destruction of property, amongst others, as reported by *The New York Times* (McIntire & Roose, 2020).

The willingness of individuals to become hypnotized by Q's online presence and to carry out egregious crimes assigned to them by someone they do not even know is alarming in itself. It is also one of the aspects of the QAnon conspiracy theory that separates it from other types of conspiracy theorists, inciting real-world, co-conspirators. The other interesting aspect of QAnon that differentiates it from your typical conspiracy theory is that it can be thought of as a meta-conspiracy. Birther conspiracy theories focus on the origins of an individual, and the Benghazi conspiracy theories all relate back to one event; however, QAnon spreads multiple conspiracy theories about numerous people, places and events, often what is referred to as a super conspiracy (Barkun, 2013). QAnon's theories have attacked people ranging from members of the democratic party, the main targets, to celebrities like Oprah.

To understand what Q's breadcrumbs entail, below is a screen grab with three Q breadcrumbs, in order to encapsulate the complexity of this particular conspiracy theory.



Figure 1: Screenshot from QAnon website.

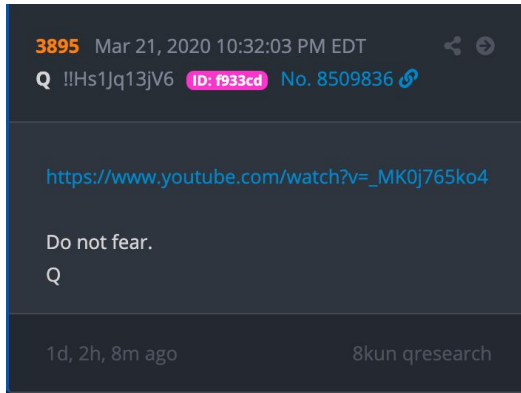


Figure 2: Screenshot from QAnon website.

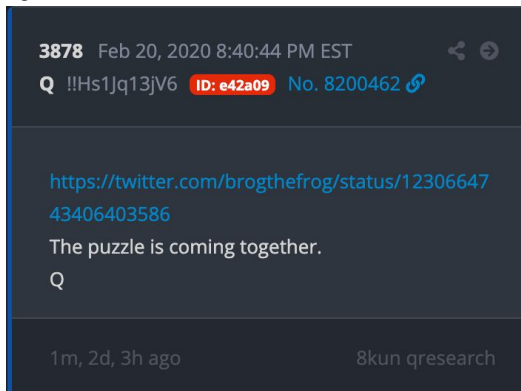


Figure 3: Screenshot from QAnon website.

Looking at the above images, it is difficult for someone who does not avidly follow Q to comprehend what these breadcrumbs mean. However, there is a clear message for Q's avid followers in these three screen grabs. The overarching message of Q and their followers is that the "deep state" is plotting against President Trump and that members of the Democratic Party make up this "deep state." The purpose of including these images is to ensure that individuals understand the content that Q produces and how these messages may have different meanings, some of which result in violent actions and crimes. In the following section, I will attempt to explain how and why conspiracy theorists, or Q's followers, seem to be entranced by their leader Q and how they make sense of messages from their leader, such as the ones above.

a. Why Follow Q?

One of the biggest questions asked by those who study both conspiracy theories as well as cults is how and why people become so devoted to certain theories or groups. For QAnon, unquestionable loyalty to an anonymous leader is exemplified by individuals like Matthew Wright. With this, there are many more personal accounts of individuals who have had entire personality changes due to their undying obsession with Q. These recounts come from an article by *VICE*, who asked for users to submit how QAnon has affected their personal relationships (Lamoureux, 2019). Certainly, it must be noted that these stories could be fabricated or exaggerated in some sense; however, I believe that these personal accounts show in part the hold that QAnon has over some of its most devoted followers.

The first story comes from a woman whose mother is in her mid-60s and has had issues with mental illness in the past. This first recount is not as drastic as others, but the woman, named Deb, recalls that she and her mother were able to, “just talk like a mother and daughter should,” but this all changed when Deb’s mother began to follow Q, which became the only thing her mother was able to talk about. The most interesting part of Deb’s story is that she writes, “We can't ignore the danger that QAnon poses for the upcoming elections; you better believe each and every one of Q's followers will be voting, including my mother who hasn't voted in an election since Nixon. They'll be voting with information that they got from a LARPer [Live Action Role Playing], and in my mind, that's worse than Russian interference.” This story again shows the threat that conspiracy theories, especially mass conspiracy theories such as QAnon, pose to our democratic systems and values in the United States. with no transparency

and low information as well as fringe conspiracy movements taking place in the United States. These movements make it difficult for people to think for themselves, especially when individuals are so easily swayed by entities like Q (Lamoureux, 2019).

