THEY STOLE IT FROM US:

A Study of U.S. Election Conspiracy Theory Discourse

By
Benjamin J. Mandler

Submitted to
Central European University
Nationalism Studies Program

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Supervisor: András Kovács

Vienna, Austria
2023

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to investigate why the election-related conspiracy theories which formed after the 2020 U.S. Presidential election were so successful in spreading and developing into a movement. As conspiracy beliefs are the product of collective reaction to real-world events and conditions this study looks at the contents of election denialism messages. This research uses Discourse-Historical Approach to analyze the conspiratorial texts used in Steve Bannon's *War Room* podcast and several elections denialism Telegram group chats. The results find that election conspiracy theories are being used as a way for believers to attribute the results of U.S. elections to a powerful external force and not a popular rejection of their ideology. This addresses the fear of losing cultural hegemony for conservative Americans and helps them feel positive about their own identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor András Kovács and all the professors from the Nationalism Studies program who provided guidance and advice throughout the process.

I would like to thank my friends, both from Vienna and back home, for providing a space to share ideas, moral support, and friendship.

I would like to thank my family for all of the support and encouragement which helped me immensely in reaching the finish line.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 U.S. Presidential election came as an unbelievable shock to a large section of Americans. Almost immediately after election results came in, Trump administration officials and right-wing media personalities called into question the validity of the electoral process. In a speech the following day, then President Donald Trump declared victory in the election, a claim he maintained throughout the transitionary period (Axelrod, 2022). Trump personally called elected officials, such as Georgia's Secretary of State, Brad Raffensperger, to ask them to alter the election results. Fox News reported claims that the voting machines used to count ballots had malfunctioned, allowing the possibility for vote tampering (Yang, 2023). Supporters of President Trump followed his lead by organizing around the rallying cry 'stop the steal' in an attempt to overturn the election results before Joe Biden was officially declared president. 'Stop the steal' supporters worked together across the country to threaten ballot workers who they believed were complicit in miscounting votes and pressured local election officials not to give official approval of the results. President Trump and officials from his administration publicly celebrated and encouraged this behavior (Naylor, 2021). Members of the 'stop the steal' movement had direct contact with Republican members of Congress to coordinate the efforts of the activists and politicians trying to overturn the election (Cheney, 2021). This whole effort culminated in the January 6th riot at the U.S. Capital where supporters gathered to stop Congress from certifying the results of the election in favor of Joe Biden.

Instead of slowly disappearing in the aftermath of the failed attempt to reverse the 2020 election results, election denialism beliefs have grown in size and influence within American politics. Polls taken in 2022 show that over forty percent of Americans believe that Joe Biden did not legitimately win the 2020 presidential election, including four-fifths of Republicans (Yang, 2022). Conspiratorial views are a large part of the reason that the 2020

election lacked legitimacy. Many election denial groups and figures support the idea that there was a coordinated effort by Democrats, or possibly an even more sinister and secret group, to miscount ballots and change the results of the election in favor of Biden. After the 2020 election, the 'stop the steal' movement multiplied into various groups with the goals of further investigating supposed election fraud and embedding themselves within election infrastructure (Gross, 2022). These groups have already had great success in influencing the electoral process. Election denialism groups trained thousands of 'poll watchers' nationwide, and successfully elected a number of their members to local election boards (Parker, So & Warburton, 2022). Additionally, a sizable majority of Republican candidates running for office in 2022 expressed doubt that the previous presidential election was fairly run (Yourish, 2022). Supporters of this movement built an ecosystem of communities that organized its members around the 'stop the steal' beliefs. The movement has dedicated podcasts, shows on YouTube, pages on social media, and many in-person conferences.

The rapid rise of this movement over the last few years leads to the question: **Why have conspiracy theories surrounding election integrity been so successful in mobilizing conservative voters in the U.S.?** To study the question, this paper will examine the communities in which election deniers are taking part in order to investigate the content of their discussions. This will include analyzing both the rhetoric used by the figures leading the movement, and ideas expressed by grassroots members of the community. Studying the narratives used inside the movement will give a clearer picture of what resonates with the people who are attracted to these beliefs. Others have studied the outside factors that lead people to join this belief system. Studying the narratives used within the movement will further the goal of figuring out why conspiratorial beliefs around the election were relevant for so many people.

A history of conspiracies theories, identity, and conservative politics

Conspiracy theories have long been a prominent part of political and cultural discourse in the United States. Conspiratorial worldviews often draw from a tradition of stories and discourses and evolve to meet the needs of the group and time (Byford, 2011, 143). American conspiratorial traditions existed since the early days of the nation and targeted various 'outside' groups, including anti-masonic beliefs; anti-papal conspiracies targeting Catholics; and anti-Black and anti-Semitic beliefs advanced by groups such as the Klu Klux Klan (Goldberg, 2001). Post WWII, conspiratorial thinking became more prominent than ever. Narratives in this period, such as beliefs in a global communist plot, addressed fears of a loss of agency to large and complex agencies, bureaucracies, or organizations (Melley, 2000). Events over the next couple of decades, such as the lies from the Nixon administration surrounding the Watergate scandal and the release of the Pentagon Papers detailing how the U.S. government misled and lied to the public about the Vietnam War, led to increased distrust of government among the public. These events focused the post WWII grand conspiracy theories of shadowy organizations on the U.S. government itself. This distrust in government institutions is seen in doubts about the 'true story' of the Kennedy assassination or the moon landing. Later, the September 11th attacks in the United States, and the fear and suspicion they caused, spawned perhaps one of the most widespread conspiracy theory movements within the United States. A community of disbelievers formed who shared theories about who they believed really caused the attacks. Aided by new internet technologies, these theories were more intricate and spread farther and faster than ever before (Fenster, 2008). The ecosystem that sprang up around the 9/11 truther movement has a long shadow. Infrastructure built for the movement, like websites, community boards, and internet shows continue to operate and move into the territory of new conspiracies (Sardarizadeh, 2021). Conspiracy theory celebrities whose careers were launched by the 9/11 truther

movement, Alex Jones, for example, found it profitable to continue the spread of conspiracy theories. Currently, the election denialism movement is one part of a wider wave of conspiratorial beliefs that has gained popularity in recent years. These belief systems, such as the anti-vaccination movements and QAnon, build upon ideas of widespread global networks and a deep distrust of institutions reflective of theories previously popular among Americans.

The recent resurgence in conspiracy theory beliefs is, however, distinct from its 9/11 predecessor in the fact that it is paralleled and connected with a rise in far-right identitarian politics. The last decade of American politics has seen an increased vocal assertion that the United States is a place that should be white, Christian, and conservative. The policies and cultural campaigns that are the current focus of conservative politics reflect this. A recent campaign labels any attempt to discuss systematic racism in America as 'critical race theory' and seeks to remove it from curriculum used in schools. Opponents of 'critical race theory' label any curriculum that examines systemic racism as 'anti-white' racism and an attack on 'American values' (Fortin, 2021). Successful legislative efforts that completely ban abortion and curtail the rights of transgender people speak to the power of conservative Christian views within U.S. politics. Some have labeled this political movement as Christian nationalism, because the movement defines national morals as only those embraced by evangelical Christians, beliefs, and correspondingly advances legislation as if the whole country shares and should follow those moral beliefs (Whitehead & Perry, 2022).

Christian nationalism based politics is not a new phenomenon, as some characterize. Recent scholarship complicates the view that American national identity was traditionally based on patriotic or civic ties. Throughout the history of the United States, significant populations of the country were motivated by equally strong national ideologies based on ascriptive ethnic and cultural ties (Smith, 2015; Lepore, 2018). Nativist and religious movements fought for and held significant political power within the United States. While

both major U.S. political parties have channeled religious-based identities over the last half century, an emergent form of Christian nationalism has recently all but taken over Republican party politics. This form of American Christian identitarianism re-emerged within conservative politics with talk radio hosts, such as Rush Limbaugh, and partisan politicians, such as Pat Buchanan and Newt Gingrich (Hemmer, 2022). The movement grew in strength and conviction over time, becoming mainstream during the 2010 Tea Party movement, and being supercharged by the internet age and Trumpism. Much of the politics surrounding Donald Trump had a specific focus on reclaiming the power of this particular type of American identity. Slogans like 'Make America Great Again' speak to a sense among his supporters that they lost something in recent years. Trump's rhetoric often directly addressed a fear of 'white decline' (Gökarıksel & Smith, 2016). This mirrored a real-life relative loss in well-being for white middle-class Americans. Research from 2016 showed a decrease in the health expectancy of white Americans due to increases in drug overdoses and anxiety (Tavernise, 2016). The financial status and size of the white middle class was diminishing, and the 2008 financial crisis still affects the lives of many within this group (Thompson, 2016; Newburger & Higgins, 2018). The rhetoric of the white Christian conservative identitarian movement also encompasses fears of cultural decline. Cultural conservatives will often use the term 'wokism' to describe people or media who they believe are unnecessarily promoting racial, gender, sexual, or cultural diversity (Alfonseca, 2023). Movies or TV shows which portray a diverse cast often get accused of 'wokism,'directly relating to the fear that traditional American culture is being 'replaced.'

Some of the most popular contemporary conspiratorial beliefs capture the sentiment of this turn within conservative politics. The 'Birther' movement was an early example of this development. Followers of the Birther theory believed that President Barack Obama was born in Kenya rather than in the United States, thus making it illegal for him to hold the presidency

(Gross, 2022). This theory highlighted a growing racial resentment which is a key component of similar conspiracy theories during this time frame. Aside from partisan differences, belief in Christian nationalism and racial resentment has the strongest correlation with election denialism (Stewart, 2023). Similarly, a strong association with white identity has the strongest correlation with Covid-19 conspiracies (Utych, 2022).

