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## WHAT IS A CONSPIRACY THEORY AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

**ABSTRACT:** *Growing concern has been expressed that we have entered a “post-truth” era in which each of us willfully believes whatever we choose, aided and abetted by alternative and social media that spin alternative realities for boutique consumption. A prime example of the belief in alternative realities is said to be acceptance of “conspiracy theories”—a term that is often used as a pejorative to indict claims of conspiracy that are so obviously absurd that only the unhinged could believe them. The epistemological standard often involved in this indictment, however—the standard of “obvious” falsity—invites subjectivity in its application, because what is obviously false to one person can be common sense to another. This is not just a truism; considerable research suggests that people’s political beliefs, in general, and their acceptance or rejection of conspiracy theories in particular, tends in large part to be determined by partisan, ideological, and other priors.*

**Keywords:** *conspiracy theories; post-truth; journalism; fake news; epistemology.*

Conspiracy theories have for many years generated concerns over their accusatory nature (Stokes 2018, Rääkkä 2009), their reliance on questionable evidence (Dentith 2019), and the intentions of those who believe in

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or share them (McKenzie-McHarg 2018). These concerns have created a social stigma against both conspiracy theories and their adherents (Thalmann 2019) that has led to the pathologizing of conspiracy theories, which are often treated as bizarre, irrational, or insane (Butter and Knight 2018; Blanuša and Hristov 2020; Dentith 2018c).

Since the 2016 Brexit and Trump campaigns, a new worry has emerged: that conspiracy theories are spreading as part of a “post-truth” environment in which “alternative realities” flourish and “objective facts are less influential” than they were in the past (Wang 2016). As the story goes, conspiracy theories have “entered the mainstream,” having escaped the “fringes of polite society” (Willingham 2020). The public agrees with these assessments; polls show that a vast majority of Americans believe that conspiracy theories are not only more prominent now than in the past (CBS News 2018a), but are “out of control” (Quinnipiac University Poll 2021). Surveys also show that the public (CBS News 2018b), like many journalists (Collins 2020; Zadrozny and Collins 2020; Roose 2020; Wong 2020; Stelter 2020), blames social media for the prominence of conspiracy theories in our discourse. Politicians and government officials, taking notice of the journalistic narratives and public opinion, have increasingly called for measures to limit the reach and influence of conspiracy theories (Heilweil 2020; Pecorin 2020), particularly in online environments (Riggleman 2020).

However, current proposals to fact-check, deplatform, or outright censor conspiracy theories fail to offer an objective definition of “conspiracy theory” that would produce defensible guidelines for what does and does not count as one. Instead, most discussions invoke some version of the unviable and easily abused I-know-it-when-I-see-it standard. If translated into policy, such subjectivity would likely result in the selective censoring of ideas merely because those with political power wish to curtail, stigmatize, or criminalize the ideas of their political opponents. This would also have a chilling effect on speech, given that the boundaries of acceptable discourse would be both ambiguous and defined, in the end, by the norms of the politically dominant group.

The I-know-it-when-I-see-it standard is now routinely applied to castigate ideas that journalists find ridiculous (e.g., Hay 2021), while “conspiracy theory” is rarely employed to describe theories that journalists find plausible, even when these theories are, literally, accusations that a conspiracy has taken place (Coady 2003). Hence, the allegation that Barack Obama was nominated for president despite being ineligible for

office due to his place of birth, like the allegation that the Democrats stole the 2020 election, are usually referred to as “conspiracy theories” by media personnel, who have repeatedly been found to lean Democratic (Gold 2014), while the allegations that Trump conspired with Russia in 2016 are not (e.g., Hay 2017), even though it is unclear what epistemological standard journalists have applied to make this distinction. This is not to say that journalists do not have reasons, even sound ones, for employing the “conspiracy theory” label selectively and pejoratively. However, these reasons are rarely disclosed, highly subjective, and, therefore, likely to be applied asymmetrically.

Not surprisingly, politicians have also applied the “conspiracy theory” label asymmetrically. They are quick to brand unflattering accusations made against them, and beliefs held by sociopolitical “others”—especially electoral opponents—as conspiracy theories (Wood 2016), but slow to apply the label to their own and their supporters’ conspiratorial beliefs. The clearly partisan purposes of politicians’ asymmetrical accusations against their opponents for peddling (supposedly false) conspiracy theories should warn us of the danger when ostensibly nonpartisan actors such as journalists, governments, social media companies, and scholars use similarly subjective criteria to determine what counts as a conspiracy theory of the sort that should be dismissed out of hand or censored out of existence.

