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BACKSLIDING:

Donald Trump, Conspiracy Theory, & Democratic Decline

A thesis presented

by

Hannah Kessel

to

The Political Science Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for Honors in Political Science

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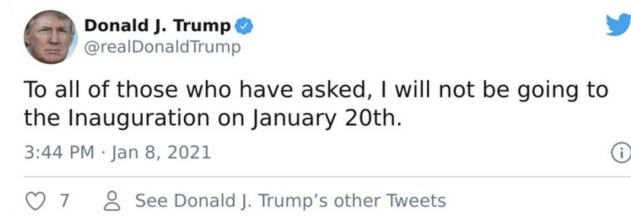
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Abstract



The relationship between conspiracy and democratic decline is well established in political theory. The tradition of American conspiracy imposes fear, mistrust, and unreality on citizens, which threatens the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Democratic electoral processes rely on a shared sense of objectivity and truth. Without this, electoral legitimacy crumbles. Twitter's emergence as a new medium for political discourse alongside the Donald Trump presidential administration have jointly posed unique challenges to American democracy within this theoretical framework. The impacts of social media on the electoral process are unmeasured, and the implications of a conspiracy-minded president are unprecedented. I observe this relationship through Donald Trump's use of Twitter as a new, strategic means of political discourse. To make my argument, I apply storytelling and affect theory to two case studies: Birtherism and Stop the Steal. Storytelling describes methods of rhetorical delivery, and affect theory describes listener reception. I apply four elements of storytelling (performance, adaptation, context, and iconicity) and two principles of affect theory (threat & protection and shame & belonging) to 136 of Trump's tweets that engage the Birther and Stop the Steal conspiracy theories. I find that Trump amplifies conspiracy theories through social media and entertainment features. Entertainment is unique to Trump's conspiratorial strategy. His emphasis on entertainment increases the embodiment of conspiracies in his followers. Donald Trump used the Birtherism conspiracy to consolidate a large, homogeneous base of followers and amass political power. When his power ran out, Trump weaponized the Stop the Steal conspiracy to mobilize his base. His base willingly participated in anti-democratic action. I attribute the attempted coup, the capitol insurrection, and post-2020 voter suppression legislation to democratic decline.

CHAPTER 1

FRAMING CONSPIRACY THEORY & DEMOCRATIC DECLINE

1.1 Introduction

Democracy is a fragile institution. It rests on the will of its citizens, requiring a shared sense of trust to function adequately. Without proper maintenance, democracy will inevitably crumble. Like any mode of governance powered by the wills of citizens, the American experiment in democracy is vulnerable— it hangs precariously over a nation battling polarization, growing inequality, and misinformation. The experiment has weathered threats before; however, the emergence of social media and unprecedented levels of polarization¹ present new, unique threats. Conspiracy theories have threatened democratic institutions in the United States before, and have evolved to pose a contemporary threat in the 21st century. In the new style of conspiracy, previous methods of democratic maintenance may no longer ensure the continued preservation of democratic liberties. Pervasive conspiracy erodes democratic norms by fracturing reality, thus pulverizing democratic accessibility. Without a shared perception of reality, citizens enter a distorted realm of reason. This distortion means reason ceases to exist. Without reason, citizens lose objectivity. Modern conspiracy theorizing is highly partisan, leading members on opposing sides into constant conflict. Legitimate bipartisan discourse becomes impossible, even at the most fundamental level. Each party will always find the other illegitimate. Donald Trump is the most significant source of conspiracy theory in modern America. The resulting affronts to democracy are unprecedented— never before has the United States had a *president* who was also

¹ Gordon Heltzel and Kristin Laurin. “Polarization in America: Two Possible Futures.” *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 34 (August 2020): 179–84, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2020.03.008>.

a conspiracy theorist, and never before has a president had such direct access to communication with voters as through social media. I argue Donald Trump has used social media to spread conspiracy theories that have contributed to American democratic decline.

The medium Trump uses to amplify conspiracy theories and reinforce his construction of reality is unprecedented— it's Twitter. The social media platform provides limitless opportunities for interactions with his followers. Anyone in the world can access Twitter at any time, and information has never been able to reach that far instantaneously. Trump is able to engage directly with his followers, exciting them and establishing a community. Followers can also follow and speak with each other in comment sections and private messages, furthering those community ties. He's also able to deliver information in a way followers find entertaining, often through harassing those who take opposition against him. The rise of Twitter has directly coincided with the rise of Trump in American politics, and he was able to effectively capitalize on this new media space in a way other politicians are now attempting to emulate.

I offer two case studies to make my argument: Birtherism and Stop the Steal (STS). Each is a conspiracy theory Donald Trump has championed. Trump's distinctive rhetorical style achieved popularity during the Birtherism era, and that popularity enabled him to capture the Republican Party's 2016 nomination. He also contributed significantly to the institutionalization and increasing prominence of the Tea Party faction within the GOP. The STS theory claims the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent; Trump was the true winner and, therefore, the true president. This theory remains an active component of public political discourse.

STS led to clear instances of democratic decline: the violent Capitol insurrection of January 6th, state-level vote recounts and audits, several lawsuits, and several newly-passed laws that directly restrict democracy in multiple states. These case studies institute a clear timeline of

anti-democratic events and work effectively as bookends for Trump's political conspiracism. Trump's specific use of Twitter engages new conspiracism in a way that has catalyzed American democratic decline. In order to fully engage with Trump, conspiracy theory, and ensuing democratic decline, I engage with two bodies of literature: First, democracy and democratic decline, and second, American conspiracy theory. Political theory scholarship supports widely accepted definitions for each.

1.2 Methodology

My case studies, Birtherism and Stop the Steal (STS), explain how Trump used conspiracy theories to mobilize his base of followers. Birtherism was Trump's first political conspiracy that enabled his rise to political power and introduced his style of engagement with new conspiracism. He is the first elite with a mass audience to champion this theory. The Birther conspiracy, which originated in 2008, asserts that Barack Obama was not born in the United States and was, therefore, an illegitimate president. STS, which became a full-fledged conspiracy in 2020, claims that the 2020 presidential election was "stolen," meaning President Joe Biden is illegitimate, and Donald Trump is the true president of the United States. STS is explicitly linked to instances of democratic decline, followed by a timely fall in Trump's political power. Together, these case studies fully capture Trump's unique style of conspiracism and its impact on American democracy. Both case studies also have substantial evidence available via Twitter.

Given the timeline, these case studies act as bookends of Trump's political career. While Trumpism and its implications are still evolving, considering these events as bookends allows for a better analysis of continuity, escalation, and action driven by Trump's conspiracism. Birtherism coincides with his rise to power within the GOP and, therefore, his creation of a credulous, conspiratorially-minded follower base. STS represents a dramatic escalation in the real-world

impact of online conspiratorial thinking. This final provocation enabled his followers to participate in the destruction of democratic norms willingly. After STS, the attempted coup (lawsuits filed for state-level recounting), the insurrection (Capitol riot), and new voter suppression laws mark fundamental elements of democratic decline. Shortly after these events, Trump was impeached for the second time, though not removed from office, and he was permanently banned from Twitter, cutting off his unique capacity for communication that was integral for the conspiracy machine he had created. To interpret Trump's role in the Birther and STS conspiracies, I apply storytelling and affect theory directly to Trump's tweets within the relevant timeframes.

Storytelling is a method of interpretation that operationalizes the way speakers create narratives. I use Andrew Leslie's four elements of political conspiracy to describe the way Trump conveys information: performance, adaptation, context, and iconicity.² Each element describes the deliberate construction of persuasive stories that convey information through rhetoric, style, method, and manner of communication. Storytelling illuminates the persuasive components of elite cueing and community building in conspiracism. Storytelling is a rhetorical tool often employed strategically by partisan elites in the political sphere. Elites cue the general public to adopt predetermined attitudes and amplify specific issues in popular political discourse, creating political communities. Political communities are not necessarily built through reasoned persuasion, as partisan loyalty becomes more important as conspiracy distorts shared perceptions of reality. According to Andrew Leslie, "A story may serve to thematize an issue: that is, to make an issue visible to a community—to frame it in such a way that it can become the subject of public debate and argument."³ In my application of storytelling to Trump's tweets, I treat the

² Leslie, "How Stories Argue," 75.

³ Leslie, "How Stories Argue," 69.

tweets as “stories” intended to construct an artificial version of reality. Storytelling situates Trump among his audience of followers and helps the listeners to find themselves within the “story;” this is how he performs the Trump character. For my first case study, Birtherism, I use storytelling to explore how Trump was able to consolidate his base. For the second study, STS, storytelling explains how the base was authorized to take anti-democratic action. Trump uses the same storytelling strategies to construct both Birtherism and STS.

Affect theory studies the emotional reception and tangible manifestations spurred by rhetorical imposition. In the context of conspiracy theory and democratic decline, reception is just as important as the content of the message. Modern believers in conspiracy theory “saw our world as shaped not simply by narratives and arguments but also by nonlinguistic effects—by mood, by atmosphere, by feelings.”⁴ In my application of affect theory, I use a combination of Brian Massumi’s theory of threat and protection⁵ and Elspeth Probyn’s theory of shame and belonging.⁶ Threat and shame describe negative affects used to stir targets toward unrest and unease. Protection and belonging offer deliverance from these negative affects. The promise of reprieve from imposed negativity forms loyalty and community, even when based upon lies. I find the delivery of conspiratory messages alongside reception among listeners explains how the conspirator is able to create an artificial reality that supersedes rational thought. Persuasion of mood and feeling is sufficient to motivate action, making affect theory crucial in examining conspiratory rhetoric. In regards to Trump and his efficacy as a persuasive speaker to his base, the content of his discourse is less important than his delivery; this delivery is what spurs feelings, or affects, in his followers. Trump would not have been able to solidify his base with

⁴ Hsu, “Affect Theory and the New Age of Anxiety.”

⁵ Brian Massumi, “The Political Ontology of Threat,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), 54.

⁶ Elspeth Probyn, “Writing Shame,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010), 80.

the same degree of efficacy if he had solely used rational persuasion. His pseudo-authentic appeal to listeners' emotions and attempt to sell himself as relatable establish a pattern of mobilization unique to his rhetorical style.

I apply these prongs of affect theory to Trump's tweets relevant to my case studies, Birtherism and STS, to explain how Trump's followers came to willingly participate in explicitly anti-democratic action. Affect theory applied to Birtherism, the first case study, explains how Trump created a community of loyal, conspiracy-minded followers. When applied to STS, the second case study, affect theory explains anti-democratic actions executed by Trump's followers that attempt to maintain community under his direction and leadership. Affects are dynamic, and this timeline of events reveals an escalation in the perception of negative affects that spurred intensity in response to rhetoric promising positive affects. Affect theory pairs well with storytelling for this exploration, as storytelling explores rhetorical delivery while affect theory explores emotional reception.

Since I am specifically interested in how Twitter acts as a new medium for mobilizing conspiracy theories, I use Trump's tweets as the primary source material for my case studies. The Trump Twitter Archive⁷ includes every Trump tweet ever sent– the database was created before Trump was permanently banned from Twitter on January 8th, 2021. The Archive includes deleted tweets created after September 2016, providing direct access to all of Trump's tweets, engagement, and retweets, even if any involved accounts no longer exist. With these materials, I apply storytelling and affect theory to my case studies to illuminate Trump's unique contribution to conspiracy theory through Twitter.

I frame my discussion of conspiracy theory and democratic decline primarily within American political thought on democracy and conspiracy theory. Birtherism and STS fit the

⁷ Brown, "Trump Twitter Archive," <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>.

definition of conspiracy in that literature. To establish de-democratization, I interpret modern legislation enacted after the 2020 election and evaluate components that restrict voting rights and voter accessibility. The main objective for drawing on two traditions in American political thought is to establish the connection between de-democratization and conspiratorial thinking. I argue Trump's use of conspiracy theory simultaneously fits into a well established tradition of American conspiracy theory, but also partakes of the new conspiracism, or conspiracy without theory. Moreover, I argue that because of his elite position, first as a presidential candidate and then president, as well as his use of social media his amplification of the new conspiracism contributed directly to de-democratization. This type of analysis creates a foundation for my exploration into Trump's impact on electoral conspiracy theories and frames my discussion of the consequential de-democratization. Finally, I argue the new conspiracies are entertaining, and the entertainment value is crucial to the spread of a conspiracy theory. This thread is much more prominent in Birtherism and STS. I find other scholars have overlooked the importance of entertainment in the propagation of conspiracy theory. Trump's history as media figure and reality-show host with connections across politics, entertainment, news media, and law enforcement allowed him to construct and amplify cross domain conspiracies. Perhaps entertainment was critical in the spread of past conspiracies, but the available scholarship does not currently consider that possibility. For future research, scholars might consider studying the entertainment value of conspiracies and their spreadability transmission in past conspiracies. Conspiracies might have only ever gained popularity because engagement was entertaining.

1.3 Literature Review

Part 1: Political Theory on De-Democratization

Many political theorists understand democracy from an evolutionary perspective, which allows scholars to evaluate democracy alongside other forms of government instead of in isolation. Evaluating the full scope of democracy, from its conception to eventual decline, makes contemporary instances of de-democratization more poignant. The life cycle of a typical democracy describes its origins, the emergence and threat of the demagogue, and decline toward fascism. This literature review takes a similar shape, beginning with a broad exploration of democracy, then de-democratization and specific trends of democratic decline. Because of the significance of the role of the demagogue in democratic decline, theorists of democracy and democratic decline emphasize the role of elite communication in democratic erosion. Elite communication maintains relevance in the contemporary case of Donald Trump and democratic decline.

In *Origins of Democracy*, Victor Ehrenberg describes democracy's Greek origins, as the Greeks were the pioneers of democracy. Ehrenberg emphasizes the importance of constitutional enforcement and consent of the governed as foundational pillars of early democracy. According to Ehrenberg, "the administration and creation of policy were the right and duty of these citizens," and "rule of the majority" was critical in governance.⁸ Therefore, democracy refers to a free and consensual participation of citizens in the operation and execution of public policy. In *Toward Democracy*, Kloppenberg conversely refers to democratic origins as inherently bloody, violent, and unequal. According to Kloppenberg, Greek democratic origins are also less clear

⁸ Ehrenberg, "Origins of Democracy," 515.

than those expressed by Ehrenberg. He claims that “no one rule of law reigned supreme,”⁹ and depended “centrally on the use of sortition, or lottery,” to choose government officials, as opposed to the democratic idea of elections.¹⁰ Perhaps this analogy is useful in considering contemporary American democracy— while the United States holds open elections, those who hold positions of high power, like the presidency, high level senate seats, and Supreme Court positions, frequently come from what is already considered a high status position in society. In some ways, the United States has adopted this lottery, too— the lottery of who is born rich, and, among the rich, a lottery of who is to hold power to advance other elite agendas. While Ehrenberg and Kloppenberg disagree on the levels of violence required to achieve democratic governance, both contend democracy is a highly vulnerable institution, subject to the wills and ills of human intervention. Both scholars also argue that the vulnerability makes the institution of democracy fragile, and that the true definition of democracy has yet to be reached. Rather, democracy as we know it reflects an imperfect movement toward equitable participation by flawed individuals rather than a rigid set of explicit norms and institutions.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origins of American democracy to any one specific event,¹¹ the emergence of a peoples’ agency coincides directly with civilian-led policy and discourse. Gordon Wood is frequently cited as an American democratic theorist, and he cites Ehrenberg in his work. He describes what democracy looked like in the early United States in his work “Origins of American Democracy, or How the People Became Judges in Their Own Causes.” According to Wood, the United States shifted from a pre-patronage society to a democratic society after the American Revolution. Democracy as we now understand it was a consequence of the Revolution and, while the earliest concept of democracy was limited in that

⁹ Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy*, 26.

¹⁰ Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy*, 28.

¹¹ Wood, “The Origins of American Democracy,” 309.

not all people were entitled to the same legal protections or privileges, federal and state structure shifted to a representative style we have seen previously employed by the ancient Greeks.¹² Early American democracy was not truly egalitarian, but was contingent on implementation by only some citizens. While Ehrenberg provides a fuller description of the broader conditions of democracy, Wood focuses on elite discourse. Elite discourse is central to democratic maintenance for Wood because elites have the potential to distort democratic institutions through corruption and self-serving power plays. Ehrenberg might criticize Wood for his anti-egalitarian approach to democratic discourse, as Ehrenberg claims responsibility, leadership, and equality as core principles of democracy.¹³ However, Wood's discussion of inequality is relevant in describing elite discourse and large-scale societal power plays. Elites are able to manipulate public discourse to serve themselves and the rest of the upper echelon of American society, and these themes are present in my discussion of democratic norms. Ehrenberg's more universal description reflects the ideal democracy, rather than actual democracy (or movement toward democratic governance) in practice.¹⁴

As Wood suggests, the emergence of the demagogue is a threat to democracy. I find that Trump's amplification of conspiracy theories is the demagogic threat Wood fears. Justin Gustainis' "Demagoguery and political rhetoric" describes the demagogue as "a politician who holds power by stirring up the feelings of his audience and leading them to action despite the considerations which weigh against it."¹⁵ According to the Gustainis, demagoguery is a direct threat to democracy. It has the potential to tear down the truth, and citizens can not directly

¹² Wood, "The Origins of American Democracy," 311.

¹³ Ehrenberg, "Origins of Democracy," 529.

¹⁴ Gordon Wood is often criticized for diminishing the impact of chattel slavery on modern America. Since I am using his work to define democracy, this is a relevant point of contention. His personal opinion is ironically exemplary to my own paper, as he has accepted an elitist and exclusionary form of democracy, and this works in tandem with my argument regarding elite rhetoric; I consider democratic accessibility restrained to elites as democratic decline. Wood is a symptom of the problem I am trying to diagnose.

¹⁵ Gustainis, "Demagoguery and Political Rhetoric," 155.

participate in democracy under a fragmented and distorted reality. Gustainis makes it clear that demagogues have a political motive to lie or otherwise deceive citizens so as to maintain power or elite status. He also claims the demagogue “cannot function in an atmosphere of social harmony and tolerance.”¹⁶ The demagogue thrives by thwarting traditional democratic ideals for personal gain. Oliver Hahl applies these principles to Trump in “The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue.” He emphasizes the importance of the demagogue’s perceived authenticity to his success. According to Hahl, part of Trump’s demagogic success comes from his ability to appear authentic to voters, even though he uses lies to amass power. Hahl differentiates between special access versus common knowledge lies. The public cannot detect special access lies, as the public might not necessarily know what the real truth is-- Hahl gives the example of Bill Clinton’s statements on Monica Lewinski as a special access lie. Trump is different, however, because he tells common knowledge lies; Trump disputes the existence of climate change, which, on its surface, is not a contestable issue.¹⁷ Yet, Trump’s demagogue status allows him to lie to a receptive audience. Hahl and Gustainis both emphasize the importance of deception to the demagogue’s power; followers are implicitly divorced from the truth, and exist solely within the realm of “reason” crafted by the demagogue.

While the emergence of Internet-based conspiracy theorists might be new, lying politicians are not. Lying is well understood as a component of political discourse. A president who spreads conspiracy theories on Twitter is, however, new. Political scholars who have considered the significance of the lie in political spaces include Derrida, who defines the lie as a “fabulous, *phantasma*, return of some specter: apparition of specter, vision of phantom,

¹⁶ Gustainis, “Demagoguery and Political Rhetoric,” 157.

¹⁷ Hahl, Kim, and Zuckerman Sivan, “The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue,” 5.

phenomenon of the revenant.”¹⁸ According to his work, lies have critical ethical impacts and are among the most frequently employed political tools. In Nadia Urbinati’s *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*, untruth is painted as one of the most pressing, critical threats to democracy.¹⁹ In accordance with the aforementioned definition, Harry Frankfurt asserts that “telling a lie is an act with a sharp focus. It is designed to insert a particular falsehood at a particular point in a set or system of beliefs,” which insinuates a necessity of understanding the truth and how to manipulate it to achieve a predetermined outcome. Bullshit, conversely, involves speaking with no knowledge about the particular topic at hand, and in turn “denies that we can have any reliable access to an objective reality.”²⁰ Bullshit is not constrained by truths, as is the lie. Since bullshit is entirely subjective, orators can openly contradict any previously acknowledged parameter and still maintain persuasive efficacy. The weaponization of untruth by democratic politicians implies the use of conspiracy theory as a means to mobilize and influence voters also provides electoral benefits.

The emergence of fascism is commonly presented as the final stage of democratic decline. Robert Paxton’s *The Anatomy of Fascism* argues fascism is not like other political movements. It is not supported by any coherent philosophical system, but is a product of mass politics invented only after the introduction of universal suffrage, the spread of nationalism, and the entry of socialist parties into coalition governments.²¹ Fascist emergence typically follows the emergence of the demagogue. Governments are most vulnerable to the threat of fascism in times of social unrest or conflict. Lies, radical partisanship, and crises manufactured to subjugate citizens warn of fascist emergence. Federico Finchelstein makes similar arguments in *A Brief*

¹⁸ Derrida, “History of the Lie,” 28.

¹⁹ Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured*, 9-11.

²⁰ Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 22.

²¹ Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, 61-74.

History of Fascist Lies. Finchelstein describes a fascist integration of strategic lies that advance political gain in a small group of societal elites. Elites manipulate truth and impose irrational societal constructions on lower classes to gain social mobility.²² Jason Stanley's *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* describes the methods used in fascist emergence. Stanley asserts that fascists emerge during times of extreme inequality or socioeconomic factionalization. He claims fascist strategy typically involves a mythologization of the past, or a return to a romanticized era that never existed. Stanley also emphasizes the importance of propaganda and undermining intellectualism in fascist emergence.²³ Fascists create an unreality in which the "us versus them" mentality thrives by challenging or opposing established facts and science. The fascist plays on the falsely curated victimhood of his followers to gain appeal, and then is able to take a disingenuous appeal to law and order to seize power²⁴ The fascist's persistent reinforcement of in-group safety and out-group danger influences citizens to unify behind the fascist while looking for safety. The fascists' followers join together out of fear. Paxton, Finchelstein, and Stanley are generally in agreement regarding fascist principles. Paxton's nationalist approach asserts that nationalism is a core principle in fascist emergence, where othering and reliance on 'American values' are highly influential. Finchelstein and Stanley both discuss the deliberate manipulation of information, and describe a divorce from reality that destroys democratic institutions.