Republican politicians who promote conservative politics aligning with an image of an ascriptive American national identity have taken advantage of the rise in conspiracy theory ideologies. The Republican Party has nominated or elected politicians who hold election denialism beliefs to positions key to influencing future elections. For example, Doug Mastriano, the Republican 2022 nominee for the Governor of Pennsylvania, indicated he would use the office to officiate the next presidential results in the favor of Republicans if he suspected voter fraud (Gabbatt, 2022). Research from the Public Religion Research Institute shows around 23% of Republican voters believe that the U.S. government and national institutions are run by "Satan-worshiping pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation" (PRRI Staff, 2022). Republican politicians increasingly draw upon conspiracy theories to justify controversial decisions, deflect blame, and attack Democrat politicians and policies, inevitably exposing these ideas to more of the public (Milbank, 2023). Groups organized to 'investigate' specific conspiracy theories politically benefit the Republican party. Such groups aid in fundraising and turnout for Republican candidates in exchange for the elevation of their causes within congressional proceedings (Voght, 2023). Conservative media also embrace conspiracy theories for the attention (and income) they bring to their platforms. A recent lawsuit brought by Dominion Voting Systems uncovered messages from Fox News executives demonstrating that the network chose to air election related conspiracy theories not because they believed in their validity, but because it brought in more viewers to the channel (Pengelly, 2023). Conspiracy theory movements and conservative politics have formed a

symbiotic relationship. Republican politicians spread theories, help these communities grow, and in turn, they lend their support to Republican political causes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Literature overview

Conspiracy theories have long been a subject of both popular discussion and literary analysis by authors such as Suetonius from the ancient Roman period or the Renaissance thinker Machiavelli (Giry & Tika, 2020, 108). Despite this historical interest in conspiracy theories, an academic field around the subject only began to develop after the Second World War as a way to make sense of the conspiratorial thinking often found in the ideologies that support the rise of totalitarian regimes. The genesis of the academic study of conspiracy theories is often attributed to the works of Austrian Philosopher Karl Popper and American Historian Richard Hofstadter. Popper first named the concept using the term "conspiracy of society" to describe the belief that social phenomena are the results of powerful and secret interest groups working together to further their interests (Popper, 1945). Hofstadter popularized this idea by identifying what he called the 'paranoid style' of American politics; where those engaging in political discourse will use exaggerated language to frame themselves or their lifestyle as under attack from some nebulous group (Hofstadter, 1964).

Many authors used these initial works to frame conspiracy theorists as a paranoid fringe of people who fundamentally misunderstand the relations of modern society (see Fenster, 2008; Harambam, 2020). Studies show, however, that conspiratorial thinking is widespread (Goertzel, 1994) and has been present throughout different historical periods (Pipes, 1997) and across many different demographic groups (Oliver & Wood, 2014; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Evidence demonstrating that a wider section of society held conspiracy beliefs steered a new generation of researchers to avoid describing these beliefs through a pathological lens and instead search for a wider cause for the phenomenon. These scholars depict conspiracies in a more neutral manner, as a way for people to make sense of an

increasingly complicated world, especially when such complications are disadvantageous to them (Knight, 2000; Birchall, 2006). This approach moved the field away from analyzing conspiratorial thought as affecting only those at the margins of society, although it still rarely differentiated between perspectives of various conspiratorial groups or addressed the impact of conspiracy theories on society as a whole. This is especially an issue with groups such as the U.S. electoral denialism movement, whose believers often hold a position of relative power within U.S. society, and whose beliefs have caused real damage to U.S. political institutions.

There has been renewed scholarly interest addressing the rise of conspiratorial beliefs in the United States, specifically the election denial movement. Thus far, much of that work focuses on the individual or collective psychological conditions that lead people to hold these conspiratorial beliefs (Moyer, 2019; Stasielowicz, 2022; Golec de Zavala, 2018). Other research centers on some of the factors, such as exposure to fake news, that trigger Americans' belief in conspiracies (Albertson & Guiler, 2020; Ferrara et al., 2020). What's missing is an academic study that addresses the specific content and rhetoric used within the U.S. election conspiracy movement. Many Americans believe in conspiracies that are not related to beliefs tied to election denialism, and many political movements within the United States do not rely on conspiracy for popularity. Moving beyond identifying the pathological factors shared by conspiracy believers makes it possible to highlight the societal factors that are influencing conspiratorial beliefs. Focusing on the identities expressed and rhetoric used by spreaders and followers of conspiratorial beliefs illuminates the purpose this movement provides to its adherents in order to successfully mobilize a specific group of people.

Defining terms

Before going into the significance that conspiracy theories provide for followers, it is necessary to define what constitutes a conspiracy and who are the actors involved. Conspiracy theories are explanations of events and phenomena which attribute their cause to the secretive actions of individuals or groups. Within popular culture and media, describing something as a 'conspiracy theory' tends to indicate that it is a false and illogical belief (Byford, 2011, 21). Describing beliefs as conspiracy theories highlights a power dynamic between the communities depicted in this paper and academics who analyze such beliefs (Harambam, 2020, 279). The use of the word conspiracy in this paper is a neutral and descriptive term rather than a way to cast judgment upon the followers of this movement. It is still useful to use the term conspiracy theory, despite the connotations, as conspiracies are a specific way of viewing the world which can offer meaning for followers and which differs from other political belief systems. There is plenty of evidence disproving many of the central claims of the election denialism movement (Wendling, Sardarizadeh, & Horton, 2022). The aim of this thesis is not to provide another explanation of why these beliefs are wrong or to depict conspiracy believers as irrational, but to highlight the substance of these conspiracy theories and what they mean and provide to the people who believe in them.

It is most useful to describe the collection of conspiratorial beliefs surrounding elections in the United States as a conspiracy theory movement. Although conspiracy theorists sometimes work alone, it is more often true that conspiracists collaborate to grow their influence and popularize their worldview (Harambam, 2020, 283). Increasingly, conspiracy theories take on a collective expression, as believers with similar worldviews form communities and organizations around shared beliefs (Byford, 2011, 142). Conspiracies are narratives that are disseminated through media and popular culture and in that process, they in turn influence and combine with other conspiracies. This can be seen with the 9/11 truther

movement which drew upon previous conspiracy traditions and brought together multiple conspiratorial ideas and prominent conspiracy theory promoters (Byford, 2011, 109). Conceptualizing election denialism beliefs as a movement allows for the study of the collective identities shared by the followers of the movement.

In order to better highlight the power structures and motives of the actors within a conspiracy theory movement, this paper will not use the term conspiracy theorist to describe anyone involved in the movement. Instead, the actors will be differentiated into conspiracy theory entrepreneurs and conspiracy theory believers or followers. Harabam conceptualizes a conspiracy theory entrepreneur as someone who builds or supports belief systems centered around conspiracy theories in order to grow an audience that supports their goals, which are often their own reputational or financial growth (Harambam, 2020, 281-282). One of the most prominent examples of a conspiracy theory entrepreneur would be Alex Jones. Jones first rose to prominence by promoting the idea that the 9/11 terror attacks were an orchestrated plot by the Bush administration, and he cultivated a dedicated audience around this conspiratorial worldview. Jones made enormous profit off of this audience, using their trust in him to sell millions of dollars in products which he marketed as health supplements (Squire & Edison Hayden, 2023). For the purposes of this thesis, the definition of a conspiratorial entrepreneur will also include those who utilize conspiracy theories for political gain. Republican and far-right political figures are acting as conspiracy theory entrepreneurs by promoting a belief that United States elections are rigged in order to raise support for far-right Republican political causes.

Conspiracy entrepreneurs manufacture the conceptual world of a conspiracy theory movement, but the heart of the movement is inhabited by the followers who form communities around their beliefs and work to sustain the movement. Many Americans of various political beliefs and demographic backgrounds hold conspiratorial views of American

democracy and electoral systems (Albertson & Guiler, 2020). What differentiates conspiracy theory followers is that they make conspiracy theory communities an important part of their lives. Followers of the electoral denialism movement consume podcasts and YouTube shows, form communities with fellow followers on Facebook and messaging apps, and organize campaigns around pressuring local officials or running for office. Highlighting the difference between them and conspiracy theory entrepreneurs exemplifies the different ways individuals derive meaning from being involved in a conspiracy theory movement. Entrepreneurs use conspiracy movements to further external goals such as increased political power, whereas conspiracy followers seek the internal benefits provided to their sense of self and identity. Individuals can certainly hold both of these roles. It is an open question whether the Republican politicians pushing doubt in U.S. elections actually believe in the claims they are pushing. While some certainly believe their claims, their individual beliefs are less important than their role in promoting the movement (Yourish et al., 2022). Conspiracy believers also sometimes act as entrepreneurs. Individuals grow in prominence as figures of authority within conspiracy communities, and some who started as followers of the movement run for election.

The role of conspiracies

In previous years, far-right activists and elected Republicans promoted various conspiracy theories in support of conservative politics and pushed related election conspiratorial claims (Gross 2022). But why was there such a rapid expansion in election conspiratorial beliefs in the aftermath of the 2020 election? Conspiratorial beliefs tend to be triggered by events that call into question the reality of a believer's worldview (Goodnight & Poulakos 1981). For supporters of President Trump, this world-threatening event was an election demonstrating that their views did not represent the majority of Americans. In writing

about the most ardent supporters of President Trump, philosopher Logan Spence expanded Fischer and Zizek's idea that ideological cynicism leads people to view capitalism as a natural part of society along with other hierarchies such as sexism, racism, and homophobia (Spence 2021, Fisher 2009, Zizek 2008). Ideological cynicism led Trump supporters to view Trump's rhetoric and policies as the natural state of American society. When Joe Biden won the presidential election, it was easier for many to assume that a conspiracy from outsiders seeking to destroy the natural order was at play rather than entertain the notion that a majority of Americans, at least in some part, rejected the worldview of Trump as natural. Meta-studies of religion and conspiracy theories have confirmed the idea that conspiracy theories occur at times of epistemological crisis because of their explanatory power (Franks et al. 2013).

Once triggered, successful conspiracy theory worldviews, like the electoral denialism movement, sustain themselves because their contents speak to the needs of their believers. Byford conceptualizes conspiracy theories as collectively shared narrative structures (Byford, 2011). These theories are shared discourses within society, which evolve over time and change to fit the circumstances of believers. The images, logic, and structures of a conspiracy convey meaning to the believers and allow believers to share conspiratorial beliefs among themselves (Byford, 2011, 143). The narrative power of a conspiracy theory contains psychological benefits for the believers, leading to what Péter Krekó depicts as 'collective motivated cognition' (Krekó, 2015). The collective is an outgrowth of group settings which often revolve around the subject of conspiratorial beliefs. Conspiratorial beliefs draw a distinction between the social identity of the ingroup and that of the outgroup who they believe is targeting them, often reflecting the dynamic of real-life intergroup relations (Krekó, 2015, 64). Conspiracy theories are motivated thinking because they reflect the goals and desires of the group holding them. Theories can help shift blame away from the ingroup, enhance self-esteem, and justify stereotypes or violence towards outgroups (Krekó, 2015, 64-

5). Finally, conspiracy theories are cognitive because they are a way to make sense of the world. Complicated socio-political phenomena can be reduced to simple and understandable explanations. Reducing explanations can help maintain a shared worldview for the group and protect them from conflicting ideas that cause cognitive dissonance (Krekó, 2015, 65). If conspiracy theories are conceptualized as 'collective motivated cognition,' then which group dynamics, worries, and aspirations are the election denialism beliefs reflecting within American society?