The second account in this article is a submission from an individual named Jane, whose husband had a complete personality change after he began avidly following the QAnon conspiracy theory. Jane writes that although she is unsure where her husband's obsession with the conspiracy theory came from. She and her husband fought over QAnon one night and after that their relationship was never the same. Prior to her husband's personality change, the couple had been together for eight years. After their initial fight, Jane recalls coming home from work to her husband prepared to show her a QAnon video, telling Jane that, "[she'll] have to have the veil lifted from [her] eyes." Jane recalls leaving her house for 10 minutes, not looking at her phone (Lamoureux, 2019). She came back to her husband, in a state of panic, holding a shotgun. Her recount is as follows:

"When I walked through the door my husband was a mix of hysterics and anger, and pacing the house with a shotgun strapped to him. The gun wasn't there to intimidate me. It was for protection. He thought martial law was going to break out at any moment," (Lamoureux, 2019).

Again, it cannot be claimed that all individuals who follow Q have undergone a complete personality change or have become violent or brainwashed due to following the conspiracy theory; however, stories such as Jane's show the level of paranoia that can affect many individuals, especially in a time full of political polarization and mistrust in government, as shown earlier in this work. Many people take conspiracy theories such as QAnon seriously and many of the followers of these fringe conspiracy theories do not have underlying mental health

issues; while others do. Regardless, these stories show how conspiracy theories can inhibit the autonomy that an individual should expect to have in a country where liberal democracy is the framework and democratic values and systems are prided.

In each of these examples, it is shown how QAnon does not only affect the autonomy of its followers, but also those that Q followers interact with, as they have to deal with personality changes, violent actions and uncertainty. QAnon is negatively affecting individuals' autonomy and ability to think independently when it comes to politics. The next section of this work will address why people tend to believe in conspiracy theories in the first place.

b. The Sociological Perspective of QAnon

QAnon is unlike the other two conspiracy theories that are explored throughout this work, as it can be labeled a meta-conspiracy theory, which addresses various people and events through a multitude of different conspiracy theories that Q begins and spreads to their followers. Considering this meta-theory, some have compared Trump supporters and QAnon supporters to cult members, as they seem to blindly follow theories and leaders who are not legitimate, or dismiss facts and evidence as misinformation from an enemy. To elaborate on this point, one must look to Steven Hassan's work on this subject. In his book, *The Cult of Trump*, Steven Hassan relates Donald Trump to a cult leader (Hassan, 2019). One small facet of Hassan's argument is the rising popularity of QAnon. QAnon's influence quickly spread, amassing thousands of followers in a short period of time. Conspiracy theories like these have even led to individuals' personalities completely changing, as mentioned in the previous section. Further, conspiracy theories have become so mainstream that President Trump has tweeted about them

numerous times throughout his presidency. Trump has promoted conspiracy theories in 1,710 of his tweets posted on his personal Twitter account (McIntire et al., 2019). This is just one example of how conspiracy theories have infiltrated mainstream media and political rhetoric in recent years. Moreover, it is critical to acknowledge the devotion many have to President Trump. This makes Trump's followers even more likely to believe what he posts on his Twitter, even if his Tweets are filled with misinformation that is unsupported by facts and promotes conspiracy theories, which is then retweeted by his followers, reiterating the loop of proliferating conspiracy theories that was discussed briefly in section III, subsection c.

Our president, however, is not the sole example of how conspiracy theories have become normalized today. QAnon has received media attention from Fox News, Business Insider, The New York Times, BuzzFeed and other popular news sources. The amount of media coverage and overall rising popularity of QAnon begs the question whether QAnon and their followers should be considered a social movement. Throughout this section I will explain how QAnon could be considered a social movement and why that may incline people to believe in this fringe conspiracy theory. In order to explain this phenomenon, I will use the sociological mass society theory to argue that QAnon is, in fact, a social movement.