Ruth Ben-Ghiat applies the foundational concepts of fascism to contemporary examples in *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present*. She emphasizes the myth that fascists seize power by force. The reality, according to Ben-Ghiat, is that both liberals and conservatives are afraid of the "radical left," so they submit to fascism willingly, as they believe the fascist can crush this

²² Finchelstein, *A Brief History of Fascist Lies*, 88-121.

²³ Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, 12.

²⁴ Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, 14.

radical leftist force.²⁵ The fascist is also able to leverage elite discourse to influence followers.²⁶ Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi also emphasizes submission to fascism as a common response to perceived leftist threat; the fascist's followers submit out of fear to protect the status quo and avoid communism.²⁷ Her work in *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* describes the fear-based rhetorical tactics fascists use to seize power. The "consensual" submission of followers to fascists makes the nature of the fascist more dangerous, as, even though the followers are living in unreality and do not have reason, they genuinely believe the fascist. If what the fascist claims is true, the followers are theoretically authorized to respond with violence and revolt. Ben-Ghat's emphasis on the public acceptance of fascist power seizure describes an accelerated timeline in which the fascist eventually no longer has to work to advance claims or form coalitions, as the unstoppable movement of the base and reinforced ideals will outpace, outlast, and potentially outlive the actual fascist. Ideas are much more difficult to repeal than single people or institutions.

Cas Mudde's *The Far Right Today* employs useful applied discussion of modern American democracy and describes the evolutionary path of democratic theory as it is applied to the United States. Evaluating his work in conjunction with Wood's also lends more completion to discourse on race, class, and inequity. According to Mudde, the United States is moving from democracy toward fascism as far-right leaders take power in the world's three most powerful democracies: India, Brazil, and the United States.²⁸ Mudde describes the Far Right as a once-fringe movement that is now perceived as a legitimate, popular, center-stage political organization. He describes the Far Right as a once "relatively minor nuisance"²⁹ that is now a

²⁵ Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen*, 14.

²⁶ Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen*, 14.

²⁷ Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 31.

²⁸ Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, 18.

²⁹ Mudde, *The Far Right Today*, 19.

real threat to American democracy. While the inclusion of social media would have improved Mudde's arguments it may also have made his conclusions more dire. However, even without the inclusion of social media Mudde's conclusions are disturbing. Mudde argues that far right ideas are becoming highly normalized, and, in rich and powerful countries, these ideals have the potential to cause harm to the lives and liberties of citizens. Mudde exemplifies a decline in democracy and movement toward fascism even beyond the reach of social media. The emergence of Trumpism, which functions as a separate entity from traditional Republicanism or conservatism, aligns with Mudde's depiction of the modernization, normalization, and acceptance of the far-right as mainstream. Trump has gained support from openly white nationalist followers, and has been endorsed by both the Proud Boys and the Klu Klux Klan. For these right-wing extremists to openly back a politician, and for this public wave of support to be received with little opposition or surprise, reflects a normalization of the far-right in American politics.

Part 2: American Conspiracy Theory

The conspiracy theory attempts to attribute causal factors to complex issues, usually through attributing power and control over major institutions to specific people.³⁰ In the American tradition, conspiracy theory is well established and understood among political thinkers; conspiracy theories have been important parts of American politics since English colonizers landed. Elite political utilization of the conspiracy theory was central to gaining support for the American Revolution, and to the Cold War in the form of the "Red Scare." While conspiracy theory has a long history in American Political Theory, the "new conspiracism" marks a shift in American politics. I find that Trump is a unique spreader of new conspiracism,

³⁰ Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 19.

as he is using a new medium, Twitter, which requires little contextual evidence to make claims. His position as a president who conspires is also unique. The shift to new conspiracy marks a change in information accessibility, distribution, and perception.

Donald Critchlow defines conspiracy theory as a fear-based dissemination of information rooted in events that are typically difficult to explain. Conspiracy theories also typically involve an in-group and an out-group, and the in-group blames the out-group for the consequence of the theory, and typically responds to this group with fear.³¹ Conspiracy theory is embedded into the creation of the United States. Some groups of conspirators create communities based on untruth, hoping to manufacture answers to give themselves solace. The persistence of fear in a developing experimental nation bred conspiracy theory as a response to perceived threats against liberty and freedom. The conspiracy *seems* real to its believers, and this, in turn, authorizes acts of violence in the name of self-preservation or protection of a nation.³² Michael Butter echoes those sentiments, claiming “The American predilection for conspiracy theorizing can be traced back to the co-presence and persistence of a specific epistemological paradigm that relates all effects to intentional human action, the ideology of republicanism, and the Puritan heritage.”³³ Butter also asserts that conspiracy theories were considered legitimate forms of knowledge until the late 20th century. Historically, American conspiracy theory has gripped citizens across classes, fundamentally shaping the way Americans interpret reality. Conspiracy theory also shapes the way Americans have understood the nation, the nation’s history, and the experiences of other citizens.

Birtherism was the original conspiracy that propelled Trump to political notoriety— he exploited a group of Americans that were both dissatisfied with the Republican party and

³¹ Critchlow, Korasick, and Sherman, *Political Conspiracies in America: A Reader*, 2.

³² Critchlow, Korasick, and Sherman, *Political Conspiracies in America: A Reader*, 9.

³³ Butter, *Plots, Designs, and Schemes*, 6.

disinterested in the Democratic party through a pseudo-authentic appeal to “traditional” American ideals. What Trump really found was a group of people who wanted to be openly racist in a community of other openly racist people. Trump formed this base by participating in the birtherism conspiracy theory, in which Trump fervently denied Barack Obama’s American citizenship in an attempt to delegitimize his presidency. Birtherism is an openly racist conspiracy theory, emphasized by Trump’s birther reiterations against VP Kamala Harris 2021. His base responds to racist theory with fervor, and Trump knows this. In alignment with Butter, Trump’s base considers any theory he may claim as a legitimate form of knowledge. There is also significant fear mongering in his discourse, which is relevant in both case studies.

Jason Stanley’s *How Propaganda Works* is also useful in exploring the ideological origins of conspiracy theory. Stanley uses the previously-explored definitions of lies and bullshit. He uses the term bullshit interchangeably with propaganda. He also explores the nature of the conspiracy theory as a tool used by political elites. While the political elites might not necessarily create conspiracy theories, they can use them for political gain through the manipulation of reality and the persuasion of the electorate. According to Stanley, untruth breeds “society ruled by technocrats who make decisions on behalf of the masses.”³⁴ The destruction of democracy through conspiracy theory is subtle. Conspiracy theory affects the minds of listeners, and no one is immune to the impacts of fear and perceived solutions to that fear. Key players can understand and manipulate information as it is disseminated to larger and more specific audiences to advance individual agendas. The subtle nature of conspiracy theory enables elites to control the American narrative in a way that makes its believers “feel” what is genuine and leaves listeners uninterested in the “fact” of the matter at hand. Rationality is superseded by a

³⁴ Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 16.

desire to belong and to feel safe. With Trump, the follower base finds safety in numbers and in the forming of a large and impermeable community.

Understanding the American Paranoid Tradition is critical to understanding the role of conspiracy theories in American democracy, both historically and contemporarily. Richard Hofstadter originally coined the term “Paranoid Tradition” to describe the paranoid style in American politics. The paranoid style rests in the looming threat of an ominous “other side,” and “the feeling of persecution is central, and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy.”³⁵ Paranoia is chronic,³⁶ and those suffering from conspiracy-induced paranoia cannot simply shake themselves from the grips of unreality. It begs Americans to align themselves with others so they may be perceived as one strong unit as opposed to many fractionalized individuals. Unifying behind a common front, even if that front is not rooted in logic or reason, provides a sense of security, while solidifying divisions between opposing groups. Identities rooted in paranoia might also not necessarily conform to the labels these identities hold-- “conservatives” may not necessarily hold conservative values. The power is not in the name, nor in the ideals, but the unified opposition to the perceived threat of the Other. I find that Trump’s followers are afraid of the out-group. As a result, they look to him for protection, and are encouraged to stay with him. Benjamin McArthur echoes support for Hofstadter’s work in “They’re Out to Get us: Another Look at our Paranoid Tradition.” He supports the notion of conspiracy as “a belief held by a sizable number of people that there are influential and malevolent groups seeking more power for themselves and/or to harm others,” and as a phenomenon that “defies simple appeals to rationality.”³⁷ McArthur also expands upon the paranoid tradition by explicitly defining four types of conspiracy-mindedness. The first two

³⁵ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 4.

³⁶ Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 39.

³⁷ McArthur, “They’re out to Get Us,” 38.

are seemingly innocuous-- the first refers to a casual embrace of certain conspiracy theories, but not to any level of consequence. The second refers to people who consume conspiracy theories for entertainment, like those interested in John F. Kennedy documentaries or mystery novels. Here, conspiracy theory acts more like a game. The third and fourth, however, hold critical democratic consequences. The third type of conspiracy-mindedness refers to “the conviction of socially oppressed or disadvantaged groups” by “an organized effort,” which is a common and persistent thought pattern used to harm marginalized groups.³⁸ Conspirators construct narratives that portray other groups as “evil” entities of insidious and substantial power– the Jewish population, for example, is repeatedly subject to these types of world domination conspiracies by white supremacists. The final form of conspiracy mindedness refers to the use of accusations of conspiracy as a political weapon. The latter two are more consequential, as they both authorize fear-based action in the name of preservation and are receptive to elite cueing. Together, these authors explain the impact of the American conspiracy theory and the tradition of paranoia.

The American Revolution was wrought with conspiracy theory, and stands as one of the primary examples of the original American paranoid tradition. William Hogue’s *The Religious Conspiracy Theory of the American Revolution: Anglican Motive* describes the roots of the original American conspiracy theory. He describes the religious roots and asserts that, in tune with the works of Hofstadter and McArthur, fear of others, perceived goodness of the self and the in-group, and actions based in self-preservation were central.³⁹ Bernard Bailyn’s *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* examines the roots of these theories, and describes the danger they posed to the infant democracy. According to Bailyn, conspiracy theory is a key component of the fallibility of democracy, as the nature of man is not immune to

³⁸ McArthur, “They’re out to Get Us,” 44.

³⁹ Hogue, “The Religious Conspiracy Theory of the American Revolution,” 34.

persuasion or corruption, even in irrational circumstances. The conspiracy theory can be used to further individual power plays or advance specific agendas, like those of the Puritans or Anglicans. He argues reason alone cannot protect democracy, as “nothing within man is sufficiently strong to guard against these effects of power”—certainly not "the united considerations of reason and religion," for they have never "been sufficiently powerful to restrain these lusts of men.”⁴⁰ Disguising agenda in conspiracy theory and portraying theories as threatening external forces to life and liberty have historically been consistent in moving Americans to action. Hogue and Bailyn’s work on the American Revolution demonstrate that American democracy was born in conspiracy theory.

The Red Scare is another politically significant and well-documented American conspiracy theory. Michael Butter describes the Red Scare as a highly formulaic example of conspiracy theory and consequence. According to Butter, the whistleblowers of the Red Scare used typical rhetorical models, predictable patterns of information dissemination, and generated the same fear-based actions previous conspiracies have influenced. He also notes elites held most of the power in directing the actions of this theory, and were able to weaponize it to further individual agendas.⁴¹ Kathryn Olmsted also refers to this pattern, and notes the modern conspiracy theory has evolved in that conspirators now perceive the threat as the American government, rather than some external force.⁴² The direct content of the conspiracies at hand doesn’t necessarily matter, nor does their proximity to truth. What matters is the pattern of conspiratory persuasion, and how this pattern impacts democracy. Birtherism and STS are both driven by elite rhetoric, and rely heavily on imposed fear of the out-group.

⁴⁰ Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 54.

⁴¹ Butter, *Plots, Designs, and Schemes*, 26-28.

⁴² Olmsted, “Real Enemies,” 886.

Contemporary American conspiracy follows the formula of fear, elite rhetoric, and otherization, but has evolved in the 21st century. Nancy Rosenblum's *A Lot of People are Saying* emphasizes the purposeful ambiguity of misinformation. According to Rosenblum, the characteristic forms of new conspiracy are bare assertion, ominous questions, and innuendo.⁴³ These assertions might look like Trump exclaiming Barack Obama does not have a birth certificate, or that the Democrats 'stole' the election. Ominous questions might inquire *where* the birth certificate is, or where the 'extra' votes came from. Trump might also take a purposefully ambiguous approach, leaving voters to make determinations about the truth and providing opportunity for more theories; he might make claims like 'We all know what happened' or other ambiguous nods toward some other untruth. Vagueness allows conspiracy theorists to spread information without citing origins, enabling conspirators to skirt responsibility. Under the new conspiracy, there is no one source of misinformation. Since there is no one specific body to point to, and since there is no responsibility or ownership, modern conspiracy theories are constantly evolving and expanding, and it is difficult to trace their roots. New conspiracies don't engage theories. Rather, new conspiracies can become effective on entirely baseless claims. Rosenblum also cites the hidden nature of power structures and corporate influence on new conspiracies. The general themes and historical precedents still hold, but in the contemporary case, agendas are more hidden, more sinister, and more difficult to trace. This also means they are more difficult to disprove, and bodies of followers are more resistant to reason. This has devastating implications for democracy.

I use this existing body of literature to frame my discussion of conspiracy theory and democratic decline. I argue Trump's unique contribution to American conspiracy theory through Twitter has resulted in instances of anti-democratic action. I find that entertainment plays a

⁴³ Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 19-41.

bigger role in the spread of conspiracy than other theories have. Entertainment might have played a substantial role in the contagiousness of past conspiracy theories, but there is a gap in this literature. I fill the gap by explaining this relationship through social media and features of entertainment. Understanding the role of entertainment in conspiracy is a promising area for future research. Trump's contribution to conspiracy theory, where conspiracy theory is a special kind of story that contributes to democratic decline. I am interested in the substance of speech, explored through storytelling, the reception of this rhetoric, explained by affect theory, and the unique medium through which these tactics were used, which is Twitter. These components work together to mobilize conspiracy theories, and have lurched American democracy toward decline. Twitter represents a new form of political rhetoric, which Trump has used to advance conspiracy theory. He is also unique in that he was a president who actively engaged in conspiracy theories for electoral gain.

1.4 Contemporary Applications

Donald Trump's significant influence on contemporary democratic norms is contingent on his amplification of conspiracies, which I categorize as "new conspiracism," or "conspiracy without theory."⁴⁴ His role in the Republican Party marks a unique transformation in American politics, and his methods of rhetorical engagement are new in the political space. Trump's Twitter activity during the Birtherism and STS movements fall within the historical framework of elite cueing, demagoguery, and conspiracy. The new method of discourse Trump uses is explicitly linked to his Twitter presence. Since social media is a new medium of political discourse, information on how this medium influences American political culture is limited.

⁴⁴ Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 11.

Trump used Twitter as a primary tool for voter consolidation and mobilization. I seek to understand how this tool influences democratic decline.

Trump's follower base is susceptible to falsified or exaggerated imagery of an imagined radical left; Trump has effectively instilled fear among his base that Joe Biden and other Democratic leaders pose extreme leftist, communist-level threats to their democratic freedoms, even though Biden is a moderate Democrat. Trumpism as a movement has maintained mobility after his departure from the White House, indicating a key transformation in the way voters want to exercise civic engagement within American democracy. Trump's base is also persistently loyal to his word and his person— even if Trump later recants or contradicts his earlier statements, the base will move as one. Even in the face of multiple impeachments, scandals, and unprecedented international scrutiny, the base marches in unison behind Trump. This loyalty is uncommon, especially among American political leaders. The willingness to ignore external influence makes the ability to spread conspiracy easier, and places greater power in the hands of Trump and with those who continue to promote Trumpist political engagement. Understanding how Trump amassed this following lends scholarly insight into new modes of political engagement, power consolidation, and democratic institutions.

Trump's contribution to conspiracy theory and his utilization of misinformation for power extends beyond the scope of his time in office; the Birtherism conspiracy took flight in 2008, and Trump began tweeting about it in 2010. My first case study, Birtherism, exemplifies Trump's rise as the Great American Presidential Conspirator.

CHAPTER 2

BIRTHERISM

2.1 Objectives

I argue Donald Trump used Twitter to amplify the birtherism conspiracy theory in a way that allowed him to enter the American political landscape and amass a following. Twitter's introduction to the political space created a new political discourse, and Trump used the platform to spread conspiracy. The birther movement enabled Trump to capture the Tea Party, which eventually secured him the 2016 presidential nomination. The full scope of my project explores Trump's contribution to democratic decline through two case studies, birtherism and stop the steal. Together, these conspiracies create a story arc that fully captures Trump's conspiratorial contribution to democratic decline. I apply storytelling and affect theory to Donald Trump's tweets to make my argument. Storytelling explores styles of delivery purposefully used in persuasive discourse, while affect theory speaks to emotional responses of recipients or listeners. I apply both to situate my argument among established political theory that emphasizes elite cueing, fear mongering, and conspiracy as warning signs of democratic decline. I also find new patterns which suggest features of entertainment and the ontology of Twitter uniquely explain the relationship between Trump, conspiracy, and democratic decline.

For the purpose of this evaluation, a Trump follower, also known as a follower, listener, Trump voter, and member of the "base," refers to an American individual who supports Donald Trump. The MAGA identity has become ubiquitous unto itself. Support comes in voicing support online and elsewhere, adopting ideals purported by Trump, attributing truth value to his word, and, eventually, in votes during elections.

2.2 Defining Birtherism

The birtherism conspiracy theory claims Barack Obama was not born in the United States and was, therefore, an unconstitutional president. Donald Trump is consistently attributed to the massive spread of this conspiracy. The movement began 2008 when Barack Obama “first emerged as a serious presidential candidate,” and, even after being debunked thoroughly, consistently, and repeatedly by sources of authority, birther ideology retained support in both moderate and far-right voters.⁴⁵ Variations of the conspiracy theory insisted Obama was Muslim, was educated in Indonesia (and therefore didn’t receive a “legitimate” education), and that he was born in Kenya, which is the heart of the theory.⁴⁶ The theory was not based in any conceivable reality and instead spoke staunchly of partisanship, racism, and impressionability of Republican voters. Trump played heavily into this narrative, repeating his messages, claiming to have the “truth,” and portraying himself as an ally of the people. The group that was susceptible to Trump’s persuasion was already open to racist or anti-other attitudes. In Trump, this group saw a conduit to express those attitudes in a socially acceptable way. In an interesting contrast, Barack Obama’s political opponent, John McCain, an older white member of the Republican Party, had a legitimate citizenship question: he had been born in the U.S.-occupied region of the Panama Canal Zone while his father was stationed there for the Navy, and his status as a “natural-born citizen” was legitimately debatable.⁴⁷ However, issues with McCain’s citizenship status did not revere the same scrutiny as Obama’s, and members of the GOP did not engage this narrative, even though it had some legal credibility. Trump’s engagement with Birtherism peaked in 2011, and by then he had managed to consolidate the beginning of what would become his voter base in his bid for the presidential nomination.

⁴⁵ Klinkner, Phillip, “The Causes and Consequences of ‘Birtherism,’” 2.

⁴⁶ Klinkner, Phillip, “The Causes and Consequences of ‘Birtherism,’” 4.

⁴⁷ Klinkner, Phillip, “The Causes and Consequences of ‘Birtherism,’” 6.

In April of 2011, the White House released a long-form copy of Obama's birth certificate, but birthers refused to accept it; with Trump's encouragement, they refuted it as fraud. Even though the earlier Birtherism discourse revolved heavily around believers' demands for the long-form birth certificate, once they got it, they still weren't happy. The Birtherism conspiracy theory maintained support even after it was debunked because it was a conspiracy theory. Barack Obama's citizenship was never actually in question. If this had been the case, supporters of the movement would have accepted the proof offered. Birtherism does not present an honest inquiry or fact-finding. This conspiracy theory allows Trump to delegitimize all sources of information outside of himself— he was able to make the Obama administration respond to his lies, which appears powerful to his followers, and he is simultaneously able to reject its validity; Trump developed monopoly power over the construction of reality through the birther conspiracy..

In this chapter, I apply storytelling and affect theory directly to Trump's tweets to interpret his role in American conspiracism and democratic decline. In this case, I find that Twitter was integral to Trump's rise within the GOP, both because of its uniqueness as a medium and for its exposition of Birtherism. The Birtherism movement marks the first time the Republican Party party directly engaged in conspiratory political discourse through social media. This medium of discourse granted politicians direct and repetitive contact with followers at previously impossible rates. Through Twitter, Trump was able to capitalize on the birther movement and gain leadership of the Tea Party, which catalyzed his political momentum toward the presidency.

2.3 Twitter: Uncharted Territory

I argue Twitter as a unique medium allowed Trump to amplify the Birtherism conspiracy theory to attract and consolidate a loyal voter base that he would be able to further manipulate

for his political gain. Donald Trump's contribution to modern political discourse is unique not only in his targeted delivery of messages but also in the medium he uses— the advent and universal adaptation of Twitter as a rhetorical tool used by political figures marks a key shift in the way voters receive and understand information. Twitter allows politicians to create coalitions of voters that would not otherwise interact. Trump used Twitter as a vessel to consolidate his base through the amplification of conspiracy. The Twitter character limit was also set at 140 characters during this period of time (2011-2014), providing even less opportunity for context or elaboration. While the character limit has since increased to 280, the medium still is still too narrow of a medium to convey complex and complete ideas through. To the politician, Twitter makes access to voters limitless and immediate. Any politician can say anything at any given moment about an impassioned issue or a political opponent without offering the opportunity for rebuttal from opposing parties. During his presidency alone, Trump spent over nine days tweeting.⁴⁸ This constant reinforcement insulates the base, making it impervious to external influence. Pressure from the “out-group,” may serve only to reinforce the beliefs of the in-group, and the base will take any criticism from others as a reason to stand together in opposition. To the politician (or any person aspiring to political influence), tweets are crafted explicitly to achieve that solidification of voters. Understanding how Trump used Twitter to build, shape, and maintain his coalition is important to understanding how he incorporated conspiracy theory to build political power.

