

CARR Report: Responding to Conspiracist Movements in the Post-Trump Era

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Introduction

On January 6th, hundreds of Stop the Steal protesters, who believe in the Big Lie that the election was “stolen” due to massive voter fraud, led an insurrection on the US Capitol building, seeking to do harm to US lawmakers and overturn the November 2020 election results. A lesser known, yet just as harmful, event occurred a few months earlier when a group of far right *Reichsbürger* protesters broke off from a larger demonstration against health measures, organized by the conspiracist-oriented *Querdenken* movement, and nearly stormed the Reichstag building in Berlin. This tendency to commit acts of political violence of this kind has led the FBI to label certain “fringe political conspiracy theories,” such as QAnon, as motivators of domestic extremist activity.¹

Movements organized around conspiratorial narratives are by no means a new phenomenon. During the early American Republic, the anti-Masons formed an entire political party based on their anti-elitist conspiratorial beliefs. The People’s Party of the late 19th century strategically spread conspiratorial narratives about continued British dominance and the demonetization of silver to bring their message to regions where farmers were less prominent. In the current day, political movements based on conspiratorial narratives have seen an explosion of activity over the past year, due in part to the pandemic and the ‘populist moment’ that continues to be felt in certain parts of the world. Throughout the pandemic, groups in the United States and abroad took to the streets to protest what they saw as not simply infringements of their rights, but also what they perceive to be the apocalyptic end to political liberty in its entirety, often leading to political violence. These beliefs have gained widespread prominence and formed the basis for protest movements that increasingly prove to be both a security threat and a danger to liberal democracy. What are the factors that drive these movements and lead them to disruptive and violent behavior, and how can they be effectively countered?

This analytical report investigates the rising prominence of these conspiracist movements in the current day, focusing on two specific cases, the “Stop the Steal” protests in the United States and the *Querdenken* demonstrations in Germany. While both mobilized based on different grievances, these two movements are of interest for several reasons. First, both movements were driven primarily by conspiratorial visions of politics; the Stop the Steal demonstrators all coalesced around the “Big Lie” that the election had been “stolen”, while the *Querdenken* see apocalyptic visions of tyranny from COVID-19 health measures. Secondly, while both movements have attracted far-right groups on the fringes of political society to their

¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation. (30 May, 2019). Anti-Government, Identity Based, and Fringe Political Conspiracy Theories Very Likely Motivate Some Domestic Extremists to Commit Criminal, Sometimes Violent Activity; Zachary Cohen and Whitney Wild (14 June, 2021). First on CNN: FBI warns lawmakers that QAnon 'digital soldiers' may become more violent. CNN.

protests, the core base of protesters did not necessarily come from radical backgrounds, testifying to the potential for these conspiratorial narratives to radicalize believers. As this report will show, contemporary research demonstrates that conspiracy theories of this kind can have a harmful effect on the effective operations of democracy in three primary ways: widespread belief in conspiracy theories targeting knowledge authorities, such as scientists, journalists, and other experts, can render solving important issues that require collective action, such as navigating a pandemic, more difficult. Secondly, the Manichean division of society and demonization of the “Other” within conspiratorial narratives promotes political environments characterized by mass polarization, which justify actions that break with the “spirit” of democracy. Finally, conspiracy theory beliefs that promote a sense of victimization and urgency can serve as a path to radicalization and political violence. This report concludes with a number of non-intrusive reforms that can be taken to tackle the spread of conspiracy theories in the current day.

Background

Anti-Coronavirus Protests in Germany

Germany has witnessed a significant amount of protest activity from conspiracist movements during the pandemic. Most of these demonstrations have been registered by the *Querdenken*, or “lateral thinking” movement, which is unified by their skepticism and resistance to anti-coronavirus health measures. Derived from marketing terminology, *Querdenken* refers to a sort of “out-of-the-box” style of thinking that contrasts with that of societal elites, and draws comparisons to the *Querfront*, or third-position politics that aim to unify Red and Brown militants. Started in Stuttgart in 2020 by Michael Ballweg, the lateral thinkers have become the primary force on the streets throughout the pandemic. Prominent among them are anti-lockdown protesters, vaccine skeptics, and pandemic deniers. The core claim of the movement is that elites have resorted to “fear-mongering” and that the laws put in place to counter the COVID-19 pandemic are a significant infringement on their individual liberties.

However, their claims do not stop there. *Querdenken* protesters are heavily invested in conspiracy theories related to the pandemic; these basic claims about harmful health measures imposed by politicians and fearmongering by journalists are seen through a populist lens; they are not simply wrong about the policy, but seek to exploit the pandemic in a “totalitarian” fashion to gain more power. In a December 2020 study by sociologists at the University of Basel found that 77 percent of the *Querdenken* participants they surveyed in Germany and Switzerland believed that national politicians and the media were in cahoots.² 50 percent agreed with the statement that “there are secret organizations that have a major influence on political decisions,” while another 52 percent believed that “politicians are just puppets of the powers behind them,” a clear indication of a largely conspiratorial worldview. A majority believed that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation seeks to achieve worldwide mandatory vaccinations, while a small, yet significant 16 percent believed that governments plan to implant microchips in the people to be able to monitor them better.

The *Querdenken* protests have been made up of a motley crew of various anti-establishment political groups; hippies, antiwar activists, libertarians, alternative medicine and anti-vaccine campaigners, as well

² Oliver Nachtwey, Robert Schäfer, and Nadine Frei. (2020). Politische Soziologie der Corona-Proteste. Universität Basel. <https://idw-online.de/de/attachmentdata85376>

as a smaller, yet significant cohort of far-right extremists make up the composition of the protesters, while US Confederate, QAnon, Nazi, and the Wilhelmine Imperial War flags can all regularly be found at their demonstrations.³ Past research has demonstrated that the flexibility of conspiratorial narratives, the ease at which they can be modified to fit new events, and conspiracists' tendency to be easily accept other conspiratorial beliefs allows them to serve as "bridging frames" that provide members of different political movements ground for collaborating and participating in each other's movements.⁴ Reports have noted that movement entrepreneurs, such as KenFM's Ken Jebsen, Michael Friedrich Vogt, Heiko Schrang, and Samuel Eckert, span the ideological spectrum, and converge on common enemies such as "Big Pharma" and "Big Tech" and overlapping conspiratorial narratives about political life.⁵

The conspiracy beliefs expressed by the Covid-deniers, in this instance, served to bring together a significant number of far-right groups to Querdenken protests, most prominently the *Reichsbürger*. In a January 2021 report from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the authors note the progressive "infiltration" of these protests by far-right groups such as the Identitarian Movement, the Steeler Boys, The Right, and the *Reichsbürger*.⁶ The latter have been of particular concern due to their large numbers and their history of carrying out lone-wolf attacks and attempting to form terror cells.⁷