While scholars largely agree about how to conceptualize the “conspiracy” component of conspiracy theories, there is widespread disagreement regarding the “theory” component. Conspiracies may or may not actually exist in given cases, but *conspiracy theory* is often a pejorative term that, across many applications, expresses the view that the conspiracy referenced by the theory is false, or at least unlikely to be true (Douglas, van Prooijen, and Sutton 2022). Without an objective definition of what would constitute an acceptable theory, scholars selectively denigrate ideas with which they personally disagree as “conspiracy theories,” just as politicians and journalists do.

We propose to analyze some of the factors that have promoted the current state of confusion about “conspiracy theories.” We begin by discussing how any definition of the term must be based upon both formal standards (does the theory allege what can fairly be counted as a conspiracy?) and epistemological standards (what is the standard for dismissing such a theory as unevidenced, unlikely to be true, or outright false?), focusing on the latter, more hotly contested issue. Next, we detail the

individual characteristics that promote belief in conspiracy theories, which often frustrate their analysis by political elites and opinion leaders. We then argue that much of the contemporary concern about society's devolution into "post-truth" suffers from the same epistemological problems that plague conspiracy theories. Finally, we detail both observed and hypothetical implications of disagreements about what "conspiracy theory" entails.

### *What Is a Conspiracy Theory?*

Any definition of "conspiracy theory" that would justify its use as a pejorative must include both a formal component regarding the nature of a conspiracy and an epistemological component indicating deficiencies in evidence or theorization that single out particular theories as unevidenced, unlikely to be true, or false. The latter component would justify dismissing some conspiracy *theories* for not meeting a given epistemological standard while allowing for the fact that *conspiracies* do occur.

A brief working definition of the formal component might run as follows: "conspiracies, in the political context, involve the machinations of a small group of powerful people, working in secret, against the common good."<sup>1</sup> It is clear that *conspiracies* might exist that meet this definition. However, people often label theories involving a conspiracy as "conspiracy theories" because the label connotes that the proposed conspiracy in question is *self-evidently* false (Harambam and Aupers 2017; Dentith 2018d). Yet, strictly speaking, it cannot be the case that a conspiracy theory is self-evidently false, since self-evident truths would be plain to all, while conspiracy theories have their believers—for whom the theories in which they believe are *not* self-evidently false. Therefore, such people are cordoned off from the community of those who recognize the self-evident truth by designating the former group as gullible, irrational, or insane. Similar reasoning applies to those who use the conspiracy theory label to indicate the truth value of the proposed conspiracy in question lies somewhere between true and *self-evidently* false—perhaps being unevidenced, poorly evidenced, or less likely to be true. Given that such assessments are also not self-evident and plain to all (Dentith 2022), the use of the "conspiracy theory" label in these cases becomes little more than a marker of one's own personal assessment of the evidence.

Even if we accept the tendency to pathologize our political opponents, then, we are left with the possibility that a theory that we in the

community of the sane view as self-evidently false may in fact be true—which we may not have recognized because evidence for its truth has not yet been discovered or has been concealed (Keeley 1999). A second possibility is that there is no evidence for a theory that is nevertheless true. It is often forgotten in public discourse, and even in political science, that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. A more complicated possibility is that a theory that most people consider obviously, a priori false *is* false in reality, even though it has a posteriori evidence in its favor that is known to those who believe in the conspiracy but unknown to the rest of us. (Insofar as a theory with evidence in its favor is in fact false, of course, the evidence must be incomplete or otherwise misleading.) Some believers in particular conspiracy theories are aware of numerous pieces of supposedly supporting evidence for their pet theories—evidence that is frequently unknown to those who do not share their interest (Dentith 2019). For example, there were legions of QAnon proponents who knew far more about the patterns of Q’s cryptic communications than did most of the journalists or scholars who dismissed Q as ridiculous—but this does not mean that it was *not* ridiculous.<sup>2</sup>