The relationship between Trump, Twitter, and conspiracy is critical to understanding contemporary developments of democratic decline. Storytelling and affect theory lend insight into how Trump consolidated a base with unmired loyalty, even beyond the point of rationality. Twitter was Trump's primary mode of discourse, and its political implications are substantial.

⁴⁸ Bump, Phillip. “Analysis: How Much of Trump's Presidency Has He Spent Tweeting?”

His contribution to the Birtherism movement makes his Birtherism tweets a natural place to begin my analysis.

The tweets I use in my analysis are from Donald Trump's former Twitter account, @realdonaldtrump. A complete history of Trump's tweets is publicly available via the Donald Trump Twitter archive,⁴⁹ even after Trump had been banned from Twitter on 1/8/2021. How Trump uses these Tweets to tell a story, particularly a conspiracy theory, establishes continuity in a narrative that promotes destruction of democratic norms.

2.4 Storytelling

Storytelling methods help scholars understand established and explicit narratives in rhetoric. It also provides unique insight into the connection between the storyteller and the listener. By applying storytelling to a politician, we glean insight into their motives, goals, and strategies that are lost if we focus merely on the exact content of their discourse. It's not just what they say that matters, but how and why they say it.

For my evaluation, I am interested in how Trump delivered conspiratorial messages in a way that enabled large numbers of people to persist in delusion and recruit new believers. How has he maintained persuasive efficacy over time, and how has he accumulated a large, loyal base? Storytelling analysis provides some insight into his methods as a speaker, which differ from the actual content or truth value of his words. Twitter is an appropriate vessel to gauge his storytelling strategies. He used the platform frequently, the archive provides time and date confirmation for all of his posts, and, with over fifty thousand tweets, there is sufficient source material to search for and follow patterns.

⁴⁹ Brown, "Trump Twitter Archive," <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>.

Storytelling examines the efficacy of crafted narratives, or stories, in persuading an audience toward action. Political speakers often rely on storytelling with intraparty discourse, as storytelling functions less to create rational argument and more to reinforce ideal norms and community discourse within a group that is predisposed to agreement. In this case, Trump is telling a story to his followers in order to best serve his interests. Key elements of storytelling include performance, adaptation, context, and iconicity.⁵⁰ Analysis of each element provides insight into the persuasive capacity of political rhetoric, both in its electoral reception and goal of the speaker. Performance considers the intended display of a message, while adaptation describes the ability of the message to resonate with different audiences. Context refers to the broader discourse that houses the narrative at play, and political speakers can strategically hide the extent of a story's true context. Iconicity puts the storyteller at the center of the shared narrative created through storytelling, which allows the storyteller control in community building. A message or, in my research, a tweet might be sent to elicit emotional responses of joy, fear, happiness, sadness, urgency, community... The content of the message is less important than the effect it has on voters. Establishing political motives is also critical to understanding trends in contemporary American politics. Applying storytelling methodology to Trump's tweets establishes a clear narrative of conspiracy theory, which has contributed to democratic decline.

Understanding Birtherism as a conspiracy theory is critical in understanding the fractionalization of reality that comes as a consequence. This fractionalization speaks directly of movement toward democratic decline, as the believers and non-believers of the theory find themselves at constant conflict over the nature of reality and truth. The conflicting groups are not simply having a disagreement, but are operating in two different realms of reality and cannot remedy common ground, inhibiting participatory democracy. Since the nature of this division is

⁵⁰ Leslie, "How Stories Argue," 66.

partisan, it means Democrats and Republicans will always find the other illegitimate, over both important and trivial matters. The common truth no longer exists, making cooperative governance difficult.

Performance

Perhaps the assumption that a former talk show host and media personality is inclined to dramatize or overperform is a natural conclusion; Trump, after all, has been a media personality and relevant socialite since the 1990s. In analyzing performance as a method of storytelling, consideration of gesture, facial expression, tone, and tonal emphasis are critical in understanding the efficacy of the storyteller's delivery. These types of expressions cue the audience to the storyteller's feelings on the subject matter and influence the audience to align their views with the speaker.⁵¹ Stories told with charisma and charm are much more likely to elicit a sympathetic response from listeners. A dull, boring presentation is less engaging for audiences, and speakers will not garner as much sympathy or agreement from a disengaged audience. Performance acts as a deliberate display of attitude, and listeners will use this information to govern their own opinions about the information within the story, making performance critical to persuasion.

Trump became a prolific Tweeter in early 2011. His tweets regarding Birtherism gained substantial traction early in the life cycle of his social media, and his effective performance of Birtherism storytelling clearly conveys his attitude. Social media and digital messaging is often disparaged for its inability to capture tone and intent, especially given the 140 character limit present during the Birtherism movement. Trump, however, clearly conveys attitudes with his use of punctuation and capitalization. His negative, fear-mongering attitude towards Barack Obama's presidential legitimacy is blatant. Repeated use of single quotation marks around "birth

⁵¹ Leslie, "How Stories Argue," 75.

certificate,” while grammatically incorrect, convey consistent messages of doubt around the legitimacy of the birth certificate. He utilizes this technique in tweets 4, 2, 18, and 10.⁵² These tweets read as if he had done air-quotes on stage during a speech or during an in-person conversation. His adoration for capitalization appears later in the timeline. He also uses positive language, like “congratulations,” toward individuals who support the Birtherism conspiracy. His open approval of his supporters welcomes new participants to join his community of believers.

Consider the fifth tweet. Here, Trump tags Joe Arpaio, a notoriously racist former Arizona sheriff. Arpaio is famous for his viciously anti-immigrant enforcement style and had gained substantial support within the GOP.⁵³ Tagging Arpaio functions to craft Trump’s narrative on several levels. By tagging a member of law enforcement, he implies that a crime has taken place regarding Obama’s birth certificate and “fraud.” He’s also engaging the right-wing faction of the GOP by openly congratulating a known racist; he’s signaling his racism to white nationalist Republicans and amplifying this as a credible part of his persona. The anti-immigrant sentiments that Arpaio is famous for are, of course, highly relevant in birther discourse. The character he performs to this base is a racist one, and he is making this known to these groups unambiguously. It feels like he’s creating an “if you know, you know” type of discourse between himself as a political character and white nationalists, and this audience clearly “knows” who this Joe Arpaio person is, what he supports, and how he uses his powers as an agent of the law. His intended audience is easily able to read between the lines of the Tweet and understand the group Trump supports and belongs to. Trump also amplifies his talk-show host persona here; Arpaio is also a reality show host, and his televised persona is most famous for punishing Black and Brown men in his desert prison. Arpaio had become nicknamed the “Angel of Death” from

⁵² See appendix for all references to tweet numbers.

⁵³ Sterling and Joffe-Block, “Joe Arpaio.”

his abusive tactics toward unsentenced immigrant inmates.⁵⁴ Arpaio made this abuse “entertaining” to viewers. At this point, Trump was still primarily viewed as a television personality, and by engaging Joe Arpaio he places himself in the same universe of entertainment. He signals that this treatment of Black and Brown men is acceptable, warranted, and entertaining. Trump’s political persona is new– he creates a combination of his show host, entertainer, and political commentator characters into the version of Donald Trump we now associate with MAGA and political office. This discourse makes it clear what that persona stands for, and he continues to engage in actions like this to effectively perform the character as he moves toward the presidency. People are influenced by entertainment, and portraying abusive law enforcement tactics as entertaining persuades moderates to normalize this behavior and gives white nationalists the media to embrace. This type of performance entices his followers to keep coming back for more, and he delivers on the expectations that his audience has of this character. Another point worth noting in this relationship is that Joe Arpaio was later accused of illegally detaining and deporting Black and Brown immigrants who had not been accused or suspected of breaking the law, and continued to abuse his law enforcement powers even after receiving orders from a federal judge.⁵⁵ Trump pardoned him in 2017 in a move that was, again, seen as a dog whistle to his white nationalist base and preserved continuity and performability in the character he had created of himself as a politician.

Tweet 24 is also insightful– he directly engages the idea that he’s a “trickster.” The way he engages with tweets that are directly about himself instead of any issue he claims to support speaks to the idea that he is trying to create an idea of himself as a character. He’s not only marketing his ideas to a group that finds them palatable but is creating a Trump character to sell

⁵⁴ Attwood, *Hard Time*, 7.

⁵⁵ Sterling and Joffe-Block, “Joe Arpaio.”

to his followers. The performance of this character aligns with his entertainment background and reinforces the idea that he views his political advancement as within the entertainment universe. Joe Arpaio, along with tweet #2 and tweet # 10, also conveys an entertainment value independent of his white nationalist dog whistling.

Adaptation

In storytelling, adaptation describes a story as it is conveyed through different mediums, as well as the adaptation from the actual story told by the speaker to public discourse and the individual lives of listeners.⁵⁶ Storytellers must consider the different spaces in which to tell stories and adapt accordingly to preserve consistency in the message. Methods of delivery will differ in print versus oral storytelling, and even these can be further divided and altered into subcategories housing different mediums. A printed article and a Tweet might both fall under print storytelling, but the language, punctuation, capitalization, and length might differ in formality. Visual storytelling also differs in its delivery; a photo or gif attached to a social media post is distinctly different from the physical expressions and hand gestures a storyteller can use on a televised interview. Still, the storyteller must convey the same attitude across mediums in order to preserve the integrity of the story. The way the story is told will differ across mediums, but the story is still the same story.

Trump's listeners have adapted the birtherism story as a means to identify like-minded political participants and create community. His followers also use the story to delegitimize Barack Obama's presidential eligibility among the American electorate. Trump's followers further adapt the birtherism story to delegitimize the Democratic party in its entirety and the traditional GOP, falling further into the hands of conspiracy. Tweets 21 and 9 display Trump

⁵⁶ Leslie, "How Stories Argue," 75.

criticizing both parties. Trump wants listeners to know he's *not like the others*— Trump is “honest” and effective where all other political authorities are untrustworthy. In 21, Trump hits out at both Hillary Clinton and John McCain in the same sentence in an attempt to distinguish himself from the established party. In tweet 9, Trump instructs Republicans to “stop apologizing” for the “so-called birther issue,” calling supporters to “take the offensive.” This language imposes weakness onto the GOP, and suggesting his leadership is necessary— he both panders to existing GOP voters while letting them know he's better than the ones currently in his party. He effectively portrays all existing political machines, elites, and news sources as crooked and untruthful. If his followers believe the right, GOP elites, and other news sources are “fake,” and if the Democratic party still seems unappealing, it appears that only Trump tells the truth. Members of the outgroup who know the story, but who are not necessarily “listeners,” are not as susceptible to influence by this story and speak more on the apparent racism that seems to be central to the actual story being told; Trump might claim Barack Obama was born in Kenya, and his followers might claim they agree, but beneath this discourse is the desire to destroy a Black man for being Black. Black people can actually be born in the United States, and can obviously hold presidential office, even if the thought is unappealing to Trump's followers. Trump has effectively started the birther discourse, made it a central point among his followers, and consolidated a loyal base that is unified on his storytelling principles.

In 2020, Trump adapted the birther story to Vice President Kamala Harris. Accusations of illegitimate candidacy for office had briefly shifted from Obama to Harris, and Trump inflamed this discourse. It is not a coincidence that the first and only people of color to hold the presidential and vice-presidential offices are subject to illegitimate citizenship questioning by Donald Trump. Trump's lawyer, John Eastman, was among the first to fire birther attacks on

Harris. To adapt the birther story to his contemporary political needs, Trump's decision to engage in birther discourse against Kamala is natural. It speaks to the same base that openly embraced racism against Obama, and reinforces an old narrative that was highly effective in creating political fragmentation the first time. Racism and delegitimizing other sources were effective political strategies in 2012, so why not in 2020, when Trump's political career had seemingly taken a nosedive? Continuing to create conversations that describe nonwhite people as "impure" citizens who are naturally unfit for the American presidential office stokes dangerous white nationalist and fascist flames to seize, consolidate, and steal power in a way that is unyieldingly undemocratic. This return to birtherism most likely came out of desperation as, at the time, Trump's approval had tanked and coronavirus panic had gripped many Americans.⁵⁷ Racism as a strategy is highly relevant, as is his adaptation of words like "phony," "radical," "mad woman," "nasty," and "angry," which revisit his discourse toward former opponent Hillary Clinton.⁵⁸ The intersectionality of Harris' identity as both a woman and person of color speaks to the purposeful nature of this discourse; the perpetuation of Harris as a stereotypically angry, difficult black woman is not accidental and speaks to a base that openly accepts these dangerous stereotypes. The entertainment proposition of this adaptation is also compelling— Trump possibly reintroduced the Birther conspiracy theory to boost his online engagement with his followers. It's almost like a spin-off TV show. The original was highly successful, so perhaps an adaptation will be profitable. In both cases, birtherism as a rhetorical device is a type of violence.

The adaptation of Birtherism speaks to its utilization as a machine, not as a genuine concern regarding legitimacy of citizenship. During the Democratic debates that preceded the 2020 Presidential Election, Trump's son, Donald Trump, Jr., released a tweet engaging a Birther

⁵⁷ Keith, "Trump's Racist 'Birther' Attacks On Harris Are A Return To Familiar Territory."

⁵⁸ Keith, "Trump's Racist 'Birther' Attacks On Harris Are A Return To Familiar Territory."

rumor about Harris.⁵⁹ He quickly deleted the tweet after immediate backlash, but the willingness to advance a blatantly false claim in such a way that mirrors Birther claims against Obama speaks to the adaptability to this story; the Trump administration can (and will) make Birther claims against all people of color who have political momentum, and supporters will back these claims with little prompting. Birtherism now looks like a tool in the toolbox readily weaponized against people of color, not as an isolated incident. While increased saturation of Birther claims may make such movements appear less legitimate to the outgroup, the ingroup does not lose momentum. The pattern of racist appeals to an openly white nationalist base is also blatantly dangerous for the targets of Birtherism. The distortion of legitimate opposition as a consequence of this conspiracy theory is destructive to democracy, as it emphasizes growing intergroup conflict and creates a system that excludes people of color. Any governmental system that is exclusionary is inherently undemocratic.

Context

When constrained to storytelling, context describes how information is framed to persuade others; the context of a story indicates whether it serves as a standalone argument, as evidence of a claim, or as part of a larger discourse; context indicates which conversational sphere the story is meant to exist in.⁶⁰ Context influences how readers interpret persuasive stories. A story used as evidence to support another story, for example, will achieve different results than a story intended to make an original claim or debunk another. A personal anecdote will have different implications than a statistically significant finding. Context also describes limiting degrees of storytelling. On Twitter, people can't ask follow up questions, and

⁵⁹ *Trump Jr. Sparks "birther Conspiracy" of Kamala Harris - CNN Video.*

⁶⁰ Leslie, "How Stories Argue," 76.

communication is largely one-sided. Interested parties may leave comments, but an answer from the original poster is never guaranteed. Engagement in comment threads is solely conjecture. Trump is able to control the entirety of the discourse within his base on Twitter, as he tells the story and chooses which narratives or supporting responses best suit his persuasive goals. He can choose to interact with supporting narratives by liking, retweeting, or replying to tweets, and he can ignore tweets that criticize him. The follower base becomes insulated from external influence, as Trump continually reinforces an echo chamber that advances his mission of persuasion. Large swaths of important and relevant information can be eliminated from discourse through the deliberate curation of posts and engagements. The 140-character limit also provides little room for context; a tweet cannot fully capture why someone said something, where a quote comes from, or what something actually means in its entirety.

During the Birtherism era, Trump repeatedly tweets quotes without providing sources or insight. He used quotations to argue Barack Obama was “born in Kenya,” and he has “an extremely credible source” providing information. Tweets 13, 1, 8, 10, 19, and 5 best exemplify the context principle of storytelling. Claiming a source as ‘*extremely credible*’ without giving any information about the source or its legitimacy does not establish credibility. He also references Hawaiian state statutes without using any language from the statute (tweet 5)– he provides a short question based on what we can logically assume is his own interpretation. This statement gives the impression that believers are one large group with institutionalized support. Trump’s followers see this and believe their beliefs are aligned with those of reputable and powerful entities. He also retweets accounts that would likely not have insight into the birtherism movement, yet he engages with these posts and promotes them as if they are ubiquitously true in order to persuade his audience. Most of the users are unverified, meaning they are potentially not

even real people. Still, Trump uses tweets to create an impression of both elite and mass support. Trump retweeted user @johnnyb23390 (tweet 19) with contextless information about a confidentiality agreement and praise for himself. Readers never know who this user is or why Donald Trump is platforming this account but creates an impression of mass support. In tweet 17, Trump retweets @obamafraudulant, who refers to the birth certificate shared by the White House as a “computer generated forgery.” The username alone explicitly describes the entire agenda in place. This account currently has twenty six followers, does not have a profile photo, and hasn’t tweeted since 2016. We cannot know whether this account is a sockpuppet account, but can infer that creating sockpuppets to further conspiracy theories aligns with Trump’s agenda. Affording anonymous Internet entities unrestrained truth power is irresponsible, yet Trump can benefit, so he does it anyway. Twitter might offer an unconventional and unprecedented opportunity for interaction between constituents and political speakers, but most Twitter accounts lack truth-value, especially in the absence of verification and context. This type of storytelling flattens the distinction between elites and the masses, as well as between knowledge and beliefs.

Considering context, Trump uses the “some people are saying” style of rhetoric commonly found in conspiracies.⁶¹ In this mobilization of conspiracy theory, he casts the conspiracy, but does not provide a “theory—” Trump does not attempt to situate his narrative on a basis of facts that might make his discourse palatable to those outside the intended audience. He frequently refers to other people who agree, but these “other people ” are useful for creating entertainment. These “others” are ambiguous creations that don’t carry substantive weight. He makes claims like “someone called my office,” as seen in tweets 7 and 8. Who is “someone?” He also targets elites who are “in on it,” like McCain, Romney, and Wolf Blitzer, as seen in tweets 2,

⁶¹ Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 21.

12, and 21. His followers believe these claims, even in the absence of context. This furthers polarization and emphasizes the deliberate “us versus them” discourse central to the destruction of reality. To the listener, the only relevant distinction is between the in-group and the out-group. Trump flattens distinctions between other previously-held categories; he conflates elites with masses and information with entertainment. Within the community, this rhetoric employs the narrative that believers are better informed than elites, making the group resistant to information from external sources. Trump’s followers are persuaded to find that he is the only means of receiving information– if Trump does not endorse the source or directly comment on an issue, the followers do not consider the issue. The “us versus them” mentality is a key part of conspiracy theory and democratic decline, as it again emphasizes a divergence of reality as perceived by the two different groups. Without one universally acknowledged reality, democracy cannot thrive, because all parties find the system illegitimate.

Iconicity

Iconicity, the final prong of storytelling, describes the ability of a story to stand alone on its own accord and be perceived and understood by the masses. A story has reached iconicity once it has been universally heard and understood. Iconicity appeals to persuasion in storytelling by employing unique stylistic methods of delivery and sharing content that becomes broadly understood.⁶² The storyteller, too, can achieve iconicity with deliberate inclusion of the self within the story; placing the storyteller at the center of the story persuades listeners to understand the storyteller as if he were a hero in a Greek epic. The unique style of the individual storyteller is as critical to iconicity, and therefore to persuasion, as is the commanding content of the story itself. Homer’s *The Iliad* is iconic; it now represents the epitome of the classical epic.

⁶² Leslie, "How Stories Argue," 76.

Trump was among the first elites willing to embrace the birther narrative. Before his outspokenness on Twitter, birtherism existed as a mere whisper in fringe circles and dark corners of the Internet, but Trump made birtherism a central issue in the 2012 presidential election. Birtherism was universally understood to have existed; while individuals debated whether or not Barack Obama's natural-born citizenship was actually in question, everyone understood that this was, at the very least, a discussion others were having. People were familiar with the content of the story, even if they were outside of the group that was persuaded by it. As a storyteller, Trump is inexplicably tied to the Birtherism movement through his perpetual reinforcement of the conspiracy theory. This willingness enabled him to accumulate enough political capital to capture the Tea Party. He was considered the "leader" of the Tea Party for a while. On Twitter, Trump frequently used "I" statements to remind followers that the birtherism movement had a successful outcome solely because of his influence. He also frequently retweeted praise from others, and these accounts were, again, unverified and can not be seen as credible sources of news or political information. In tweet 20, he retweeted user @Boycottmaypac, who claimed that Trump "got the president to show his Birth Certificate," and that Trump "has clout my friend! He can really stir things up!" This is important— Trump actually got Obama to respond. At this point, Birtherism is no longer a rumor and is now a conspiracy theory substantial enough to demand responses from its target. To his followers, Trump appears as a weapon against other GOP elites, Democrats, and other sources this group dislikes. He also claims he was the only one who was able to generate the reveal of Barack Obama's birth certificate. Tweets 20, 15, 21, and 16 best show Trump's employment of iconicity as a rhetorical strategy. He consistently tells his followers they owe him thanks and he is worthy of idolization; Trump paints himself as a political actor who has outsmarted and outworked all other elites in the birther wild goose chase,

and his followers owe him. This “story” works to portray Trump as a hero, not to tell a persuasive story. The idol status is comprised of the character he has created and surpasses his human existence; this is the beginning of Trumpism. Trump is the face of the movement, but his name and likeness now represent so much more than his individual personhood. Tweet 3 engages in what seems to be an inside joke between Trump and his followers. He references the Fourth of July, making a comment about “America’s actual birth certificate.” Just the phrase “birth certificate” has become synonymous with Trumpism in its earliest stages. This type of engagement also builds community and parasocial closeness between Trump and the followers. Trump and the emergence of Trumpism represent a societal shift that emboldens openly racist discourse, anti-immigrant attitudes, and skepticism of reputable political authority, all of which stem from conspiracy. Trump created a reality within his base in which he is the center of the universe, is the greatest person to ever exist, and is above public or private scrutiny, as he represents the ideal societal standard among his followers. It’s not that Trump himself is an icon, but Trump and the Trumpism movement are readily associated with these hateful and conspiratory attitudes. Trump uses Twitter to construct narratives in which truth is not important. Instead, the stories he tells create opportunities for building cohesivity and loyalty within the group.