Although there are no reliable statistics on the demographics of Q followers, those that support Q publicly are majority white, male Republicans. This may lead one to ask why these individuals feel "aggrieved." I believe part of the reason is because it has been projected that by 2043, whites will be the minority race. This projection gives an updated perspective on Hofstadter's mention of racism and xenophobia in conspiracy theories (Jardina, 2019). With this projection comes the fear of losing one's racial identity, privilege and solidarity with other white

Americans. This idea is supported by Q's, "white-supremacist ideas" and "demographic narratives of 'replacement,'" (Rosenberg, 2019). As mentioned in Section II, subsection a, political scientist Ashley E. Jardina studies the fear of losing racial identity due to changing demographics, which supplements the argument as to why those who have racial and gender privileges may find a movement like QAnon appealing (Jardina, 2019). Nonetheless, the term aggrieved cannot be used to describe QAnon's followers, which is another reason why the political process model is not suitable to analyze extremist movements like QAnon.

The basis of the mass society theory is composed of three reactionary factors (Gusfield, 1994). The first is social isolation. In an age of political polarization, it is likely that those who support QAnon believe they are a minority and have been isolated by society, as referenced prior. Further, merely looking at the timeline of events that took place prior to the emergence of QAnon shows numerous reasons why supporters may have felt isolated. The first reason being the election of the first African-American President of the United States, Barack Obama. A non-white Democrat that was able to hold the highest political office title would certainly have been seen as threatening to those who support QAnon, an entity that thinks of current Democratic party leadership as part of the "deep state" out to get President Trump. Moreover, the United States became incredibly politically polarized during Obama's terms.

According to a study from the Pew Research Center, "the partisanship so evident during Obama's years is perhaps most notable because it extended far beyond disagreements over specific leaders, parties or proposals. Today, more issues cleave along partisan lines than at any point since surveys began to track public opinion," (Dimock, 2017). This supports the contention that political polarization continues today and has been increasing for years. This continued

polarization may be a factor in the social isolation QAnon followers feel. Further, the fact that Hillary Clinton won the popular vote, but the electoral vote was in favor of Trump is another example of factors alienating those who support both Trump and QAnon from today's mainstream political discourse. The progress of the Democratic party in recent years before Trump's election may have been a precursor to the isolation some QAnon followers feel.

Considering the emergence of what Hassan calls the "Cult of Trump," one may question how far an individuals' loyalty to president Trump will go (Hassan, 2019). A prominent example of this loyalty is shown by QAnon and their following. There is no way to tell how many avid followers QAnon has, but there are several cases of extreme behavior regarding Q's influence. These cases range from armed threats to complete personality changes. This behavior begs the question of how leaders, such as President Trump, are actually chipping away at democratic norms that have been in place in the United States for centuries. As we have seen the surge of authoritarian and populist leaders emerge across the globe, one must categorize Trump as such. Hassan writes, "when a leader gains psychological sway over his followers and also other politicians- members of Congress, the cabinet, and even the judiciary- the checks and balances of a healthy democracy can be stripped away," (Hassan, 2019). Hassan also discusses the threat of the internet, especially on young individuals, when it comes to conspiracy theories and far-right white supremacy groups such as QAnon. Hassan says, "through the media and the internet, people can be indoctrinated -- and even recruited -- on their smartphones and in their homes," (Hassan, 2019). Further, Hassan describes a story from Jen Senko's documentary, *The Brainwashing of my Dad*, where Senko's father listened to right-wing radio hosts for hours and his personality and political alignment changed from liberal and accepting to far-right, racist and

hateful (Hassan, 2019). Throughout this analysis of the QAnon conspiracy theory, it is critical to keep in mind how the websites one visits and the news outlets one watches or listens to can have such a great impact on that individuals' conscious and unconscious mind. In order to elaborate on the psychological and sociological effects on conspiracy theories, the next subsection will examine the Dunning-Kruger effect and how this leads to many believing in conspiracy theories that are not supported by factual evidence.

c. The Dunning-Kruger Effect

Many conspiracy theories, like QAnon, dismiss scientific and professional evidence or undermine this evidence in order to make the theory more believable. One psychological explanation of this phenomenon is the Dunning-Kruger effect (Motta et al., 2018). The Dunning-Kruger effect is explained as a phenomenon in which people believe they are smarter and more capable than they actually are (Cherry, 2019). When one believes this about themselves, the individual becomes unable to comprehend the extent of their own power. The Dunning-Kruger effect is also a form of cognitive bias, in other words, a way in which someone emphasizes or only finds evidence that will support what they already believed. Many individuals are subject to this, but the Dunning-Kruger effect is especially intriguing when considering the psychological impact of conspiracy theories, specifically conspiracy theories like QAnon. There are three factors of this psychological effect that may be useful in analyzing QAnon: the overestimation of an individuals' own skill levels, the failure to recognize the genuine skill and expertise of other people, the failure to recognize one's own mistakes and lack of skill (Cherry, 2019). Considering this, it is interesting how the individuals who follow QAnon

seem to pick who has expertise. In this case, “Q” has expertise, and the leader’s words are always right. However, doctors, scientists and politicians who are affiliated with the “deep state” have absolutely no expertise or rationale in the eyes of Q’s most avid followers.