Querdenken protests have been anything but uneventful. Many of them have been violent, while during one demonstration, a group of demonstrators, many of whom were *Reichsbürger*, attempted to storm the Reichstag building in Berlin. Given Germany's "Militant Democracy," the response from the state to these demonstrations, and their violent tendencies, has been swift. In December 2020, the State Office for the Protection of the Constitution of the federal state Baden-Württemberg placed the movement under surveillance based on the grounds that it had been "infiltrated by extremists."⁸ The *Reichsflaggen*, a staple of earlier right-wing regimes in German political history, was banned in public by the city-state of Bremen, while the federal government banned a number of extremist groups that coalesce with the larger movement, such as Combat 18, Nordadler, Sturmbrigade 44, and the Reich Citizens' United German Peoples and Tribes branch.⁹ By April, Querdenker demonstrations were beginning to be banned in regions around the country, however, this has yet to prevent them from taking to the streets; on 1 August 2021, up to 5000 people attended an unauthorized *Querdenken* demonstration in Berlin that resulted in 600 arrests and 10 injured police officers.¹⁰

³ Similar broad coalitions can also be observed in the on-going demonstration against the *Passe Sanitaire* in France. (see John Lichfield. (16 August, 2021). The 10 tribes of the French anti-health pass protests. *Politico*)

⁴ Betty Dobratz and Lisa Waldner. (2016). The White Power Movement's Populist Connection to the Tea Party Movement in the United States. *Athens Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(3). 181-194.

⁵ William Callison and Quinn Slobodian. (January 12, 2021). *Coronapolitics from the Reichstag to the Capitol*. *Boston Review*.

⁶ Elliot Bynum, Laura Fluegel-Carew, Sam Jones, Roudabeh Kishi, and Clionadh Raleigh. (January 2021). Political Disorder in Europe: 10 Cases from ACLED's New Expansion. https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ACLED_Europe-10-Cases-2020_ReportWeb.pdf

⁷ Council for European Studies. (25 July 2021). Querdenker, Querfront, and QAnon: On the German Far-Right and Its American Occupation. *Europe Now.*; Linda Schlegel. (17 May 2019). "Germany does not exist!": Analyzing the Reichsbürger Movement. *European Eye on Radicalization*.

⁸ DW. (9 December 2020). Coronavirus: Anti-lockdown group put under surveillance in German state.

⁹ Elliot Bynum, et al. January 2021.

¹⁰ AAP. (1 August, 2021). Despite a ban, thousands protest in Berlin. *The West Australian*.

The 'Stop the Steal' Protests in the United States

The Stop the Steal protests materialized following the November 3rd general election when Donald Trump refused to accept the results of the election, claiming that it had been “stolen” by members of the Democratic Party.¹¹ Prior to the election, Trump had cast doubt on mail-in ballots, which were emphasized in many states to prevent long lines on election day in the midst of the pandemic, saying that they would lead to mass fraud. While the individual claims are numerous, and have shifted overtime to involve different political figures, plots, little to no evidence has been put forth to support these claims.¹²

The manufactured grievance that the election had been “stolen” by the Democratic elites, supported by anecdotal ‘evidence’ and unverified claims spread through the large social media platforms, served as the justification for Trump supporters to take to the streets in protest, with the primary goal of overturning the results of the election. The claims made by Trump surrogates shifted several times, ranging from the plausible to the fantastical; the initial claims of voter fraud from mail-in ballots was soon replaced with claims that the voter machines were rigged, either due to an intentional glitch that switched votes from Trump to Biden, or that votes from the German-made machines were being counted in Germany by affiliates of the late-Hugo Chavez. Trump attorneys Sydney Powell and Rudy Giuliani alleged that a whole host of right-wing bogeymen - Venezuela, the Clinton Foundation, George Soros, Antifa - were responsible for the election results. Many of these same claims were then repeated and amplified by far-right news outlets such as One America News Network (OANN), Newsmax, and Fox News.

The myth of the “stolen election” served an instrumental role in unifying a number of pro-Trump groups in a common goal of overturning the election results. Most prominent were common Trump supporters who supported the claims made by the president, without any ties to other groups.¹³ Established conspiracist communities, such as the QAnon movement, also played prominent roles, hoping to finally bring about the day when the “satanic cabal” of elitists would be arrested and executed. Anti-government militia groups, such as the Oath Keepers and the Three-Percenter who are predisposed to apocalyptic conspiracy theories involving arms confiscation and government takeover, were present in a large number of ‘Stop the Steal’ events. A late November 2020 analysis by ACLED showed that militia groups joined close to 18% of these

¹¹ In a vacuum, it is unlikely that such claims could have spurred the tidal wave of support from die hard true believers without having been fed a constant barrage of conspiratorial narratives concerning the elite, the state apparatus, and the media. The MAGA movement’s conspiratorial trajectory clearly resembles the concept of the ‘discursive shift’ outlined by Michał Krzyżanowski; what started as a strategic introduction of a new discursive element by Trump was gradually reinforced overtime with further ‘evidence’ of alleged wrongdoing, only to result in the widespread normalization of such beliefs within the Republican Party base. (see Michał Krzyżanowski (2020): Discursive shifts and the normalisation of racism: imaginaries of immigration, moral panics and the discourse of contemporary right-wing populism. *Social Semiotics*. DOI:10.1080/10350330.2020.1766199)

¹² In fact, when presented with the opportunity to demonstrate evidence of foul play, all 50 legal challenges submitted by the Trump campaign were decided against them. Moreover, when Pennsylvania Republicans appealed to the US Supreme Court to overturn Biden’s victory in the state, the now-conservative majority court unanimously decided against taking it up.

¹³ Robert Pape and Keven Ruby. (2021, 28 January). *The Face of American Insurrection: Right-Wing Organizations Evolving into a Violent Mass Movement*. University of Chicago. Chicago Project on Security & Threats.

events following the election.¹⁴ White nationalist groups as well as fully-fledged white supremacist and neo-Nazi sympathizers also participated. Beyond these disparate extremist groups, however, were the 87% of participants who held no clear affiliation to any group aside from their support of Donald Trump.¹⁵

This mass mobilization in favor of the president and the media blitz supporting these narratives from the Trump team and large right-wing media outlets had two prominent consequences. The first was the spread of the “stolen election” narrative to the Republican voters at large. Countless surveys following the election have pointed to a large percentage of GOP voters who believe these claims, with an estimated 88% of Republican voters believing that “Biden did not legitimately win the election” in November.¹⁶ The effect on Republican elected officials, however, was to incentivize them to vote to reject the election results and attempt to further restrict voting in state legislatures around the country. In Pennsylvania, more than 60 Republican state representatives called for the US Congress to formally object to the voting. When the Congress voted to certify the election, a total of 147 Republican elected officials (8 senators and 139 congressmen), voiced their objections to the vote count in Pennsylvania.¹⁷ In state legislatures, more than 400 bills to further restrict voting, based on the premise that the 2020 election involved large amounts of fraud, have been introduced around the country.¹⁸

The assault on the US Capitol on January 6th brought together many of these disparate right-wing groups. Following a rally held by Donald Trump in which he urged his supporters to go to “show strength”, and Rudy Giuliani suggested “trial by combat,” a mob of around 800 people made their way to the US Capitol building where certification of the election results was being held.¹⁹ The evidence from January 6th points to there having been separate conspiracies by the Proud Boys, Three Percenters, and Oath Keepers, that merged when Trump urged the crowd to move to the Capitol Building.²⁰ The end result was the storming and looting of the US Capitol building, and the intimidation of US representatives.