Conspiracy theories often speak to a feeling of the loss of political control or power within a society among its members. Philosopher Fredric Jameson described post WWII conspiracies as "a degraded attempt - through the figuration of advanced technology - to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (Jameson, 1991, 38). Attempting to understand the complexities of a global system is psychologically comforting and alleviates a feeling of loss created by such complexity. The world has only grown more globalized and complex. This is reflected in terms like 'globalist elite,' a phrase often used when discussing supposed U.S-based conspiracies which connect it to the global context. This may especially resonate with people who have experienced their industry make a radical change or move out of town (or out of the country) entirely due to a globalized economy. In the case of right-wing conspiracy theory supporters, this loss of power and control is not just confined to a global context but also reflects dynamics in domestic politics. Inglehart suggests that conspiratorial beliefs can occur among people in relatively stable democratic societies who hold political views that are in the minority on either end of the extreme (Inglehart, 1987). People prefer to maintain their political preferences, and for those on the political extremes, for whom it is unlikely that their views will be represented in a majority-rule democratic system, it may be more psychologically comfortable to believe that their views are in the majority and are being suppressed by an outside force (Inglehart, 1987, 232). Elections where the party and

politicians who support a community's views lose out, such as the 2020 elections for conservatives, put stress on that community's ability to hold on to their beliefs. Fear of being relegated to the political minority is especially heightened when faced with talk of 'demographics is destiny.' 'Demographics is destiny' is an idea often used by political pundits in the early years of Obama's presidency, implying that eventually, conservatives will no longer be able to win elections because of the growing numbers of young people and minorities who disagree with their views.

Additionally, conspiracy theories are constructed around negative views of powerful groups and supporters who often feel a sense of powerlessness, especially within the socio-political realm (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020). Across the political spectrum, trust in almost every national institution is down, including all three branches of the national government, the media, religious organizations, business, the police, and the criminal justice system (Jones, 2022). This has led to a general feeling amongst the public that, if they are powerless to change society, and if they are in need of help, they will not receive it (Waldman, 2022). Rhetoric leading to this feeling is especially pushed by Republican politicians. Even when in political power, Republicans push messages of vulnerability and disenfranchisement to their voters (Allen & VandeHei, 2021). Fears of the loss of economic and political control create a sense of powerlessness leading to a conspiratorial mentality. This is especially true when it is the result of an unexpected outcome for a relatively privileged group.

An additional factor contributing to the success of election denialism conspiracy theories is the increase in the perception of cultural and racial threat. As detailed in the introduction, these conspiracy theory movements are intertwined with the contemporary identity politics of white Christian conservative America. Conspiracy theories are used as a way to navigate identity and intergroup relations (Biddlestone et al., 2020; Krekó, 2015). Conspiratorial beliefs are heightened when groups feel a lack of recognition; when they feel

they are worse off than others and prevented from the same opportunities available to other groups within societies (Biddlestone et al., 2020, 223). When groups start to feel a threat to their collective identity they often look for outgroups who might be conspiring against them. White Christian conservative culture, however, remains one of the most dominant cultures within the United States. This feeling of a lack of recognition may come from their relative loss of cultural hegemony over the last several decades, and is heightened by an ingroup culture struggling to come to terms with this fact. Over the last couple of decades, U.S. culture has diversified in public facing spaces such as media representation. The widespread 2020 protests on police brutality ushered in a national public conversation about the role of racism in American society (Stafford & Long, 2020). An increasing number of people, particularly young people, have been re-examining the role of gender in their lives and their own sexualities (Jones, 2021). Conservative politics responded to these changes by waging continued culture wars over cultural symbols and expanded civil rights policies. Even after the legalization of gay marriage, gender and sexual politics continues to be an animating force for conservative movements, with an emphasis on returning to traditional family values (Nagourney & Peters, 2023). Racialized discourses supporting police departments and campaigns against movies that cast diverse actors in previously white roles, indicate that racial resentment is still an animating force, especially within conservative politics. The feeling that there is a conspiracy targeting the values and culture of one's community also works to enhance group self-esteem (Krekó, 2015, 69). If outside forces are targeting White Christian conservatives, that is validation that they are indeed the most important within society.

Media and the Internet

It is important to briefly acknowledge the role of the internet and media landscape in the development of conspiracy theories. Undoubtedly, a powerful contributor to why U.S. election denialism evolved into conspiracy theories and the recent wave of conspiracy theories in general, stems from the Internet. Social media supercharged the spread and creation of conspiratorial content (Stano, 2020). The most profitable internet algorithms use outrage to get viewers to click on content which helps conspiratorial content win over more thorough and deliberate reporting. Online media has largely developed into eco-chambers where Internet users tend to see only content from people they agree with and trust, thus creating an environment that makes it easy for online influencers to spread their own conspiratorial beliefs (Leal, 2020). The role of the internet in spreading contemporary conspiracies is outside the scope of this project and is well covered by others. It is important to note that despite its power of virality, the internet age has not largely affected the fundamental structures and contents of conspiracy theories (Caballero, 2020). Some conspiratorial narratives do better than others, and not all ideological movements rely on conspiracies for mobilization. This paper focuses on investigating the narratives of the election denial conspiracy in order to understand how it has gone so viral across social media and spread into the offline world.

METHODOLOGY

In order to study why conspiracy theories surrounding the legitimacy of U.S. elections have been so successful in gaining popularity, I examine the discourse between members of the movement supporting the spread of the conspiracy. As discussed in the previous section on theoretical framework, conspiracy theories are communal narratives that convey messages that speak to group needs and desires. If conspiracy theories are ways to understand the social and political dynamics experienced by their believers, then the way a conspiracy theory is constructed, talked about, and argued can highlight what specific role the theory fulfills for its adherents. Specifically, I look at text and audio produced by and shared online amongst the election denial community. I then conduct a discourse analysis to evaluate the underlying meaning conveyed by the texts. Another way to look at the meaning experienced by those who follow conspiracies would be to conduct in-person interviews, though for this particular topic, interviews were not practical. Right-wing American conspiracy theorists tend to be very distrustful of academic and media institutions, and in order to get accurate and meaningful responses from believers, a researcher would have to spend a significant amount of time gaining the trust of members of the election denying community, something that was not feasible within this project's time scale or resources. Thus, a discourse analysis of speech and writing used within the movement will be the most feasible and accurate way to look at the underlying beliefs and narratives of the movement.

I use the discourse-historical approach (DHA) method of discourse analysis for my research. DHA adds historical and sociological contexts to linguistic analysis in order to extract the deeper meanings behind a text (Wodak & Reisigl, 2016, 31). Conspiracy theory discourse often uses its own internal codes and references, based on in-group culture and historical contexts, and DHA is a useful tool in uncovering any latent meaning behind messages. I specifically rely on the strategies of identity formation identified in *Discursive*

Construction of National Identity by Ruth Wodak (Wodak et al., 2009). This approach was developed for understanding how national identity is formed but can also be used for the formation of sub-national identities and how these groups define those outside of their identity. Conspiracy theories are a communal exercise, they address common issues facing groups and they frame shared goals and aspirations of the group (Krekó, 2015). Therefore, understanding the rhetoric used to advance the coalescence of a conspiratorial group within the framework of the conspiracy is the clearest way to highlight what motivates the group's beliefs.

As stated in the theoretical framework section, conspiracy theory movements involve both conspiracy theory entrepreneurs and believers. The entrepreneurs spread conspiracy theories for their own goals, and the believers adopt and discuss the messages that have meaning to them, often influencing the contents of the conspiracy theories for others. If a conspiracy theory is successful, like the election fraud theory was, then the messages broadcast by the entrepreneurs will resonate with what the believers want to hear. I examine the rhetoric used by both groups. First a conspiracy entrepreneur media outlet; and then a group in which conspiracy believers consume the initial content and discuss the conspiracy amongst themselves. Studying both allows me to analyze the ways entrepreneurs seek to influence the movement and what messages are connecting the most with believers. Comparing two types of conspiracy organizations also provides insight into the dynamics of the movement as a whole.

Data

For the first section of my research, which studies rhetoric from an organization centered around conspiracy entrepreneurs, I analyze the podcast *War Room* hosted by Steve Bannon. I chose this podcast because of its uniquely high levels of reach, influence, and

centrality within the election denialism movement. The podcast's host, Steve Bannon, has been a key figure within far-right politics for a couple of decades. He spent his career working to support various right-wing populist movements, both in the United States and Europe, culminating in his role as a strategist for the 2016 Trump presidential campaign and briefly as an advisor in the Trump administration. Bannon also plays an important role within far-right media as a founder, and later executive chairman of Breitbart News, a site which has been instrumental in spreading conspiracy theories, white nationalism, and anti-semitism to new online audiences (Posner, 2016). Bannon describes his political strategy as "flood[ing] the zone with shit," or creating so many negative stories and misinformation about society and politics that people get disillusioned with the system and turn to his brand of politics (Illing, 2020). The War Room podcast, which has been broadcasting since 2019, is Bannon's latest effort to pursue this far-right media strategy. The podcast has amassed a wide audience of listeners, steadily becoming one the most popular shows on Apple's podcast platform, and has been downloaded tens of millions of times (Slate, 2021). *War Room* is notable for its role in creating inaccurate 'news,' with the Brookings Institute naming it the top spreader of misinformation in a list of shows covering U.S. politics (Wirtschafter, 2023). The podcast is also central within the electoral denialism movement. A large goal of the show is to organize a network of people who are dedicated to fighting perceived election fraud which they believe is harmful to conservative politicians and ballot measures. Through *War Room,* Bannon has successfully mobilized a group of followers who create and staff election monitoring organizations, elect members to local office, and pressure politicians to support their causes (Slate, 2021). Bannon will often highlight listeners from the community on his show and give direct assignments to followers, such as calling a local public office which is considering legislation relating to elections. In addition to the large audience and political importance, this podcast is also a good representation of voices from across the election denialism movement.

Bannon frequently hosts important guests such as media figures, politicians, and famous conspiracy theorists who are invested in spreading conspiracy theories about U.S. elections.