The second Tweet tags CNN, mentions the network’s low ratings, and directly tags Wolf Blitzer. He also puts quotation marks around “birth certificate,” implying fraud. Here, Trump conveys an image of himself as an authentic and unafraid speaker who is interested in wielding his large platform to embarrass elites and steer Americans toward the “truth.” He’s promising to embarrass Wolf Blitzer on his own show, portraying himself as a superior entertainer to Blitzer. The performative nature of Trump as “truthful” appeals to the desire for perceived authenticity

within his base. This discourse also continues a thread of performance and entertainment that entices his base to return for more: more Trump means more drama, and drama is entertaining. More drama means followers will have more opportunities to show devotion to their leader, Trump. Tweet 14 reads like a WWE announcer– “TRUMP HITS BACK AT CHRIS MATTHEWS’ BIRTHER RANT: HE USED TO BE A MUCH MORE INTELLIGENT MAN.” In this tweet, he insults Chris Matthews’ intelligence for opposing his conspiracy *and* channels entertainment. The drama entices Trump’s followers to rally around him, cheering in a strange type of competition. Trump performs a character who is “real,” which is highly appetizing to his base. He “hits back,” and shares what he thinks.

He also presents himself as the only legitimate source of information and delegitimizes all other sources, so his followers feel they have no other option but to obey his word. He also takes care to discredit elites within the GOP, including Mitt Romney and John McCain (Tweets 131-134). Trump is persistent in emphasizing that he is the only one his followers can trust. In 131, he criticizes both Hilary Clinton *and* John McCain before reminding followers that *he* was able to get the birth certificate, when “nobody else could.” His style of entertainment effectively says the quiet part out loud; he diverges from typically-accepted bipartisan speech and strategy and instead parrots racist and discriminatory attitudes back to his base, cultivating this persona of “authenticity” and differentiating himself from other elites within the party. As explored in the literature review, the demagogue is a flag in the progression toward democratic decline. The demagogue garners political support by making emotional appeals to followers and finds success in pushing narratives that don’t have to be true to be politically powerful.⁶³ This will allow him to capture nominations from Republicans who feel disillusioned by GOP elites who they

⁶³ Hahl, Kim, and Zuckerman Sivan, “The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue,” 22.

perceive as “inauthentic.” This division is highly profitable to Trump, and his purposeful contribution to this discourse is indisputable as a self-serving political strategy.

As a television personality, the performance element of storytelling seems to come naturally to Trump, and he has been able to consciously use this information to create and perform a character that appeals to a specific block of American voters in a way previous political elites had been unable to do. He frequently receives praise from “telling it how it is” and being honest, even though the truth value of his rhetoric is constantly in question. This engagement speaks directly to Trump’s emergence as a demagogue. Even though he tells lies, his followers are “in on it,” and continue to support him because of his authentic appeal.⁶⁴ Other elites tend to conform to societal molds of appropriate public discourse, but Trump says the “ugly truth,” so he appears authentic. The other elites are “liars,” and are “not like us”-- the in-group distrusts the out-group. The demagogue offers the appearance of authentic democratic participation but, as Oliver Hahl argues, engages more in self-serving narrative than in truth.⁶⁵

The reality-television nature of Trump’s storytelling encourages listeners to “stay tuned for the next installment!” Followers are under constant barrage of reinforcement via the frequency of these tweets. Even if followers do not follow each tweet in live time each day, Twitter and all tweets are constantly accessible, allowing the consumption of Trump’s narration to become individually habitual. His approach to entertainment in this space almost invites the follower to join the circle of “stars,” as all members of the outgroup are “losers.”

⁶⁴ Hahl, Kim, and Zuckerman Sivan, “The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue,” 4.

⁶⁵ Hahl, Kim, and Zuckerman Sivan, “The Authentic Appeal of the Lying Demagogue,” 22.

2.5 Affect Theory

While storytelling lends insight into Trump as a speaker and into his narratives as tools, affect theory illuminates the drivers and attitudes of Trump's followers. Affect theory considers human feelings and emotions as drivers for behavior, and this behavior can be manipulated by appeals to emotion by political speakers. At its core, affect theory describes a state in which recipients are *affected* by specific speech or action toward a feeling.⁶⁶ Like storytelling, the significance of affect theory lies not in the truth value of any matter asserted. In political discourse, affect theory drives the emotions of a group toward a specified goal through deliberate methods of delivery. Affect theory is predicated on existing social norms; the collective emotional state of a group is dynamic and volatile, meaning appeals to specific emotions using the same language may have different results in different time periods or cultures. In order to best use affect theory to influence voters, political speakers must display an awareness of communally shared emotions in their target groups to deliver messages in a way that is productive to their partisan and electoral goals. Groups who are not responsive to climate change data, for example, will not be swayed by an emotional appeal to climate catastrophe by a politician. Feelings of shame, fear, and belonging are central to Donald Trump's mobilization of affect. I use affect theory to understand and interpret the consequences of his rhetoric. Birtherism is a notable place to start in that it reflects the moment Trump was able to seize a community. By instilling fear and doubt into the minds of his followers, and by portraying Barack Obama's election as a threat of "outsiders" distorting American culture, Trump's follower base began to consolidate. Once the base began consolidating, Trump was able to focus more on emotional appeals than on factual information, employing new conspiracy, or conspiracy without the

⁶⁶ Gregg and Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, 2.

theory.⁶⁷ His followers prioritize the aesthetics of belonging to the group over actual individualized perceptions of reality or morality in order to avoid the shame they perceive as an inevitable consequence of defecting from Trump's word. This particular group of followers has been emotionally manipulated beyond the reach of objective facts or data and lives in conspiracy theory as a means to justify the fear-induced spiral Trump is responsible for creating among this group of voters. He was able to create this community by understanding that there was a group of people who already existed who were looking for an elite to reinforce their beliefs, and he capitalized on that opportunity. Trump doesn't necessarily need to believe what he says, nor does he have to say anything true, in order to mobilize his followers and position himself in a position of power.

Threat & Protection

Fear is a primary affective device used to influence audiences, as it is highly effective in driving people to act. People are easily affected by the desire to feel safe, and perceived threats to safety are met with decisive action. Safety may come in financial security, physical safety, or any element that predicates a valued way of life. Affect theory suggests political appeals to fear or threat, whether authentic or fabricated, affect the visceral and primal nature of people.⁶⁸ Affecting the instinctual desire for self-preservation also allows room to promise protection from any "threat," and enables the political demagogue to affect his audience to promote feelings of dependence. When a political speaker manipulates his audience to feel threatened and scared, the audience becomes reliant on the speaker for feelings of safety.

⁶⁷ Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*, 21.

⁶⁸ Massumi, "The Political Ontology of Threat," 63.

Trump posed the birtherism movement as a threat to conservative American life and values; the depiction of Barack Obama's presidency as illegitimate caused believers to feel that American democracy, as they had known and lived it, was under threat. Trump consequently offers "protection" to believers as the leader of the movement. In this instance, he frequently tweets that the birtherism issue is scary and will harm Americans. He also frequently reminds people that he will protect them from the implied threat of democratic destruction by continuing to press the issue, even though the birtherism movement had been thoroughly debunked several times. Once the birtherism issue had become relevant enough to reach the majority of Americans, and once Trump had encountered significant opposition, he was able to craft a narrative in which the Democrats were the true threat to the traditional American lifestyle. The affective appeal against Democrats caused his follower base to become distrustful of all who rejected Birtherism. In turn, the base also stopped trusting all who opposed Trump. The nature of affect theory as it applies to fear, threat, and protection suggests, once Trump had given his followers something to fear, he was no longer bound to any means of truth or rationality. He would still be a powerful influence as the leader of this group, regardless of anything he ever actually said. On Twitter, he repeatedly uses language like "Just remember, ..." to rally his followers back behind the fear of threat and his apparent martyrship (see tweets 21, 22). He also uses phrases like "Read this!" (tweet 6), "let's take a closer look (tweet 1), and, less subtly, "Wake up America!" (tweet 11). These phrases engage directly with the audience, building a sense of community and inviting the listener to feel as if Trump truly cares for them. This language also continues the thread of entertainment-style narrative present throughout this Twitter timeline. Trump wants his followers to feel as if they're in the 'fight' together, and that

he is the savior promised to protect ‘real Americans’ from vicious elites on both sides of the aisle.

Twitter also allows for constant reinforcement of a proposed narrative, as Trump can simply send out a tweet to millions to continually cue the fear narrative. He also emphasizes moralizing language about America, Americans, and patriotism to remind his followers of what is at stake. Their perceptions of threat feel genuine to them, and Trump genuinely seems to be the hero in their narratives, even though these narratives are not rational. He also engages with tweets from others thanking or congratulating him for his work in producing Barack Obama’s birth certificate. The illusion of protection from a fabricated threat is a strong emotional appeal and profoundly affects the target audience, even if the promise of protection cannot be guaranteed or the threat does not even exist. Other GOP elites are also not going to protect this group, as Trump has described them as “crooked” as well, so the followers are led to believe they can only trust Trump with their safety, livelihood, and prosperity. To reinforce this idea, Trump shirks responsibility by repeatedly asking why people are mad at him. Tweets 9 and 15 both ask “why are people mad?” regarding Trump’s involvement with Birtherism. To Trump, the conspiracy is a joke. He is playing a character, and his primary concern is the entertainment value he can provide. Entertainment is politically profitable to Trump, and he is more concerned with his own enjoyment than with his impact on the electorate.

Shame & Belonging

The natural desire to belong and the emotional need to feel accepted by a community are easily shaped to political ends by cueing affect. The shame incurred by individuals who fail to reproduce a social norm, and the desire to avoid shame, affects individuals and their behaviors.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Probyn, “Writing Shame,” 74.

Shame is produced when a body and mind are not aligned.⁷⁰ individuals will physically act, even in the presence of cognitive dissonance, to maintain a sense of belonging within their communities. Going against the group consensus causes people to experience shame when the opinion of the outgroup has been vilified. Appeals to the affect of shame moralize compliance with commonly held group opinion, and defectors are portrayed as “bad people.” Shame may result from regrettable action or failure to act by the affected. In turn, the threat of shame renders the affected individual submissive to the community-held narrative. Affect then becomes an aesthetic, and individuals must outwardly express feelings consistent with those of the group. A conservative voter, for example, must convey fear and outrage toward discourse of the American “border crisis,” even if the individual was previously unaffected by the issue. Donald Trump famously criticizes all who oppose him, causing the follower base to unify against all who oppose his ideals, and to become submissive within the community itself to avoid ostracization. Affecting shame in his followers ensured compliance with the Birtherism movement both internally and externally; the ingroup polices itself and vilifies the opposition.

Trump successfully weaponized his Twitter presence to affect shame in his followers. Shame is a negative affect correlated with fear; followers are afraid of being shamed. His flagrant and public ostracization of women on Twitter was particularly violent; he commonly used language like “horseface,” “lowlife,” “fat,” “ugly,” and other debasing insults to refer to women who disagreed with him.⁷¹ Patriarchal societal conditioning already affects women’s sense of worth, autonomy, and purpose. Such bold and public vilification of women encourages women within his base to conform and keep quiet. He effectively affects shame in women both within and beyond the group, encouraging the women among his follower base to distinguish

⁷⁰ Probyn, “Writing Shame,” 74.

⁷¹ Shear, Michael D. and Eileen Sullivan. “‘Horseface,’ ‘Lowlife,’ ‘Fat, Ugly’: How the President Demeans Women”

themselves from the women he criticizes. The desire to be “one of the good ones” is imminent, and there is obvious pressure to conform out of self-preservation. His famous “nasty women” discourse comes later. If a woman disagrees with Trump, she becomes vilified and excommunicated from the group, and she’s also subjected to high levels of public verbal abuse. Tweet 135 shows evidence of Trump using feminization to affect shame. In the tweet, Trump calls Arianna Huffington, co-founder of the Huffington Post, “unattractive,” and says he “fully understands why her husband left her for a man.” A few moments later, he tweets “Don’t think my statement on @ariannahuff was harsh– if you knew her and the phony Huffington Post you would understand– more to follow.” The “more to follow” piece and the reference to the Huffington Post as “phony” further the promise of entertainment and the delegitimization of opposition that he has consistently maintained throughout his conspiratory discourse. The tweet calling Huffington “unattractive” received 8,000 retweets and 9,000 likes. The threat of such public embarrassment is enough to keep possible defectors in line. I argue that this contributes to why Trump’s base has so many women in it, even after a substantial body of evidence has emerged exposing Trump as a sexual predator. Those who are not considering defecting get the same reinforcement they had been getting earlier through the entertainment soundbite– “more to follow” sounds like a television commercial. The actual shaming is also entertaining. Thousands of people engaged with the tweet, indicating followers enjoy participating in this type of virtual public flogging. The “phony” claim reinforces what the followers have also been led to believe about media and its untrustworthiness.

Men also find themselves threatened with shame from Trump’s discourse. Trump has a record of weaponizing femininity *against* men, invoking shame against the men he feminizes. Men who are expelled from the group are feminized and, since Trump has created a community

in which femininity is inferior, the shame from these men is substantial enough to deter defection from the group. Gender functions as “an apparatus of power and disempowerment” within Trump’s base.⁷² James Comey, former director of the FBI, was subject to the brunt of this gendered disempowerment. At the beginning of the Mueller investigation, Trump, in an attempt to intimidate Comey, invited him to dinner and engaged in gendered interaction with Comey to render him submissive. When Trump was unable to secure “loyalty, and [he] expect[s] loyalty,” from Comey, he destroyed his professional credibility by portraying him as feminine. In tweets 26, 28, 29, 31-34, 36, and 47, Trump refers to Comey as “weak,” “slippery,” “shadey,” “sick,” “dumb,” a poor leader, and, most importantly, as a liar. The distrustful woman is a common trope weaponized by Trump. We see this with “Crooked Hillary” and with the women who accuse him of sexual assault. He describes these women, all of whom threaten his professional power, as conniving and untrustworthy, vilifying all “difficult” women. The feminization of Comey is akin to professional destruction, and the shame tied to his demasculinization that followed opposing Trump makes any opposition highly risky and undesirable within his base. In tweet 136, Trump mocks Mark Cuban and compares his golf swing to that of a little girl. “Girl,” of course, is being used pejoratively. We also see how he exalts “hardworking” and “GREAT men” who side with him in opposing Comey in tweets 44 and 35. Those who associate with the shamed are doomed, too; in tweet 30, Trump calls Andrew McCabe, who worked with Comey, a choirboy. During this scandal, he also repeatedly tries to redirect outrage away from himself and toward Hillary Clinton in tweets 37 and 38. Frequently repeated use of the term “Witch Hunt” is also interestingly a historically gendered term, though here Trump victimizes himself as the “witch.” Even though this language seems like an inversion of his narrative, he promotes continuity here by reinforcing the fear of being cast out as the radicalized, feminized “other.” Since feminization

⁷² Honig, Bonnie. “He Said, He Said.”

is equated with such visceral feelings of shame within this group, Trump can use the “witch” rhetoric to his advantage; he portrays his enemies as so corrupt that they can invert the ‘natural’ order by feminizing *him*.

Comey responds to his emasculation by frequently mentioning his wife in interviews, likely to restore his public image as a heterosexual, “real” man.⁷³ This response is highly telling, as it lends insight into the shame he experienced during his exile from both Trump’s inner circle and from the social construct of manhood. The birther base remains loyal to Trump throughout his presidency, so this narrative is highly applicable to his followers across time. Affecting shame creates reluctance to defect from the group as a means of social self-preservation. Assimilating to Trump’s narrative is akin to survival. His conservative follower base is also more concerned with societally imposed constructions of gender, femininity, and masculinity, and is more inclined to moralize these terms, to prefer masculinity, and to see gender in strictly binary terms. This group’s heightened concern with upholding gender roles makes the threat of feminization more urgent than in other groups that hold more liberal attitudes toward gender.

While Trump may affect emotion using old and established discriminatory tactics, like attacking race and gender, the way he uses Twitter presents a contemporary political issue. The frequency at which he tweets allows him unprecedented access into the phones and minds of his base. He’s constantly reinforcing his narrative, and his followers are conditioned to constantly check for more reinforcement or more information. Twitter also has post notifications, so followers can be notified when he tweets. This envelopes Twitter users in a constant and unyielding feedback cycle that prevents them from accessing, therefore considering, many other outside sources. Joining Trump’s Twitter army is a type of voluntary servitude. Participants have freely chosen to enter the space, effectively enslaving themselves. Though Twitter engagement is

⁷³ Honig, Bonnie. “He Said, He Said.”

not anti-democratic, it raises a red flag. As Ben-Ghiat argues, fascists do not come to power by force; rather, “the action of a few conservative elites” deliberately influence public discourse to favor the rising fascist, and the fascist seizes power with the willing support of his followers.⁷⁴ The nature of the algorithm also reinforces their preexisting beliefs; the more users interact with Trump’s tweets, the more they will see from Trump and those who reiterate his words. Twitter has the potential to provide unrestrained access to different sources of information, but in the case of Trump’s base, Twitter is a limiting agent that allows people to enter the world of Trump and, in conjunction with Trump’s employment of storytelling and affect theory, makes it impossible to leave. In the stylistic fashion of a true reality television entertainer, Trump keeps his followers hooked on his stories, and keeps them coming back for more.

2.6 Discussion

Donald Trump used Twitter to amplify the birtherism conspiracy theory. His involvement with the theory allowed him to create a loyal coalition whom he willingly led into delusion through conspiracism. His use of Twitter was, at the time, unprecedented, and allowed him to engage in this specific type of storytelling. In addition to typical modes of elite rhetoric, Trump’s conspiracism conveys an entertainment feature that is uniquely persuasive to his audience. He was also one of the first major public figures, or elites, to use Twitter as a vector for conspiracism. Trump’s storytelling strategies allowed him to establish a version of reality in which entertainment and appeal to authenticity give him monopolistic credibility. No one may disagree with Trump, and no one may challenge him. By manipulating shame and fear in his followers, Trump established a rulebook for membership that allows him to maintain control and cohesivity within the group. The threat of group excommunication allowed Trump to reinforce

⁷⁴ Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen*, 21.

the Birther conspiracy theory within his base. This willing delusion is a powerful mobilizer toward democratic decline—two parties that are fundamentally divorced on the idea of reality and who cannot observe any objectivity in relation to each other cannot function in a democratic society.

Trump uses Twitter to establish a following and clear group boundaries. His believers get rewarded, while non-believers get punished. This punishment, visible through the lens of excommunication or feminization, is a consequence of the conspiracy theory. These components are not necessarily lies but are the consequences of engaging with the lie. Believers are treated well, while non-believers are not. The perception of this punishment is powerful enough to persuade followers against defection. This calls into question the authenticity of even the in-group. While I have previously explored the relationship between intergroup conflict and democratic decline exacerbated by conspiracy theory, the intragroup authenticity is also worth considering. If the followers are not all necessarily true believers, but still act in accordance out of self preservation, divisions are still furthered, and the consequences for democracy are the same. Promoting lies, for any reason, distorts reality and authorizes anti-democratic action.

CHAPTER 3

STOP THE STEAL

3.1 Objectives

The tumultuous end of Trump's presidency lurched the United States into an early state of democratic decline. I argue that Trump's contribution to the Stop the Steal (STS) conspiracy through Twitter has resulted in democratic decline. This conspiracy contests the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election results, directly challenging the legitimacy of the American electoral system. To make my argument, I extend my application of storytelling and affect theory to my second case study, STS. I evaluate STS tweets using the same storytelling and affect theory principles I applied to birtherism. Comparing the conspiracy theories simultaneously creates an opportunity to look for rhetorical patterns and examine Trump's impact on the American electoral system. I find that STS mirrors birtherism in the rhetorical strategies Trump used to channel conspiracies through Twitter, but the aims of each are distinctly different. Features of entertainment, elite cueing, and the unique role of *presidential* conspiracism complement established political scholarship on conspiracy and democratic decline in my analysis. In the next chapter, I engage three components of democratic decline that followed STS: the coup, the capitol insurrection, and new voter suppression legislation.

Birtherism consolidated a new political subculture under Trump based on the unique incorporation of Twitter into mainstream political discourse and the dynamic of an elite-turned-presidential conspirator. STS uses the same medium—Twitter—with the same rhetorical strategies, but is exponentially more intense and more dangerous to democratic

institutions. The STS conspiracy theory mobilized followers to participate in explicitly antidemocratic action.

3.2 Defining Stop the Steal

“Stop the Steal” (STS) is Trump’s most recent and most destructive conspiracy theory, which claims the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent. The core of the conspiracy theory accuses Democrats of colluding to “steal” the election by rigging voting machines, forging mail-in ballots, and manipulating the media to install Joe Biden in office, which Trump engaged substantially through Twitter. Like birtherism, STS aligns with new conspiracy, as it conveys “conspiracy without theory;”⁷⁵ STS is a recycled conspiracy initially intended for mobilization in 2016 based exclusively on an illegitimate, antidemocratic attempt to seize presidential power.

Birtherism consolidated a new political subculture under Trump based on the unique incorporation of Twitter into mainstream political discourse and the dynamic of an elite-turned-presidential conspirator. Its primary objective was community building. STS uses the same medium—Twitter— with the same rhetorical strategies, but is exponentially more intense and more dangerous to democratic institutions. The STS conspiracy theory mobilized the community of followers that began assembling during birtherism to participate in explicitly antidemocratic action, explicitly fracturing democratic institutions.