Spreading Distrust of Science and Commonly-Held Narratives

Conspiracy theory beliefs are often closely tied with other sorts of misinformation. While beliefs in the Earth being flat, vaccines being dangerous, and climate change being “fraudulent” are not in themselves conspiracy theory beliefs, when searching for an explanation as to why these pseudo-scientific beliefs remain on the epistemological fringes, believers very often express, by way of conspiratorial visions, a

¹⁴ Roudabeh Kishi, Hampton Stall, and Sam Jones. (2020, December). The Future of ‘Stop the Steal’: Post-Election Trajectories for Right-Wing Mobilization in the US. ACLED US Crisis Monitor.

¹⁵ Robert Pape and Keven Ruby. (2021). The Face of American Insurrection: Right-Wing Organizations Evolving into a Violent Mass Movement. Chicago Project on Security & Threats.

¹⁶ Data For Progress/Vox. (11 Jan, 2021). Poll.

https://www.filesforprogress.org/datasets/2021/1/dfp_vox_election_trust.pdf; Frankovic, (20 Nov, 2020). Trump voters still see Biden's victory as illegitimate. *YouGov*. <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/11/19/trump-voters-biden-poll>

¹⁷ Karen Yourisn, Larry Buchanan, and Denise Lu. (2021). The 147 Republicans Who Voted to Overturn Election Results. *New York Times*.

¹⁸ Brennan Center for Justice. (2021, 22 July). Voting Laws Roundup: July 2021

¹⁹ Antonio Fins. (6 Jan 2021). What Trump said in rally speech to spark U.S. Capitol storming. *The Palm Beach*.

²⁰ Mark Potok. (2021, 25 June). The Interconnected Conspiracies That Sparked The January 6 Insurrection. *Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right*.

belief in a cover-up of the “truth,” or worse, a malevolent plot by powerful forces. A primary consequence of these conspiracy theories is the spread of distrust of knowledge experts more broadly and the delegitimization of certain commonly-held narratives about the world. In Imhoff, Lamberty, and Klein’s experimental study on conspiracy theories’ effects on the perceived credibility of knowledge authorities, the authors found that they led to a questioning of even commonly-held historical narratives.²¹ This was very clearly demonstrated by the January 6th rioters, who were prepared to storm the heart of American democracy based on the sincere belief that the election had been “stolen.”

Conspiracy theories, including those related to Covid-19 and vaccinations, commonly originate from psychological needs related to feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness, and insecurity.²² A recent study by Radnitz and Hsiao demonstrated that support for conspiratorial political candidates were linked with situational anxiety, which occurs due to sudden unexpected events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.²³ These sentiments have been felt by a large number of people around the world, who are worried about their future, frustrated by the disruption of their daily routines, and uncertain about aspects of the virus. Similarly, those who have a tendency to rely on intuitive thinking, instead of approaching a piece of information analytically, have also been linked to conspiratorial ideation.²⁴ As more people around the world stay indoors during the pandemic and engage with misinformation online, conspiracy theories about the pandemic, elites, and vaccines have had the opportunity to spread more than in the past.

While some conspiracy theories may have content that may seem fantastical, humorous, or absurd, they are not without their societal consequences. Countless studies on the consequences of being exposed to conspiracy theories demonstrate that they can lead people to be less likely to be engaged in climate-friendly behavior, less likely to use contraceptives, and more likely to approve of alternative medicines.²⁵ For example, in Jolley and Douglas’ experimental study, wherein participants were exposed to information arguing that climate change was a hoax, the treatment group reported being significantly less willing to reduce their carbon footprint.²⁶ These effects become especially problematic once they spread to the mass-

²¹ Imhoff, R., Lamberty, P. and Klein, O. (2018) ‘Using power as a negative cue: how conspiracy mentality affects epistemic trust in sources of historical knowledge’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 44(9):1364–79

²² Karen Douglas. (2021). COVID-19 conspiracy theories. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 24(2). 270-275.

²³ Radnitz, Scott and Hsiao, Yuan, Explaining Support for Conspiratorial Leaders in the Time of COVID-19: The Role of Situational Anxiety (October 28, 2020). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3720912> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3720912>

²⁴ Gordon Pennycook, and David Rand (2019). Lazy, not biased: Susceptibility to partisan fake news is better explained by lack of reasoning than by motivated reasoning. *Cognition*, 188, July 2019, pp. 39-50

²⁵ Jolley, D. and Douglas, K.M. (2014a) ‘The social consequences of conspiracism: exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one’s carbon footprint’, *British Journal of Psychology*, 105(1): 35–6.; Van der Linden, S. (2015) ‘The conspiracy-effect: exposure to conspiracy theories (about global warming) decreases pro-social behavior and science acceptance’, *Personality and Individual Differences*, 87: 171–3.; Bogart, L.M. and Thorburn, S. (2006) ‘Relationship of African Americans’ sociodemographic characteristics to belief in conspiracies about HIV/AIDS and birth control’, *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 98(7): 1144–50.; Lamberty, P. and Imhoff, R. (2018) ‘Powerful pharma and its marginalized alternatives? Effects of individual differences in conspiracy mentality on attitudes toward medical approaches’, *Social Psychology*, 49(5): 255–70.

²⁶ Daniel Jolley and Karen Douglas. (2014). The social consequences of conspiracism: Exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one’s carbon Footprint. *British Journal of Psychology*, 105. 35-56.

level and prevent society from organizing collectively on certain issues of pivotal importance due to a distrust of governmental authorities, scientists, or journalists.²⁷

Addressing the global pandemic is one prominent contemporary issue that has faced significant resistance from conspiracy theorists. Taking climate change denial as a proxy, Brzczinski et al. (2020) show, using phone location data, that those living in areas with lower trust in science had higher tendencies to violate social distancing measures²⁸; surveys conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom have come to similar conclusions.²⁹ Using a multi-wave survey, van Prooijen, Etienne, Kutiyiski, and Krouwel (2021) demonstrate that those with conspiracy theory beliefs early in the pandemic were less likely to get tested for the coronavirus, more likely to violate health restrictions, and more likely to catch the virus at later stages.³⁰ There is a significant amount of evidence showing that anti-vaccine material has proliferated and been diffused by way of social media, and that exposure to anti-vaccine conspiracy theories lead people to be much less likely to take a vaccine, or give their (hypothetical) child a vaccine.³¹ Simione, et al. show that this relationship can be explained by increased levels of death anxiety which mediate the relationship between conspiracy theory belief and vaccine-hesitancy.³² Moreover, these beliefs also promote alternative, and possibly harmful, sources of medical treatment, such as hydroxychloroquine, as a remedy for Covid-19.³³