To explain this with a recent example, in the midst of a global pandemic, groups like QAnon are accusing Dr. Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and one of the most prevalent health care professionals in the world, of being a fraud. In this example, both social media and the Dunning-Kruger effect play a critical part. The New York Times reported that they, “found over 70 accounts on Twitter that have promoted the hashtag #FauciFraud, with some tweeting as frequently as 795 times a day,” (Alba & Frenkel, 2020). Further, President Trump called the State Department the “Deep State Department” during a briefing on the pandemic. To this, QAnon continued to spread falsities about Dr. Fauci on multiple social media platforms, which exacerbated the spread of the conspiracy theories.

There are multiple important takeaways. First, we see the normalization of a conspiracy theory in the media, and even worse, in the midst of a global crisis. The willingness of prominent politicians to casually refer to conspiracy theories normalizes the theories and exposes vulnerable individuals to misinformation. Further, this example shows the prominence of social media in spreading theories. With social media acting as a means to spread conspiracy theories, it is easy to see how much of the media can be consumed by conspiracy theories that do not hold any truth. As a result of this, one must ask if the infiltration of conspiracy theories into much of the mainstream media is yet another example of the possible detriment that conspiracy theories could bring to individuals’ trust in government as well as democracy itself. Finally, from this

example we see the Dunning-Kruger effect playing a part in how many individuals dismiss professionals and undermine their work and advice, such as in the case of Dr. Fauci.

In conclusion, it can be useful to identify the potential amount of ignorance that may influence the perception of a “Q” follower, or the follower of any conspiracy theory. When one’s perception of what is trustworthy and correct information is impeded, it may be difficult for others to comprehend what seems logical to that individual. With this, the Dunning-Kruger effect and its role in conspiracy theory belief can be a helpful tool to an outsider looking in.

V. Conclusion

In the age of the “Tweeter-in-chief” and conspiracy theories infiltrating mainstream media, understanding and analyzing conspiracy theories is more critical than ever. Although this sentiment is not one felt throughout the entirety of the last decade, within the last few years, conspiracy theories have begun to control people’s lives unlike few would have expected. Conspiracy theories have moved from fringe to mainstream and are now a core part of policy making and democratic government.

Further, conspiracy theories demonstrate the politicalization of most topics in society now. Once thought of as fringe beliefs, conspiracy theories can now be used as verbal weapons that cast doubt on another political actor or party. Conspiracy theories certainly hold more weight than they have in the past, with a growing distrust in media and government and the normalization of conspiracy theories in mainstream media and social media platforms. Trump has successfully made conspiracy theories more popular and mainstream during his presidency, deterring from norms of past presidents who did not spread conspiracy theories. Considering this,

it begs the question, has Trump changed the perception of conspiracy theories in politics? I do believe Trump has changed the perception of conspiracy theories during the past four years; however, this change is reversible. It will be critical for our next leader to stop proliferating conspiracy theories to the public and instead focus on facts and government transparency. Without this shift, conspiracy theories could continue to act as the norm as they did under President Trump.

Conspiracy theorists are now able to satisfy their need for confirmation bias by finding articles, other conspiracy theorists and various platforms where they can espouse a conspiracy theory that is not supported by any legitimate evidence or research. Social media is the most critical tool for the modern conspiracy theorist. In dark corners of the internet, conspiracy theorists nudge one another further down the deep hole of belief in unfounded claims and ideas. Recalling the politicalization of most topics today, conspiracy theorists seem to always have an enemy, usually it is one of the two major political parties in the United States. This furthers partisan polarization. As explained in the section about QAnon, one can completely change their political ideology simply through being consumed by a conspiracy theory.