Trump’s attempted seizure of presidential power is unsurprising, as “his cynical willingness to exploit the worst fears and instincts of many voters across the United States of America had been openly on display.”⁷⁶ STS challenges American democratic norms and

⁷⁵ Rosenblum and Muirhead, *A Lot of People Are Saying*.

⁷⁶ Luke, Timothy W., “Democracy under Threat after 2020 National Elections in the USA,” 1.

emphasizes the detrimental threat conspiracy theory poses to the democratic process. Like birtherism, STS sorts voters based on whether they affiliate with the Trump narrative.

STS preceded Trump's second impeachment, loss of election and exit from the White House, and ban from Twitter, which was his primary mode of engagement with his followers. This conspiracy theory also authorized anti-democratic action among his followers. The fallout from STS is still unfolding in 2022, and evidence of the devastation caused by this conspiracy theory will continue to develop in coming election cycles. STS also currently acts as a new norm in the Republican party; candidates who refuse to believe or preach that the 2020 presidential election was stolen are unable to gain power within the party. Trump endorses candidates who support the conspiracy theory, like upcoming 2022 congressional candidates Kari Lake and Mike Demter.⁷⁷ Trump's continued support of these candidates furthered conspiratorial discourse, as other prospective candidates eagerly sought Trump's endorsement. The implications of both the attempted coup of the actual election and the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol are both clear, relevant consequences of the STS conspiracy theory that distort American democracy.

The Birtherism movement established Trump as a political power player, acting as a trial run for a rhetorical style that would serve as his model for strategic political discourse in the following years. By using Twitter as his primary medium of communication, Trump was able to launch this conspiracy theory and create huge momentum within his base without any evidence to support his claims. If he had used a different medium that required him to flesh out a more coherent story with proof, it might not have been effective. It seems as though democracy is on the betting table for American citizens, and the stakes are incredibly high.

The STS conspiracy theory differs from the birtherism theory in its timing; Trump did not begin using STS rhetoric in 2020 as he had begun using birtherism rhetoric only surrounding Barack

⁷⁷ Powell, "Trump's Backing of 'Stop the Steal' Candidates May Cost GOP Seats in 2022."

Obama's presidential elections. Rather, STS first appeared in Trump's 2016 campaign and was largely advanced by Roger Stone.⁷⁸ Trump has unequivocally advanced this conspiracy theory, but Roger Stone, a key Trump advisor and associate, instituted the theory within the administration. Trump amplifies others' work if it benefits him. At the behest of Stone, Trump fanned flames of this theory in 2016 and 2020. STS cropped up when Trump's Republican nomination was questioned, and the administration had planned to use it against Hillary Clinton if she had won the 2016 presidential election, which never came to fruition. Trump's Twitter archive reveals STS tweets months ahead of the actual election, which aligns with the planned and strategic nature of this conspiracy theory. STS advances and protects Donald Trump's power. If Donald Trump is in power, those he holds close are protected from adversaries, legal or otherwise. This incentivizes the administration in its entirety, alongside close friends, to promote STS. Perhaps an apparent willingness to pay for personal protection and prosperity with American democracy as currency is relevant in the face of the STS fallout.

3.3 Twitter: Weaponized Repetition

Twitter is as integral to STS as it was to Birtherism. By 2020, Twitter was no longer a "new" medium. Politicians have adopted Twitter and other forms of social media into mainstream political discourse. However, in the context of growing conspiracy theory and waning democratic norms that are easily understood through STS and the insurrection, Twitter still presents new political obstacles. Twitter provides a live, short, continual platform for political messaging. Trump also claims to author his own tweets. In other political offices, staffers run Twitter accounts for politicians.⁷⁹ The use of Twitter as a rhetorical weapon allowed

⁷⁸ Atlantic Council's DFRLab. "#StopTheSteal."

⁷⁹ Some rumors surrounding Trump's Twitter discourse argue Trump did not write any of his own tweets. The truth of this statement does not matter for my evaluation, as I am more concerned with reception than authorship. It

Trump to beat his preferred unreality into the brains of his followers and obliterate the credibility of other sources of information. The repetition of conspiratory messages and rate of repetition enabled by Twitter were not accessible tools to previous conspirators. The 1922 March of Rome, for example, brought Benito Mussolini of the National Fascist Party to power in Italy with a movement fueled by widespread conspiracy and fear of far-left political figures. The power Trump holds by having direct, constant, and unbarred communication with highly affected voters is incredibly dangerous in the face of an insurrection, and Twitter has made this type of connection uniquely possible. The absence of such a medium in former authoritarian movements is a notable difference and is worth measuring to create a deeper historical understanding of how dramatic power shifts happen in democratic governments.

Twitter also holds some tangible permanence other modes of discourse lack; records of Trump's tweets show dates, times, and engagement, giving written insight into his mobilization of followers that we had previously been unable to observe in such hard, unambiguous data. This permanence benefits researchers in establishing trends, and it presents new opportunities for engagement with followers. Followers can recycle old messages at any point by retweeting, and these old ideas can go viral at any time. Virality ensures any talking point becomes a primary mode of discourse among both the ingroup and the outgroup while the issue is salient. In conjunction with the birtherism tweets, fear and fear-mongering tactics are readily employed to move voters further into the party. The feelings of a polarized nation might feel readily apparent to most engaged American citizens, but hard analysis of text and comparison with earlier movements are more revealing as to rhetorical strategies. The STS conspiracy theory is

doesn't necessarily matter who authored tweets on Trump's Twitter account, because his followers attribute those tweets to him and act in accordance.

fundamentally emotional and deliberate mass manipulation of individual emotions is highly effective at transmitting conspiracy theory.

I use the Trump Twitter Archive to analyze tweets from STS. The archive shows likes, retweets, and which tweets have been deleted, which show the ways Trump shaped and reshaped narratives to protect himself during the STS theory and all of its fallout. As of January 8th, 2021, Donald Trump was permanently banned from Twitter. The power held by this sense is also unprecedented in other such political transformations and is worth observing in the context of political power, truth, and the power of private tech businesses within American democracy.

The scope of tweets regarding the STS conspiracy theory is vast. According to the Trump Twitter Archive, Trump tweeted 1,552 times between November 3rd and his permanent account suspension on January 8th.⁸⁰ By a manual count,⁸¹ 1,238 of those tweets were about STS. That accounts for 79.7% of all activity on his Twitter account, and this number excludes STS tweets that preceded the 2020 presidential election. Sixty-six days elapsed during this time, meaning the President was tweeting 23.5 times per day, on average. During this timeframe, he also tweeted 18 times using the word “steal,” 15 times using the word “stolen,” 54 times using “rigged,” and 98 times using the word “fraud,” all in reference to the 2020 presidential election. I have identified 91 tweets to apply my methods and explore Trump’s contribution to the STS conspiracy theory and democratic decline. This rate and repetition over this period of time is highly relevant in the later outcomes of the insurrection and attempted coup.

⁸⁰ Brown, “Trump Twitter Archive,” <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>.

⁸¹ I used a counter app to manually count each tweet that referenced STS from November 3, 2020, to January 8th, 2021, as outlined using the Trump Twitter Archive. I only counted specific references to STS, and did not count tweets marked as ‘deleted’ or duplicated. I did not count image links posted without captions— since the @realdonaldtrump Twitter account is banned, I cannot open these links and cannot verify context.

3.4 Storytelling

In the context of STS, storytelling refers to the methods Trump used to convey information to impose meaningful and salient pressures on his followers to act. Trump's rhetorical style and medium of discourse have stayed consistent throughout his presidency, and Twitter plays a crucial role in this conspiracy theory just as it had in the Birtherism theory. In order to make a meaningful comparison between birtherism and STS, this chapter evaluates Trump's STS tweets using the same four elements: performance, adaptation, context, and iconicity.

Trump's message in the theory is clear; Joe Biden and the Democrats, with help from the RINOs, China, the fake news media, and corporate America, have stolen the 2022 presidential election, and Donald Trump is the true winner. However, for this evaluation, the truth value of the theory is not necessarily important. Rather, the way he was able to convince his followers to believe his words is critical to understanding the link between conspiracy theory and democratic decline. Storytelling encompasses not only what Trump said about STS, but how he told this story with meaning and salience. The conspiracy theory was powerful enough to authorize action toward a coup and an insurrection and now governs sorting within the GOP. Understanding the way he catalyzed this momentum is critical in understanding the situation and its future implications in its entirety.

Performance

As the STS conspiracy theory comes years after the birtherism theory, Trump has already crafted a community through repeatedly preaching a "shared narrative" within his group. The experience of belonging to the group is heavily shaped by the shared narrative, and Trump

approaches the narrative from a continuity perspective; he has already formed a loyal and homogeneous base. To preserve continuity, Trump cues his followers to rally around his claims and repeat him. Adherence to Trump's proposed narratives construct the requirements for membership within the community and encourage fidelity. He does not necessarily need to say the same things—he has openly contradicted himself, and his base has continued to support him— but must continue the narrative in which his base is united. The “we” a community understands themselves as is created through storytelling.⁸² Trump is highly in need of the “we” if he hopes to garner any power from the STS narrative. His sense of urgency is readily apparent during STS, as he had much more to lose than he had during birtherism. The performance of the Trump character, which is vital to the illegitimate grab for power Trump attempts, is readily observable through his Twitter presence during STS. In the same way he engaged the Birtherism conspiracy theory, Trump demonizes all external sources of information— the Democrats, GOP elites, “RINOs,” big tech, and mainstream media are all oppressive forces that threaten “real Americans,” or the followers. Trump leads his followers to believe his assertions are mainstream, and anyone who disagrees is an enemy. He also introduces a dichotomy by imposing the long list of enemies while continually reinforcing that “everyone agrees” because he promotes the “real American truth.”

The significance is not an evidence-based story, but rather the emotional response elicited through the way audiences are asked to read between the lines and observe gestures as symbolic. The storyteller performs these deliberate gestures to elicit sympathetic responses from his audience.⁸³ Trump's specific style of tweeting aligns with his performative character. Repetition of key phrases, capitalization, and exclamation points all characterize a typical Trump tweet. He

⁸² Leslie, “How Stories Argue,” 68.

⁸³ Leslie, “How Stories Argue,” 75.

also engages directly with supporters and political television personalities to preserve this character and portray it to the public. This conspiracy theory is also accompanied by a call to action, which is the most urgent difference between STS and birtherism.

Consider tweets 72-74 and 112. Trump uses short, punchy soundbites, exclamation points, and capitalization on all of these tweets. Each tweet was sent mere seconds apart, indicating some rapid reinforcement and urgency of messaging. The way he delivers this message reads more like a battle mantra than information from a politician. He uses short phrases with capital letters, and all three tweets were sent seconds apart. He introduces the set of tweets with “MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” This is a familiar rallying cry to the base. He follows with “RIGGED ELECTION!” and “GET TOUGH REPUBLICANS.” The MAGA cry opens this performance by re-establishing a familiar narrative. Then, Trump moves to perform a character of a politician who has been unfairly robbed. Trump may be the victim of the democratic process, if you consider an election loser a victim, but his performance suggests he is a victim of theft, cheating, and affront from his opponents. Followers are expected to understand the implied urgency and the symbolism of the larger issue (the “stolen election”) at hand. This is never explicitly laid out, and there is no coherent story or specific claims. Rather, reinforcement of that urgency and the “conspiracy against YOU!” Tweets 58, 98, 116, 107, 106, 105, 87, and, most notably, 128, use similar styles. The call to “fight” is also readily apparent; it seems as though Trump is relying heavily on moralization and justice as mobilizers, though he doesn’t necessarily use this specific language. It’s implied, as is the nature of performance. The deliberate mischaracterization of Democrats, the GOP, and the tech industry as allied forces against “real” Americans doesn’t hold a clear motivating factor– Trump doesn’t offer a “how” or a “why” to explain his aggressive characterization of the outgroup, but heavily reinforces the

idea that his followers are truly victims, and that he, as always, is the only legitimate source of information. False perceptions of victimhood also relate to fascist emergence and democratic decline.⁸⁴ According to Stanley, false victimhood encourages consensual submission to the fascist under similar principles as those in political threat and protection. His followers internalize this perception of victimhood and act in accordance.

The call to action Trump imposes on his followers becomes ostensibly clear in tweets 66, 111, 113 (deleted), 114, 115, 119, 121, and 125. Here, Trump explicitly asks his followers to come to the ellipse Capitol on January 6th, where a rally will begin at 11am. For weeks ahead of the insurrection, Trump called on his base to mobilize, show up, and take action to put him back in office. The instructions are clear, and, when paired with the “fight” rhetoric I described, launches the base into full participatory de-democratization.

This message of urgency pairs with tweet 79, in which Trump retweets an account named @TeamTrump. His retweeting of this account alone reflects his engagement with positive feedback from his followers; as of 2022, the account appears to have been deleted or suspended. However, this is a nameless account that only tweeted positive messages about President Trump. This is a critical component of the performance in storytelling– he’s conveying that he has a large, faceless support, which might create the illusion that his support reaches farther than it actually does. This coincides with all the work he has previously done to equate and delegitimize all sources outside of himself; experts who audited elections are given the same legitimacy as random follower @jim735924. The tweet itself contains heavily moralizing language about ‘fighting back’ against Democrats in STS. That a follower tweeted this reveals Trump’s successful invocation of urgency and unity among his base; the Twitter user tweets back strong feelings of righteousness and clear support for President Trump, which indicates the goal of

⁸⁴ Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, 114.

Trump’s performative messaging was effective. Trump’s retweeting of this account stokes those flames and amplifies the discourse. In tweet 51, Trump also promises to “withhold federal funds” to states that do not overturn their election results in his favor. He is deliberately escalating the intensity of STS with this dialogue. His supporters are entertained by this and want to see “justice” prevail.

In addition to platforming faceless accounts, Trump relies heavily on showing support for those in power who support him. Tweets 127, 122, 84, 83, 82, and 77 show this strategic amplification of powerful supporting voices. In Tweet 127, President Trump retweets Tomi Lahren, a right-winged political commentator with a substantial following. He does the same with reporter Christina Bobb in tweet 77— both Lahren and Bobb have sustained significant criticism for irresponsible reporting and for openly wielding misinformation. Both commentators have also received public criticism for racist and discriminatory actions in their capacities as reporters and commentators.⁸⁵⁸⁶ His followers know who Lahren and Bobb are and are aware of their values. Trump’s platforming of these individuals signals more to his own beliefs and takes an unambiguous stance on their value in the political space. Trump wants to make sure he’s aligned with the correct people to perform the narrative he’s sought to explore. This strategy is also consistent with the entertainment component of his narrative... the drama is “entertaining” to his followers, and they are encouraged to “Stay Tuned!” for the next installment. The tone of this messaging reads like a 1980s television commercial.

Other politicians are also subject to this type of endorsement or evaluation. Tweets 122, 123, 108 (deleted) and 82-84 show Trump engaging with Senator Ted Cruz and a string of public officials who publicly support STS, including Representative Paul Gosar (AZ), Representative

⁸⁵ Goodykoontz, “Why Christina Bobb’s OAN ‘coverage’ of the Arizona Audit Is Deceptive — and Dangerous.”

⁸⁶ McAfee, Tierney. “Mocking March for Our Lives and Comparing Black Lives Matter to KKK.”

Andy Biggs (AZ), Representative Louie Gohmert (TX), Re Ted Budd (NC), Re Jody Hice (GA), Re Greg Steube (FL), and Re Alex Mooney (WV). Ted Cruz is notorious for attempting to platform himself off of a campaign opposing Trump's in 2016; he claimed to be a model of "integrity," but famously flipped in support of Trump after Cruz had been unable to surpass him in the polls or other points of power.⁸⁷ Trump has been highly critical of Cruz in the past, but immediately shows support when Cruz backs Trump's political strategies. In this case, STS is part of the strategy. Cruz is well known for supporting strict voter ID laws, which are highly coded against Black and Brown POC and immigrants in his home state of Texas.⁸⁸ Similarly to his platforming of Joe Arpaio during the Birtherism era, the anti-immigrant stance is popular among his supporters, and retweeting Cruz is an easy example of similar unwritten signaling to GOP followers. The trend of anti-immigration sentiment is an interesting point of continuity in both birtherism and STS. Trump also calls on Bernard Kerik in tweet 76. Like Arpaio, Kerik had a career in law enforcement before spending some time in prison himself. When Kerik tweets that Biden is a "criminal," Trump retweets him, signaling to his base that law enforcement sides with them, and they are "right." The representatives Trump grouped together are also notable in their locations; Arizona and Georgia were some of the primary targets of STS discourse and showing public support and consensus among holding their state representatives and STS lends apparent legitimacy to the conspiracy theory among followers. Trump does not need to explicitly state this connection; rather, publicly showing consensus and support between himself and this group of representatives furthers his performance of the STS story. His followers are able to see this connection—the president, whom they trust, and their elected officials agree on STS, which makes it seem more unambiguous within the group.

⁸⁷ Buncombe, Andrew. "You Either Hate Him or You Hate Him."

⁸⁸ Blake, Aaron. "Analysis: Ted Cruz Makes a Texas-Size Mess on Voter ID and Racism."

Still, the entertainment component persists, as the idea of friends and enemies, or “good guys” and “bad guys,” or, as Stanley, argues, “us and them,”⁸⁹ promises a particular drama that is engaging and emotionally gripping to the audience. Linguistic intergroup bias suggests members of the in-group regard actions of the ingroup differently than actions of the outgroup, and the same persists for members of the out-group.⁹⁰ This phenomenon encourages members of the in-group to associate positive character traits within their community and negative character traits with outsiders, or the out-group. If elites are constrained by partisan norms to remain viable in a political landscape, the desire to remain within the “in-group” is imminent. This relationship is exemplified in tweets 89 and 95, in which Trump blames “RINOs” for “letting Democrats steal the election” and explicitly criticizes Chris Krebs, who worked as Director of Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency under Trump for failing to support STS. The sense of urgency I described earlier means tweets like this subjects Chris Krebs to harassment and possible physical danger from overzealous conspirators. Elites within the party are constrained by this fragile yet important sense of belonging— the threat of villainization is politically detrimental, and any vocalized opposition to any of Trump’s claims will result in a Twitter storm of damaging messages, which may become politically fatal in the hands of the base.

Adaptation

In the birtherism movement, Trump’s role in adaptation was primarily characterized by the move to Twitter as a then-new mainstream mode of political discourse. He also adapted texts, statistics, and data from other sources to promote his conspiracy theory. Adaptation is a critical component of storytelling, as it lends to the sustainability of a story’s relevancy; the ability for a

⁸⁹ Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, 114.

⁹⁰ Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, 114.

story to transcend time or narrow applications allows a story to endure, even if circumstances and available information change.⁹¹ This story, like Birtherism, is a story in which all outer sources are untrustworthy, and Trump will protect the believers, who are the “true victims” of democratic destruction. In the context of STS, Trump employs adaptation in the timing of STS discourse, as well as in the way he uses resources containing information about the 2020 election. The component about information differs from context, which I explore in the next section. This component considers entire sources artificially created solely to advance Trump’s narrative. Context considers small bites of information and their origins that are incomplete when presented to establish facts or persuade. By STS, Trump had been delegitimizing all external sources of information, particularly any coming from other elites, for years. During this period, he has progressively alienated his followers from more sources and stands alone as the marker of “truth.” This is not unlike a cult. He’s the leader, and his followers are blind to anything else other than what he says, even if his followers are led to dangerous action. The insurrection might be interpreted as the American democracy version of “drinking the Kool-aid.”⁹² The cult of followers is ferociously disjoined from objectivity at this point, and movement toward democratic decline in the wake of STS further emphasizes the destructive nature of conspiracy theory in democracies. Trump’s followers have learned to evaluate information in new ways. As I have argued, conspiracy theories impose democratic decline by destroying objective perceptions of reality, truth, and legitimacy. Trump’s use of Twitter during SPS readily parallels Birtherism in its methods but is magnified exponentially in its intensity and its consequences.

STS discourse began well before the 2020 presidential election; as previously discussed, STS became a canonized political strategy within the Trump administration in 2016 during the

⁹¹ Leslie, "How Stories Argue," 75.

⁹² Refers to the Jones Cult, in which cult members willingly drank poison and died at the instruction of their leader.

presidential primaries. The theory itself is not new, but the adaptation and application of the theory to the 2020 presidential election is. Consider Tweets 39-43, 25, 23, 45, 46, and 48.27, Trump openly tweeted about STS well in advance of the election, effectively priming his followers to contest any situation in which Trump was not victorious. This specific rhetoric enforces the theme of the “distrustful Democrat,” which is easily adapted to any situation Trump faces in his entire political career. Between April of 2016 and October of 2019, Trump directly tweeted about Democrats “stealing elections” 11 times. His use of words like “rigged,” “steal,” “stolen,” and “corrupt” is identical to the language used in his 2020 STS tweets. If the dates were missing from the archived tweets, it would be impossible to determine whether these tweets were about the 2020 election or any preceding election. It seems his greatest strategic weapon is to claim that Democrats are fraudulent in any and all elections. This is an all-purpose claim about who can exercise power. This theme is perfectly adaptable; each election represents a new situation in which Democrat-sanctioned voter fraud and election theft is a relevant point of discourse, even if data does not support the claim. Since the theme is well established, Trump’s followers need little persuasion to maintain belief.