For my analysis, I collect data from shows that were aired in the two-week period following the 2022 United States midterm elections. I chose this period because the *War Room* shows posted during that period focused almost exclusively on election coverage and saw an increase in claims of electoral manipulation (Perreira 2022). Focusing on the 2022 election cycle also investigates the analysis of discourse that developed among the community since the 2020 election. Covering an election period allows the observation of how this discourse was applied in real-time to the new election results. The episodes encompass a wide range of issues relating to the election, including technical aspects such as voting procedures and broader discussions on electoral strategy. In order to narrow the focus of my analysis, I examine discussions where speakers are directly addressing conspiratorial views and the identities of those affected by or perpetrating election conspiracies.

For the second half of my research, I study rhetoric used in groups of election conspiracy theory believers, and evaluate messages sent on Telegram channels focused on investigating and discussing election fraud during the U.S. 2022 midterm elections. When looking for election conspiracy theory groups, I focus on online chat rooms in which members had a high level of engagement and personal investment. I started by looking at groups on Facebook but found that the election denialism groups tended to be larger and more centralized around certain figures or organizations. Facebook had the additional problem of having deleted some of the more active election denialism groups in an effort to combat disinformation. I also looked at popular online messaging board websites such as Reddit and 4-chan/8-chan but decided against using these as the user base because these websites tend towards younger and male, a demographic which is both studied most often in online research and not representative of the elections denialism movement as a whole. Compared to these

election denialism groups Telegram demonstrated a more engaged and representative user base. Telegram's increased privacy and more relaxed moderation make it popular among conservative activist groups, yet historically have not been as popular in the United States, meaning those who have downloaded it are more likely to be engaged with a cause like electoral denialism (Liedke, 2022). Based on the profile pictures, names, and personal posts about interests or family, the users of Telegram group chats have the indicia of a group relatively mixed in terms of both age and gender.

In order to focus on a manageable number of election denialism messaging groups, I searched Telegram for channels that were active during the two-week period after the U.S. 2022 midterm election. I chose this period for the same reasons enumerated for the *War Room* podcast so the two parts of the research would match. The election denialism movement has evolved into a wide and splintered network of smaller and more local efforts (Martínez & Parks, 2022). I therefore focused on finding smaller, more engaged communities, rather than larger mass communication efforts. In order to find these groups, I used the Telegram search function to search the terms '2022 midterms', 'stop the steal', 'election watcher' and 'Arizona midterm elections,' and then used links from the groups that showed up to find additional channels. Arizona specifically was the center of a large amount of election-related conspiracies in 2022, and two of the groups selected for analysis were at least partially focused on elections taking place in Arizona (Reston, 2022). Out of all of the channels I considered, I chose three groups to focus on which were representative of election denialism groups on Telegram; didn't espouse a niche political ideology or fringe conspiracy theories; and had high levels of interaction between group members. The first channel, "Arizona 2022 Mid-term Election Watch," which currently has 88 subscribers, is a group of people who organize and share information around election monitoring in Arizona. The second channel, "Trooper Channel," which currently has 343 subscribers, is focused on posts and re-posts

shared by one personality “the Trooper,” but has significant discussion amongst members and a community feel with members organizing real life meet-ups. This channel also focuses on Arizona news. The third channel, “America First Precinct Project,” which currently has 514 subscribers, is more focused on reports from across the nation and coordinating efforts from across different local initiatives. Since these groups were all mainly focused on the 2022 election period, it is likely that they all had larger audiences during that time but there is not a way to measure how many subscribers a channel had in the past. From these groups I chose to analyze the comments left by community members on each other's posts as these comments offer more natural organic thoughts of members as opposed to larger re-posts from other channels.

WAR ROOM

War Room with Steve Bannon's coverage of the United States' 2022 midterm election portrayed the period as a fight between the listeners and an enemy who is trying to hinder their right to vote. In order to put listeners into the mindset they are engaged in a fight with an enemy the style, format, and presentation of the podcast during this period emulates the genre of wartime television reporting. Genres are a recognizable "set of conventions" which are meant to emulate a "socially ratified type of activity" which are generally used to frame the thinking of the audience (Fairclough, 1992, 126). The name of the podcast itself the 'War Room' refers to Steve Bannon's recording studio and makes it seem like a bunker or headquarters. Throughout the episodes, he connects with on-the-ground correspondents who act as reporters informing Bannon and the listeners of the different ways in which their votes are being suppressed throughout the country. In an episode posted the day after the election, Bannon informs his listeners that they must be focused and serious for this episode because "we are in a fight"[1]. Episode titles, such as 'We Are Changing The Balance Of Power In America', add to the feeling that the listeners are engaged in an active struggle. Bannon's coverage of the election is not framed as an exercise of people weighing their options and choosing between the options presented to them, but rather as a battle between the listeners who want to vote for Republicans and a nebulous enemy who is trying to stop them.

Bannon and his guests on *War Room* use several different rhetorical strategies to frame the identities of voters and their supposed enemy. These rhetorical strategies fall into two main groups, previously identified in Ruth Wodak's *Discursive Construction of National Identity* (Wodak et al., 2009). The first type, constructive strategies, are used by the speakers to create a common identity for the people who they are portraying as the victims of the election conspiracy. Constructive strategies use discourse to create assimilation and inclusion, contrasted with differentiation to build a unifying and specific idea of what the national

identity represents (Wodak et al., 2009, 37). Constructive strategies include strategies of singularization, autonomisation, and unification. Relatedly, strategies of perpetuation and continuation are used to elevate the importance of a continuous national identity and elevate the importance of threats against the national identity (Wodak et al., 2009, 39). These strategies are contrasted with strategies of dismantling and destruction, which speakers on the podcast use to define enemies and invalidate opinions not in line with their version of American identity (Wodak et al., 2009, 42). Each of these strategies use various topoi (argumentation schemes) and means of realization which are used depending on the context of the statement.

Below is a selection of quotes from speakers on *War Room* using these rhetorical devices to construct the identities of the conspiracy perpetrators and victims:

Table I	
Quotes	Speaker
"The steely resolve of sovereignty of the American people, they can't stop it, Morning Mika can't stop it, the Democratic Party can't stop it, their paymasters on Wall Street can't stop it, the global corporations can't stop it, the Carter Center can't stop it, Soros, the CCP, the people are supreme"	Steve Bannon[2]
"The fraud has been institutionalized, the engineered chaos that [it] remains to be seen whose hand was at the wheel when the tabulator settings were changed … the process is so fundamentally broken"	Catherine Engelbrecht[3]
"We have the historic basic precepts and values that made America and have made civilization great … we promote safety and security and honor and prosperity and freedom, they promote a Venezuelan type Chinese communist nightmare"	Alex Jones[4]
"Those people in line are awakened, they understand what the grift is, they understand the scam, they understand exactly, the people are sovereign, and the people now are going to have their voice heard and they're not going to take any nonsense"	Steve Bannon[5]
"[Republican Governors] have control of their states, they are able to put policies in place that are good for all of the citizens no matter how they vote … Democrat voters, conservative Republicans, people fled	Marjorie Taylor Greene[6]

California, they fled New York, they fled these blue states … and moved to Florida and Georgia."	
Baris: "Look at Broward County today and the early vote, now that Brenda Snipes is gone. Two cycles, two cycles it took, and the Republicans are outpassing Democrats." Bannon: "This is all about leadership, when Ron Desantis came in and he cleaned the thing up, he brought in criminal penalties"	Richard Baris, Steve Bannon[7]

The Enemy

Throughout the podcast episodes, speakers almost never concretely define who they believe is behind the attempt to subvert U.S. elections. Instead, their enemy is often spoken of as a vague and global entity with many potential components. In the first quote from Table I, Bannon uses comparison to oppose the "American people" with a vague other referred to as "they". Bannon employs the constructive strategy of autonomisation using lexemes such as "sovereignty" and "steely resolve" to emphasize the value of national autonomy. Bannon uses the strategy of perpetuation by setting up a scenario where national values need to be defended by comparing the value of autonomy with an enemy "they" who are trying to "stop it". The pronoun "they" in this quote is a synecdoche used to represent any group who might want to diminish the American people's autonomy. The 'they' is left vague in order for Bannon to list several groups who fall into this category. Among his list "paymasters on Wall Street", "global corporations", and "Soros" all reference the anti-Semitic idea of a global conspiracy. The idea of a global Jewish conspiracy refers to the supposed influence of Jewish individuals and networks within global economic and political organizations and is often used as a tool to help simplify complicated political or economic conditions into a simple narrative of a global enemy (Richardson & Wodak 2022, 416). George Soros has become a modern synecdoche for the belief that there is a Jewish conspiracy behind many of the issues in modern society (Richardson & Wodak 2022, 402). The references to Wall Street and global corporations, while not themselves directly referencing a Jewish conspiracy, are terms which

are often used with proximity to other direct references, in this case, “Soros”, and also portray the enemy as global in scale. Continuing the theme of loss of autonomy, Bannon attributes the real control of “the Democratic Party” to an outside “paymaster”. With the pronoun “their” Bannon uses the strategy of heteronomy to remove the agency of the Democratic Party and instead imply that the real actor is an outside group of paymasters controlling them. Finally, with a reference to the liberal political talk show “Morning Mika”, Bannon includes media within the same category of an outside enemy. Earlier in the same episode, Bannon played a clip from Morning Mika where the host, Mika Brzezinski, discussed the Trumpism movement as a “cult” and “fascist”[8]. By including this show at the same level of his other list of actors trying to stop the American people's autonomy Bannon is equating the opinions of liberal media shows to these views of outside interests and not legitimate opinions of a section of the American people. Through the first quote, Bannon built up “they” to refer to a vaguely defined network which occurs outside and is opposed to the values of the American people. The word “they” is used throughout the podcast episodes by various speakers as a synecdoche representing the perpetrators of the election conspiracy. “They” is a vague term making it possible to represent an undefined enemy and to fit into the specific narratives of each speaker.

While the enemy perpetrating the conspiracy is portrayed as a nebulous “they” working from the outside, it is also constructed using language which conflates it with the governmental system itself. This is demonstrated by the second quote from Table I, spoken by Catherine Engelbrecht, an elections activist who founded True the Vote one of the first major conservative elections monitoring organizations. Engelbrecht uses linguistic strategies to obscure the culprit behind the election conspiracy and instead widen the blame to the system behind the supposed fraud. The word fraud is a general rather than specific accusation and the fact that “the fraud has been institutionalized” widens attribution beyond individual cases of

electoral manipulation. The phrase "engineered chaos" uses the passive voice hiding who Engelbrecht is accusing, which is confirmed by the phrase "remains to be seen whose hand was at the wheel". Additionally, describing the chaos of the election as "engineered" ascribes the action to a nefarious motive rather than just poor planning on the part of the election's organizers. Throughout the quote, Englebrecht leaves it unclear whether the "process" she describes as "fundamentally broken" is the election system or a wider sense of societal and governmental systems.