Unfortunately, social media allows conspiracy theories to spread more quickly than ever before, leaving many vulnerable to those online who advocate for their purported conspiracy theory. Considering all of this: the threat to individual autonomy and safety, public safety, political polarization, trust in government and in the media, one must refer to the meta-question of this thesis: are conspiracy theories harmful to democracy? In short, yes. For some, it may seem like a stretch to say that conspiracy theories are a threat; however, I would like to refer back to a few key points made throughout the thesis.

First, there is no concrete definition for democracy. As Dahl said, “‘democracy’ has meant different things to different people at different times and places,” which means that democracy is not the same to everyone. However, it typically means that an individual has more autonomy and liberties in comparison to other societal structures. Are conspiracy theories taking away the individual liberties that are allowed within the context of American democracy? I would argue yes. As we see most clearly in the QAnon conspiracy theory, the autonomy and liberty of others has been threatened due to the beliefs of QAnon followers. This is referring back to the New York Times report about how conspiracy theories are seemingly shifting offline and into real life (McIntire & Roose, 2020). This is exemplified by both the individual who went to the Hoover Dam armed, or the other individuals that have disrupted the liberty of others in order to pursue the message of QAnon.

Despite the physical harm that conspiracy theories can have on other individuals, it is also critical to recall the structure of conspiracy theorists. There are some conspiracy theorists that doubt the government to an extent, but do not actively promote conspiracy theories in their day to day lives and on social media. It is necessary to think of conspiracy theorists on a spectrum. There are few that are on the far end and completely believe in a conspiracy or set of conspiracy theories, with many people being near the polar opposite end or somewhere in the middle, believing none or few conspiracy theories and not discussing conspiracy theories or posting about them publicly. However, it is the few on the far end that make the threat conspiracy theories real through violence and extremist behavior.

The three case studies of conspiracy theories in this work were certainly chosen for specific reasons. All to show that although not the only threat, conspiracy theories certainly pose

a threat to American democracy. First, we have birtherism. The birtherism conspiracy shows polarization and the threat that polarization has to how our legislative and governmental systems work in the U.S., as well as how doubt by a few can truly cause many to question the situation at hand. When the few loud conspiracy theorists began to ask Obama for his birth certificate, it made many others question the validity of these accusations. Further, it is shown that this sort of conspiracy, one often driven by racism, can inhibit one's rights as a citizen of the U.S. and their ability to run for office. Although Obama was successful in his campaign and running for office, behavior that was perpetuated by birthers at the time should not be acceptable within a democratic society and further shows that even when the public is presented with evidence that negates their original claim, some are unable to make a distinction between reality and conspiracy.

Second, conspiracy theories about Benghazi show again, political polarization in the U.S., but also distrust in government. One of the key distinctions of democracy in America is the accessibility of politicians and their ability to represent their constituents. With a major distrust in government, as shown in the Benghazi conspiracy theories case study, it is impossible for democratic systems to function properly. Further, Benghazi is a prime example of how distrust in the media, a pillar of American democracy, is also growing. It is undeniable that the media to an extent disseminated both birther and Benghazi conspiracy theories, which in turn affects how the situation is viewed by the public. This is a great example of how conspiracy theories can lead to a distortion of the truth, which in turn makes the public distrust common democratic values and systems.

Finally, we see the meta-conspiracy of QAnon. One that has created conspiracy theories about a variety of topics and has gained national media attention. Members of QAnon have grown violent against others and seem to be the biggest threat out of the three conspiracy theories. They have created conspiracy theories about various celebrities and politicians and are actively promoted in local political campaigns (Franco & Radford, 2019). It is concerning to see conspiracy theories, specifically QAnon, that are represented in professional political races, with a “Q” on a candidate's t-shirt or sign. The message is clear: no one is safe from conspiracy theories. Considering these three case studies, conspiracy theories like birtherism and Benghazi were simply just the beginning, while conspiracy theories like QAnon are a new breed. What once were empty accusations at presidential candidates have turned into political polarization and individual security threats, something previously unseen in the realm of conspiracy theories.

The most alarming part is that conspiracy theorists are no longer a select handful of people who seem to believe in questionable statements and possible explanations for events, but rather each of us is becoming exposed to theories that spread misinformation, further perpetuating mistrust and chipping away at the liberties offered in American democracy. Further, the three case studies in this work all surround presidential politics, with the main players being Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. More than in the past, presidential politics have become a contest of conspiracy theories.