Trump also flattens articles, statistics, and reports about the 2020 election into his discourse. As I have mentioned, Trump flattens the distinction between information and entertainment. The only distinction he preserves is the distinction between the in-group and the out-group. In tweets 67, 59, 60, 71, 49, 53, 91, 103, and 104, Trump directly posts sources that support STS. He uses these sources to shape his argument; since he appears to “cite his sources,” this mode of discourse garners legitimacy among his followers. However, the cherry picking of resources that support his claims is not a valid method for investigation. A critical component of adaptation describes the transformation of the story from Trump’s twitter account to the mouths

of his followers.⁹³ The ways his followers internalize and parrot the STS story heightens the efficacy of the story and strengthens its power. His followers see these sources and garner them as trustworthy, as they are directly endorsed and supported by the President of the United States. In discussions with family, friends, and community members, Trump's followers cite these sources as a reason for the STS theory being unambiguously true. He uses a similar strategy to discredit Dominion, the company that produced the voting booths used in November 2020, in tweets 61, 62, and 97. Trump has fervently sought out every possible source to rally against. His scope of the truth is incredibly narrow—only he and his STS-supporting Republican colleagues are allowed to speak without facing an onslaught of angry tweets. To Trump's followers, this appears to develop continuity between his conspiracies. Since Trump's followers are loyal, he is able to delegitimize any threat, including the election administration. He relies on this their loyalty to *take*, in any capacity. If he wins the election, he will support those who verified those results, and if he loses, he will claim there was a crime. Such adaptation is deliberate by Trump, and effectively strengthens support for the theory, even though the actual evidence is lacking. By conflating the validity of experts, entertainment, and the personal feelings of random Twitter users, Trump flattens reality and is able to bend truth in a self-serving manner. The manipulation of reality has manifestations beyond his political viability—his supporters are moved to action by this discourse. The action, in this case, is the Capitol insurrection of January 6th and the constituent support for an attempted coup. The STS conspiracy theory has also been adapted as a test required to enter the GOP—only believers may succeed.

⁹³ Leslie, "How Stories Argue," 75.

Context

As a storytelling component, context is similar to the latter part of adaptation as it involves information presented as factual evidence. Context broadly describes the use of such information for persuasive argument.⁹⁴ As it specifically pertains to Trump's tweets and STS, the tweets containing persuasive information without any indication as to where the information is from are most relevant; throughout STS discourse, Trump frequently shares numbers and statistics without any resource or information on its origin. He presents this data as factual when it may be entirely made up—without the context of the original source, readers are unable to consider whether the source is credible. All intellectual inquisition is barred in these tweets, which read as a rolling diatribe of facts and figures with no intelligible source. However, it appears to bolster his legitimacy to his followers, as he is amplifying other “sources,” even though he's hand-selecting these sources without a sense of objectivity. He has already destroyed the sense of trust between his followers and other sources of information, like other GOP elites, the media, and Democrats. As a result, he holds all the cards in deciding what reality he wants to create. These “secondary sources” merely reinforce the ideas he's already decided to work with.

In tweet 93, Trump claims “92% of Republican Voters think the election was rigged!” without any source material whatsoever. Surely, the remaining 8% will soon be referred to as RINOs, and 100% of “real” Republican voters support STS. This is a made-up figure; Trump has a record of other tweets with similar data points (percentages, statistics, counts) that he provides some citation for. Followers do not know whether there is any context to this post, or whether it is entirely fabricated. Tweets 64, 69, 118, and 92 similarly have baseless numbers presented as fact. Trump is bullshitting his followers; he is not constrained by the realm of truth, and “is

⁹⁴ Leslie, "How Stories Argue," 78.

willing to fake context,” as long as he has a need⁹⁵. Tweet 52 begins with “in an illegal late-night coup...” with no other context. Tweet 55 is similar, claiming, “they are sending out 50,000 ballots to people” who don’t want them, and many to people who “don’t exist.” Who is “they?” The ominous “they” reappears in tweets 57, 100, and 117. This discourse is merely inflammatory; if he can continue to stoke the flames of STS, perhaps he can retake political power, even by antidemocratic means. His administration has been criticized heavily for spreading self-serving misinformation, and it is difficult to characterize this specific mode of discourse as anything else in complete contextual absence.

In addition to uncited statistics and percentages, Trump tweets quotes from external sources without full context. In tweet 90, he comments on the “fakeness” of the water main breakage story that stalled ballot counting in Georgia; he utterly rebukes any truth in this story without sharing the full context or elaborating in any way. Tweet 70 institutes a meta-conspiracy, claiming Joe Biden paid Native Americans in “cash and jewelry” to vote for him. In Tweets 78 and 94, Trump quotes exactly two words from external sources and claims these quotes as sufficient evidence to support STS, even though the context of these statements remains unexplored. He also openly challenges any critical thinking, as seen in tweets 68 and 101. When faced with questions, he responds with “and how exactly is this misinformation?” followed by an obscure video attachment. It seems as if his propensity for ambiguity is deliberate, as it allows for control of the narrative discourse surrounding STS.

Iconicity

A significant part of Trump’s persuasive power lies in the fact that *he is Donald Trump*. The character he plays represents something bigger than himself. Iconicity doesn’t specifically

⁹⁵ Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, 17.

refer to Donald Trump, the individual. Rather, it refers to Donald Trump, the political machine. Trumpism reflects a massive movement of voters consolidated upon similar attitudes of racial resentment, distrust of elites, whiteness, and extreme conservatism. In the sense of iconicity, Donald Trump is an icon because he is inseparable from this massive movement— he is the face of it, and the perception of his person will always be associated with Trumpism. The Trump character and all it represents is much more important than the Trump individual. Looking at a photo of Trump, a MAGA hat, or a group of Trump supporters represents so much more than it does at face value. Trumpism is a new political allegiance distinguishable from previous conventions by the way it receives information. Trump followers are united to an unheard of degree of loyalty to one individual instead of a party. Their opposition to the DNC and conventional GOP is unprecedented. The character of Donald Trump as a politician holds power in that it is unique, and this uniqueness has garnered staying power throughout his political career. Political pundits once predicted that Trump would quickly lose momentum and would never see electoral success. Instead, Trump, MAGA, and Trumpism encompass a growing political subculture that holds large influence and seems to persist, even after Trump has left office. Trump is aware of the icon status of the character he's created of his political persona, and uses this strategically to sell his STS story. Storytelling describes iconicity as the biographical narrative shaped by the storyteller that conveys specific motifs and themes to the audience.⁹⁶ The motifs of Trump as the authentic, "of the people," brutally honest, unapologetic, and unconventional politician are central to the Trump icon his followers understand. Whether he encompasses any of these traits is irrelevant, as his base believes them to be true. What's more important is Trump is the author, amplifier, and main character of the narrative he has imposed.

⁹⁶ Leslie, "How Stories Argue," 77.

Throughout STS, Trump leans on the motifs of his character to support his narrative and persuade his listeners. In tweets 110, 81, 50, 59, and 60, Trump leans heavily on this “everyman” character to appeal to his followers. In these tweets, he describes himself as the “only” honest politician and is being unfairly targeted. In tweet 85, for example, Trump claims he won in a “landslide,” but “only in terms of legal votes.” He also leans on moral imposition toward the elderly and other vulnerable populations his group favors. Here, we can observe a pattern of Trump repeating “I am the good guy,” ad nauseum.

Awareness of his icon status also allows Trump to leverage himself as an incentive for support. In tweets 88 and 129, Trump expresses gratitude to his followers and promises to show up and engage with those who continue to support him. Here, his icon status becomes more relevant, as he’s referring to in-person acts of protest and STS mobilization efforts. Promises of his appearance and his praise are highly incentivizing to his loyal follower base. Trump’s conspiracies are highly entertaining, and his followers want to be “part of the show.” His base willingly (and enthusiastically) executes anti-democratic action because of the pervasiveness of this style of conspiracy.

3.5 Affect Theory

Affect theory is also relevant to evaluating the reception of STS by Trump’s followers. Trump affected fear and shame in his followers, as he had during the Birtherism movement, using similar tactics as he had during the former conspiracy theory. The emotions of his followers are real and powerful, and have tangible consequences for all American citizens. He also strategically offered illusions of protection from perceived threats– in this case, the “threat” refers to the Democrats, who his followers believe are purely Communist in nature and who are fundamentally at odds with Republican voters. By legitimizing STS as a norm within the

Republican Party, he is effectively able to bar legitimate opposition from within the GOP and influencing his voters. STS is now a litmus test for Republican politicians to determine who is worthy of endorsement and who is not. Those who do not support STS do not receive endorsement and are lumped in with the outgroup (he usually calls them RINOs). Trump's voters are unlikely to be persuaded by Democrats, and by insulating his own base, he is able to maintain the STS conspiracy theory, and therefore is able to maintain some illusion of power among a significant voter block. Trump has effectively shamed Republicans into submission. I apply the same methodological constraints to evaluate STS as in the birtherism chapter to preserve continuity and create genuine comparison. The linear nature of the conspiracy theories is also telling as this paper turns to discourse on democratic decline.

Threat & Protection

As in the Birtherism movement, Trump relies heavily on portrayal of the Democratic Party and RINOS, which typically constitute GOP members who vocally oppose Trump, as external threats to the livelihood of American citizens, freedom, and prosperity. He also promises protection to those who align with him. Affect theory describes fear as a salient and powerful force of influence from an undefined and open-ended future.⁹⁷ Trump's weaponization of fear is consistent in STS as it was in birtherism; the Democrats are targeted as indisputably evil and destructive. STS amplifies birther fear mongering against Democrats, as discourse of corruption, illegitimacy, fraud, cheating, and theft remains the same. However, STS differs from birtherism in that the fear mongering is accompanied by a call to action that extends beyond vocal support for Trump on Twitter. The fear-based rhetoric used by Trump in STS is more dire, more immediate, and appears more salient to many Americans.

⁹⁷ Massumi, "The Political Ontology of Threat," 53.

Tweet 80 most succinctly represents the fear Trump deliberately inflicts upon his base. The tweet is a retweet from the aforementioned faceless @TeamTrump and reads “If you don’t vote. The socialists and communists win.” The implicit fear of a far-Left hostile government siege is imminent in Trump’s group of followers and is highly effective in deterring members of his group from questioning STS. To his base, Trump appears as the only form of protection for the average American’s everyday life even though Joe Biden is a moderate Democrat. Tweets 74 and 75 incorporate Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer, who are also moderates, into this “radical left” narrative, using the word “criminal.” Still, the presence of Democratic leadership, coupled with the longstanding accusations of fraud and theft, incite fear in Trump’s followers. This group genuinely believes the United States is under immediate threat of socialist or communist siege. Tweets 65, 102, 117, and 124 also appropriately conveys this sentiment, claiming “We are not acting to thwart the Democratic process, we are acting to protect it.” The imposition of protection is clearly stated, and protection is a powerful grounding force for those who have been affected by fear. To the Trump follower, the intense fear of Leftist takeover is only alleviated by the promises of protection by Trump. If Democrats hold power at any point, the followers feel threatened. Any opposition he faces is then perceived as illegitimate and of the “radical Left.” He leans heavily into this perception of victimhood, encouraging his followers to perceive themselves that way. As I explained in the literature review, the imposition of the “radical left” as a threat motivates both liberals and conservatives to consensually submit to fascism.⁹⁸ Trump is using fascist fear mongering tactics to amplify a conspiracy theory, which, if successful, would place him in the presidential seat of power without winning an election. STS was created to authorize a fascist government takeover.

⁹⁸ Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*, 31.

Fear is the primary affect driving STS believers. Trump repeatedly engages this fear, as it is politically valuable for him. He often repeats sentiments he has already made, placing more emphasis on the reinforcement of this fear and less on creating new statements. In Tweets 56, 54, and 64, Trump repeatedly reminds his followers that “the Democrats are trying to STEAL the election.” That phrase alone is significant enough to remind his followers of their fear and persuade them to stay the course of STS. The capitalized “THEM” in Tweet 64 reads ominously. As a result, his followers share an artificial perception of victimhood at the hands of powerful, faceless elites.

Shame & Belonging

The consequences of challenging STS are shame and excommunication, as in Birtherism. Defecting from the commonly shared vision of the truth will lead followers to be feminized and expelled. For many, this means a loss of community, resources, and relationships. The nature of Trump’s Twitter discourse surrounding STS is heavily moralizing, implicating all who fail to uphold the conspiracy theory as “crooked” or “threatening.” During the birtherism movement, the never-Trump Republican had an opportunity to openly express opposition and maintain legitimacy within the GOP. During STS, however, the bounds on intraparty legitimacy have tightened, and support of STS is, in essence, a litmus test for partisan loyalty, both for elected officials and citizens. Tweets 96 and 120 exemplify the use of STS as a litmus– the retweet asks, “Will the Kentucky Republican challenge the electoral college?” Given the context, we might interpret this to say “Will the Kentucky be a good Republican, or will he be a RINO?” The implication of the tweet implies Trump and his band of conspirators are paying attention, looking to cull the herd of disloyalty. 120 explicitly uses the word “disgrace.” Fear of shame incentivizes

individuals to avoid taking action that might result in ostracism, even if those actions do not directly align with the thoughts an individual might hold privately.⁹⁹ The perception that any who might disagree are inherently threatening is dangerous in itself, especially in the face of specific calls to action in protest of the electoral process. Democracy requires acknowledgement of legitimate opposition to survive.

Gendered approaches to strength and honor are continually present in this discourse, as in birtherism. Trump's base values traditional constructions of gender. Women are associated with femininity and men are associated with masculinity. This construction is hierarchical, as masculinity is always superior to femininity. In this group, feminization results in ostracism. Through his Tweets, Trump uses traditionally masculine concepts in his calls to action. He places heavy emphasis on strength, weakness, and righteousness relevant to STS and the perseverance of his followers. Some of the language is reminiscent of old-world gendered ideas of standing up for oneself. In tweet 109, Trump claims that, if Republicans and Democrats had switched positions, the election would have been "an act of war" resulting in a "fight to the death." In Tweets 128 and 99, Trump specifically instructs his followers to "fight" for the election. This is intense language, especially in divisive rhetoric coming directly from the President. Those who do not participate are stripped of this valor— in tweets 86 and 126, Trump specifically references "weak RINOs," ousting members of his own party who do not support STS. In this case, Gov. Brian Kemp (GA) and Gov. Doug Ducey (AZ) are characterized as weak and crooked. These tropes align with Trump's history of feminizing characterization to his opposition; Hilary Clinton, of course, was characterized in such a way by Trump in 2016. He has consistently weaponized such characterizations toward both men and women who do not support his claims. Only the weak (or the "unmasculine") disagree. The tough readily fight (or stage an insurrection)

⁹⁹ Probyn, "Writing Shame," 74.

in opposition to an openly democratic election they perceive as unfavorable. This discourse parallels tweet 25, in which Trump refutes allegations of sexual misconduct as “totally made up nonsense to steal the election!” This tweet is from 2016, which exemplifies the degree of forethought that went into STS. Trump and his team had planned to unleash the conspiracy in the face of any loss— a legitimate electoral claim never framed STS ideology.

3.6 Discussion

The STS conspiracy theory reflects a continuity in Trump’s Twitter usage that maintains an entertainment-style appeal to storytelling and emotional affect. During Birtherism, Donald Trump amplified conspiracy to assemble his base. During STS, he employs the same rhetorical strategies to mobilize the base to act. Trump’s followers willingly took destructive action against democracy to support their leader and maintain social survival in their communities. The results reflect unambiguous milestones in democratic decline. The coup, the insurrection, and voter suppression legislation are tangible instances of democratic decline that resulted directly from Trump’s participation in conspiracy. American democratic institutions are fundamentally injured in the wake of STS.

CHAPTER 4

DEMOCRATIC DECLINE

4.1 Democratic Decline

Three distinct instances of democratic decline follow Donald Trump's conspiracy legacy: First, the attempted coup, in which Trump attempted to sue and steal the 2020 presidential election on false pretenses. Second, the January 6th insurrection at the United States Capitol. Third, new legislation that has constrained voter accessibility. These events mark turning points in the lineage of polarization, conspiracy, and action.

De-democratizing legislation that has followed his presidency is a notable consequence of the efficacy of his rhetorical strategy. As Trump was able to get Obama to release his birth certificate, he was able to get legislators to act on behalf of his claims. This time, the scope is much larger— post-STS voter suppression legislation spans several states. Restricting voter accessibility is inherently anti-democratic. Thus, this legislation is a tangible marker of democratic decline. The STS conspiracy theory contributed to democratic decline by creating a context in which the Republican Party can pursue a variety of voting restrictions and appear legitimate to their base. These restrictions include harsh voter ID requirements, decreasing accessibility of mail-in voting, and preventing the distribution of food and water among long voting lines. As legislative evidence of post-Trump democratic decline is evolving, my work and evaluations are also subject to evolution and reconsideration.

Trump's discourse surrounding the 2020 presidential election is well-documented. The intent behind the 2020 STS conspiracy theory is clear, and the attempted coup was a predictable outcome. Trump's team made several moves attempting to capitalize on minor irregularities and

‘reclaim stolen votes’ by claiming these irregularities sufficient to alter the outcome of the election. After November 3rd, “state and federal judges dismissed more than 50 lawsuits brought by Trump and his allies challenging the election.”¹⁰⁰ Several judges and election authorities, including former United States Attorney General William Barr, unambiguously stated there was a lack of evidence to support the Trump administration’s claims of fraud. The lawsuits were executed haphazardly, and several were thrown out for procedural errors. In a filing against Arizona, Trump’s lawyer Sidney Powell made three typos on the first page alone. Trump’s “legal effort has been plagued by losses because of its baseless, frequently recycled, debunked claims.”¹⁰¹ Lawsuits levied against Arizona and Michigan had similar issues. The sloppiness indicates a motivation to move quickly rather than correctly. As I have stated, disingenuous appeals to law, such as this, mark evidence of fascist emergence.¹⁰² Fascists seek to live outside the law but enjoy having the ability to hurl it at others.

Several state-level audits accompanied the influx of lawsuits. In Georgia, a highly contentious battleground state which Biden had narrowly flipped, Republican election official Brad Raffensperger conducted a post-election audit and did not find any evidence of fraud, affirming the results of the original 2020 election.¹⁰³ Arizona’s results were also audited and reviewed, also by Trump allies, but the “full forensic audit” did not reveal fraud, either.¹⁰⁴ The STS conspiracy theory has authorized what it claims has already happened; the theory claims the election was stolen. In response, the Trump administration was almost able to steal the election. The clear pattern of baseless claims implies the Trump administration knowingly and deliberately attempted a coup of the United States Presidential Office. In doing so, American

¹⁰⁰ Wolfe, “Factbox.”

¹⁰¹ Blake, “Analysis: Trump Allies’ Sloppy, Error-Riddled Legal Effort.”

¹⁰² Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, 11.

¹⁰³ Wolfe, “Factbox.”

¹⁰⁴ Wolfe, “Factbox.”

democracy has effectively been crippled— if American voters no longer hold legitimate voting power in elections, the United States is no longer a democracy.

The United States Capitol attack of January 6th, 2021 marks a critical shift in the attempt at democratic destruction from high, seemingly disembodied political voices to the everyday person, who has now been authorized to act based on the perception that American democracy has been ‘stolen.’ On January 6th, following weeks of inflammatory discourse observable on Trump’s Twitter, a mob of Trump supporters stormed the United States Capitol, infiltrating and interrupting a joint session of Congress convened to certify the results of the presidential election of 2020. The attack has been termed an ‘insurrection’ because its purpose was to prevent a legitimate president from taking office. The irony of the motivation is apparent— rioters moved on the Capitol to protest a “stolen election,” when, of course, this group was trying to prevent an illegitimate president from leaving office. Trump’s encouragement of the attack, which turned violent and grossly breached national security, resulted in his second impeachment (of which the Senate acquitted him) weeks before he completed his term. According to the Department of Justice, 6 people died as a result of the attack. 140 police officers were assaulted by the mob, leaving one officer dead as a direct result of those injuries and two others committing suicide in the wake of the destruction. One rioter was shot and killed by police, one was crushed to death “by the stampeding mob,” and one suffered a heart attack during the insurrection. This mob, who was mobilized entirely on the basis of conspiracy theory, willingly took violent action against election results they perceived as unfavorable. This is ostensibly undemocratic.

In the wake of the coup and the insurrection, several new pieces of legislation have passed that directly constrain voter accessibility and contribute to voter suppression in what will

be a lasting component of democratic decline after Trump and the STS mania have disappeared. Systematic dismantling of democratic accessibility through laws constraining voter accessibility are openly racist. People of color are currently facing most of the tangible outcomes of democratic decline— groups of voters are being racially targeted by legislation that directly supports the Republican agenda in an effort to “fix” future elections to predictable and favored outcomes within the party. The GOP only wants people to vote who will vote to preserve power for Republicans, and, since the GOP voter base is largely homogeneous in its racial composition, conservative white voters will be protected, while everyone outside of this category will be effectively disenfranchised. This is minority rule. When minority rule becomes the rule of law, democracy is no longer functional— in a democracy, the will of the majority is meant to steer legislation. In 2020, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, and Oklahoma passed restrictive Voter ID laws that disproportionately disenfranchised Black voters.¹⁰⁵ Ahead of the 2020 election, Georgia, Ohio, and Texas initiated massive voter roll purges that predominantly impacted people of color and their ability to re-register before the next election.¹⁰⁶ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, mail-in voting was popularized. This was a key point of discourse by the Trump administration before the election— as the Trump Tweets have shown, STS discourse began well before the actual 2020 election. STS conspiracy surrounding mail-in ballots was highly inflammatory, and voters of color were most impacted by imposed restraints. Disparities in mail delivery, eligibility for mail-in voting, reduced accessibility for returning ballots at drop off locations, and disparities in mail-in ballot processing burdened people of color several times over what white voters experienced in the lead-up to the election.¹⁰⁷ in 2021, “legislators in 49 states drafted more than

¹⁰⁵ Wilder, “Voter Suppression in 2020,” 4.

¹⁰⁶ Wilder, “Voter Suppression in 2020,” 6.

¹⁰⁷ Wilder, “Voter Suppression in 2020,” 9.