Social movements formed around resisting pandemic health measures have been a disruptive force to government attempts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. In the United States, “re-open” demonstrations

²⁷ Niklas Harring, Sverker C. Jagers, and Åsa Löfgren. (2021). COVID-19: Large-scale collective action, government intervention, and the importance of trust. *World Dev.* 138: 105236. doi: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105236

²⁸ Adam Brzezinski, Valentin Kecht, David Van Dijke, Austin Wright (2020). Science Skepticism Reduced Compliance with COVID-19 Shelter-in-Place Policies in the United States. Becker Friedman Institute Working Paper

²⁹ Daniel Freeman, Felicity Waite, Laina Rosebrock, Ariane Petit, Chiara Causier, Anna East, Lucy Jenner, Ashley-Louise Teale, Lydia Carr, Sophie Mulhall, Emily Bold, Sinéad Lambe. (2020). Coronavirus conspiracy beliefs, mistrust, and compliance with government guidelines in England. *Psychol Med.* 2020 May 21;1-13.; Daniel Romer, Kathleen Hall Jamieson. (2020). Conspiracy theories as barriers to controlling the spread of COVID-19 in the U.S. *Soc Sci Med.* 2020 Oct;263:113356.

³⁰ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Tom W. Etienne, Yordan Kutiyiski, and André P. M. Krouwe. (2021). Conspiracy beliefs prospectively predict health behavior and well-being during a pandemic. *Psychological Medicine.* pp. 1–8.

³¹ Chou, W., A. Oh, W. Klein. (2018). Addressing Health-Related Misinformation on Social Media. *JAMA* 320(23). 2417-8. doi:10.1001/jama.2018.16865; Harmsen IA, Doorman GG, Mollema L, Ruiters RA, Kok G, de Melker HE. Parental information-seeking behaviour in childhood vaccinations. *BMC Public Health.* 2013 Dec 21;13:1219. doi: 10.1186/1471-2458-13-1219. PMID: 24358990; PMCID: PMC3909325.; Jones, A., Saad B. Omer, Robert A. Bednarczyk, Neal A. Halsey, Lawrence H. Moulton, and Daniel A. Salmon. (2012). Parents' Source of Vaccine Information and Impact on Vaccine Attitudes, Beliefs, and Nonmedical Exemptions. *Advances in Preventive Medicine.* Volume 2012, Article ID 932741 doi:10.1155/2012/932741; Jolley, D. and Douglas, K.M. (2014a) 'The social consequences of conspiracism: exposure to conspiracy theories decreases intentions to engage in politics and to reduce one's carbon footprint', *British Journal of Psychology*, 105(1): 35–6.; Jolley, D. and Douglas, K.M. (2014b) 'The effects of anti-vaccine conspiracy theories on vaccination intentions', *PLoS ONE*, 9(2).

³² Luca Simione, Monia Vagni, Camilla Gnagnarella, Giuseppe Bersani and Daniela Pajardi. Mistrust and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories Differently Mediate the Effects of Psychological Factors on Propensity for COVID-19 Vaccine. *Frontiers in Psychology.*

³³ Paul Bertin, Kenzo Nera, Sylvain Delouvé. (2020). Conspiracy Beliefs, Rejection of Vaccination, and Support for hydroxychloroquine: A Conceptual Replication-Extension in the COVID-19 Pandemic Context. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2020, 11: 565128

served as an important way for militia movements, including many of the January 6th participants, to network and establish coalitions with each other. Some of these actions, such as the storming of the Michigan State Capitol in April 2020, and the attempted kidnapping of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, can be seen as important preludes to the January 6th insurrection.³⁴ Many of these same groups have been present in the ongoing anti-mask and anti-vaccine protests that have disrupted school board meetings and mobile vaccination clinics across the United States, and forced schools to go into lockdown.³⁵

Arguably more disruptive, however, has been these groups' efforts to disseminate misinformation about the pandemic online. In a recent study by the Center for Countering Digital Hate, just twelve people, nicknamed the "Disinformation Dozen," have been responsible for a disproportionate amount of disinformation online concerning the pandemic, including an estimated 65% of the English-language anti-vaccine misinformation on Twitter and Facebook.³⁶ Consequently, a consistent 13% of the US population has claimed that they "definitely will not" get vaccinated.³⁷ The *Querdenker* activists, for their part, have been very active online, including on social media platforms such as Telegram and Youtube, regularly moving to alternative platforms each time their accounts are removed for violating terms of agreement. *Querdenker* channels Telegram are commonly dedicated to dubbing over content from far-right news outlets in the US, and distributing misinformation on a range of topics, from esotericism, alternative medicine, and "alternative science," to conspiracy theories involving Bill Gates and other powerful figures.³⁸ *Querdenker*-adjacent groups, such as the "*Freie Bürger Kassel*," have had success in astro-turfing anti-health measure protests outside of Germany as well.³⁹

The effect of this misinformation in terms of its consequences for pandemic response are difficult to quantify, however, some studies point to their being a link with higher infection and mortality rates. Bursztyn, et al.'s (2020) study of far-right news outlet Fox News found that viewers of the specific shows on that channel that downplayed the seriousness of the virus and framed the pandemic as a concerted attempt by Democrats to undermine the Trump Presidency, were statistically more likely to have higher confirmed cases and deaths in their county.⁴⁰ In the United States, vaccine hesitancy and opposition to masking has disproportionately leaned rightward, due to the politicization of the issues by the Republican Party, with Republicans and white evangelical Christians, as well as rural and suburban populations,

³⁴ Roudabeh Kishi, Aaron Wolfson, Myung-Gyun Lim, Hampton Stall, and Sam Jones. (2021). A National Emergency: How Covid-19 is Fueling Unrest in the US.

³⁵ Heidi Jones, Cloee Cooper. (June 21, 2021). Anti-Vaxx Events in New York Highlight Alignment Among Far-Right Militias, Alternative Health Promoters, and Local Politicians. *Political Research Associates.*; Jonathan Levinson and Troy Brynelson. (September 4, 2021). 3 Vancouver schools placed on lockdown after Proud Boys try to enter during masks protest. *Oregon Public Broadcasting.*

³⁶ Center for Countering Digital Hate. (2021). The Disinformation Dozen: Why Platforms Must Act On Twelve Leading Online Anti-Vaxxers.

³⁷ Ashley Kirzinger, Grace Sparks, Liz Hamel, Lunna Lopes, Audrey Kearney, Mellisha Stokes, and Mollyann Brodie. (4 August, 2021). KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: July 2021. *Kaiser Family Foundation.*

³⁸ William Callison and Quinn Slobodian (12 January, 2021).

³⁹ Joe Indrak and Jordan Wildon. (14 May, 2021). EXCLUSIVE: Worldwide Anti-Lockdown Protests Organized by German Cell. *Logically.*

⁴⁰ Leonardo Bursztyn, Aakaash Rao, Christopher Roth, and David Yanagizawa-Drott. (2020). Misinformation During a Pandemic. *Becker Friedman Institute.* Working Paper

consistently reporting being less likely to get vaccinated⁴¹ or wear masks⁴²; it is, thus, an unfortunate reality that the vast majority of those who have been hospitalized during the fourth wave were those who were unvaccinated, with “red” states bearing the brunt of the pandemic. It goes without saying that many needless deaths could have been averted if not for the proliferation of such misinformation.