Speakers on *War Room* construct the perpetrators of the election conspiracy as a distant and systematic group. Sometimes, however, speakers use language to give the threat of conspiracy a more personal motive, playing to the listener's emotions. In a section where Bannon is describing how the world media is currently focused on the U.S. elections, he says of the election "this is a humiliation"[9]. Bannon is using a strategy of unification, utilizing the word humiliation to ascribe an active motive to harm the shared pride of those who are voting. By setting it on the world stage Bannon is comparing the humiliation of the particular American identity against all other national groups. Later in the same podcast, Bannon states "they want us to kneel"[10] referring to the allegation that the elections were rigged against the listeners. Here Bannon is using the strategy of autonomisation to heighten fears that the election conspiratory "they" are working to take autonomy away from the listeners by making them "kneel". These passages both point to Kreko's theory that conspiracies are an exercise of self-esteem (Krekó, 2015). By framing the election conspiracy as an active attempt to humiliate and take agency away from listeners Bannon is placing the listeners and their identity as the central reason for the conspirators to be conducting their election conspiracy.

The People

Speakers on *War Room* contrast their image of a vague, vast, and sinister enemy by constructing an identity for their listeners defined by positive values and morals. In the third quote from Table I, the infamous conspiracist Alex Jones, who is appearing as a guest, posits that those who are being targeted are targeted because of their positive values, which are opposed to the values of the enemy. Jones starts by utilizing the constructive strategy of singularization, which is a strategy used to emphasize the unique importance of the national character. The phrase "values that made America and have made civilization great" indicates the values held by the speakers he is talking to are the exact same unique values that make societies throughout history great. With phrases like "historic basic precepts", Jones also utilizes the perpetuation strategy of continuation, which is a strategy used to emphasize the continuation of an identity. The use of the past tense "made" as well as the word "great", a likely reference to Trump's "make America great again slogan", indicates that there are these values are no longer seen as university positive and their continuation is under threat. The values listed; "safety and security and honor and prosperity and freedom", are so general and positive that anyone could relate to them, but they also are often the values that conservative political campaigns focus on expressing in election campaigns, especially when contrasted with the phrase "Venezuelan type Chinese communist nightmare", which references the Cold War discourse of American freedom versus foreign communism. By starting the quote with the pronoun "we" Bannon is including himself and anyone who shares his values. Because the values are so generic this identity is inclusive to anyone who feels they have both uniquely positive and important values and that their values are under threat.

In the fourth quote from Table I, Bannon uses similar techniques to construct the identity of those who are voting for conservative candidates as those who understand there is a conspiracy against them occurring. Bannon refers to those waiting in line to vote for

Republican candidates as “awakened”. They are there because they “understand” that there is “grift”, “scam” and “nonsense” within the system working against them. Bannon again employs the constructive strategy of autonomisation, in order to presuppose that people who deserve to “have their voice heard” are the ones who are independent from outside influence. Those who understand that there is a conspiracy going on are “sovereign” and are having “their voice heard” by voting for Republicans, as opposed to those Americans who can’t see the conspiracy and there have been tricked into voting for Democrats. Bannon constructs a self-referential identity for his listeners; those who feel as if there is a conspiracy against them are exactly those who are targeted because they pose a threat to the conspirators.

There are two main levels of identity for the American people being constructed by speakers on *War Room*. The first, and most typical, is a specific identity representing the sub-national group who share the characteristics and views that represent what the speakers see as the true national identity. This construction is seen in the previous quotes, where Jones and Bannon are using the linguistic strategies of singularization to push a specific notion of those who are “awakened” and “values that made America … great”. But there are also instances of a slightly different strategy where speakers try and construct a wider identity by emphasizing commonalities between all Americans. In the fifth quote from Table I, Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene uses a constructive strategy of unification by playing on shared common struggles and interests to build an American identity inclusive of everyone regardless of their relation to the elections conspiracy. Congresswomen Greene tells an anecdote in which she includes both Democratic and Republican voters into the same category. In the story, voters of both party affiliations flee the Democrat-controlled “blue states” of New York and California and moved to “Florida and Georgia” where Republican officials create policies that are “good for all of the citizens no matter how they vote”. Both groups are constructed in the same category because they are affected by the same problems

and saved by the same solutions. Greene used the phrase “Democrat voters” and opposes it with “conservative Republicans” “Democrat voter” is a temporary position, one can vote for the Democratic Party, but it doesn't make them a Democrat. Republican voters, on the other hand, are referred to as “conservative Republicans”, a stable identity that ordinary people are allowed to hold without being politicians themselves. Congresswomen Greene’s rhetorical strategy of unification works to dismiss alternative beliefs as temporary and define the true needs of all Americans as people as those being met by Republican politicians and policies.

Criminality and Corruption

Speakers on *War Room* also regularly use discourse to discredit anyone who doesn’t follow the political views of their listeners but can’t be constructed in the same category as the conspirators. In order to build an identity for this category speakers rely on the dismantling strategies of negative presentation and discrediting opponents in order to dismiss opponents as those with moral and character failing. Specifically, speakers often rely on the argumentative scheme I have identified as the topos of corruption or criminality. The topos of corruption or criminality is an argument that if something is repealed to be corrupt or criminal then anything that it represents is illegitimate. For example, Bannon uses the topos of corruption in a section where he is discussing the Biden administration’s plan to relieve a large amount of student debt; claiming “this is how they bribed these kids to vote”[11]. The word “bribed” implies that Democrats are paying voters to do something they would naturally do. Classifying them as “kids”, when often people are still paying off student loans well into adulthood, attributes these voters with both a sense of naivete and innocence, implying that they are being tricked. In the sixth quote from Table I guest Richard Baris, a right-wing media personality, utilized the topos of criminality, which is slightly different that the topos of corruption as it is often accompanied by racialized language. Baris mentions “Broward

County", a county in Florida with a high black population, and Brenda Snipes, the black woman who was formerly the supervisor of elections for the county. Bannon follows up this by claiming that Florida's Republican governor Ron Desantis "cleaned the thing up" with "criminal penalties" implying that there was some criminal activity going on in Broward County beforehand. There is a long history of political discourse tying Black Americans to criminality, for example, rhetoric from the 'war on drugs' often conflated being black with being criminal (Rosino 2017). During the aftermath of the U.S. election, some of the scrutiny put on election workers by conspiracy believers took on a racialized element. One elections worker, Ruby Freedman, testified to Congress that she was the target of a harassment campaign, which often included racist insults directed at her because conspiracy theorists believed she helped in the rigging of the 2020 U.S. election (Fausset 2022). Speakers on Bannon's podcast use the topoi of corruptibility and criminality, sometimes relying on racialized language, to draw a negative image of those people who they see as furthering the conspiracy in order to explain how some ordinary people have gotten involved 'on the wrong side'.

TELEGRAM

Telegram users who were part of the election denialism movement spent the two-week period after the U.S. 2022 midterm election trying to investigate supposed voter fraud that occurred during the election or during the counting of the ballots. The language they used to describe the conspiracy theory that the election was being stolen was very similar to that used on the *War Room* podcast, albeit with a focus on using measured or professional language. I will be analyzing these texts through the same framework developed by Ruth Wodak for investigating how national identities are constructed. These texts utilize linguistic strategies of construction and dismantling in order to build a picture of who is the perpetrator and who is the target of the election conspiracy. Below are a series of quotes organized by theme, that illustrate the main currents of discourse relating to identities which appeared in these channels. I have not included the identity of the posters for the sake of their privacy.

Table II	
Quotes	Channel, Date
1. "The truth is, they hide things BECAUSE THEY CHEAT. And it is difficult to know which one did it or set the "rules"."	Trooper Channel. November 8, 2022[12]
2. "Paul was bought and paid for he knows once we get in he will be in trouble he also was installed"	Arizona 2022 Mid-term Election Watch. Nov 11, 2022[13]
3. "Shockingly…… Only 150 showed up 2 Saturdays ago 13 this week Paper tiger"	Arizona 2022 Mid-term Election Watch. Nov 24, 2022[14]

<u>Paper Tigers</u>

When discussing the election, Telegram users almost never discuss elections officials or other voters as actors with legitimate opinions, and instead portray them as agents for a

larger, more obscure enemy. The group that most users report as being truly behind the election conspiracy is described with very similar language to that used on *War Room*; a vast, powerful and ambiguous entity. The first quote in Table II addresses concerns about distance restrictions in place for election observers of vote counting on election day. The commenter's characterization of the rules describes the attributes ascribed to conspirators enforcing the distance rules. This user describes the conspirators with the pronoun "they," a synecdoche which allows the speaker to leave the identity of the conspirators undefined and widely set, utilizing the same strategy as Bannon does in *War Room*. The phrase "it is difficult to know which one did it," also demonstrates this construction. "One," similar to "they," is a non-specific pronoun, and the fact "it is difficult to know which" implies that there are a number of possible culprits who could have rigged the election and who are hard to specifically define. The commenter also utilizes the strategy of discrediting their opponent by linking them with the operation of the voting system and then describing that system as unfair. The user puts the word "rules" in quotations, implying that the actual rules do not reflect the true meaning of rules, representing fairness, but rather a system in which conspirators "CHEAT." Discrediting opponents and describing them as non-concrete entities are linguistic strategies which work to dismantle any sub-national identities, such as Democratic voters, that do not fit into the view of what posters think is truly American.

