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WHY DEMOCRACY FUELS CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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Around the world, conspiracy theories appear to have taken politics by storm. From India and Indonesia to Brazil, Tanzania, and the United States, declarations that conspiracies are afoot have gained wide currency, alleging a planned foreign takeover of the Amazon rainforest, a secret plot by Muslim men to convert Hindu women by marrying them, Chinese infiltration of the national police to suppress postelection riots, a foreign plot to pay scientists to exaggerate covid-19, and a scheme by the “deep state” to deprive Donald Trump of victory in the 2020 U.S. presidential election—to name only a few examples.¹

A conspiracy theory, by definition, is the belief that individuals or groups are “acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end.”² As the examples above indicate, such accounts of events and social reality have been implicated recently in ills that include rejection of vaccines against covid, interethnic violence, and insurrection. Accumulating evidence suggests that such beliefs arise from deep wells of social distrust, cynicism, polarization, and feelings of alienation.³ As such, the prominence of conspiracy theories in a society is a symptom more than it is a cause of recent challenges to democracy. Yet beyond their function as the expression of citizens’ imaginings of the worst abuses of power, conspiracy theories serve purposes that make them useful as political rhetoric. Even though conspiracy theories’ appearance and increasing popularity may be symptomatic more than causal in themselves, once conspiracy theories do appear—and when belief in them spreads and intensifies—they can do damage of their own to democracy by sharpening

social divides, degrading trust in democratic institutions, and exacerbating democracy's weaknesses.

In efforts to explain the rhetoric of conspiracy, one element that deserves more attention is the presence of political competition. While it is common to classify such rhetoric as a trapping of dictatorships, it is important to grasp the ways in which relatively open political systems—meaning ones with at least somewhat free and fair elections and a measure of media freedom—supply politicians with incentives to level conspiracy charges at their foes. Until recently, it was common to associate the strategic use of conspiracy theories in politics with history's worst dictators. From Adolf Hitler's adoption of the Imperial German high command's use of the *Dolchstoß* ("stab in the back") myth to explain defeat in World War I to Josef Stalin's grim warnings about "capitalist encirclement" of the Soviet Union, conspiracies were invoked by leaders whose regimes had total control of the media, and conspiracy rhetoric was used to provide pretexts for campaigns of mass violence and repression. Fulminations against internal and external enemies were meant to keep entire peoples in a state of constant fear, and to redirect their frustrations away from the rulers and toward marginalized groups.

Recently, the world witnessed how Russian president Vladimir Putin marshaled conspiracy theories to manufacture the *casus belli* for invading Ukraine. On the eve of the war, he alleged that NATO enlargement threatened Russia's existence and that Ukraine was ruled by Nazis and carrying out "genocide" against Russian-speakers, among other claims. These fanciful assertions of nefarious states of affairs came after years of Kremlin propaganda charging that a duplicitous West was hell-bent on subduing Russia.

The view of conspiracy theories as an autocrats' monopoly is out of date, however. In the twenty-first century, conspiracy theories have been democratized. The norms that may once have held public officials back from promoting conspiracy theories have been weakened in democracies to the point that conspiracy-mongering sometimes brings not ostracization, but electoral rewards. The hallmark of democratic politics, competition, is itself a contributor to conspiratorial rhetoric, and indeed even semidemocratic countries (where competition, even if restricted, is still part of the political game) are seeing the rise of "conspiracism." It is a global phenomenon, and its rise threatens to heighten citizens' disillusionment with democracy and hinder the ability of governments to address challenges such as climate change and the spread of infectious diseases. In the extreme, it opens the door to elected demagogues whose preferred response to imagined conspiracies is to end democracy itself.

The Political Advantage of Hidden Foes

Conspiracy theories can be considered a variant of propaganda: deliberate deception employed by people in power to shape perceptions

and drive behavior that furthers their own interests.⁴ Conspiracy theories posit that great harm is being committed against the public but do not provide credible evidence that such claims are true. An insidious kind of

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agenda-setting is at work: Attention is fixed on a problem and blame is attributed, but without meeting conventional burdens of proof.