Undermining Democracy

Conspiracy theories are ideologically cohesive with a populist, Manichean perspective of the world. The structure of conspiratorial beliefs is characterized primarily by a populist “shell,” wherein an evil, conspiring group of powerful individuals actively plots against the people. Imbued with sinister intentions and incredible social influence, the image of the conspiring elitist presents the believer with a “threat,” either to themselves, to their in-group, or their valued way of life, and provokes feelings of anger and injustice associated with being victimized by the evil plotters. “The people,” on the other hand, who are seen as being “pure of heart” according to the dichotomy of the populist, are believed to be so innocent that they are “blind” to the schemes of the elitists. This pushes the believer to become more resolute in their mission to unveil the “truth” to the broader public and stop the evildoers. Experimental studies have demonstrated that exposure to conspiracy theories tends to increase the level of these populist, Manichean attitudes in individuals.⁴³

Conspiracy theories framed as a threat or attack on “sacred values” held in common are often the catalyst for political mobilization.⁴⁴ While Flat Earthers may believe that the government and the scientific community are lying to them about the characteristics of the planet Earth, these narratives are unlikely to provoke political action. Political conspiracy theories that allege the undermining of individual liberties, democratic processes, cultural practices, or religious faith, are felt as a direct threat to the wellbeing of oneself and their community. This can be observed in both the *Querdenken* and Stop the Steal protest movements. As with their American counterparts during “Operation Gridlock”, the lateral thinkers resort to such animated activity during demonstrations against health restrictions, and commonly elicit comparisons to Nazi Germany, because the “lie” told to them is utilized to curb all individual liberties that German citizens have.⁴⁵ These apocalyptic feelings were twice as prominent in the Stop the Steal demonstrations as the American right felt, not only that the basic notion of popular sovereignty had been usurped due to voter fraud, but also that “radical” Democrats would then use their power to upend the American way of life and destroy everything the MAGA movement stood for. Thus, the creation of a “victimization complex” is an important component of conspiratorial beliefs that promote political action.

⁴¹ Ashley Kirzinger, et al. (4 August, 2021).; Robert Hart. (5 September, 2021). By The Numbers: Who’s Refusing Covid Vaccinations—And Why. *Forbes*.; Jennifer Kates, Jennifer Tolbert, and Kendal Orgera. (14 September, 2021). The Red/Blue Divide in COVID-19 Vaccination Rates. *Kaiser Family Foundation*.

⁴² Brenan, M. (2020, 13 July). Americans’ Face Mask Usage Varies Greatly by Demographics. Gallup.

⁴³ Michael Hameleers. (2020). They are selling themselves out to the enemy! The content and effects of populist conspiracy theories. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edaa004

⁴⁴ Bradley Franks, Adrian Bangerter, & Martin Bauer. (2013). Conspiracy theories as quasi-religious mentality: an integrated account from cognitive science, social representations theory, and frame theory. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4. 1-12.

⁴⁵ Anne-Coralie Bonnaire. (2020, 10 December). Allemagne : quand le covidoscepticisme entraîne la banalisation du nazisme. *The Conversation*.

By demonizing political opponents or other societal cohorts, conspiracy theories can actively lead to polarization on the mass level by fulfilling three main criteria for political sectarianism.⁴⁶ First, they “Other” political opponents, creating the tendency to view certain groups in society, such as those who identify with a specific political identity, as fundamentally different from one’s group. Straight-ticket voting becomes more prominent over time which severs the link between voters and their representatives, as politicians have less of an incentive to represent those in the out-group, and promotes strategies related to negative partisanship to rally the base.⁴⁷ Next, they lead to strong feelings of aversion, distrust, or resentment towards the other side, which renders efforts to empathize with the other camp and attempts to find common-ground less likely. If a significant number of supporters dislike the other camp, then political gridlock becomes more likely, as elected officials will be rewarded by voters for opposing compromises. Finally, negative moral categories are applied to the other camp based on their alleged role in the conspiracy. This may be one reason why we tend to observe levels of in-group “warmth” stagnate in countries such as the United States but see record levels of out-group hate.⁴⁸ In environments of acute polarization, conspiracy theories can provide significant communicative methods for directing partisan activity, identifying who the “enemy” is and what must be done to overcome them, which incentives political elites to instrumentalize them in the political arena.⁴⁹

The most problematic consequence of polarization is, however, is the justification it provides to discriminate against and engage in explicitly anti-democratic actions taken against the other camp.⁵⁰ The perception of opposition groups as an existential evil, and not simply as parties with different worldviews or interests, is a detriment to the functioning of democracy, promoting distrust of opponents and political institutions and justifying an ‘anything goes’ style of politics in order to defeat the ‘Other,’ what Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt call the loosening of the “guard rails” of democracy.⁵¹ This can be seen in the case of the Republican members of Congress who helped plan the January 6th insurrection or Trump National Security Advisor and prominent QAnon leader Michael Flynn to call for Trump to “suspend the constitution,” “impose martial law,” and “rerun” the election after it was understood that the vote tally would not come out in Trump’s favor, and subsequently call for a Myanmar-style coup after the insurrection ultimately failed. According to many conspiracy theories, entire political institutions are alleged to be under the influence of the conspirators, and thus deemed completely illegitimate. By promoting the feeling that the core democratic foundation of popular sovereignty has been “usurped from the people, the sad irony is that the language of democracy is often the same tool that is used to undermine the very democratic values they seek to defend, as the effort to overturn the results of the latest US election demonstrated.

⁴⁶ Eli J. Finkel, Christopher A. Bail, Mina Cikara, Peter H. Ditto, Shanto Iyengar, Samara Klar, Lilliana Mason, Mary C. Mcgrath, Brendan Nyhan, David G. Rand, Linda J. Skitka, Joshua A. Tucker, Jay J. Van Bavel, Cynthia S. Wang, and James N. Druckman. (2020). Political sectarianism in America. *Science*, 370(6516). 533-536.

⁴⁷ Abramowitz, A., and S. Webster. (2016). The rise of negative partisanship and the nationalization of U.S. elections in the 21st century. *Electoral Studies* (41)12.

⁴⁸ Eli J. Finkel, et al. (2020).

⁴⁹ Smallpage, Steven, Adam Enders, Joseph Uscinski. (2017). The partisan contours of conspiracy theory beliefs. *Research and Politics*, October-December, 1-7.

⁵⁰ Ekim Arbatli and Dina Rosenberg (2021) United we stand, divided we rule: how political polarization erodes democracy, *Democratization*, 28:2, 285-307.; Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Giuliana Spadaro, and Haiyan Wang. (2021). Suspicion of institutions: How distrust and conspiracy theories deteriorate social relationships. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 43, February 2022, pp. 65-69.