Another way in which Telegram users dismantle any identity outside of their strict definition of national American identity is to create distinction between outside conspirators and local officials. Telegram chat members have a tendency to describe elections officials and local government members as puppets who are not acting through their own volition or with their own agency. The second quote from Table II works to depict Maricopa County Sheriff Paul Penzone as one of these local officials who is acting, not in line with his governmental role or personal beliefs, but beholden to a higher power. Penzone, a Democrat, has been a

controversial figure within Maricopa County, Arizona, since defeating longtime incumbent Joe Arpaio in 2016, himself a hero within conservative politics for his aggressive law enforcement tactics (Sanders & Cassidy, 2016). The commenter casts doubt on Penzone's efforts to provide security for the election by utilizing topos of corruption and criminality, which seeks to delegitimize opponents. The phrase "bought and paid for" evokes the idea that Penzone was acting for monetary interest. Stating "he will be in trouble" portrays Penzone as not following the rules of his position and adding that "he knows" attributes Penzone with a level of active criminality. Depicting Penzone as a corrupt individual, dismantles his personal beliefs as a Democrat and his position as a sheriff who was helping to administer the election, and implies the real power and beliefs belong to the higher powers who "installed" him. It is also telling that Penzone, a law enforcement officer, received such a high level of personal attacks across the Telegram group chats - one user from the 'Trooper Channel' repeatedly called him a "POS"[15] (piece of shit). Police officers have been a fundamental component of conservative identity in recent years. Symbols like the widely adopted 'thin blue line' and the American flag have tied together notions of American patriotism with showing respect for members of police forces. The fact that Penzone is a public member of the Democratic party and also a law enforcement officer contradicts the image of a conservative police force, so it is easier for the commenters to imagine him as an installed puppet of an election conspiracy.

Members of these election denial group chats also portray voters who are opposed to their movement as a small and invalid group. In the third quote from Table II, a Telegram user uses the size of a rally supporting elections workers as evidence that there is not really a significant amount of people supporting the elections systems. The comment is a response to a post about a group of liberal voters who were counter-protesting a demonstration of election deniers who had gathered in front of the Maricopa County government building. The commenter uses the linguistic strategy of discrediting opponents of their identity by

comparing the small size of the counter-protest to the supposed strength of liberal voters. Focusing on the "150" and "13" counter-protesters implies that this number is an important proxy for measuring the strength of liberal voters' convictions compared to the better attended election denialism protest. The phrase "paper tiger," which means a figure which appears strong but is, in reality, weak, is used as a metaphor for liberal voters and supporters of the elections system in Arizona. The user ironically uses "shockingly" as a way to emphasize that while the small support for liberal causes may seem obvious to the group chats users, that is not how it is being portrayed by those outside of the election denialism community. This comment is another way of dismantling any subnational identities that fall outside of who these Telegram users see as those who should be represented through the electoral process.

Table III	
Quotes	Channel, Date
1. User 1: "Our responsibility is to remove them from office through the ballot box, before they start removing us through the magazine box." User 2: "No, our responsibility is to remove them from our airspace:), exile to the mother land."	Arizona 2022 Mid-term Election Watch. November 8, 2022[16]
2. "Katie Hobbs and the rest of the Arizona statewide Dem ticket should disgust every American by claiming victory in an election as corrupted as Arizona's, especially Maricopa County. "Imagine a scenario in reverse, like a GOP candidate in PA claiming victory under 20,000 votes when 10% of core urban Philly didn't get to vote. "Our media is a global embarrassment."	Arizona 2022 Mid-term Election Watch. November 24, 2022[17]

Imagine a scenario in reverse

Despite spending so much effort to diminish those with different views than conservative voters, members of these electoral denialism group chats demonstrate anxiety about cultural and racial differences within American society. The exchange seen in quote 1 from Table III is a discussion between users about who they describe as "leftists," and points

to this fear of cultural replacement. The first user utilizes the strategy of unification by arguing that their group identity is being threatened and they must unite with other group members to fight back. Contrasting the pronouns “our” with “them” sets up an ingroup outgroup oppositional dynamic. The user also contrasts the two groups by describing the means they would use to fight the other. Their group would use the moral and peaceful strategy of the “ballot box,” or voting them out of power, whereas the opposition would be using the violent “magazine box,” referring to guns. Declaring it the ingroup’s “responsibility” to stop them, employs a call to action to unify the group in the face of threat. The quote has the additional layer of recalling the famous Malcolm X speech “The Ballot or the Bullet.” “The Ballot or the Bullet” was a speech Malcolm X delivered in 1964 to a church audience in Michigan in which he argues that both electoral fights and armed opposition are valid ways of fighting U.S. governmental oppression depending on the circumstances (Jones, 2021). The reference to this speech is a reinterpretation. According to the user, the normal function of change in society should be the electoral process, but as can be seen with the Malcolm X speech, some groups in U.S. history have considered change through violence. While the original speech was about actions against the U.S. government, the user positions their group identity with the true national identity by aligning it with the government. Additionally, the user's choice of the word “removing” evokes genocidal language, and this fact, combined with the reference to Malcolm X, hints at latent racial fears.

The second user in quote 1 from Table III responds to the first user’s claim that leftists are a threat to the identity shared by members of the group chat by portraying leftists as an outside force. This response uses the linguistic strategies of heteronomization to portray those opposed to the user's group identity as extra-national, rather than an internal group fighting for the meaning of the national identity. The second user notes it is “our responsibility” to oppose “them,” a scheme utilized to unify their ingroup identity in opposition to a threat from

an outgroup. In order to demonstrate that the second user believes the outgroup is an outside force, they suggest removing them from “our airspace.” Using the term “our” equates the sub-national conservative voter identity with the national “airspace” territory, implying that the user is referring to incoming immigrants. The phrase “exile to the mother land” again implies that the outgroup is foreign in origin.” “Mother land” has an additional meaning of referencing Russia, especially during the communist Soviet period, a connotation which is still prominently used within American popular culture. The use of “mother land” implies the “leftist” opposition holds the foreign idea of communism. The second user is stating that the people comprising the “leftist” groups who oppose the user's identities are foreigners and their ideas originate in foreign spaces, as opposed to the native people and ideals of their ingroup.

The second quote from Table III turns the divide between ingroup and outgroup more clearly into a racial divide. The user sets up a scenario comparing the election in Arizona, and specifically Maricopa County, which the user describes as “corrupt,” and a fictional election in Pennsylvania where voters in Philadelphia did not get to vote. Maricopa County is majority white. The city of Philadelphia on the other hand is majority people of color, with the largest demographic group being black. The use of racialized terms to describe Philadelphia indicates the user had demographics in mind. Setting the scene in the “10% of core urban Philly” shows that the user is referring to the most central and diverse parts of Philadelphia, rather than, for example, the suburbs. The word “urban” has long been used as a substitution to refer to black or minority populations (McEvoy, 2020). The user states that “every American " should care that the election was supposedly stolen in Arizona because the identity of those in Maricopa country is important for the national identity. Contrasting this with “imagine” implies that society and especially the media would care very much if an area populated by people of color were disenfranchised. This quote portrays a narrative where the national narrative prioritizes the importance of minorities over white Americans.

Table IV	
Quotes	Channel, Date
1. “When we take back Congress and the Oval Office, we’ll send their private land, commercial property, residential, farm, and all other real estate owners packing as well.” “China has been waging a protracted war against us for decades - time for CCP to GTFO.”	America First Precinct Project. Nov 15, 2022[18]
2. “It’s the effing CCP they have their evil tentacles all over the world.”	Arizona 2022 Mid-term Election Watch. November 2, 2022[19]

A Chinese Conspiracy

Another recurring theme throughout both the Telegram group chats and the *War Room* podcast is the subject of China and the Chinese Communist Party, or CCP. There are countless instances in the Telegram group chats of politicians and election officials being affixed to the CCP label in order to connect them with the idea of conspiracy. The anti-China sentiment seen with the election denialism movement occupies a similar conceptual space within the group as the anti-semitic idea of a global Jewish conspiracy theory. The idea of a global Jewish conspiracy has long been used within conspiracy theory discourses to explain complicated global systems by depicting Jewish people as a network of coordinated and evil actors working to control societies. The first quote from Table IV creates a long list of the different types of property which they believe China has been investing in within the United States. The user compares this list with the notion that China is “waging a protracted war,” implying that Chinese ownership of land, be it governmental or individual ownership, is part of a plan for control. The second quote from Table IV utilizes the dehumanizing phrase “tentacles” to describe the “evil” CCP. Both the invocation of the international control of domestic property and the use of dehumanizing language create parallels to the ways election

denialism group chat users apply anti-Semitic and anti-China conspiratorial language. Research shows that conspiracy theory beliefs about groups reflect the stereotype content model in that they often target groups that have perceived high power and low likeability within a society (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Operario & Fiske, 2003). Stereotypes surrounding Jewish and Asian Americans both fit into this category. The increased use of China and CCP related conspiracy theories could reflect a new adoption of stereotype related beliefs into the conspiracy theory canon. This adoption of anti-Chinese conspiracy theories has certainly bled into the real world with recent anti-Asian attacks in the United States correlating with an increased spike in covid-19 conspiracy theories.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The proponents and followers of the election denial conspiracy theory that arose after the 2020 U.S. Presidential election built it into a narrative movement and successful political network. The recurring cast of spokespeople, and the internal references, events and messages featured in both the *War Room* podcast and Telegram group chats, all point to the nature of the conspiracy theory as a movement with the political cause of influencing further elections. Why have conspiratorial beliefs surrounding U.S. elections been so successful in spreading and inspiring organized political activity? This is not, as some commentators seek to portray it, only a group of highly paranoid individuals who see shadows in every corner. By studying the discourse used throughout Telegram and the *War Room*, a picture emerges of a consistent worldview that shapes into the form of election conspiracy theory.

The first consistent theme is an idea central to many conspiracy theory movements, the fear of a loss of power to outside forces. Specifically, much of the rhetorical work done in both of the platforms demonstrates a fear of loss of cultural power. The framework of conspiracy theory involving elections allows for believers to attribute the popular rejection of politicians, who they feel represent their identity, to an outside force trying to control them. The language used among members of the election denialism movement describes the conspiracists behind the plot to steal elections as a powerful global network looking to steal power from conspiracy believers. This view of a global conspiracy is part of a long tradition of conspiratorial rhetoric that has been used since WWII to address anxieties stemming from a perceived loss of personal control to increasingly complicated agencies, bureaucracies, and organizations (Melley, 2000). Speakers from both platforms studied in the paper mostly use the pronoun ‘they’ to refer to the conspirators behind the supposed election fraud. This language enables broad interpretation regarding the identity of the enemy group, as it avoids explicitly naming or defining them, thereby leaving room for an image of a global,

multifaceted and powerful group. Traditionally, one of the most common theories of a powerful outside group is the idea of a grand Jewish global conspiracy. This continues to be seen throughout election denialism discourse, especially with references to George Soros. Election denialism discourse also displays newer forms of this idea. One example is the belief in an all powerful China seeking to control the United States, which reflects contemporary demographic changes and political conversations prominent within U.S. society. These discourses are partially a reflection of increased globalization and deindustrialization that has left some in the U.S. at the whims of the global market, which is reflected in conspiracists' references to corporations or economic changes. However, a larger part of the discourse utilizes strategies of autonomization to heighten fear of outside powerful groups targeting the tenets of the believers' national identity.