Political leaders typically select from a menu of rhetorical options depending on the setting and the audience. The narrative form of conspiracy theories has the advantage, from the speaker's perspective, of deepening social or political divides. Naming a plot and perpetrator may heighten a sense

of in-group identity based on feelings of victimization, as when people are falling behind economically or fear losing status to another group.⁵ People who do not typically identify with one another may come to see themselves as facing a common threat, and therefore as sharing a common fate. As a final move, leaders who promote conspiracy theories can present themselves as allies of the victimized in-group. This enables them to downplay their elite status while purporting to represent the in-group's interests. Donald Trump is a wealthy businessman and Jair Bolsonaro a veteran politician, but both successfully presented themselves as fellow victims of an unjust system and thereby rallied supporters to vote, organize, spread disinformation, and refrain from criticism of one who seemed to champion their interests.

Another impetus for the political use of conspiracy theories involves signaling, in which actors provide information about themselves indirectly through their words or actions. State officials have access to exclusive information through informants, intelligence agencies, and technology. This intelligence gives them insights into events occurring in the country beyond what any ordinary individual can discern. When officials give voice to conspiracy theories, using their access to the media, their demonstration of knowledge of a secretive plot signals their authority and reminds audiences of their power over potential challengers.⁶ The assertion of conspiracy claims based on access to state secrets also shields officials from refutation by skeptics. This was the specious basis on which Senator Joseph McCarthy asserted that there were communists in the U.S. State Department in 1950, just as former President Trump warned in a tweet that there were "criminals and unknown Middle Easterners" in a caravan of migrants traveling through Mexico.⁷

Conspiracy theories can also be deployed to signal transgression, a device used to greatest effect in advanced democracies. Democratic politicians conventionally make standard policy-based appeals to specific

constituencies, complete with empirically grounded claims that are, in theory at least, subject to verification. Yet this style may wear thin where large numbers of voters dismiss the system as corrupt and politicians as liars. Popular cynicism creates an opening for entrepreneurial politicians to gain attention by violating these expectations. Conspiracy theories can be used to appeal to disaffected citizens, but they are especially potent in a competitive context. They enable transgressors to signal their unconventional credentials and flaunt their “authenticity” in opposition to “typical” politicians.⁸

Not surprisingly, conspiracy theories are favored by populist politicians, who purport to represent a pure manifestation of “the people” against a faceless elite. Conspiracy theories positing sinister alliances of intellectual or cultural elites with immigrants (on the right), neoliberal politicians with finance capital (on the left), or any political adversary with Jews (for both) against a vulnerable national majority fit this template. The classic conspiratorial framing, of an in-group threatened by a well-organized and seemingly indomitable out-group, aligns with the tendency of people to sympathize with virtuous Davids against insidious Goliaths, even if the Davids may objectively hold more power.⁹

Competition and Conspiracism

Despite the intrinsic appeal of conspiracy theories, clearly not all politicians rely on them. As with any form of political rhetoric, the frequency with which they are voiced, and their content, depend on a variety of factors such as political culture, historical memory, social trust, and institutional strength.

The association of conspiracy theories with openness may seem counterintuitive, until we pay attention to how incumbents in different systems deploy propaganda. Today’s authoritarian regimes are sometimes called “informational” autocracies. This is because they use their control over the media to shape opinion and cultivate support, with the aim of avoiding open coercion.¹⁰ Regimes with an ability to censor alternative narratives—as in Xi Jinping’s China or the Persian Gulf monarchies—typically prefer public communications that play up their competence, heroism, and nationalist credentials. Some regimes, such as Putin’s Russia, put out a steady stream of both positive propaganda to solidify support for the incumbent and conspiracy theories to create an image of implacable foreign enemies. The most tightly controlled and isolated autocratic regimes eschew conspiracy theories in favor of “absurd” propaganda boasting of their achievements—one infamous example is the president of Turkmenistan, who is portrayed on state television as an expert marksman, musician, equestrian, and daredevil off-road driver¹¹—attesting to their overwhelming power and lack of viable opposition.¹²