⁵¹ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. (2019) *How Democracies Die*. Penguin Books.

The societal stigmatization and dogmatic belief in the “truth” that often follows from believing in conspiracy theories often pushes individuals to form conspiracist communities of like-minded people. These networks, whether online or in-person, help to provide these communities with the “quasi-religious” character that characterizes their belief system, and isolate them from the outside world in an epistemological bubble. Group identity is reinforced in perpetuity by providing ‘evidence’ and rehearsing answers to shared questions, anticipating critiques from the outside world, denigrating and promoting fear of the “conspirators,” and promoting a “path to redemption.”⁵² An extreme example of this is the QAnon community, that behaves with almost religious-like devotion to signs, termed “Q-drops,” from an online prophet. At the beginning of the pandemic, QAnon beliefs spread rapidly in the US, drawing from diverse pools of sympathizers such as the conservative movement, anti-vaccine advocates, the elderly, and the spiritual and wellness community from online social networks.⁵³ Once the “political insider” Q left his message, movement adherents would collectively interpret the meaning of the message, search for “evidence” in support of the claims, form predictions about impending events based upon this knowledge, and turn to common slogans and symbols with which to rally behind and reinforce group identity. According to QAnon lore, the Messiah, Donald Trump, would bring about a day of reckoning with the political establishment and the “secret cabal” controlling them during “the Storm,” when mass arrests and executions put an end to the satanic forces.

Political conspiracy theories such as the “stolen election” or the “tyrannical health measures” do not simply divide society between in-groups and out-groups based on Manichean categories, they also provide political opportunities for anti-systemic and anti-democratic politicians to rally supporters to their cause. The image of an evil, conspiring opponent serves to give the bond between the leader and their supporters an intensity that facilitates their easy mobilization for elections or political protests. In addition, the “quasi-religious” character of conspiratorial communities can easily be co-opted and instrumentalized by anti-systemic politicians.⁵⁴ Donald Trump is a prime example. By delegitimizing political opponents and the media, and fostering a strong sense of near-blind trust in him, Trump was capable of launching unprecedented attacks on American democracy without losing support from voters, such as suggesting the election be delayed, refusing to commit to a peaceful transfer of power, pressuring election officials, and urging Justice Department officials to declare the results of the election “corrupt.” Stop the Steal, which unified a large coalition of pro-Trump conspiracy theorists, served a clear instrumental purpose of attempting to undermine American democratic institutions by way of overturning election results. In Figure 1 below, protest event data from the Stop the Steal protests clearly demonstrates a focus on certain state capitols, such as Phoenix, Atlanta, Lansing, St. Paul, and Philadelphia, where the election results were close and votes were being re-tallied between the general election on November 3rd and the vote to certify the results on January 6th, 2021.

⁵² Bradley Franks, Adrian Bangerter, & Martin Bauer. (2013).

⁵³ Stories abound of children finding out that their parents had been radicalized online by QAnon. (see NPR. (January 15, 2021). How QAnon-Like Conspiracy Theories Tear Families Apart.)

⁵⁴ Patrick Sawyer. (2021). Conspiracism in Populist Radical Right Candidates: Rallying the Base or Mainstreaming the Fringe? *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-021-09398-4>

Figure 1. Stop the Steal protests, November 3, 2020 - January 6, 2021.⁵⁵



Conspiracism and Political Violence

While it is difficult to analyze the full impact that conspiracy theories have on the propensity for radicalization, what is known from studying the effect that conspiracy theories have on more moderate populations, as well as studying conspiracism in extremist groups at a distance, is that the evidence points to conspiratorial narratives being a possible conduit to violent behavior. The mid-twentieth century historian Richard Hofstadter was an early observer of this potential:

“As a member of the avant-garde who is capable of perceiving the conspiracy before it is fully obvious to an as yet unaroused public, the paranoid is a militant leader. He does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, what is necessary is not compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. Since the enemy is thought

⁵⁵ Source: Clionadh Raleigh, Andrew Linke, Håvard Hegre and Joakim Karlsen. (2010). Introducing ACLED-Armed Conflict Location and Event Data. *Journal of Peace Research*, 47(5) 651-660.

*of as being totally evil and totally unappeasable, he must be totally eliminated—if not from the world, at least from the theatre of operations to which the paranoid directs his attention”.*⁵⁶

Conspiracy theories which postulate a secret scheming cohort, responsible for a societal ill, provokes emotions related to victimization: anger and injustice. Unlike other emotions common to conspiratorial beliefs, anger has a specifically “moral” character which often activates different forms of political participation and social action and activates latent stereotypes that people have of others. In a recent experiment conducted by Daniel Jolley and Jenny Paterson, a sample of 601 Britons were exposed to conspiracy theories regarding the coronavirus pandemic, including the belief that electromagnetic waves transmitted by 5G technology were responsible for the spread of COVID-19. The result was that those who were exposed to the treatment, as expected, reported being much angrier at the government.⁵⁷

This anger can often spill over into anti-systemic and violent behavior. Psychological studies point to a higher likelihood to resort to hostility when one’s views are threatened the more strongly a person believes in conspiracy theories as well as higher levels of paranoia characterized by a tendency to be overly suspicious of hostile intentions of others where they do not necessarily exist.⁵⁸ Returning again to Jolley and Paterson’s study of 5G conspiracy theories, the authors also found that those participants who were exposed to the conspiracy theory treatment were associated with a “greater justification of real-life and hypothetical violence,” mediated by feelings of anger.⁵⁹ In another experimental study by psychologists Roland Imhoff, Lea Dieterle, and Pia Lamberty demonstrates that belief in conspiracy theories can lower the likelihood that an individual will engage in normative political behavior, such as voting, and increase their tendency towards non-normative forms of political engagement, such as refusing to pay taxes, engaging in illegal activity, and committing acts of property damage and physical violence.⁶⁰

Conspiracy theory belief in itself does not necessarily promote violent behavior. It is a well-documented fact that conspiracy theory belief is widespread in contemporary societies and most refer to specific political events and curious paranormal beliefs, and do not lead towards radicalization. Instead, *certain* political conspiracy theories that form a larger narrative, or worldview, can provoke this behavior. First, the narrative must provide a justification for inflicting violence. Humans’s adverse disposition to violence is only overcome if blame can be attributed to a societal actor perceived to pose a threat or be at fault for their problems.⁶¹ These “enemies” of the people, often originating from stereotypes of groups who are already distrusted, are not only identified, but also given a descriptive account of the “crimes” they have committed.

⁵⁶ Richard Hofstadter. (1964, November). The Paranoid Style in American Politics. *Harper’s Magazine*.

⁵⁷ Daniel Jolley and Jenny Paterson. (2020). Pylons ablaze: Examining the role of 5G COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs and support for violence.