The confusion that results when these possibilities are selectively ignored was particularly evident in the wake of Trump’s charge that the 2020 presidential election was stolen. The same mainstream media outlets that had previously given credence to conspiracy theories that posited various schemes of Trump and Russia to subvert the electoral process in 2016 peremptorily dismissed Trump’s contention that the 2020 election had been “rigged” and accused those who believed Trump’s theories of accepting self-evidently false conspiracy theories. Whatever standards were at work in journalists’ treatment of Trump’s claims regarding the 2020 election appeared to be very different from the standards employed in the treatment of accusations of his wrongdoing in the years following the 2016 election. Later, when a variety of courts ruled that there was insufficient evidence to reverse any election results, many media outlets misreported this as demonstrating that Trump’s contentions had been disproven, which conflated the absence of evidence for an electorally consequential conspiracy with evidence for the absence of that alleged conspiracy. The courts had not ruled on the existence of a conspiracy to rig the election or its effects (an ontological issue), but on whether plaintiffs had *proven* its existence to the degree required by law (an epistemological issue).

Setting aside the likelihood that treating conspiracy theories as self-evidently false will be unpersuasive to those who believe them to be true (Wood 2016), and may even backfire, what was at work in this case, and is at work in every case in which conspiracy theories are dismissed peremptorily, is the subjectivity of people's judgments about what is "self-evidently" true. What appears to be self-evidently true to any given person is likely to have more to do with her priors than with direct apprehensions of the truth, which are exceedingly rare. Whether we are dealing with claims of election fraud or claims of treason, what happened or did not happen was almost never witnessed by us, so our conclusions about what did or did not happen are based on fallible interpretations communicated to us from fallible sources. Viewed from this perspective, the problem with the epistemological component of the pejorative connotation of "conspiracy theory"—that is, the problem with the notion that such theories are self-evidently false—is that it is subjective. What is self-evidently false to one person can be self-evidently true to another; the more popular a conspiracy theory, the more evident it is that the theory's falseness is *not* self-evident, as a great many people find it plausible.

The subjectivity of the self-evidence standard elides the difficulty of determining the veracity of a purported conspiracy (when this is even possible). Conspiracy theories are much like scientific hypotheses in this sense. Investigating claims about the invisible activities of other people so as to build up a body of reliable confirmatory or falsifying evidence is an inherently slow, time-consuming endeavor in which even the most skilled scientists can and do get things wrong. The truth is hard to discern, even under optimal conditions, but accusations of conspiracy are particularly tricky to verify or falsify, since one of the major goals of any real conspiracy will be to hide evidence of its existence (Keeley 1999). Therefore, a lack of evidence for an alleged conspiracy, and even an abundance of evidence against it, might count *in favor* of the allegation.

To get around this problem, philosophers and social scientists have proposed various evidentiary standards aimed at determining the veracity of conspiracy theories (e.g., Clarke 2006; Mandik 2007; Buenting and Taylor 2010; Uscinski and Parent 2014). However, these standards, too, are largely relative and require significant leaps of subjective judgment. For example, Brian Keeley (1999) argues in a seminal paper that belief in a conspiracy theory becomes less "warranted" as the theory becomes larger (encompassing more actors to pull off the scheme or

more institutions to maintain the coverup). While this argument makes logical sense—more actors mean more opportunities to get caught, confess, or botch the execution of a conspiracy—and is supported to some extent by empirical work (Grimes 2021, 2016), it relies on subjective judgments about feasibility and size. Thus, the size and scope of any given conspiracy theory may seem unfeasible to one person but feasible to another. The generic, a priori theorem that a big conspiracy is less likely to be real than a small one does not help to determine whether a given (alleged) conspiracy is real, a determination that must rest on the specific evidence adduced, not abstract probabilities relevant to “conspiracies” as a class (Dentith 2018a). The proponents of particular conspiracy theories are not making claims about conspiracies in general, but are specifically concerned with a particular conspiracy that they find warranted by the evidence of which they are aware.

Others argue that determining the truth-value of conspiracy theories should be the task of experts or a consensus of experts (Levy 2007). The value in this approach is that appeals to expertise represent an alternative to the view that conspiracy theories can be ruled out of court as self-evidently false; experts are needed only because it is *not* self-evident what the truth is, but requires careful investigation to go beyond appearances. In this view, far from being self-evident, the truth or falsity of a conspiracy theory is so difficult to discern that only specialists can figure it out. This is a welcome step away from the naïve epistemology of self-evidence. In taking this step we abandon the notion that *objective* truth about conspiracy theories is easy for anyone to come by.