By contrast, where incumbents face institutionalized competition and oppositions have access to the media—conditions typical of semidemocratic or hybrid regimes—they must contend with public criticism. Opposition messages need not make conspiracy claims. In many polities and especially in autocracies and quasi-autocracies, corruption and malfeasance are sadly all too common. Oppositionists need only publicize facts about the government's misdealings and deficiencies. In recent years, official shortcomings have become clearer to publics thanks to social media and investigative journalism. The ability of independent voices to contribute to public discourse provides the means to hold politicians accountable while, ironically, also making the degradation of that discourse more likely.

Leaders faced with criticism, legitimate or otherwise, will struggle to define the public narrative on their own terms. Conspiracy theories come in handy for leaders seeking ways to strike back at their accusers. Instead of addressing accusations—especially well-founded ones—directly, rulers can attack the messenger. Thus a media outlet that exposes corruption in government contracting will be called a tool of the CIA. An opposition legislator who wants inquiries into a failed policy must be trying to distract attention from his own shady ties to terrorists or drug traffickers.

In all regimes, but especially in competitive ones, leaders who feel besieged by perceptions that their governance is inept can invoke conspiracies to signal their strength and thereby (or so they hope) counter such impressions. In India in April 2020, politicians close to the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi reacted to a covid outbreak at a Muslim institution in New Delhi by publicly calling it “corona terrorism.”¹³ In May 2021, Brazil's President Bolsonaro speculated that the virus was the result of “biological warfare.”¹⁴ If a government says it is striving to guard the public against powerful malevolent forces, might more citizens not be moved to give it the benefit of the doubt?

Mass antigovernment protests often trigger conspiracy accusations because they pose visible, and potentially regime-threatening, challenges. Conspiracy theories insinuating nefarious, and especially foreign, support for protests serve to delegitimize the protesters and signal strength by reminding audiences of the government's ability to access intelligence about seemingly murky events. Thus the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul could not be accepted as expressing grassroots disagreement with the urban-development plans of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government, but were instead claimed to be a U.S. and Zionist plot to thwart Turkey's progress.¹⁵ Likewise, according to the Islamic Republic of Iran, citizens who in late 2019 and early 2020 protested rising fuel prices during an economic contraction had to have been trained, financed, and organized by the United States.¹⁶

In competitive regimes, election seasons can see charges of conspira-

cy flying in multiple directions. Political campaigns in general often become personal, involving tactics such as character assassination, rumor-mongering, insinuation, exaggeration, and outright lies. In established democracies, with important exceptions, candidates typically try to level accusations that are factually accurate, or at least hard to refute. Politicians caught making patently false assertions commonly fear negative media coverage and falling public support. Research has shown, however, that people are drawn to beliefs that conform to their existing opinions and resistant to disconfirming information, especially when their friends and neighbors think the same way. Voters may therefore not punish politicians for stretching the truth, and may be primed to believe the basest allegations about politicians whom they already distrust. In these circumstances, conspiracy theories can be an attractive campaign tactic.

In hybrid regimes, where media are often partisan and the institutions of political accountability are weak, conspiracy theories proliferate during political campaigns. Elections provide challengers with unusual attention and a platform to level public criticism against incumbents. Incumbents usually lack equivalent factual material to discredit challengers, who have not held power and who have spent less time in the public spotlight. Incumbents may therefore find conspiracy theories useful, as a way to associate their rivals with hidden agendas, fabricated personal histories, or unpopular foreign or domestic “others.” The theories can be spread by “cut-outs” rather than by incumbents themselves, providing a layer of deniability. If there are claims that officially secret information backs up the charges, all the better from the incumbents’ point of view, as this reminds voters of their power and authority.