⁵⁸ Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen Douglas. (2018). Belief in conspiracy theories: Basic principles of an emerging research domain. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 48(7). 897-908; Marina Abalakina-Paap, Walter Stephan, Traci Craig, W. Larry Gregory. (2002). Beliefs in Conspiracies. *Political Psychology*, 20(3). 637-647.; Hannah Darwin, Nick Neave, and Jon Holmes. (2011). Belief in conspiracy theories. The role of paranormal belief, paranoid ideation and schizotypy. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 50(8). 1289-1293.

⁵⁹ Daniel Jolley and Jenny Paterson. (2020)

⁶⁰ Roland Imhoff, Lea Dieterle, and Pia Lamberty. (2021). Resolving the Puzzle of Conspiracy Worldview and Political Activism: Belief in Secret Plots Decreases Normative but Increases Nonnormative Political Engagement. *Social Psychology and Personality Science*, 12(1) 71-79.

⁶¹ Stephane Baele. (2019). Conspiratorial Narratives in Violent Political Actors’ Language. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 38(5-4), 706-734.

These provoke negative sentiments, such as resentment, in the believer and provide a motive to act violently ‘out of self-defense’. Secondly, the narrative must provoke a sense of urgency in believers. Conspiracies that allege sinister political actors are not in themselves beliefs that incite violence. Oftentimes, the opposite is the case, and believers can end up feeling apathetic or powerless against such powerful adversaries. In believers of the conspiracy, the threat of the evil “Other” brings about a sense of urgency that requires immediate action on their part. While populists seek to “return the country to the people,” and expel the corrupt, immoral, and foreign influences from the country, by adding a conspiratorial frame to the conflict with the political elite, the stakes are risen; now the basic survival of the people are in play.⁶² Conspiracy theorists often develop strong apocalyptic anxieties about politics that tend to exaggerate the Manichean dimension of the populist or extremist worldview that instigate a desire to “do something” to stop the evil forces.

While conspiracy theories may be a sufficient (but not a necessary) path to radicalization, they do tend to act as “radicalization multipliers.”⁶³ In other words, while not all populist and extremist movements are conspiracist in nature, Bartlett and Miller’s study of conspiratorial beliefs in extremist movements concluded that those groups whose beliefs hinged on overarching conspiracist beliefs tended to be more prone to lash out violently. The conspiratorial narrative leads to the constant sentiment of being “under attack” and a siege mentality in movement adherents that signals to them that peaceful reconciliation is unattainable.⁶⁴ Through a process of group polarization, that solidifies in-group identity by attributing blame to every member of the outgroup, and their “collaborators,” the group closes themselves off to the world and reinforces their beliefs through “group think,” leading them to take actions that they otherwise would not be predisposed to do so.⁶⁵

Querdenken protests have had a particular tendency for turning violent. Protesters know, for example, that one strategic repertoire is to overpower authorities with the “sheer mass” of the participants.⁶⁶ The active participation of radical right-wing groups such as the *Reichsbürger* have been a major factor promoting violent behavior. On the whole, while only 2 percent of demonstrations without the participation of far right actors recorded by ACLED were violent, this percentage increased to 10 percent when demonstrations included far right groups.⁶⁷ On August 29th, 2020, for example, 38,000 people, many of them belonging to the Identitarian movement, the Neo-Nazi group Steeler Jung, Reich Citizens, and far right party *Die Rechte*, attended a demonstration in Berlin which ended in violence. Demonstrators, holding the flags of the German Empire, broke through police barriers and attempted to storm the Reichstag building. In the city of Leipzig, a demonstration of anywhere between 20,000 and 45,000 *Querdenken* protesters, including members of the far right Pro Chemnitz and Nationalist Democratic Party (NDP), also turned violent on November 7th; rocks were thrown at police and over 32 journalists were attacked and injured by protesters.

⁶² Ruth Wodak. (2015). *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. SAGE: London.

⁶³ Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller. (2010). *The power of unreason*. London: Demos.

⁶⁴ Roger Brown. (2003). *Social Psychology*, 2nd Edition. Free Press., pp. 203-26

⁶⁵ Robert Baron, Sieg Hoppe, Chuan Feng Kao, Bethany Brunsman, Barbara Linneweh, and Diane Rogers. (1996). Social Corroboration and Opinion Extremity. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 32. p. 537-560.

⁶⁶ DW News, “Meet Germany’s ‘Querdenker’ COVID protest movement,” April 3, 2021.

⁶⁷ Elliot Bynum, et al. (January 2021).

The violence on behalf of the January sixth insurrectionists is much more apparent. During the assault, four people died, including one who was bludgeoned to death with a fire extinguisher, and more than 100 police officers suffered injuries from the incident. Apart from the large mob of general Trump protesters who entered the building along with the crowd, there is also a large body of evidence that points to organized attempts to commit acts of violence on lawmakers. For one, the participants came armed; court documents show that at least three dozen people who took part possessed some kind of weapon such as stun guns, pepper spray, baseball bats, batons, or flagpoles, while others showed up with zipties and body armor. The night before, an individual placed pipe bombs outside of the Democratic and Republican Party headquarters while an improvised device was found in the Capitol building on the day of the insurrection.⁶⁸ On the day of the insurrection, a noose was quickly constructed in front of the Capitol building, likely an attempt to replicate the “day of the rope.”⁶⁹ Referring back to Figure 1, it is clear from the data that a large number of Stop the Steal protests were violent in nature. All across the country, supporters of Trump protested the results of the election, many of which turned violent. In Washington D.C., MAGA supporters and members of the Proud Boys rioted and engaged in street fighting with anti-Trump counterprotesters, resulting in four people being stabbed. Similar street fighting also broke out at demonstrations in Portland, Sacramento, and Pittsburgh.

The radicalization potential of the “stolen election” trope, however, can be seen in the demographics of the participants who were arrested in the aftermath of the attack; Research by Robert Pape and Keven Ruby has shown that the demographic profiles of the participants of the January 6th insurrection were different from past extremist activity.⁷⁰ Those arrested were significantly older, more likely to be employed, and tended to come from more diverse, urban, and “purple” counties that Biden won during the presidential election, the opposite of past extremist profiles. Finally, while the insurrectionists did join with the traditional far right, such as militia and white supremacist groups, 87% of those who were arrested were unaffiliated with any of these groups, implying that the insurrectionists instead tended to be radicalized Trump supporters on the whole. Subsequent surveys fielded by Pape have pointed to a large number of Americans who report having “insurrectionist sentiments” in the wake of January 6th.⁷¹ These results point to the existence of a movement that is much broader than that of traditional right-wing extremist movements, based in areas where Trump supporters are the minority, that is prepared to use violence based on conspiratorial visions of the world to further a far-right political agenda.⁷²

Policy Recommendations

⁶⁸ Jones, D. (2021, 29 January). Pipe Bombs Believed To Have Been Placed Night Before Attack On U.S. Capitol. *NPR*.

⁶⁹ The “Day of the Rope” is a scene in the white supremacist novel *The Turner Diaries* in which the protagonist and his white revolutionary comrades commit a mass execution of minorities and “race traitors”. Since being published, this novel has been influential in serving as a model for white supremacist terroristic activities in the United States.