440 restrictive voting bills,” and 34 of those bills have passed.¹⁰⁸ In response to Black voters utilizing mail-in ballots at higher rates than in previous election cycles, Florida Senate Bill 90 explicitly limits the number of ballot drop-off locations, requires state ID or Social Security identification on the ballot, and limits the assistance options for those who are not able to access drop-off locations without help.¹⁰⁹ Florida S.B. 90 disproportionately disenfranchises Black voters. Georgia, which was targeted with a large swath of STS conspiracy theory fallout, passed S.B. 202, which bans food and water at polling locations, restrains vote-by-mail accessibility, and, in a move reminiscent of McCarthyism, “allows any voter to come to a county clerk’s office and challenge the voter registrations of as many people as they would like.”¹¹⁰ Iowa Senate File 413 targets election officials, and voters are harmed secondarily. IA Senate File 413 imposes criminal prosecution on election officials who fail to uphold massive voter-roll purges and penalizes officials for expanding voter access.¹¹¹ This move started a national trend in legislation targeting election officials. Texas S.B. 1 follows the trend of mail-in restrictions while also imposing new constraints on election workers: under this law, even encouraging voters to register is criminalized.¹¹² Voter suppression, especially deliberate suppression against specific races, cannot be characterized as anything other than democratic decline. This erosion of democratic norms is observable as a direct consequence of the STS conspiracy theory.

¹⁰⁸ Timm, Jane C, “19 States Enacted Voting Restrictions in 2021. What’s Next?”

¹⁰⁹ Wilder, Will and Stuart Baum, “5 Egregious Voter Suppression Laws from 2021.”

¹¹⁰ Wilder, Will and Stuart Baum, “5 Egregious Voter Suppression Laws from 2021.”

¹¹¹ Wilder, Will and Stuart Baum, “5 Egregious Voter Suppression Laws from 2021.”

¹¹² Wilder, Will and Stuart Baum., “5 Egregious Voter Suppression Laws from 2021.”

4.2 My Contribution to Political Theory

I find evidence that supports a relationship between Donald Trump, conspiracy theory, and democratic decline. Trump's conspiratory discourse on Twitter consolidated a base during birtherism and mobilized that base to anti-democratic action during STS. In my analysis of the birtherism conspiracy, I observed elite cueing, demagogic or "pseudo-authentic" appeals, and willing participation in conspiracy. In STS, I found those same tactics were sufficient to authorize anti-democratic action.

I established a pattern of fascist emergence consistent with Trump's actions regarding the role of conspiracy and democratic decline. Trump's propensity for delegitimizing democrats, RINOS, media, and other sources of information lend to Stanley's idea of unreality.¹¹³ The disingenuous appeal to law Stanley describes is illustrated in Trump's sloppy legal actions taken during STS. Finchelstein warns that irrational political lies lead to fascism,¹¹⁴ and these actions following four years of presidential conspiracy support that. Trump's persistent engagement in us-versus-them rhetoric and artificial imposition of victimhood onto his followers is perhaps most troubling, as these attitudes prevent communal reparations that will restore democratic institutions and their legitimacy. I have applied my findings on conspiracy and democratic decline to an existing body of scholarship.

My original contribution to political theory comes from my exploration of Twitter as a new, unique medium of political discourse. As Twitter becomes embodied in political culture, future scholars may consider studying the way Twitter influences discourse; Twitter provides a very specific form of political engagement. The medium constrains users to short-form speech (280 characters or less), introduces unprecedented accessibility to citizens, allows for limitless

¹¹³ Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, 12.

¹¹⁴ Finchelstein, *A Brief History of Fascist Lies*, 91.

repetition of messages, and facilitates engagement with people. My findings on entertainment comprise my original contribution— I think I have opened up a discussion on conspiracy and efficacy, and I am curious as to how entertainment influences other types of conspiracies. I also found that presidential conspiracism has the potential to be massively powerful among citizens, not just among politicians.

4.3 Precedents

Trump no longer has access to Twitter, which was his primary mode of engaging in conspiracism. Conspiracy theories have been critical to his accumulation of power. Twitter also allowed him to engage in community building and isolate other sources of information. Since his online presence has diminished, he's essentially lost narrative control, and he is less able to mobilize conspiracy theories to further his personal agenda, especially at a near-constant rate. Without Twitter, Trump may no longer be politically viable.

The MAGA base has been unique in their unabridged loyalty to Trump, even in the face of apparent disinformation and conflicting narratives. Since its consolidation at the beginning of the Birtherism movement, the base has supported Trump's word, even if he contradicts previous statements he's made. It seems Trump has lost his power with this group, as the anti-vax community has platformed the importance of this issue above all else. At a rally in December of 2021, Trump was booed by his followers after revealing he'd received a booster shot for COVID-19.¹¹⁵ It appears a weak demagogue can lose power of the very machine he created; he's lost the folksy, "authentic" appeal to his base and instead finds himself ousted. Perhaps the Twitter ban has been politically crippling beyond the scope of conspiracy alone.

¹¹⁵ Shabad, Rebecca and The Associated Press. "Trump Booed after Revealing He Got a Covid Booster Shot."

However, even if Trump has permanently exited the political mainstage, his methods of voter engagement are becoming normalized and repeated. The attempt to appear “authentic” to voters, the opposition to both intraparty GOP elites and to Democrats, and the use of social media to engage voters is now mainstream political strategy. Ahead of 2024, Ted Cruz, who is generally disliked, has tried to adopt the Trump Strategy, as has Ron DeSantis. Both have employed “us versus them” rhetoric and engaged emotional appeals in an attempt to fill the apparent void left by Trump. The nature of the MAGA machine and the fundamental way Trump’s rhetoric has changed political discourse means there will always be another “Trump” lurking, waiting for an opportunity. In the future, a viral tweet might kick off someone’s successful political career.

From a broader perspective, democratic viability has been highly endangered by this mode of conspiracy-driven discourse. Americans no longer believe in the integrity of elections. This is horribly destructive— a democracy cannot function without buy-in from voters. Efforts to suppress voters and plans for future coups by the GOP indicate the American democratic system is wounded, perhaps mortally. This may represent a backslide into earlier days of restricted democratic governance, like before people all got the right to vote, or may be the beginning of a transformation into something more sinister, like genuine authoritarianism. The state of the American experiment in democracy is at its most precarious state in all of American history.

4.4 Weaknesses of the Study

My exploration of Donald Trump’s Twitter account and its relationship to news events is not without flaw. Since Trump was banned from Twitter, I can no longer access photos or videos that were once posted, so I was forced to omit several Tweets that solely contained links. These media insertions could have supported or opposed my argument, but they are inaccessible,

meaning I am missing an important chunk of the narrative that cannot be recovered. Some Tweets were also unavailable in their full context, so I was only able to see a shortened or cut-off version. Some tweets also had strange engagements— tweets with thousands of retweets had zero likes. I do not have an explanation for this, and neither does the archive. However, with thousands of Tweets to work with, I was able to compile a large sample size to situate my argument within, and did not find these constraints altogether too incapacitating.

My argument also holds a subjective element that is difficult to measure. My analysis of the feelings of Trump's followers cannot be independently verified. However, trends in discourse and actionable events match with precedented literature and are still insightful in a discussion of democratic norms. My argument may have been enhanced through polling, ethnographic research, or interviews, in addition to my analysis of Trump's tweets. Gauging the way Americans feel about Twitter itself may also prove worthwhile.

Political theory on American democracy is housed in two primary categories: institutions and ethical practices. Some scholars argue democracy is rigidly defined through the explicit institutions that construct governance. Others support democracy as a set of ethics and practices that work toward true, egalitarian democratic accessibility. I situate my argument among the latter discourse, as I am concerned with de-democratization as a result of the conspiracy theories I have explored. The argument that the United States has never truly been democratic is compelling; the electoral college means that citizens do not directly vote for presidential candidates, and prior systematic legislative history of the right to vote and voter accessibility is relevant. Perhaps the current political moment is less transformative than I imply, and is simply more transparent about American electoral systemic oppression. Political theory might characterize the United States as an oligarchy considering the disparate wealth and power

dynamics that have characterized the nation from the times of Rockefeller to the Bezos.

However, my discussion of democratic decline indicates a regression in democratic accessibility, and contemporary disenfranchisement has a salient impact on modern citizens. As a result, I find my framing of democracy as a set of practices appropriate. Both definitions of democracy would find disenfranchisement anti-democratic.

To acknowledge the timely nature of this project, the evolving nature of its implications, and the definitive completion date, I do not consider new information after December 31, 2021. Since the democratic consequences of the STS conspiracy are ongoing, this time restriction prevents my analysis from being as full as it could possibly be.




























4.5 Areas for Future Research




























As the nature of this democratic transformation is evolving, future research will be able to capture events as they unfold in real time and understand them in relation to democracy. In coming election cycles, measuring the attitudes and confidence of American voters in government will be highly insightful into the performance of democracy. Stratification based on race and political party will also be highly salient. Measurement of voter turnout in POC communities is also going to be a necessary point of research in coming years, especially in the wake of voter suppression legislation.




























Future scholars might also consider studying the entertainment value of conspiracies and how entertainment impacts the way past conspiracies have spread. Conspiracies might have only ever gained popularity because engagement was entertaining. I established a thread of conspiracy theories that gained popularity through implicit entertainment. As a storyteller, Trump amplified conspiracies in an entertaining way. His followers were also able to participate directly, adding elements of excitement. Applying entertainment to past conspiracy theories may allow future

























scholars to establish this relationship with greater depth. The Salem Witch Trials and McCarthyism both employ performative elements and may present an ideal place to begin this investigation.




























Appendix




























#	Tweet
1	<p>May 18th 2012 - 3:31:44 PM EST  2k  3k  Show</p> <p>Let's take a closer look at that birth certificate. @BarackObama was described in 2003 as being "born in Kenya." http://t.co/vfqJesJL</p>
2	<p>May 30th 2012 - 2:52:30 PM EST  156  104  Show</p> <p>My @CNN interview with @wolfblitzercnn where I discuss @BarackObama's 'birth certificate' and why @CNN has low ratings http://t.co/PQwR5XUH</p>
3	<p>Jul 3rd 2012 - 12:13:19 PM EST  396  157  Show</p> <p>Tomorrow we celebrate Independence Day, America's 236th birthday. Here is America's actual birth certificate http://t.co/0Dnwgj5p</p>
4	<p>Jul 18th 2012 - 11:56:53 AM EST  5k  3k  Show</p> <p>Congratulations to @RealSheriffJoe on his successful Cold Case Posse investigation which claims @BarackObama's 'birth certificate' is fake</p>
5	<p>Jul 18th 2012 - 12:06:01 PM EST  390  394  Show</p> <p>Why does HI Revised Statute 338-17.8 allow an HI resident who doesn't have to be US citizen to procure an official Hawaii birth certificate?</p>
6	<p>Jul 23rd 2012 - 4:44:42 PM EST  1k  2k  Show</p> <p>Read this--@BarackObama's birth certificate "cannot survive judicial scrutiny" because of "phantom numbers" http://t.co/Dlv9sLl2</p>
7	<p>Aug 6th 2012 - 4:20:13 PM EST  1k  595  Show</p> <p>An 'extremely credible source' has called my office & told me that @BarackObama applied to Occidental as a foreign student--think about it!</p>
8	<p>Aug 6th 2012 - 4:23:00 PM EST  24k  22k  Show</p> <p>An 'extremely credible source' has called my office and told me that @BarackObama's birth certificate is a fraud.</p>
9	<p>Aug 27th 2012 - 11:58:43 AM EST  1k  824  Show</p> <p>Why do the Republicans keep apologizing on the so called "birther" issue? No more apologies--take the offensive!</p>




























#	Tweet
10	<p>Aug 28th 2012 - 9:37:25 AM EST  468  194  Show</p> <p>Media silent when @BarackObama called @MittRomney a murderer & felon. Mitt mentions 'birth certificate' and they go nuts. Double standard!</p>
11	<p>Sep 13th 2012 - 11:40:43 AM EST  2k  1k  Show</p> <p>Wake Up America! See article: "Israeli Science: Obama Birth Certificate is a Fake" http://t.co/f7esUdSz</p>
12	<p>Oct 1st 2012 - 3:21:07 PM EST  882  632  Show</p> <p>In debate, @MittRomney should ask Obama why autobiography states "born in Kenya, raised in Indonesia."</p>
13	<p>Oct 29th 2012 - 12:34:09 PM EST  287  104  Show</p> <p>Dave Letterman @Late_Show said during my interview that Obama was "probably" born in the US--the word "probably" is a disaster for Obama.</p>
14	<p>Mar 18th 2013 - 3:14:33 PM EST  35  12  Show</p> <p>"TRUMP HITS BACK AT CHRIS MATTHEWS' BIRTHEER RANT: 'HE USED TO BE A MUCH MORE INTELLIGENT MAN'" http://t.co/bBlm1jymlr @MadeleineBlaze</p>
15	<p>Aug 22nd 2013 - 4:41:33 PM EST  765  1k  Show</p> <p>Why are people upset w/ me over Pres Obama's birth certificate?! got him to release it, or whatever it was, when nobody else could!</p>
16	<p>Aug 22nd 2013 - 4:41:42 PM EST  348  445  Show</p> <p>People should be proud of the fact that I got Obama to release his birth certificate, which in a recent book he "miraculously" found.</p>
17	<p>Sep 10th 2013 - 8:26:54 PM EST  803  1k  Show</p> <p>"@obamafraudulent: @realDonaldTrump @d18mt2 The birth certificate that you forced Obama to show is a computer generated forgery.</p>
18	<p>Dec 12th 2013 - 4:32:44 PM EST  19k  24k  Show</p> <p>How amazing, the State Health Director who verified copies of Obama's "birth certificate" died in plane crash today. All others lived</p>

#	Tweet
19	<p>Jan 14th 2014 - 11:10:16 PM EST  74  79  Show</p> <p>"@johnnyb23390: @realDonaldTrump - the only confidentiality agreement he signed was for his real birth certificate. keep up the great work!"</p>
20	<p>Jun 4th 2014 - 7:13:47 PM EST  69  72  Show</p> <p>"@Boycottmaypac: @realDonaldTrump He got the president to show his Birth Certificate! He has clout my friend! He can really stir things up!"</p>
21	<p>Jun 29th 2014 - 2:42:57 PM EST  1k  2k  Show</p> <p>Always remember, I was the one who got Obama to release his birth certificate, or whatever that was! Hilary couldn't, McCain couldn't.</p>
22	<p>Sep 22nd 2015 - 10:16:44 PM EST  2k  3k  Show</p> <p>Just remember, the birther movement was started by Hillary Clinton in 2008. She was all in!</p>
23	<p>Apr 9th 2016 - 11:04:56 PM EST  3k  8k  Show</p> <p>"@AnnCoulter: GOP is trying to steal nomination from the winner (Trump) not block an insurgent catching up 2 frontrunner (Sanders).</p>
24	<p>Sep 17th 2016 - 1:15:44 AM EST  5k  15k  Show</p> <p>"Donald Trump's birther event is the greatest trick he's ever pulled" https://t.co/zvVQnxeiQ9</p>
25	<p>Oct 15th 2016 - 2:29:22 PM EST  17k  49k  Show</p> <p>Nothing ever happened with any of these women. Totally made up nonsense to steal the election. Nobody has more respect for women than me!</p>
26	<p>Oct 18th 2017 - 6:56:36 AM EST  20k  79k  Show</p> <p>As it has turned out, James Comey lied and leaked and totally protected Hillary Clinton. He was the best thing that ever happened to her!</p>
27	<p>Nov 2nd 2017 - 8:39:57 PM EST  19k  69k  Show</p> <p>Donna Brazile just stated the DNC RIGGED the system to illegally steal the Primary from Bernie Sanders. Bought and paid for by Crooked H....</p>




























#	Tweet
28	<p>Dec 3rd 2017 - 6:15:02 AM EST  17k  78k  Show</p> <p>I never asked Comey to stop investigating Flynn. Just more Fake News covering another Comey lie!</p>
29	<p>Feb 5th 2018 - 7:39:10 AM EST  34k  119k  Show</p> <p>Little Adam Schiff, who is desperate to run for higher office, is one of the biggest liars and leakers in Washington, right up there with Comey, Warner, Brennan and Clapper! Adam leaves closed committee hearings to illegally leak confidential information. Must be stopped!</p>
30	<p>Mar 17th 2018 - 12:08:02 AM EST  37k  138k  Show</p> <p>Andrew McCabe FIRED, a great day for the hard working men and women of the FBI - A great day for Democracy. Sanctimonious James Comey was his boss and made McCabe look like a choirboy. He knew all about the lies and corruption going on at the highest levels of the FBI!</p>
31	<p>Apr 13th 2018 - 8:01:47 AM EST  26k  107k  Show</p> <p>James Comey is a proven LEAKER & LIAR. Virtually everyone in Washington thought he should be fired for the terrible job he did-until he was, in fact, fired. He leaked CLASSIFIED information, for which he should be prosecuted. He lied to Congress under OATH. He is a weak and.....</p>
32	<p>Apr 15th 2018 - 9:07:10 AM EST  17k  83k  Show</p> <p>Slippery James Comey, a man who always ends up badly and out of whack (he is not smart!), will go down as the WORST FBI Director in history, by far!</p>
33	<p>Apr 20th 2018 - 6:34:16 AM EST  25k  94k  Show</p> <p>So General Michael Flynn's life can be totally destroyed while Shadey James Comey can Leak and Lie and make lots of money from a third rate book (that should never have been written). Is that really the way life in America is supposed to work? I don't think so!</p>
34	<p>Apr 27th 2018 - 6:26:35 AM EST  20k  91k  Show</p> <p>Is everybody believing what is going on. James Comey can't define what a leak is. He illegally leaked CLASSIFIED INFORMATION but doesn't understand what he did or how serious it is. He lied all over the place to cover it up. He's either very sick or very dumb. Remember sailor!</p>
35	<p>May 24th 2018 - 8:34:29 AM EST  27k  104k  Show</p> <p>Not surprisingly, the GREAT Men & Women of the FBI are starting to speak out against Comey, McCabe and all of the political corruption and poor leadership found within the top ranks of the FBI. Comey was a terrible and corrupt leader who inflicted great pain on the FBI! #SPYGATE</p>




























#	Tweet
36	<p>Jun 15th 2018 - 6:55:40 AM EST  15k  73k  Show</p> <p>The IG Report is a total disaster for Comey, his minions and sadly, the FBI. Comey will now officially go down as the worst leader, by far, in the history of the FBI. I did a great service to the people in firing him. Good Instincts. Christopher Wray will bring it proudly back!</p>
37	<p>Jun 28th 2018 - 7:25:15 AM EST  19k  81k  Show</p> <p>Russia continues to say they had nothing to do with Meddling in our Election! Where is the DNC Server, and why didn't Shady James Comey and the now disgraced FBI agents take and closely examine it? Why isn't Hillary/Russia being looked at? So many questions, so much corruption!</p>
38	<p>Aug 11th 2018 - 9:18:06 AM EST  20k  90k  Show</p> <p>.....Will the FBI ever recover it's once stellar reputation, so badly damaged by Comey, McCabe, Peter S and his lover, the lovely Lisa Page, and other top officials now dismissed or fired? So many of the great men and women of the FBI have been hurt by these clowns and losers!</p>
39	<p>Aug 15th 2018 - 10:04:42 PM EST  23k  93k  Show</p> <p>"I'd strip the whole bunch of them. They're all corrupt. They've all abused their power. They've all betrayed the American people with a political agenda. They tried to steal and influence an election in the United States." @seanhannity</p>
40	<p>Aug 15th 2018 - 11:04:16 AM EST  16k  70k  Show</p> <p>Our Country was built on Tariffs, and Tariffs are now leading us to great new Trade Deals - as opposed to the horrible and unfair Trade Deals that I inherited as your President. Other Countries should not be allowed to come in and steal the wealth of our great U.S.A. No longer!</p>
41	<p>Nov 3rd 2018 - 5:05:26 PM EST  22k  84k  Show</p> <p>Rumor has it that Senator Joe Donnelly of Indiana is paying for Facebook ads for his so-called opponent on the libertarian ticket. Donnelly is trying to steal the election? Isn't that what Russia did!?</p>
42	<p>Nov 10th 2018 - 2:09:29 PM EST  25k  103k  Show</p> <p>Trying to STEAL two big elections in Florida! We are watching closely!</p>
43	<p>Mar 17th 2019 - 7:16:38 PM EST  30k  112k  Show</p> <p>What the Democrats have done in trying to steal a Presidential Election, first at the "ballot box" and then, after that failed, with the "Insurance Policy," is the biggest Scandal in the history of our Country!</p>
44	<p>May 9th 2019 - 11:00:20 PM EST  22k  96k  Show</p> <p>James Comey is a disgrace to the FBI & will go down as the worst Director in its long and once proud history. He brought the FBI down, almost all Republicans & Democrats thought he should be FIRED, but the FBI will regain greatness because of the great men & women who work there!</p>




























#	Tweet
45	<p>Jun 23rd 2019 - 10:46:46 AM EST  27k  129k  Show</p> <p>When our Country had no debt and built everything from Highways to the Military with CASH, we had a big system of Tariffs. Now we allow other countries to steal our wealth, treasure, and jobs - But no more! The USA is doing great, with unlimited upside into the future!</p>
46	<p>Aug 5th 2019 - 11:58:59 AM EST  13k  75k  Show</p> <p>....used currency manipulation to steal our businesses and factories, hurt our jobs, depress our workers' wages and harm our farmers' prices. Not anymore!</p>
47	<p>Sep 2nd 2019 - 7:49:18 AM EST  10k  47k  Show</p> <p>"They are liars, and in my opinion, TRAITORS!" @LouDobbs talking about Comey and his dwindling group of friends.</p>
48	<p>Oct 2nd 2019 - 7:41:51 PM EST  34k  92k  Show</p> <p>DEMOCRATS WANT TO STEAL THE ELECTION! #KAG2020 https://t.co/hz6fWLid3L</p>
49	<p>May 14th 2020 - 11:37:49 PM EST  45k  162k  Show</p> <p>Where is the 302? It is missing. Was it stolen or destroyed? General Flynn is being persecuted! #OBAMAGATE</p>
50	<p>May 16th 2020 - 6:36:07 AM EST  6k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @Heritage: Who do ballot harvesters most commonly target and steal votes from? The poor and elderly. A vote-by-mail election would ma...</p>
51	<p>May 21st 2020 - 12:56:01 AM EST  34k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @charliekirk11: RT if President Trump should withhold federal funds to states that try to STEAL our elections with voter fraud!</p>
52	<p>Aug 3rd 2020 - 9:41:25 PM EST  36k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @realDonaldTrump: In an illegal late night coup, Nevada's clubhouse Governor made it impossible for Republicans to win the state. Post O...</p>
53	<p>Aug 15th 2020 - 7:47:08 AM EST  10k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @LizRNC: 1 in 5 ballots thrown out, councilmen indicted for fraud, ballots stolen out of mailboxes, Republicans getting ballots with no...</p>




