The transgressive function of conspiracy theories works best when a challenger faces off against a foil who represents conventional political norms. In the United States and Europe, trust in government has been declining for years, and a portion of the electorate has come to reject center-left and center-right politicians as self-serving and out-of-touch.¹⁷ In such circumstances, political opportunists can invoke conspiracies to signal their outsider status. Attempts by establishment politicians, media figures, and fact-checkers to refute opportunists and their conspiracy theories may backfire and reinforce the appeal of conspiracy theories to people who (let us recall) are already disdainful of the establishment and its claims to authority. This logic points to the disquieting conclusion that robust knowledge-producing institutions and broad stigmatization of the rhetoric of conspiracy may help conspiracy-mongering challengers to pose ever more vigorously as the champions of disaffected voters.

The use of conspiracy theories to appeal to cynical citizens is usually not an effective strategy to win a democratic majority. In countries with countermajoritarian electoral institutions (the United States) or biased proportional rules (Hungary), however, a strategy of rallying and mobilizing one’s base can be potent since it can provide a path to

power without the need to worry as much as conventional politicians do about “owning” the broad middle of the electorate. It may also be enough to provide a foothold in parliament (in a low-threshold proportional system) and with it perhaps the

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ability to shape winning coalitions. Right-populist parties in France, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands have taken this approach, promoting narratives linking establishment elites with immigration from Muslim countries.¹⁸

These claims go beyond conventional policy disagreements and instead allege nefarious designs by liberal and centrist elites to undermine traditional values or dilute the native population.

Although these parties typically fail to win more than 20 percent of the vote, they cause center-right parties—which, unlike the fringe parties, often do hold governing power—to move further to the right for fear of losing their most rightward voters, and normalize conspiratorial ideas as political discourse.¹⁹

In Poland and Hungary, parties have wielded conspiracy theories to win pluralities across multiple election cycles. The Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland ran in opposition to the postcommunist establishment, criticizing inequality resulting from neoliberal reforms and the ability of former communist officials to profit from the transition. It embraced conspiracy theories as a political tool after an April 2010 plane crash killed President Lech Kaczyński, who had been flying to Russia for a reconciliation event. Although independent investigations determined the crash to have been an accident brought about by Kaczyński pressing the pilot (a Polish Air Force officer) to land at Smolensk in dense fog, the late president’s surviving brother Jarosław began to foster a consistent narrative that the Kremlin—and PiS’s political rivals—had in fact sabotaged the plane and carried out an assassination. This conspiracy theory served to make Lech Kaczyński into a political martyr and to remind the public of his party’s nationalist credentials.²⁰

In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has used conspiracy theories to amass power on the basis of defending against myriad purported threats. Like other right-wing populists in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, Orbán capitalized on economic and cultural anxieties by blaming outsiders for his country’s troubles: the EU, George Soros, and the (Muslim) migrants whom they supposedly assisted. Although few of the migrants who fled the Middle East for Europe in 2015 entered Hungary, Orbán nevertheless exploited imagery of marauding Muslims to pose as a righteous defender of the Hungarian nation and Christian civilization.²¹

The conspiracy theories prevalent among right-wing populists in

Europe take several forms, but a common thread is the stoking of ethnic nationalism by targeting unpopular foils, sometimes a distant entity such as Brussels, at other times internal scapegoats such as minorities. Claims positing an alliance between the two entities appealed to disaffected voters sensitive to the presence of new immigrants and apprehensive about cultural change. And once a conspiracy narrative resonated in one country, it could be imitated and adapted in others where a viable constituency was receptive to the politics of “us versus them.”

A notable case of conspiracism as a signal of transgression in established democracies is the rise of Donald Trump and the remaking of the Republican Party. In 2016, candidate Trump’s copious conspiracy claims—about the so-called deep state, immigrants, Barack Obama’s birthplace, and the Clinton Foundation, among others—helped to establish his reputation as an outsider and a disruptor of the political establishment. Conspiracy theories were key to Trump’s positioning as a champion of voters who felt neglected or abused by what he called a “rigged” system. Transgressing norms of political rhetoric provoked criticism by mainstream actors and institutions, including fellow Republicans, which further endeared him to disaffected voters who came to view Trump as their “voice.”