Although some may not see a threat to democracy as much as a threat to individual safety or the right to information, one can see the “chipping away of norms” that Levitt and Zibinsky discuss in *How Democracies Die*. Norms surrounding conspiracy theories and

misinformation are certainly changing as these ideas become more mainstream. We have politicians and a president who now supports these notions, alarmingly chiseling away at norms.

The question that arises from this threat is how do conspiracy theories fit in with American democracy? With freedoms such as freedom of speech and freedom of the press in place, do conspiracy theories fall under these categories and when are they considered threats versus when are they considered acting within your rights. I believe the distinction must be made that it is one thing for an individual or group of individuals to believe and promote a conspiracy theory, that is within their right to do so. However, the issue comes when scientific and factual evidence are being called into question by prominent political figures, which streamlines belief toward misinformation. This is where theories become a threat.

This work is structured in order to first ensure that the reader understands the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, that they should not frame all conspiracy theorists as the outdated “crazy” person, since conspiracy theories have become so normalized and adopted by many. After completing my argument and research, I still believe that this should be the case. Now, anyone can be a conspiracy theorist and people are more vulnerable than in the past to believe conspiracy theories. After this, the reader is introduced to the idea of democracy, this is meant to show the reader that although democracy cannot be pinned down to one concise definition, it is critical to understand the liberties and processes that conspiracy theories can impede upon. Many today wonder why legislation cannot be passed as swiftly as it once was, and although this is not due completely to conspiracy theories, it is due to the growing political party polarization that has inhibited our nation’s ability to correctly use our democratic systems. Conspiracy theories contribute to this polarization and often act as collateral damage to political

polarization, so although they may not be the main threat, they certainly still pose somewhat of a threat to democracy.

Further, it is unlikely that conspiracy theories ever hold true information or claims about an event, situation or political candidate. Due to this, it is critical to think of conspiracy theories as the spreading of misinformation. Many argue that conspiracy theories enrich democracy and are a critical part of free speech, but we must weigh the benefits of this notion against the cost of spreading misinformation, which can be dangerous especially in a society where the people are intended to have power in democratic processes such as voting.

Spreading misinformation can damage democracy and hurt the public in a multitude of ways. However, it is interesting to think about how Trump's legacy as "Tweeter-in-chief" will affect conspiracy theories in the future and how Americans view information on social media. Many look to Twitter and other social media platforms as news sources, which can be detrimental to information and news consumption if the information on the platform is incorrect or promoting conspiracy.

Throughout my research, I have recognized that the subject at hand is a relatively new one. Although conspiracy theories have been around for many years, the spread of conspiracy theories and the rate at which the public accepts and believes conspiracy theories is completely new. Before the internet and social media, conspiracy theorists were unable to connect and spread information, as well as further their given conspiracy. Even during the years of the birther conspiracy and Benghazi conspiracy theories, there was little room on the internet and in the media for the spread of conspiracy theories. Although it did happen that these conspiracy theories were further spread through the news media, it was still a new phenomenon and did not

gain so much attention that it was used in political campaigns or trends on social media sites as we see today with conspiracy theories like QAnon.

Although this research barely scratches the surface of a new topic, it has left me with many questions that I would like to leave the reader with: Do you believe political conspiracy theories can negatively affect democracy in the United States? Are they a part of our right to freedom of thought and speech? How do conspiracy theorists and their conspiracy theories affect others? Do we live in a climate where conspiracy theories and misinformation represent advantageous political strategies? Do conspiracy theories further exacerbate the political polarization in our country? Does political polarization make our democratic systems, such as our legislative system, less effective? Should news media be preoccupied with publishing correct content or content that will catch the eyes of most viewers? How do we restore trust in our government?

I do not have answers to many of these questions and only offer what was discussed in this work, but I certainly believe that further research should dive into these questions in order to understand how conspiracy theories affect not only the individual and the public, but also the media, politics and democracy itself.

VI. Epilogue

Epstein didn't kill himself. 5G networks are fueling the coronavirus. Climate change is not real. Russia will interfere with the 2020 election. Coronavirus is a means of population control. No, these statements are not my personal beliefs, nor are they factual statements. Each of these is a conspiracy theory that I have seen or heard of throughout my time completing this

work. Fortunately, I am now able to assess these theories through a new lens, as provided throughout the thesis. Unfortunately, the aforementioned theories are only a small percentage of the conspiracy theories that have arisen in the past year.