However, this approach also offers its own set of challenges. Experts can disagree and they can, of course, be wrong. Moreover, experts are not always open, reliable, or honest. Thus, there is no guarantee that expert consensus—about supposed conspiracies, or anything else for that matter—are correct. This is perhaps why even those in favor of such approaches contend that experts’ opinions are less valuable when their evidence and methods are not available and open for refutation (Levy 2007).

Perhaps most importantly, however, agreement on who the “experts” are can be extremely difficult to obtain (Dentith and Keeley 2018). Say, for example, that one intended to parrot the conclusions of experts with respect to the 1963 Kennedy assassination. One could appeal to the conclusions of the Warren Commission (1964) or the House Select Committee on Assassinations (1979). The choice to rely on one or the other

would not only be a subjective one, but would lead to differing conclusions about the existence of a conspiracy involving more actors than just Lee Harvey Oswald: the Warren Commission did not conclude in favor of such a conspiracy, but the House Select Committee did.

Moreover, a reliance on experts begs the question against the proponents of a conspiracy theory, who will frequently be in possession of evidence that, arguably, qualifies them as more expert than recognized “experts” (Dentith 2018b). Consider again the huge accumulation of “evidence” for various QAnon-related conspiracy theories, which those outside the QAnon milieu have trouble grasping because they have not devoted large portions of their recent lives to gathering or viewing such evidence, attending conferences with other devotees, and so on. The QAnon believers often knew much more about this evidence than those skeptical of QAnon claims, even when the latter were journalists and academics who published about the conspiracy theory. Who, then, were the true experts? Ultimately, that is a matter of subjective judgment.

### *Why Do People Believe Conspiracy Theories?*

Journalistic accounts often put significant weight on the effects of incidental exposure to conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation, as if ideational exposures are the only cause of belief.<sup>3</sup> This is, however, an overly simplistic assumption. While ideational exposure is often an important part of belief in conspiracy theories, people do not believe everything they hear, so the availability of information does not guarantee belief in that information.

Instead, people often seek out and adopt ideas that comport with pre-existing worldviews, beliefs, values, and identities (Kunda 1990; Stroud 2008). These processes are no different for conspiracy theories than for other ideas. People tend to view their own groups and identities as moral, virtuous, and good, whereas out-groups are often perceived to exhibit the opposite qualities (Tajfel 1981). People also tend to place more weight on real or imagined transgressions by out-groups than on those committed by their in-group (Claassen and Ensley 2016). This leads to the acceptance of conspiracy theories about out-groups rather than in-groups (Enders and Smallpage 2018), as well as conspiracy theories that reflect the pronouncements of in-group leaders and information sources (Uscinski et al. 2020). In the U.S. context, Republicans

are more likely to believe conspiracy theories about Democrats and those propagated by trusted Republican and conservative leaders, while Democrats are more likely to do the opposite (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016). Election-fraud conspiracy theories neatly exemplify this pattern. During election campaigns, both Republicans and Democrats agree prospectively, at roughly equal rates, that an unfavorable outcome would be due to fraud (Enders et al. 2021a); but after a result has been reached, partisans on the losing side are more likely to proclaim that the outcome was fraudulent, whereas winners tend to believe the outcome was fair and just (Edelson et al. 2017).

While group identities help determine *which* conspiracy theories one will adopt, some individuals are more likely to interpret salient events and circumstances through the lens of conspiracy and, thus, are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories in general. We call this disposition “conspiracy thinking,” which is likely to be a result of substantive world-views, personality factors, and psychological biases. Conspiracy thinking can be conceived of as a continuum, with those distributed at the high end more likely to interpret events and circumstances as the product of conspiracies and those on the low end more likely to reject conspiratorial explanations (Uscinski, Klofstad, and Atkinson 2016; Enders et al. 2021b). Epistemologically, however, both ends can be problematic. Those on the high end are likely to make Type I errors by believing in conspiracy theories that are not true (Frenken and Imhoff 2021), while those on the low end are likely to make Type II errors by rejecting actual conspiracies (Wood 2016). In either case, biases color assessments of alleged conspiracies, just as group identities do.