Although Trump, in both his rhetoric and his actions as president, was compared by many of his detractors to authoritarian leaders, it was precisely the hypercompetitive nature of U.S. democracy that enabled Trump’s gambit to work. Opposition from Democrats in Congress and on the streets, and the Justice Department’s investigation into Russian collusion, played into the narrative of Trump as an embattled victim in an unjust system. A robust independent media fascinated by the Trump spectacle and enticed by high ratings gave Trump and his conspiracy theories a platform and direct access to voters through their televisions and social-media feeds. At the same time, the informal institutional checks that had previously limited the political viability of demagogues failed to operate as designed. In particular, media fact-checking efforts and investigative reporting did not resonate with constituents for whom Trump’s conspiratorial style was a virtue and not a drawback.²² Trump did not carry the popular vote (Hillary Clinton won that by 48.2 to 46.1 percent), but he did win the Electoral College and with it, the White House.

The Degradation of Political Discourse

The ability of politicians to thrive on lies and xenophobia in the United States and other democracies is enabled by, and further contributes to, faltering trust in institutions. These processes occur as a pincer movement: Leaders deliberately poison the public discourse by making unfounded claims, while their supporters work to discredit independent bodies that are designed to expose false claims and hold their purveyors

accountable. Slanderous campaigns from below to undermine the press, universities, judges, and neutral civil servants heighten the impact of conspiratorial politicians' rhetoric, while conspiratorial verbal attacks make it easier for the enablers of authoritarians to stoke doubts about those bodies.

What happens to a political system once conspiracy theories are deemed to be an effective electoral strategy? One scenario is that seen in the cases above: Conspiracy theories work for some actors by establishing their transgressive credentials, yet others continue to communicate their positions and values in more conventional registers. Parties that have established reputations for effective governance may conclude that they can gain the most votes with ordinary policy appeals. In doing so, they seek to (re)capture the political center by coaxing back into the fold disaffected voters who still have material concerns.

Indeed, this has been the strategy of center-right and center-left parties in Europe as well as the Democratic Party in the United States. In France and Germany, center-right parties have moved further to the right to head off defections to the extreme right, but continue to compete for votes based on conventional policy positions and well-established campaign tactics.²³ Broad-based appeals centered on effective governance and countering corruption have also been the strategy of opposition coalitions in Hungary, Poland, and Turkey.

In the United States, although some Democrats flirted with conspiracism to account for Trump's puzzling fondness for Russia and Putin, campaigns for the 2020 Democratic presidential primary mostly revolved around economic and social issues as candidates sought to capitalize on the backlash against Trump's actions as president. While running for the White House and as president, Joseph Biden embraced a strategy of trying to maintain and expand the Democratic Party's coalition by addressing the root causes of the political alienation that had driven some to vote for Trump in 2016. These programs, designed to expand the safety net and reduce inequality, were intended to demonstrate the government's responsiveness and to reduce the potential for future demagogues.

A more ominous equilibrium can also develop, in which major parties employ conspiracy theories with abandon. Once conspiratorial rhetoric becomes mainstream, efforts to refute conspiratorial allegations can backfire by reinforcing the initial claims through repetition. The targets of conspiracy claims may therefore be incentivized to lob their own claims at their accusers, both as a preemptive move and as a distraction. Political calculations can result in a self-reinforcing dynamic of inter-necine conspiracy allegations that crowd out policy-oriented appeals. This situation is most likely to occur in systems with raucous competition and feeble or widely distrusted institutions.

For example, such a dynamic was evident in Ukraine, a politically

divided nation that is also an object of geopolitical competition. In one typical episode in 2011, President Viktor Yanukovich accused his opposition of purchasing weapons and plotting a revolution, while the opposition claimed that Yanukovich was spreading disinformation as a pretext to crack down and turn Ukraine into Belarus.²⁴ During the 2014 EuroMaidan protests, the president echoed Russia by accusing his political enemies of being coup plotters and agents of NATO. The opposition, for its part, charged Yanukovich with taking orders from Russia and plotting false-flag attacks meant to make the demonstrators look violent. Oligarch-owned media spread stories that served the owners' political interests regardless of their factual content.²⁵ The geopolitical overlay, as Ukraine vacillated between East and West, raised the stakes and gave conspiracy claims a patina of plausibility.