A conspiracy theory movement around elections allows its believers to depict electoral mechanisms in a way that attacks the values of their own identity, and rejects the notion that there are others in society who do not share their specific view of what it means to be American. The primary way this was achieved within the discourse of the War Room podcast and Telegram group chats was by rejecting the fact that results of the election were in Democrat's favor and instead, blaming anyone who disagreed with them as a puppet for the nebulous outside conspiracy group. Election deniers use the rhetorical strategy of dismantling identity by personally attacking election officials and claiming the individuals or groups supporting the elections were fraudulent. One particularly popular strategy of the topos of corruption and criminality, is the delegitimization of other individuals by associating them with criminal behavior; an especially effective attack when combined with racialized language. It is clear that the fears of losing a legitimate election were not just politically motivated, but based on cultural and racial identity too. Speakers used pronouns like "we" and deployed strategies of unifying the identity of election deniers. Often, when referring to those

who admitted to actually voting for Democrats, the election deniers use language to depict them as culturally and racially different than their own identity. The focus of election deniers, that their own identity was under attack, also seems to confirm the hypothesis that conspiracy theories can be a form of collective self-esteem enhancement (Krekó, 2015). Speakers use the strategy of singularization to make it seem as if their own group identity is uniquely important within the world and within American society and is one of the reasons for their being under attack.

One of the reasons the election denialism movement is so successful is the level of similarity of the discourse between the entrepreneurs creating it and the believers sharing and consuming it. In order for believers to adopt a conspiratorial belief, the message has to resonate with them and seem authentic. Bannon is Harvard educated and many other leaders of the movement hold high levels of elite status. Despite being in this position of societal power, Bannon seems to genuinely believe in the overall message of the crisis from the decline of power for conservative culture. Power within the United States has become increasingly economically, geographically, politically, and culturally concentrated. When viewing the world through a zero-sum lens, the diversifying gender, sexual and racial politics of the U.S. can seem like more people vying for the same level of concentrated control. This is a fear held by both elites like Bannon and regular Americans, who are viewing a changing society. The election conspiracy theories give focus to this anxiety and allow participants to feel it as a group. Even after defeats to prominent supporters in the 2022 midterm election, the election denialism movement is alive and well (Qamar, 2022). Diminishing the influence of the group is not a simple task of debunking the theories they believe in, but requires directly addressing cultures of fear and control within conservative communities, and contending with the concentration of political and economic power in the United States.

APPENDIX

War Room

1.Bannon's War Room, *Episode 2290: We Are Changing The Balance Of Power In America*, November 9th 2022, Timestamp - 1:28

2. Bannon's War Room, *Episode 2289: The Direction Of The Country*, November 9th 2022, Timestamp - 41:34

3. Bannon's War Room, *Episode 2301: Still Thousands of Ballots Outstanding in Arizona*, November 14th 2022, Timestamp - 12:18

4. Bannon's War Room, *Episode 2296: Remembering The Fallen And Continuing Their Fight For Freedom*, November 11th 2022, Timestamp - 9:38

5. Bannon's War Room, *Episode 2289: The Direction Of The Country*, November 9th 2022, Timestamp - 40:02

6. Bannon's War Room, *Episode 2290: We Are Changing The Balance Of Power In America*, November 9th 2022, Timestamp - 13:52

7. Bannon's War Room, *Episode 2289: The Direction Of The Country*, November 9th 2022, Timestamp - 22:26

8. Bannon's War Room, *Episode 2289: The Direction Of The Country*, November 9th 2022, Timestamp - 00:31

9. Bannon's War Room, *Episode 2301: Still Thousands of Ballots Outstanding in Arizona*, November 14th 2022, Timestamp - 22:22

10. Bannon's War Room, *Episode 2301: Still Thousands of Ballots Outstanding in Arizona*, November 14th 2022, Timestamp - 25:38

11. Bannon's War Room, *Episode 2296: Remembering The Fallen And Continuing Their Fight For Freedom*, November 11th 2022, Timestamp - 44:21

Telegram

12. Trooper Channel, ""The truth is, they hide things BECAUSE THEY CHEAT. And it is difficult to know which one did it or set the "rules"." November 8th, 2022. https://t.me/trooper_channel/144?comment=916

13. Arizona 2022 Mid-term Election Watch, "Paul was bought and paid for he knows once we get in he will be in trouble he also was installed" Nov 11th, 2022. https://t.me/arizonaelectionwatch/113?comment=348

14. Arizona 2022 Mid-term Election Watch, ""Shockingly……Only 150 showed up 2 Saturdays ago, 13 this week, Paper tiger" November 24th, 2022. https://t.me/arizonaelectionwatch/169?comment=453

15. Trooper Channel, "POS Communist" November, 15th, 2022. https://t.me/trooper_channel/181?comment=1109

16. Arizona 2022 Mid-term Election Watch, “Our responsibility is to remove them from office through the ballot box”, “No our responsibility is to remove them from our airspace:), exile to the mother land” Telegram, November 8th, 2022. https://t.me/arizonaelectionwatch/102?comment=314

17. Arizona 2022 Mid-term Election Watch, ““Katie Hobbs and the rest of the Arizona statewide Dem ticket should disgust every American by claiming victory in an election as corrupted as Arizona’s, especially Maricopa County. Imagine a scenario in reverse, like a GOP candidate in PA claiming victory under 20,000 votes when 10% of core urban Philly didn’t get to vote. Our media is a global embarrassment.” Telegram, November 24th, 2022. https://t.me/arizonaelectionwatch/176

18. America First Precinct Project, “When we take back Congress and Oval Office, we’ll send their private land, commercial property, residential, farm, and all other real estate owners packing as well. China has been waging a protracted war against us for decades - time for CCP to GTFO” Telegram, November 15th, 2022. https://t.me/AFPP_US/1359?comment=23428

19. Arizona 2022 Mid-term Election Watch, “It’s the effing CCP they have their evil tentacles all over the world.” November 2nd, 2022. https://t.me/arizonaelectionwatch/90?comment=266

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Albertson, B., & Guiler, K. (2020). Conspiracy theories, election rigging, and support for Democratic norms. *Research & Politics*, *7*(3), 205316802095985. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168020959859

Alfonseca, K. (2023, January 20). *What does "woke" mean and why are some conservatives using it?* ABC News. https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/woke-conservatives/story?id=93051138

Allen, M., & VandeHei, J. (2021, January 11). *Republicans come to grips with powerlessness everywhere*. Axios. https://www.axios.com/2021/01/11/republicans-no-power-politics-tech-business

Axelrod, T. (2022, September 8). *A timeline of Donald Trump's election denial claims, which Republican politicians increasingly embrace*. ABC News. https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/timeline-donald-trumps-election-denial-claims-republican-politicians/story?id=89168408

Biddlestone, M., Cichocka, A., Iris Žeželj, I., Bilewicz, M., Butter, M., Knight, P. (2020). Conspiracy theories and intergroup relations. In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 219–230). essay, Routledge.

Birchall, C. (2006) Knowledge goes pop: from conspiracy theory to gossip, Oxford: Berg.

Byford, J. (2011). *Conspiracy theories: A critical introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Caballero, E., Butter, M., Knight, P. (2020). Networked disinformation and the lifecycle of online conspiracy theories. In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 135–147). essay, Routledge.

Cheney, K. (2021, December 18). *"stop the steal" founder told Jan. 6 committee about contacts with GOP lawmakers*. POLITICO. https://www.politico.com/news/2021/12/18/stop-the-steal-founder-jan-6-committee-gop-lawmakers-525345

Fairclough, N. (1992). Discourse and Text: Linguistic and Intertextual Analysis within Discourse Analysis. Discourse & Society, 3(2), 193–217. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926592003002004

Fausset, R., & Hakim, D. (2022, November 1). *Inquiry scrutinizes trump allies' false claims about election worker*. The New York Times. Retrieved April 16, 2023, from https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/01/us/trump-georgia-election-ruby-freeman.html

Fenster, M. (2008) Conspiracy theories: secrecy and power in American culture, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Ferrara, E., Chang, H., Chen, E., Muric, G., & Patel, J. (2020). Characterizing social media manipulation in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. *First Monday*, 25(11).

Fisher, M. (2009). Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?

Fortin, J. (2021, July 27). *Critical race theory: A brief history*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-critical-race-theory.html

Franks, B., Bangerter, A., & Bauer, M. W. (2013). Conspiracy theories as quasi-religious mentality: An integrated account from Cognitive Science, social representations theory, and frame theory. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00424

Gabbatt, A. (2022, October 24). *Doug Mastriano: Is the trump-backed election denier too extreme to win?*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/oct/24/doug-mastriano-pennsylvania-republicans-trump-governor

Giry, J., & Tika, P., Butter, M., Knight, P. (2020). Conspiracy Theories in Political Science and Political Theory. In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 108–120). essay, Routledge.