The influence of the aforementioned biases is, therefore, inconsistent with treating “conspiracy theories” as self-evidently false, as it implies that true ideas are easily distinguishable from false ones (Keeley 2007), so that when people adopt what someone else considers to be an “obviously false” belief (e.g., Bump 2021), they must be doing so *knowingly*. It strikes us as logically impossible for someone to believe as true a claim they also know is false. Moreover, ideas do not possess systematic characteristics that make their veracity immediately discernible. In the political arena, separating fact from fiction is very difficult; the supposed veracity of ideas regularly changes as more and better evidence is produced, and it varies from person to person according to which of this evidence is known to them. There may be no (easy) way to know the truth of an idea simply upon exposure to that idea. Therefore, while information

environments, cognitive processes, and ability matter for belief adoption, people must often rely on their identities, ideologies, and values when accepting some ideas, propositions, and information as true and rejecting others as outlandish.

### *Political Bias and the Categorization of Ideas as Conspiracy Theories*

How do partisan identities and conspiracy thinking interact to increase one's attraction to specific conspiracy theories? Examining the role of these factors in driving belief in the Russiagate theory (that Donald Trump actively conspired with Russia to determine the 2016 presidential election outcome) is illustrative. For years after Trump's 2016 win, mainstream and left-leaning news coverage focused steadily on connections between Trump and Russia (Howland, Pasquier, and Waniewski 2019), alleging, for example, that Trump had made a deal with Russia, was a longtime Russian agent, or was a traitor (e.g., Blow 2018). Numerous Democratic politicians accused Trump of treason (Silva 2017; Rupar 2019). These allegations prompted Congress and the Justice Department to commission expansive investigations into the Trump campaign's contacts with Russia. While Trump supporters largely rejected the allegations, only a small minority of left-leaning thought leaders challenged the prevailing narrative (e.g., Greenwald 2019; Taibbi 2019), and those who did were accused of being either right-wingers or Russian agents themselves (Taibbi 2017).

Surveys suggested that allegations of a Russian conspiracy resonated with the public—except for Republican members of the public. When asked in 2016 if Russia had tampered with vote tallies, 50 percent of Clinton voters, but only 9 percent of Trump voters, believed that it was true (Frankovic 2016). After the Mueller investigation failed in March 2020 to produce evidence that Trump colluded with Russia to win the 2016 election, 55 percent of Democrats but only 19 percent of Republicans agreed that “Russia has compromising information about Donald Trump and has used Trump as a foreign asset.” At the same time, 59 percent of Democrats, but only 14 percent of Republicans, agreed that “Donald Trump colluded with Russians to steal the presidency.” Similar beliefs carried over into the 2020 election. In October 2020, 54 percent of Democrats believed that there was a conspiracy to

stop the U.S. Post Office from processing mail-in ballots (a charge that was dropped after Trump lost the election), yet only 29 percent of Republicans believed as much (Enders et al. 2021a).

One way for scholars to approach such findings without falling into subjectivist bias is by bracketing our own agreement or disagreement with particular conspiracy theories. The fact that the Russiagate theory seems credible to any particular scholar does not at all help to explain why Democrats but not Republicans tended to *believe* in the theory. Beliefs about reality, after all, are only generated by reality itself if reality is self-evident. If it is not, then beliefs about it likely stem from some combination of ideational exposures and biases, not the theory's "inherent" credibility or "obvious" falseness.

The empirical evidence suggests that conspiratorial beliefs about Russiagate were reflective of partisanship, a predisposition toward conspiracy thinking, and highly polarized messaging in the mainstream media. Although merely identifying as a Democrat was strongly associated with belief in various Russiagate propositions, those Democrats who were most likely to believe that Trump conspired in some way with Russia also exhibited relatively high levels of conspiracy thinking (Uscinski et al. 2021). While the combination of partisanship and conspiracy thinking explains belief in many partisan conspiracy theories (Sternisko, Cichocka, and Van Bavel 2020), the relationship is not fixed and cannot on its own explain the relative popularity of some conspiracy theories. Prominent and polarized mainstream media coverage brought Russiagate allegations to the fore for many Americans. The more that partisan and media elites promote an allegation of conspiracy, the more it will appeal to partisans regardless of whether they are generally attracted to conspiracy theories, because it becomes indistinguishable from other partisan information, such as that regarding issue positions or proposed legislation. Conspiracy theory or not, political and media elites can drive beliefs in the mass public by making claims and infusing information, positions, and issues with partisan and ideological cues (Zaller 1992).