In 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky—who was not a professional politician—sought to transcend Ukraine's toxic political culture by running for the presidency without conspiracy rhetoric or geopolitical grandstanding. Like the mainstream scourges of populists discussed above, he “lowered the temperature” by emphasizing popular policies—in this case, anticorruption measures—in order to build a broad coalition. He succeeded, overcoming claims that he was a Russian puppet and defeating incumbent Petro Poroshenko with an overwhelming 73 percent of the vote.²⁶

Before journalistic norms took hold in the twentieth century, conspiracy theories were par for the course in U.S. politics. From Federalists' supposed pro-British leanings to the alleged designs of abolitionists before the Civil War, it was common for elected officials and respected members of society to lodge conspiracy claims to gain political advantage.²⁷ A partisan and profit-driven press eagerly circulated these ideas in a vigorous—and often corrupt—democracy. A proclivity for conspiracy theories may stem from an underlying suspicion of government that has persisted in various forms across U.S. history, but their use by elites is owing to their perceived political benefits. There are no greater exemplars of this tendency than two Cold War-era practitioners of the conspiracy-mongering arts, the aforementioned Senator McCarthy and Richard Nixon, who as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives and later the Senate sought political advancement by pushing conspiracy theories about communists in the federal government.²⁸

Today, conspiracy theories have metastasized in the Republican Party at both the elite and mass levels, in ways counter to trends in other advanced democracies. When Trump demonstrated the political dividends of stoking conspiracism, others followed his lead, particularly in spreading the claim that Democrats “stole” the 2020 election. Thus, Republican members of Congress, state attorneys-general, state legislators, and prospective election officials have utilized this narrative to signal their loyalty to Trump, to appeal to the party base, and to manufac-

ture the pretext to enact state-level voting restrictions.²⁹ This conspiracy narrative, while a symptom of institutional distrust on the right, also serves to further a cause—one with potentially dire consequences for democracy. It provides a foundation for Republicans to challenge, and possibly overturn, future elections that they lose. The media’s reference to this gambit as the “Big Lie,” while provocatively referencing Nazi Germany, accurately captures its powerful momentum and the ways it imposes conformity on those who want to remain party members in good standing.

How Can Conspiracy Be Countered?

The way in which conspiracy rhetoric waxes and wanes suggests that not all politicians see conspiracy-mongering as a winning tactic, and that even those inclined to spread conspiracy theories can restrain themselves at times. Observing that the incidence of conspiracy rhetoric is variable naturally raises the question of what factors militate against the use of conspiracy theories in politics.

Recently, in response to an apparent glut of “fake news” and misinformation, advocates have urged a variety of countermeasures such as information literacy, fact-checking, and aggressive monitoring and labeling of misinformation by social-media companies. These may help to some degree, but where misinformation is ubiquitous and seen as politically useful, they are unlikely to do much good. Research suggests that partisans are the most effective debunkers when conspiracy theories come from their own ideological camp,³⁰ yet they are usually reluctant to be seen as betraying their party, as evidenced by the widespread acquiescence of Republican elites to the patently false “stop the steal” campaign.

Instead, insofar as conspiracy theories are deployed because they are perceived to be politically useful, the best hope for their decline is that they will eventually collapse under their own weight. First, rhetoric that is at odds with reality might lose its resonance if it conflicts with people’s personal experiences, such as with claims that covid is no more deadly than the flu, or that vaccines contain microchips. People certainly spend large amounts of time watching television and consuming social media within informational echo chambers, but they also have unmediated encounters with reality. It may be easier to believe unverified rumors about distant events—about which people only have little knowledge to begin with—than about matters they can directly observe. People may show outward fidelity to popular conspiracy theories that conform to their partisan identities yet surreptitiously behave in ways that are consistent with observable evidence, not to mention common sense. For example, many Republican members of Congress and Fox News personalities who spread misinformation about covid vaccines have likely been vaccinated.³¹