⁷⁰ Robert Pape and Keven Ruby. (2021, 28 January). The Face of American Insurrection: Right-Wing Organizations Evolving into a Violent Mass Movement. University of Chicago. Chicago Project on Security & Threats.

⁷¹ Sarah Steimer. (12 April, 2021). Insurrectionist movement in U.S. is larger and more dangerous than expected, research finds. *Uchicago News*.

⁷² Robert Pape and Keven Ruby. (2 February, 2021). The Capitol Rioters Aren’t Like Other Extremists. *The Atlantic*.

There are a number of valid reasons why conspiracy theories should generally not be countered by the state. For one, the question naturally arises; who becomes the arbiter of truth in a free society? While the state may see it in the national interest to limit the scope of conspiracy theories in their entirety, the problem is that actual conspiracies do indeed exist in the political realm, and suppressing them only limits citizens' right to question the actions and motives of their governments.⁷³ Secondly, for those who are already true-believers, large-scale attempts to counter conspiracy theories will only confirm the conspiracists' worst fears, providing them with more "evidence" of governmental malevolence to further radicalize and spread their message. That said, extremist beliefs that are both widespread and damaging to society are certainly cause for concern. Conspiracy theories based not on a healthy skepticism of government, but total opposition to it often lead to anti-systemic and violent behavior, while those targeting minority groups predictably lead to hate crimes.

To address these issues, policymakers can take several non-intrusive measures to prevent further radicalization by way of conspiracy theories:

(1) By taking on the roots of conspiratorial beliefs, conspiracy theories may be pre-empted by "immunizing" citizens to such narratives. On the epistemological terrain, people tend towards conspiratorial views of the world when they lack the analytical skills to accurately process information, relying instead on intuition. Based on prior distrust that one has of the government or an out-group, intuitive feelings that "something is up" lead to endorsement of such beliefs. This can be observed in conspiracy theorists' tendency to believe in more conspiracy theories once they are introduced to them, with each conspiratorial belief serving as evidence for the next, and their tendency to simultaneously believe in contradictory conspiracy theories. Those with "monological belief systems" close themselves off to factual evidence that test their beliefs and resort to ideological, intuitive arguments.⁷⁴ By taking on the roots of conspiratorial beliefs such as by promoting critical thinking skills and media literacy, conspiracy theories may be pre-empted by "immunizing" citizens to such narratives. These efforts have seen success in countries such as Finland, where the education system was revamped to include critical thinking in their curriculum.⁷⁵

(2) By promoting certain 'best practices' for social media platforms to follow, the spread of misinformation online can be reduced. A large body of research points to the Internet, and more specifically, social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as vectors for the spread of misinformation due to their radical restructuring of the diffusion of information in society.⁷⁶ Where once, journalists, experts, and editors served as "gatekeepers" to information about society, in the current day, they have largely been sidelined by the "hive-mind" of online discourse. Without such gatekeepers in place, conspiratorial narratives of politics have ballooned over the past decade, due in part to their speedy diffusion

⁷³ i.e. the Watergate scandal.

⁷⁴ Jan Van Prooijen. (2018). *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories*. Routledge: London.; Michael Wood, Karen Douglas, and Robbie Sutton. (2012). Dead and Alive: belief in contradictory conspiracy theories. *Soc. Psychol. Pers. Sci.*, 3. 767-773.

⁷⁵ Eliza Mackintosh (May 2019). Finland is winning the war on fake news. What it's learned may be crucial to Western democracy. CNN.

⁷⁶ Rebecca Lewis. (2018). Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube. *Data&Society*. https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/DS_Alternative_Influence.pdf

through online networks.⁷⁷ The free exchange of ideas, which underlies the principle of deliberative consensus in democratic politics, requires accurate accounts of current events. The problem is that social media, and especially large outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram, have platforms which permit, and even advantage, inaccurate information. Social media platforms should be encouraged, or even regulated, to follow certain “best practices,” such as targeting misinformation with links to accurate, expert-driven information, disclosing sources of funding and ownership for large media outlets (as was done with Russia Today and Al Jazeera), and changing algorithms that de-incentivize the spread of misinformation. Where speech rights come into conflict with regulation, large online platforms which operate in a monopolistic fashion should be considered for being broken up by state regulators to both protect speech in practice and limit the spread of disinformation on a mass scale.

(3) By targeting small numbers of disinformation “super-spreaders”, the diffusion of conspiratorial narratives online can be mitigated. By democratizing the diffusion of information flow online, this not only opens the door to the masses to contribute in the production of narratives, but also allows for the creation of new hierarchical structures. One such problem emanating from this transformation has been the existence of “super-spreaders” that are responsible for a disproportionate amount of the conspiracy theories and disinformation found online.⁷⁸ While the vast majority of movement adherents are often ‘true believers’, or at the very least sympathizers with such narratives, conspiratorial entrepreneurs can be motivated by either ideological considerations or financial or political gain. The level playing field on social media networks permits and incentivizes the spread of their disinformation in a way that circumvents traditional information distributors. Deplatforming large repeat offenders such as these can have the effect of preventing the exponential growth of disinformation without necessitating the large-scale banning of casual users of conspiratorial material.⁷⁹

(4) By promoting readily-available information and transparency about the daily operations of government, and implementing democratic reforms that allow citizens more of a voice in government, trust can be rebuilt between citizens and their representatives. With trust in governmental institutions in many countries around the world at all-time low-levels, support for populist and conspiratorial movements has increased over the past several decades. One consistent finding in the literature is that distrust in mainstream institutions and dissatisfaction with the state of democracy are strong indicators of support for populist candidates and the propensity for one to believe in conspiracy theories. The result is that the individual is locked in a worldview that operates according to a logic of “if “they’ve done it” before, they’ll do it again” leading to endorsement of alternative, and sometimes multiple, narratives. Populist candidates that deride the same targets that the supporter does are often endowed with a faith-like trust.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Alessandro Bessi, and Walter Quattrociocchi. (2015). Disinformation: Digital Wildfires in the Age of Misinformation. *Australian Quarterly*, 86(4). 34-40. World Economic Forum. (2013). *Global Risks 2013: Eighth Edition*. Switzerland: World Economic Forum.

⁷⁸ Kate Starbird. (2017). Examining the Alternative Media Ecosystem through the Production of Alternative Narratives of Mass Shooting Events on Twitter. Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (ICWSM 2017).

⁷⁹ However, numerous studies and investigations point to a hesitancy and even resistance to deplatforming accounts that spread misinformation, which may warrant legislative solutions. (see Center for Countering Digital Hate. (2021); Michael Edison Hayden. (2021, 7 July). 'We Make Mistakes': Twitter's Embrace of the Extreme Far Right. *Southern Poverty Law Center*.)

⁸⁰ Nadia Urbinati. (2019). The Political Theory of Populism. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22:6.1-6.17

In order for governments to rebuild trust with their citizens, active efforts should be taken to overcome “democratic deficits” and promote operational transparency in government, such as with campaign financing and representation in supranational organizations.