Goertzel, T. (1994). Belief in conspiracy theories. Political Psychology, 15, 731–742. DOI: 10.2307/3791630
Gökarıksel, B., & Smith, S. (2016). "making america great again"?: The Fascist Body Politics of Donald Trump. *Political Geography*, *54*, 79–81. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2016.07.004
Golec de Zavala, A. and Federico, C.M. (2018), Collective narcissism and the growth of conspiracy thinking over the course of the 2016 United States presidential election: A longitudinal analysis. Eur. J. Soc. Psychol., 48: 1011-1018.
Goldberg, A. R. (2001). *Enemies within the culture of conspiracy in Modern America*. Yale University Press.
Goodnight, T., & Poulakos, J. (1981). Conspiracy rhetoric: From pragmatism to fantasy in public discourse. The Western Journal of Speech Communication, 45(4), 299–316.
Gross, T. (2022, July 28). *"stop the steal" has moved beyond trump. now it's threatening future elections*. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2022/07/28/1114224368/stop-the-steal-has-moved-beyond-trump-now-its-threatening-future-elections
Harambam, J., Butter, M., Knight, P. (2020). Conspiracy Theory Entrepreneurs, Movements and Individuals. In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 278–291). essay, Routledge.
Hemmer, N. (2022). *Partisans: The conservative revolutionaries who remade American politics in the 1990s*. Basic Books.
Hofstadter, R. (1964) The paranoid style in American politics, and other essays, New York: Knopf
Illing, S. (2020, January 16). *"flood the zone with shit": How misinformation overwhelmed our democracy*. Vox. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/1/16/20991816/impeachment-trial-trump-bannon-misinformation
Imhoff, R., & Bruder, M. (2014). Speaking (un–)truth to power: Conspiracy mentality as a generalised political attitude. *European Journal of Personality*, *28*(1), 25–43. https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1930

Imhoff, R., Lamberty, P., Butter, M., Knight, P. (2020). Conspiracy beliefs as Psycho-Political Reactions to Perceived Power. In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 192–205). essay, Routledge.
Inglehart, R., Moscovici, S., Graumann, C. F., (1987). Extremist Political Positions and Perceptions of Conspiracy: Even Paranoids Have Real Enemies . In *Changing conceptions of conspiracy* (pp. 231–244). essay, Springer-Vlg.
Jameson, F. (1991) Postmodernism, oT, The Cultural Logic of Late CapitaL Durham: Duke UP
Jones, J. (2021, November 20). *LGBT identification rises to 5.6% in latest U.S. estimate*. Gallup.com.
Jones, A. (2021). MIT - Angles . https://cmsw.mit.edu/angles/2021/the-ballot-or-the-bullet/#:~:text=The%20title%20of%20Malcolm%20X's,this%20case%2C%20the%20U.S.%20government.
https://news.gallup.com/poll/329708/lgbt-identification-rises-latest-estimate.aspx
Jones, J. (2022, July 5). *Confidence in U.S. institutions down; average at new low*. Gallup.com. https://news.gallup.com/poll/394283/confidence-institutions-down-average-new-low.aspx
Knight, P. (2000) Conspiracy culture: from the Kennedy assassination to the X-files, London: Routledge

Krekó, P. (2015) 'Conspiracy theory as collective motivated cognition', in M. Bilewicz, A. Cichocka and W. Soral (eds.) The Psychology of Conspiracy, London: Routledge, pp. 60–7.
Leal, H., Butter, M., Knight, P. (2020). Networked disinformation and the lifecycle of online conspiracy theories. In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 497–511). essay, Routledge.
Lepore J. (2018). These Truths: A History of the United States. New York: W.W. Norton
Liedke, J. (2022, December 16). *Key facts about telegram*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/16/key-facts-about-telegram/
Martínez, A., & Parks, M. (2022, June 30). *Election denialism has evolved into a sprawling nationwide force that's gone local*. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2022/06/30/1108843830/election-denialism-has-evolved-into-a-sprawling-nationwide-force-that-s-gone-loc
McEvoy, J. (2020, June 10). *Here's how "urban," a term plagued by racial stereotypes, came to be used to describe black musicians*. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemimamcevoy/2020/06/10/heres-how-urban-a-term-plagued-by-racial-stereotypes-came-to-be-used-to-describe-black-musicians/
Melley, T. (2000). *Empire of conspiracy: The culture of paranoia in postwar america*. Cornell University Press.
Milbank, D. (2023). *Destructionists: The twenty-five year crack-up of the Republican Party*. ANCHOR.
Moyer, M. W. (2019, March 1). *People drawn to conspiracy theories share a cluster of psychological features*. Scientific American. Retrieved April 16, 2023, from https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/people-drawn-to-conspiracy-theories-share-a-cluster-of-psychological-features/
Nagourney, A., & Peters, J. W. (2023, April 16). *How a campaign against transgender rights mobilized Conservatives*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/16/us/politics/transgender-conservative-campaign.html
Naylor, B. (2021, February 10). *Read trump's Jan. 6 speech, a key part of impeachment trial*. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial
Newburger, E., & Higgins, T. (2018, September 11). *Secretive cabals, fear of immigrants and the Tea Party: How the financial crisis led to the rise of Donald Trump*. CNBC. https://www.cnbc.com/2018/09/10/how-the-financial-crisis-led-to-the-rise-of-donald-trump.html
Oliver, J.E. and Wood T.J. (2014) 'Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style(s) of mass opinion', American Journal of Political Science, 58(4): 952–66.
Operario, D & Fiske, S (2003). Stereotypes: Content, Structures, Processes, and Context. In R. Brown & S. L. Gaertner (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Intergroup processes* (pp. 22–44). Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
Parker, N., So, L. S., & Warburton, M. (2022, October 13). *"stop the steal" supporters train thousands of U.S. poll observers*. Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/world/us/stop-steal-supporters-train-thousands-us-poll-observers-2022-10-13/ =
Pengelly, M. (2023, May 1). *Dominion wants "accountability" over Fox News Election Lies, co-founder says*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/may/01/fox-news-dominion-lawsuits-trump-election-lies
Pereira, I. (2022, November 10). *Election-denying secretary of state candidates see defeats in 2022 midterms*. ABC News. https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/election-denying-secretary-state-candidates-defeats-2022-midterms/story?id=92925920

Pipes, D. (1997) Conspiracy: how the paranoid style flourishes and where it comes from, New York, NY: The Free Press
Popper, K. (1945) The open society and its enemies, vol. 2, London: Routledge.
Posner, S. (2016, August 22). *How Steve Bannon created an online haven for White Nationalists*. Mother Jones. https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/stephen-bannon-donald-trump-alt-right-breitbart-news/
PRRI Staff. (2022, March 2). *The persistence of QAnon in the post-trump era: An analysis of who believes the conspiracies*. PRRI. https://www.prri.org/research/the-persistence-of-qanon-in-the-post-trump-era-an-analysis-of-who-believes-the-conspiracies/
Qamar, Z. (2022, November 18). *Election denialism lives on, even as candidates who support it concede*. FiveThirtyEight. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/election-denialism-lives-on-even-as-candidates-who-support-it-concede/
Reston, M. (2022, November 25). *Election deniers faced defeat but election denialism is still swirling in Arizona | CNN politics*. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/25/politics/election-questions-arizona-results/index.html
Richardson, J., & Wodak, R., Demata, M., Zorzi, V., Zottola, A. (2022). Anti-Sorosism. In *Conspiracy theory discourses* (pp. 395–417). essay, John Benjamins Publishing Company.
Rosino, M. L., & Hughey, M. W. (2017). Speaking through silence: Racial discourse and identity construction in mass-mediated debates on the "War on Drugs." *Social Currents*, *4*(3), 246–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496516663223
Sanders, R., & Cassidy, M. (2016, October 1). *Democratic challenger Paul Penzone sues sheriff Joe Arpaio for defamation in race for sheriff*. The Arizona Republic. https://eu.azcentral.com/story/news/politics/elections/2016/09/29/dem-challenger-paul-penzone-sues-sheriff-joe-arpaio-defamation-race-sheriff/91277892/
Sardarizadeh, S. (2021, September 10). *11 September 2001: The conspiracy theories still spreading after 20 years*. BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/58469600
Slate. (2021, September 15). *Transcript - Steve Bannon's "war room" is mobilizing*. Slate Magazine. https://slate.com/transcripts/dkxWQlpNYkdBSnBXUmZ1NkYvNDBVOWtPOWtGbk9iWTZ0b2FXS3R3M21rYz0=
Smith R. (2015). Political Peoplehood: The Roles of Values, Interests, and Identities. Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press
Spence, L. (2021) Rhetorical Denialism: The Melancholic Affect of Conspiracy Rhetoric and Ideological (C)kynicism, Southern Communication Journal, 86:5, 447-459, DOI: 10.1080/1041794X.2021.1972650
Squire, M., & Edison Hayden, M. (2023, March 8). *"absolutely bonkers": Inside infowars' money machine*. Southern Poverty Law Center. https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2023/03/08/absolutely-bonkers-inside-infowars-money-machine
Stafford, K., & Long, C. (2020, September 6). *Summer of protest: Chance for change, but obstacles exposed*. AP NEWS. https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-shootings-race-and-ethnicity-or-state-wire-racial-injustice-9035ecdfc58d5dba755185666ac0ed6d
Stano, S., Butter, M., Knight, P. (2020). The internet and the spread of conspiracy content. In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories* (pp. 483–496). essay, Routledge.
Stasielowicz, L. (2022). *Who Believes in Conspiracy Theories? A Meta-Analysis on Personality Correlates*.

Stewart III, C. (2023). Public opinion roots of election denialism. SSRN Electronic Journal. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4318153

Tavernise, S. (2016, April 20). *White Americans are dying younger as drug and alcohol abuse rises*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/20/health/life-expectancy-decline-mortality.html

Thompson, D. (2016, March 8). *How do we fix middle-class stagnation?*. The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/03/whats-the-solution-to-middle-class-stagnation/472194/

Uscinski, J.E. and Parent, J.M. (2014) American conspiracy theories, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Utych, S. Navarre, R & Rhodes-Purdy, M (2022) White Identity, Anti-Elitism, and Opposition to COVID-19 Restrictions in the United States, Representation, 58:2, 301-310, DOI: 10.1080/00344893.2022.2075030

Voght, K. (2023, January 18). *The conspiracies powering the GOP-controlled house*. Rolling Stone. https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/conspiracy-theories-drive-house-republicans-agenda-1234662219/

Waldman, P. (2022, July 5). *Opinion | feel like everything is out of control? that's what Republicans want.* The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/05/republicans-want-everything-out-of-control/

Wendling, M., Sardarizadeh, S., & Horton, J. (2022, November 9). *US midterms: Misleading election claims fact-checked*. BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news/63564964

Whitehead, A. L., & Perry, S. L. (2022). *Taking america back for god: Christian nationalism in the United States*. Oxford University Press.

Wirtschafter, V. (2023, February 10). *Audible reckoning: How top political podcasters spread unsubstantiated and false claims*. Brookings.

Wodak, R., Cillia, R. de, Reisigl, M., & Liebhart, K. (2009). *The discursive construction of national identity*. Edinburgh Univ. Press u.a..

Wodak, R & Reisigl, M (2016). *The discourse historical approach in Methods of CDS.* Sage.

Yang, Mary. (2023, February 18). *Compare the election-fraud claims Fox News aired with what its stars knew*. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2023/02/18/1157972219/fox-news-election-fraud-claims-vs-what-they-knew

Yang, Maya. (2022, January 5). *More than 40% in US do not believe Biden legitimately won election – poll*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/05/america-biden-election-2020-poll-victory

Yourish, K., Ivory, D., Byrd, A., Cai, W., Corasaniti, N., Felling, M., Taylor, R., & Weisman, J. (2022, October 13). *Over 370 Republican candidates have cast doubt on the 2020 election*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/10/13/us/politics/republican-candidates-2020-election-misinformation.html

Zizek, S. (2008). The sublime object of ideology. Verso