I decided to write this final section in order to show how applicable the topic discussed throughout this work is in everyday life. The New York Times has covered many conspiracy theories recently, writing multiple articles on 5G conspiracy theories, coronavirus conspiracy theories and Epstein conspiracy theories (Fisher, 2020). Although these articles are usually explanatory and denounce any conspiracy theory, it still shows that conspiracy theories have made their appearance in mainstream media and news outlets, and it seems as though conspiracy theories will not be leaving the news cycle any time soon.

In April of 2020, we are in the midst of a pandemic, anxiety is high for most individuals and conspiracy theories are spreading like wildfire. Although this time is a frightening one for most, it is critical to use the research from this thesis to assess conspiracy theories and how they are adding even more negativity to an already stressful situation.

I argue throughout this thesis that conspiracy theories are a threat to democracy. Obviously, not the only threat, but that the spread of conspiracy theories as well as the popularity of conspiracy theories has led to a greater distrust in the media and government, two foundational aspects of modern democracy. Applying this to the coronavirus pandemic, which has shown many of the systemic issues that the United States has, regarding health care and prison reform, conspiracy theories further exacerbate the widespread panic that has affected many during this pandemic. Further, conspiracy theories surrounding the coronavirus have proven that political polarization can have negative repercussions on the public, since many

politicians have conspired against scientific evidence and have produced misinformation for the public to consume through mass media. In the midst of a pandemic, it is clear that conspiracy theories can cause a threat to more than just our democratic liberties, but can also threaten the health and safety of our nation.

It seems as though conspiracy theories have become more popular and more concerning. When some of the public rationalizes an international pandemic as a means of population control, one must think about how low the public's trust in the United States's federal government really is.

Further, it is shown by conspiracy theories about the coronavirus that we do not trust other countries. For example, China, a country with which we are economically intertwined, has now become the target during this national pandemic, as conspiracy theories swirl about how the Chinese created the virus in a lab as a form of bio-warfare. Pew research even stated that approximately 29% of Americans believe the conspiracy that the virus was created in a lab (Noor, 2020).

Considering all of this, it is important to move forward with a new framework of how to assess conspiracy theories, which is critical as they become more popular and mainstream. The framework can be divided into two main criteria. The first criterion, which I discuss briefly in the thesis, is that just because a conspiracy theory is promoted by a celebrity, professional or politician, does not mean it should be taken as fact. Many individuals and professionals believe conspiracy theories, as we see with President Donald Trump, arguably the most powerful man in the world, promoting conspiracy theories on his social media. Even if the person seems to be a credible source, always double check a claim.

Second is to understand the detrimental effects that could occur by spreading conspiracy theories. The most prominent ones stated in this thesis are further partisan polarization, loss of individual autonomy or liberty, threats to public health and safety as well as the simple spread of misinformation. If nearly $\frac{1}{3}$ of Americans can easily believe that the coronavirus was created in a lab, then a significant number of Americans can believe many other conspiracy theories about a variety of topics. Further perpetuating the normalization of conspiracy theories can only lead to detrimental effects for individuals and the public.

Although this criterion is only a small portion of what this thesis had to offer in explaining the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, the normalization of these theories and how they are affecting democracy in the United States, the application of these criteria to conspiracy theories about the coronavirus briefly show the detriment that they can have on public life and safety. Further, hate crimes against Asian-Americans have increased drastically as a result of the coronavirus (Kelley, 2020). Many of these attacks mirror the birther conspiracy, as both the birther conspiracy theory and the increased number of hate crimes against Asian-Americans are rooted in xenophobia and are racially motivated.

Seeing an increase in conspiracy theories during times of panic and paranoia is expected, but is nonetheless disappointing. This trend shows the major disconnect between federal, state and local governments and the people, and that this disconnect is increasing. Fortunately, there are ways to denounce conspiracy theories; by spreading factual information and researching a subject so that others can see a variety of sources on the theory at hand, not just a fringe conspiracy that has no substance to it. This issue is both an individual and a national one. For the individual, research and media literacy is key. For the nation, systemic changes and building a

relationship between the people and the government is key. Working as one cohesive unit that is not overcome by partisanship and polarization will likely be another of the key solutions to stopping the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories. If we do not take charge of the issue at hand, it is likely conspiracy theories will reside in an even higher percentage of the news media. The line between conspiracy and reality or fact has already become blurred and this raises disturbing questions about the future of American Democracy in a post-Trump era.

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