Not only do group identities, such as partisanship, encourage or discourage belief in particular ideas, they also tend to color how the quality of evidence in favor of or against those ideas is perceived. Thus, people often give unwarranted credibility to evidence that supports ideas they already favor and downplay, ignore, or reject evidence that contradicts ideas they already disfavor (Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979).

There is no reason to assume that this process does not apply to belief in conspiracy theories, such that (1) the biases that lead one to believe a conspiracy theory also lead one to view the evidence in favor of that theory as confirmatory and valid, and (2) the biases that lead one to reject a conspiracy theory also lead one to be biased against the evidence in favor of that theory. The same likely applies to those who might not believe a conspiracy theory outright but have some a priori sympathies towards it. Consider, for example, those Democrats who do not believe the various theories accusing Donald Trump of one conspiracy or another: while they may not necessarily believe such accusations, they may view the supporting evidence for them as strong enough to justify the beliefs of other Democrats who do. Speaking more broadly, partisans are likely to view the evidence in favor of conspiracy theories believed by their side (even if they do not personally agree with them) as much stronger than the evidence for the conspiracy theories believed by the opposing side. Thus, ideas accepted by Republicans are likely to be labeled as “conspiracy theories” by Democrats, who are likely to label Republicans as “conspiracy theorists”; the opposite will be true for Democrats and Democratic ideas when viewed by Republicans.

It seems safe to say that all partisans (and all human beings) think of themselves as firmly anchored to reality, but that, in politics, our views of reality will tend to align with the views of reality propagated by our party (or other opinion leaders); incongruent views will, therefore, seem inherently untethered from reality, such that those who accept these views will seem unhinged. It is all the easier for people to engage in this practice when what counts as a “conspiracy theory” is dependent on the notion that such theories are inherently fanciful, outlandish, or crazy because they are self-evidently false.

### *Case Studies from Media and Political Leaders*

The subjectivity of judgments about whether a given conspiracy theory or other political claim is self-evidently false is illustrated not only by asymmetrical acceptance of such claims among members of the mass public, but by asymmetrical acceptance of them among the political elites who shape mass public opinion.

Donald Trump famously argued that Barack Obama had been born in a foreign country; that U.S. elections, in particular that of 2020, had been rigged; and that Senator Ted Cruz’s father was involved in the 1963

assassination of President Kennedy (e.g., Uscinski et al. 2020; Haberman 2016). Yet he denounced the Russiagate conspiracy theory as a “hoax.” Likewise, Hillary Clinton frequently rebuked Trump during the 2016 campaign for his conspiracy theorizing, claiming that it made him unfit to be president (McCaskill 2016). Yet when President Bill Clinton was embroiled in controversy regarding his cover-up of an affair with a White House intern, she had contended that the scandal was orchestrated by a “vast right-wing conspiracy” (Barberio 2020), and after her 2016 defeat, she argued that Trump was an “illegitimate” president who “stole” the election (Itkowitz 2019). Prior to the 2020 election, she argued that Joe Biden should not concede that Trump won “under any circumstances,” because fraud would have been the likely cause of an apparent loss (Shabad 2020); in 2021, however, she criticized Republicans for not conceding that Biden won, calling them members of “a cult” (Cunningham 2021).

Examples of this sort might be explained away as what we would expect from opportunistic politicians, but the subjectivity of assessments of conspiracy theories affects respected opinion leaders as well. During the Bush Administration, Nobel laureate economist and longtime commentator Paul Krugman argued that some conspiracy theories—particularly those that impugned the Bush Administration—were perfectly justifiable. To Krugman, those who questioned such ideas—by pejoratively labeling them “conspiracy theories”—were “lazy bullies” who used the term to deflect legitimate criticism (Krugman 2006). However, once the Obama Administration came to power, becoming a lightning rod for conspiracy theories, Krugman argued that the political right, unlike the left, was a “cult, very much given to conspiracy theorizing” (Krugman 2013). Following the 2016 presidential election, Krugman promptly floated his own conspiracy theory alleging that Trump’s victory was the result of a conspiracy between the FBI and Trump, working “in alliance” with Vladimir Putin (Bryan 2016). When Republicans are victorious or in power, Krugman defends and even proffers his own conspiracy theories about them; when Democrats are in power, he castigates Republicans as “conspiracy theorists.”