#	Tweet
54	<p>Aug 16th 2020 - 9:03:08 PM EST  7k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @DGPurser: More lies about "Vote by mail". This is nothing but a Democrat attempt to cheat and STEAL this election. Nothing they say a...</p>
55	<p>Aug 20th 2020 - 8:15:09 PM EST  56k  194k  Show</p> <p>They are sending out 51,000,000 Ballots to people who haven't even requested a Ballot. Many of those people don't even exist. They are trying to STEAL this election. This should not be allowed!</p>
56	<p>Oct 29th 2020 - 1:12:49 PM EST  35k  152k  Show</p> <p>A 3 day extension for Pennsylvania is a disaster for our Nation, and for Pennsylvania itself. The Democrats are trying to steal this Election. We have to get out and VOTE in even larger numbers. The Great Red Wave is coming!!!</p>
57	<p>Nov 4th 2020 - 12:44:57 AM EST  10k  38k  Deleted</p> <p>We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the Election. We will never let them do it. Votes cannot be cast after the Poles are closed!</p>
58	<p>Nov 4th 2020 - 12:49:04 AM EST  0  0  Show</p> <p>We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the Election. We will never let them do it. Votes cannot be cast after the Polls are closed!</p>
59	<p>Nov 8th 2020 - 9:17:33 AM EST  101k  516k  Show</p> <p>"We believe these people are thieves. The big city machines are corrupt. This was a stolen election. Best pollster in Britain wrote this morning that this clearly was a stolen election, that it's impossible to imagine that Biden outran Obama in some of these states.</p>
60	<p>Nov 8th 2020 - 9:17:35 AM EST  48k  301k  Show</p> <p>...Where it mattered, they stole what they had to steal. @newtgingrich</p>
61	<p>Nov 12th 2020 - 10:46:13 PM EST  66k  319k  Show</p> <p>Must see @seanhannity takedown of the horrible, inaccurate and anything but secure Dominion Voting System which is used in States where tens of thousands of votes were stolen from us and given to Biden. Likewise, the Great @LouDobbs has a confirming and powerful piece!</p>
62	<p>Nov 14th 2020 - 3:07:56 PM EST  66k  279k  Show</p> <p>People are not going to stand for having this Election stolen from them by a privately owned Radical Left company, Dominion, and many other reasons! https://t.co/RMOa4jKZwA</p>




























#	Tweet
63	<p>Nov 14th 2020 - 3:51:21 PM EST 🗨️ 70k ❤️ 302k 👤 Show</p> <p>The hand recount taking place in Georgia is a waste of time. They are not showing the matching signatures. Call off the recount until they allow the MATCH. Don't let the Radical Left Dems STEAL THE ELECTION!</p>
64	<p>Nov 15th 2020 - 7:56:26 AM EST 🗨️ 53k ❤️ 269k 👤 Show</p> <p>All of the mechanical "glitches" that took place on Election Night were really THEM getting caught trying to steal votes. They succeeded plenty, however, without getting caught. Mail-in elections are a sick joke!</p>
65	<p>Nov 16th 2020 - 10:37:04 AM EST 🗨️ 63k ❤️ 344k 👤 Show</p> <p>The Radical Left Democrats, working with their partner, the Fake News Media, are trying to STEAL this Election. We won't let them!</p>
66	<p>Nov 21st 2020 - 3:34:36 PM EST 🗨️ 35k ❤️ 151k 👤 Show</p> <p>Watch: Hundreds of Activists Gather for 'Stop the Steal' Rally in Georgia https://t.co/vUG1bqG9yg via BreitbartNews Big Rallies all over the Country. The proof pouring in is undeniable. Many more votes than needed. This was a LANDSLIDE!</p>
67	<p>Nov 24th 2020 - 7:33:04 AM EST 🗨️ 45k ❤️ 184k 👤 Show</p> <p>Poll: 79 Percent of Trump Voters Believe 'Election Was Stolen' https://t.co/PmMBmt05AI via @BreitbartNews They are 100% correct, but we are fighting hard. Our big lawsuit, which spells out in great detail all of the ballot fraud and more, will soon be filled. RIGGED ELECTION!</p>
68	<p>Nov 24th 2020 - 10:54:40 PM EST 🗨️ 13k ❤️ 0 👤 Show</p> <p>RT @toddeherman: This is video put it over the top for me. Election was stolen I shared @justin_hart's data showing pattern of 4:00 AM dat...</p>
69	<p>Nov 25th 2020 - 12:12:35 AM EST 🗨️ 45k ❤️ 0 👤 Show</p> <p>RT @realDonaldTrump: Poll: 79 Percent of Trump Voters Believe 'Election Was Stolen' https://t.co/PmMBmt05AI via @BreitbartNews They are 100...</p>
70	<p>Dec 3rd 2020 - 3:50:04 PM EST 🗨️ 34k ❤️ 105k 👤 Show</p> <p>"Pro-Biden effort offered Native Americans \$25-\$500 Visa gift cards and jewelry to vote" https://t.co/nNDcrhlgSX</p>
71	<p>Dec 4th 2020 - 8:14:30 AM EST 🗨️ 42k ❤️ 163k 👤 Show</p> <p>Whistleblowers reveal that the USPS is responsible for tampering with hundreds of thousands of ballots. @OANN This long time Democrat stronghold got rid of massive numbers, especially in swing states, during and before delivery of the ballots. Well documented evidence!</p>




























#	Tweet
72	<p>Dec 4th 2020 - 8:54:38 AM EST GET TOUGH REPUBLICANS!  46k  280k  Show</p>
73	<p>Dec 4th 2020 - 8:55:25 AM EST RIGGED ELECTION!  58k  351k  Show</p>
74	<p>Dec 4th 2020 - 8:56:00 AM EST MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!  54k  370k  Show</p>
75	<p>Dec 5th 2020 - 9:40:28 PM EST The answer to the Democrat voter fraud is not to stay at home - that's what Pelosi and Schumer want you to do. If you want revenge on the Democrats for their efforts to steal the Presidential election, where we are fighting hard, you have to show up and vote in RECORD numbers! https://t.co/XAJ0F2JmeL  42k  167k  Show</p>
76	<p>Dec 6th 2020 - 12:57:03 AM EST RT @BernardKerik: Democratic Party and @JoeBiden engaged in criminal conduct to steal the election, but should @realDonaldTrump lose, it wi...  18k  0  Show</p>
77	<p>Dec 6th 2020 - 12:58:29 AM EST RT @christina_bobb: Biden cheated  10k  0  Show</p>
78	<p>Dec 6th 2020 - 1:05:19 AM EST RT @OANN: How compromised was the 2020 election? Dominion Voting Systems has had a history of problems. Stolen laptops, "switched" votes, C...  9k  0  Show</p>
79	<p>Dec 6th 2020 - 1:12:00 AM EST RT @TeamTrump: We will not bend. We will not break. We will not yield. We will never give in. We will never give up. We will never...  26k  0  Show</p>
80	<p>Dec 6th 2020 - 1:17:09 AM EST RT @TeamTrump: President @realDonaldTrump: "If you don't vote. The socialists and the communists win." https://t.co/VLhaX0iKka  10k  0  Show</p>


































#	Tweet
81	<p>Dec 10th 2020 - 9:33:18 AM EST  22k  113k  Show</p> <p>...The fact that our Country is being stolen. A coup is taking place in front of our eyes, and the public can't take this anymore." A Trump fan at Georgia Rally on @OANN Bad!</p>
82	<p>Dec 10th 2020 - 10:49:38 AM EST  8k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @alexbruesewitz: LEADERSHIP. Thank you @Lancegooden! Fight for @realDonaldTrump!</p>
83	<p>Dec 10th 2020 - 10:49:59 AM EST  10k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @RepTedBudd: The DOJ needs to listen to #WeThePeople and address their election concerns NOW. Glad to join @Lancegooden and more than t...</p>
84	<p>Dec 10th 2020 - 10:50:17 AM EST  5k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @Lancegooden: Thank you to @RepGosar, @RepAndyBiggsAZ, @replouiegohmert, @RepTedBudd, @CongressmanHice, @RepGregSteube, @RepAlexMooney,...</p>
85	<p>Dec 12th 2020 - 8:05:00 AM EST  67k  349k  Show</p> <p>I WON THE ELECTION IN A LANDSLIDE, but remember, I only think in terms of legal votes, not all of the fake voters and fraud that miraculously floated in from everywhere! What a disgrace!</p>
86	<p>Dec 12th 2020 - 8:19:55 AM EST  38k  171k  Show</p> <p>Who is a worse governor, @BrianKempGA of Georgia or @dougducey of Arizona??? These are two RINO Republicans who fought against me and the Republican Party harder than any Democrat. They allowed states that I won easily to be stolen. Never forget, vote them out of office!</p>
87	<p>Dec 12th 2020 - 8:47:30 AM EST  105k  580k  Show</p> <p>WE HAVE JUST BEGUN TO FIGHT!!!</p>
88	<p>Dec 12th 2020 - 9:59:13 AM EST  62k  359k  Show</p> <p>Wow! Thousands of people forming in Washington (D.C.) for Stop the Steal. Didn't know about this, but I'll be seeing them! #MAGA</p>
89	<p>Dec 13th 2020 - 5:15:23 PM EST  36k  172k  Show</p> <p>The RINOS that run the state voting apparatus have caused us this problem of allowing the Democrats to so blatantly cheat in their attempt to steal the election, which we won overwhelmingly. How dare they allow this massive and ridiculous Mail-In Voting to occur...</p>

#	Tweet
90	<p>Dec 14th 2020 - 8:57:17 AM EST  62k  269k  Show</p> <p>"Why did the Swing States stop counting in the middle of the night?" @MariaBartirolo Because they waited to find out how many ballots they had to produce in order to steal the Rigged Election. They were so far behind that they needed time, & a fake "water main break", to recover!</p>
91	<p>Dec 14th 2020 - 2:59:09 PM EST  57k  232k  Show</p> <p>WOW. This report shows massive fraud. Election changing result! https://t.co/dFT3sRpUY5</p>
92	<p>Dec 15th 2020 - 9:25:27 AM EST  67k  325k  Show</p> <p>68% error rate in Michigan Voting Machines. Should be, by law, a tiny percentage of one percent. Did Michigan Secretary of State break the law? Stay tuned!</p>
93	<p>Dec 15th 2020 - 11:54:23 PM EST  68k  458k  Show</p> <p>Poll: 92% of Republican Voters think the election was rigged!</p>
94	<p>Dec 16th 2020 - 1:33:10 PM EST  51k  247k  Show</p> <p>Former United States Solicitor General Ken Starr: Pennsylvania "Flagrantly Violated" Laws Ahead of Election.</p>
95	<p>Dec 16th 2020 - 1:51:14 PM EST  52k  222k  Show</p> <p>Chris Krebs was totally excoriated and proven wrong at the Senate Hearing on the Fraudulent 2020 Election. Massive FRAUD took place with machines, people voting from out of state, illegals, dead people, no signatures—and so much more!</p>
96	<p>Dec 17th 2020 - 1:12:15 AM EST  15k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @theblaze: Will the Kentucky Republican challenge the Electoral College votes? https://t.co/OVIVHQyrls</p>
97	<p>Dec 17th 2020 - 1:14:10 AM EST  56k  258k  Show</p> <p>"Michigan fraud witness totally debunks Dominion CEO." @OANN It was brutal!</p>
98	<p>Dec 17th 2020 - 6:10:43 PM EST  62k  354k  Show</p> <p>Democrats would never put up with a Presidential Election stolen by the Republicans!</p>

#	Tweet
99	<p>Dec 18th 2020 - 9:14:32 AM EST  55k  212k  Show</p> <p>.@senatemajldr and Republican Senators have to get tougher, or you won't have a Republican Party anymore. We won the Presidential Election, by a lot. FIGHT FOR IT. Don't let them take it away!</p>
100	<p>Dec 19th 2020 - 9:41:03 AM EST  65k  226k  Show</p> <p>He didn't win the Election. He lost all 6 Swing States, by a lot. They then dumped hundreds of thousands of votes in each one, and got caught. Now Republican politicians have to fight so that their great victory is not stolen. Don't be weak fools! https://t.co/d9Bgu8XPj</p>
101	<p>Dec 20th 2020 - 12:50:07 PM EST  11k  0  Deleted</p> <p>RT @jeasRyuu: @MichSoS @gatewaypundit Exactly how is this misinformation 🤔 you can CLEARLY hear the conversation. The problem is revealed,...</p>
102	<p>Dec 20th 2020 - 12:54:15 PM EST  28k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @FlooritHammer: @tracybeanz @Soma4M @MichSoS @gatewaypundit The Plot to Steal America https://t.co/ve3TtqIJr via @YouTube</p>
103	<p>Dec 20th 2020 - 12:55:45 PM EST  28k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @gatewaypundit: MUST-SEE VIDEO: Voter Fraud Occurred in Arizona - The State Certified Fraudulent Results (VIDEO) via @gatewaypundit http...</p>
104	<p>Dec 20th 2020 - 12:56:57 PM EST  42k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @gatewaypundit: REVEALED: 'Simple Math' Shows Biden Claims 13 MILLION More Votes Than There Were Eligible Voters Who Voted in 2020 Elect...</p>
105	<p>Dec 22nd 2020 - 10:29:24 AM EST  92k  400k  Show</p> <p>THE DEMOCRATS DUMPED HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF BALLOTS IN THE SWING STATES LATE IN THE EVENING. IT WAS A RIGGED ELECTION!!!</p>
106	<p>Dec 24th 2020 - 3:56:47 PM EST  110k  489k  Show</p> <p>VOTER FRAUD IS NOT A CONSPIRACY THEORY, IT IS A FACT!!!</p>
107	<p>Dec 25th 2020 - 7:11:37 PM EST  42k  188k  Show</p> <p>But we already know enough, and we won big! https://t.co/hGWnz6R8Vd</p>

#	Tweet
108	<p>Dec 26th 2020 - 7:51:34 AM EST  4k  0  Deleted</p> <p>RT @ali: Our friend, Congressman @andybiggs4az, has this video message for our Arizona #StopTheSteal rally. #DoNotCertify #JAN6 🔥 https...</p>
109	<p>Dec 26th 2020 - 8:00:14 AM EST  62k  243k  Show</p> <p>If a Democrat Presidential Candidate had an Election Rigged & Stolen, with proof of such acts at a level never seen before, the Democrat Senators would consider it an act of war, and fight to the death. Mitch & the Republicans do NOTHING, just want to let it pass. NO FIGHT!</p>
110	<p>Dec 26th 2020 - 8:34:06 AM EST  61k  226k  Show</p> <p>Where the hell is the Durham Report? They spied on my campaign, colluded with Russia (and others), and got caught. Read the Horowitz Reports about Comey & McCabe. Even the Fake News @nytimes said "bad". They tried it all, and failed, so now they are trying to steal the election!</p>
111	<p>Dec 27th 2020 - 5:51:36 PM EST  85k  409k  Show</p> <p>See you in Washington, DC, on January 6th. Don't miss it. Information to follow!</p>
112	<p>Dec 29th 2020 - 2:11:26 PM EST  52k  191k  Show</p> <p>Unless Republicans have a death wish, and it is also the right thing to do, they must approve the \$2000 payments ASAP. \$600 IS NOT ENOUGH! Also, get rid of Section 230 - Don't let Big Tech steal our Country, and don't let the Democrats steal the Presidential Election. Get tough! https://t.co/GMotstu7OI</p>
113	<p>Jan 1st 2021 - 2:23:09 PM EST  19k  66k  Deleted</p> <p>The BIG Protest Rally in Washington, D.C., will take place at 11.00 A.M. on January 6th. Locational details to follow. StopTheSteal!</p>
114	<p>Jan 1st 2021 - 2:53:03 PM EST  71k  293k  Show</p> <p>The BIG Protest Rally in Washington, D.C., will take place at 11.00 A.M. on January 6th. Locational details to follow. StopTheSteal!</p>
115	<p>Jan 1st 2021 - 6:38:20 PM EST  58k  173k  Show</p> <p>January 6th. See you in D.C. https://t.co/vynZTV9IHb</p>
116	<p>Jan 1st 2021 - 6:57:46 PM EST  26k  117k  Show</p> <p>Only because Biden got very few votes, just like the Election! https://t.co/sNIAJ1i5hu</p>

#	Tweet
117	<p>Jan 2nd 2021 - 5:52:04 PM EST  36k  148k  Show</p> <p>...And after they see the facts, plenty more to come...Our Country will love them for it! #StopTheSteal https://t.co/0ldbiAClib</p>
118	<p>Jan 3rd 2021 - 9:20:33 AM EST  44k  157k  Show</p> <p>"Georgia election data, just revealed, shows that over 17,000 votes illegally flipped from Trump to Biden." @OANN This alone (there are many other irregularities) is enough to easily "swing Georgia to Trump". #StopTheSteal @HawleyMO @SenTedCruz @Jim_Jordan</p>
119	<p>Jan 3rd 2021 - 10:15:00 AM EST  11k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @JenLawrence21: We have been marching all around the country for you Mr President. Now we will bring it to DC on Jan 6 and PROUDLY stand...</p>
120	<p>Jan 3rd 2021 - 10:22:06 AM EST  32k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @SidneyPowell1: This "election" was stolen from the voters in a massive fraud that you & others are now complicit in. American elections...</p>
121	<p>Jan 3rd 2021 - 10:28:29 AM EST  20k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @AmyKremer: We are excited to announce the site of our January 6th event will be The Ellipse in the President's Park, just steps from th...</p>
122	<p>Jan 4th 2021 - 10:13:10 AM EST  54k  249k  Show</p> <p>"We've seen in the last few months, unprecedented amounts of Voter Fraud." @SenTedCruz True!</p>
123	<p>Jan 5th 2021 - 9:50:49 AM EST  42k  177k  Show</p> <p>Pleased to announce that @KLoeffler & @sendavidperdue have just joined our great #StopTheSteal group of Senators. They will fight the ridiculous Electoral College Certification of Biden. How do you certify numbers that have now proven to be wrong and, in many cases, fraudulent!</p>
124	<p>Jan 4th 2021 - 10:23:50 AM EST  61k  272k  Show</p> <p>"We are not acting to thwart the Democratic process, we are acting to protect it." @SenRonJohnson</p>
125	<p>Jan 5th 2021 - 5:05:56 PM EST  83k  328k  Show</p> <p>Washington is being inundated with people who don't want to see an election victory stolen by emboldened Radical Left Democrats. Our Country has had enough, they won't take it anymore! We hear you (and love you) from the Oval Office. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!</p>

#	Tweet
126	<p>Jan 5th 2021 - 5:12:20 PM EST  56k  211k  Show</p> <p>I hope the Democrats, and even more importantly, the weak and ineffective RINO section of the Republican Party, are looking at the thousands of people pouring into D.C. They won't stand for a landslide election victory to be stolen. @senatemajldr @JohnCornyn @SenJohnThune</p>
127	<p>Jan 6th 2021 - 12:16:10 AM EST  19k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @TomiLahren: The steal is in the making in Georgia. Wait for it.</p>
128	<p>Jan 6th 2021 - 12:43:42 AM EST  26k  127k  Show</p> <p>Get smart Republicans. FIGHT! https://t.co/3fs1oPVnAx</p>
129	<p>Jan 6th 2021 - 12:47:01 AM EST  48k  0  Show</p> <p>RT @DanScavino: 🤯 WOW! We hear you from the West Wing—THANK YOU 🇺🇸🇺🇸 https://t.co/onytmaJUhp</p>
130	<p>Jan 8th 2021 - 10:44:28 AM EST  84k  511k  Show</p> <p>To all of those who have asked, I will not be going to the Inauguration on January 20th.</p>
131	<p>Aug 22nd 2013 - 4:42:01 PM EST  94  102  Show</p> <p>John McCain couldn't get him to release "it" and neither could Hillary Clinton—but Donald did!</p>
132	<p>Oct 1st 2013 - 6:27:42 AM EST  214  150  Show</p> <p>The Republicans can absolutely win if they stick together-but they are NOT sticking together. Sen. McCain just said "we can't win".Very bad!</p>
133	<p>May 14th 2015 - 9:19:27 PM EST  22  42  Show</p> <p>@davesportsgod: @AngieBattle @realDonaldTrump @HillaryClinton After McCain and Romney, someone with an actual backbone would be refreshing.</p>
134	<p>Jul 18th 2015 - 5:45:48 PM EST  6k  5k  Show</p> <p>Via @fitsnews: "Donald Trump: John McCain Is 'A Loser'" http://t.co/sgjETvdUqi</p>
135	<p>15. Aug 28th 2012 - 11:51:55 AM EST  99  27  Show</p> <p>Don't think my statement on @ariannahuff was harsh, if you knew her and the phony Huffington Post you would understand--- more to follow.</p> <p>16. Aug 28th 2012 - 10:54:06 AM EST  8k  9k  Show</p> <p>.@ariannahuff is unattractive both inside and out. I fully understand why her former husband left her for a man- he made a good decision.</p>

#	Tweet
136	<p>Mar 18th 2013 - 7:59:21 PM EST 🔒 128 ❤️ 134 🗨️ Show</p> <p>"@kmac5911: who would win on the golf course @realDonaldTrump or @mcuban" Did you ever see Mark swing a club - the power of a little girl!</p>

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