Such contradictions will not necessarily translate into changes in political behavior, as people will continue to form political attachments on the basis of emotions and identity rather than facts alone. And the most scintillating conspiracy claims that drive national elections (George Soros, foreign intelligence services, the “deep state,” the “Great Replacement”) are not subject to individual verification, making them resistant to refutation based on experience. The promoters of conspiracy theories nonetheless risk losing credibility if they habitually predict dire outcomes that do not come to pass or make claims that are patently at odds with reality. A loss of trust can bleed over into doubts about a leader’s qualifications, especially if his power does not rest on electoral legitimacy. The conversion of a modest percentage of conspiracy believers who decide to start believing their “lying eyes” can be enough to dent the political fortunes of a rabid fabulist.

Second, conspiracy theories may lose their ability to galvanize voters once their novelty wears off. Conspiracy theories make an impact due to their contrarian nature, and by stoking anxiety or anger. As such, they gain the most attention when they come across as shocking to guardians of the status quo, but this makes them susceptible to the law of diminishing returns. If provocateurs intend to retain their notoriety, they must ratchet up the outlandishness of their claims in order to break through the constant din of television, social media, video games, and other distractions. Conspiracy theories shouted into a void may not be worth sharing at all, and increasingly sweeping, apocalyptic, and far-fetched claims—a product of competition among purveyors of conspiracism—could lead to a discrediting of the conspiracy-theory mindset as it continues to require ever wilder assumptions while pointing to unlikely results.

Finally, conspiracy-touting politicians can lose favor if they fail to meet society’s needs. Just as revolutionaries typically lack the skills to govern, so conspiracy theorists may struggle to offer a positive program. They face the risk that heightening threat perceptions only temporarily distracts the public from judging their government on its ability to address real problems. Trump’s response to covid, in which he blamed China for the pandemic but failed to take tangible measures to reduce the spread of the virus, is a case in point. Bolsonaro, who used conspiracy theories effectively both as candidate and as president, likewise privileged bravado and bluster over measures that could mitigate the pandemic, and saw his poll numbers plummet as a result.³²

While this apparent weakness may seem like an Achilles heel, there are exceptions to this rule. Some parties that put stock in conspiracy narratives have consistently won elections by using other governing instruments to gain votes. For example, under the PiS, Poland pays families a monthly allowance for every child. In India, Modi’s party has benefited from a reputation for clean government and support for business, while implementing redistributive policies that aid the poor. Voters who find

conspiracy-mongers unseemly may still be inclined to vote for them if, in the face of low expectations, they make a show of giving money back to the people rather than stealing it. The fusion of conspiracy rhetoric that appeals to an angry base with a party apparatus that addresses the mundane material concerns of constituents may be a winning formula in an era of both cynicism and material deprivation. If politicians become aware of this strategy and have the competence to implement it—never a foregone conclusion—this model has the potential to become more widespread.

In the near future, there is every reason to expect that conspiracy theories will persist and even thrive. Structural challenges such as inequality and insecurity give the impression of an uneven playing field, leading citizens to imagine that hidden agents pull the strings. A sense that people lack any ability to shape their fortunes, let alone politics or the economy, fuels their urge to seek culprits. As long as citizens turn away from institutions to improve their lives, they will seek alternative narratives that satisfy their desire to assign blame.

The rising tide of conspiracism does not herald its ultimate triumph or spell the end of fact-based political discourse—but democratic politics may start to look different. Whereas democracy is premised on agreement about facts but disagreements over policy, we may be entering a period in which political actors do not agree on basic realities—or more precisely, in which some actors deliberately disregard established facts. Depending on the institutional rules, this form of politics can persist as long as the contending parties perceive that their tactics are effective. Of course, even this state of affairs requires continued electoral competition and a press that is sufficiently independent that citizens can gain access to facts if they choose to. The danger is that a conspiratorial winner, taking conspiracist forebodings to their logical conclusion and acquiescing to conspiracist voters' wishes, might decide that democracy no longer serves the winner's interests.

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