It seems to us that there are two diametrically opposed ways of understanding this pattern of behavior. The uncharitable explanation is that Krugman is, in reality, more like a nakedly partisan politician than an honest broker of ideas, and that he says whatever he thinks will be useful to the Democratic Party, regardless of its truth-value. The

charitable explanation is that, precisely because he deeply believes in the truth-value of Democratic claims, he (perhaps like Hilary Clinton) sincerely finds conspiracy theories about Republicans plausible while finding those about Democrats, such as President Obama, to be self-evidently false.

### *The Epistemology of Post-Truth Coverage*

Other terms that have gained currency in the “post-truth” era suffer from the same subjectivity-related concerns as *conspiracy theory*. For example, Trump often labeled the news outlets that reported ideas he disagreed with as propagators of “fake news” (Cillizza 2021); but journalists were quick to call statements made by Trump with which they disagreed “misinformation” or “disinformation” (or “lies”; see Friedman 2021). This practice was picked up by social media companies to justify censoring claims about the “stolen” 2020 election; theories about the origins, severity, and best treatment of Covid-19; and an ever-widening array of other disputed claims. In each case, ideas were attacked or censored as if they are self-evidently false despite the inherent subjectivity in these judgments.

This form of epistemological naïveté has, in turn, spawned an avalanche of books and articles claiming that we have entered a post-truth age in which people believe what they choose to believe or want to believe, regardless of the (obvious) truth; or, alternatively, that people are being manipulated into believing what is (obviously) false by liars who profit, financially or politically, from the propagation of myths, including conspiracy theories (e.g., Bennett and Livingston 2021; McIntyre 2018; Lichtenberg 2021, Rini 2017, Rossi 2020, Singer and Brooking 2018). In the same vein, it is said that we are living in a “golden age” of conspiracy theories (Willingham 2020), that an “infodemic” as bad as Covid-19 itself has descended upon us (Zarocostas 2020), and that unsuspecting social media users have been lured away from believing in what is obviously true by online exposure to conspiracy theories, misinformation, disinformation, and fake news (Collins 2020).

However, the post-truth discourse tends to assume that epistemically dubious information, such as conspiracy theories, can spread unimpeded and exert a powerful influence on the beliefs and behaviors of an unwitting public. Scholars have long found that people resist messages and sources of information they are not already inclined towards and often

self-select into information environments populated by ideas congruent with their pre-existing beliefs, values, and worldviews (Stroud 2008 and 2010; Iyengar and Hahn 2009; Arceneaux, Johnson and Murphy 2012; Zaller 1992). Conspiracy theories and misinformation operate the same way: depending on social, political, and psychological motivations and, perhaps, situational factors, people tend to intentionally seek out conspiracy theories and misinformation (Enders et al. 2021b; Guess et al. 2020; Chen et al. 2021) and adopt ideas that match existing worldviews and group allegiances (Enders and Smallpage 2018; Ryan and Aziz 2021).

A less sensationalist reaction to what might otherwise appear to be “post-truth” phenomena would begin by taking note of the subjectivity of the post-truth discourse itself. To be blunt, what has exercised so many scholars and pundits who write about post-truth is the emergence of what seem to them to be *right-wing* denials of truth, including right-wing conspiracy theorizing. Thus, left-wing conspiracy theorizing and misinformation have largely escaped scrutiny. With equal subjectivity, those on the right tend to view as absurd left-wing “conspiracy theories” such as the claim that “Bush lied” about Iraqi WMD, as opposed to being mistaken about them (see Jervis 2010); that ultimate political power is held by “the one percent” (rather than by “the deep state”); and that Trump was a Russian asset. It is important to make these comparisons not for the sake of balance, nor because the “conspiracy theories” of left and right are equally implausible, nor to dismiss the important consequences of widespread belief in one or more of these theories. Rather, we intend to highlight the fact that when they are understood from within—taking full account of how the various factors we have reviewed converge to make certain beliefs plausible to partisans—it is easy to understand why these beliefs are widely accepted: namely, because they seem (to the partisans who accept them) to be *true*. Only when perceived from without do certain of these beliefs—the beliefs of one’s political opponents—seem to be so absurd that in “believing” them, the believers must have entered an epistemological nightmare in which they have repudiated the very concept of truth.

### *Implications and Consequences*

Because people are most likely to accept the veracity of ideas that comport with their identities and worldviews, and because conspiracy

theories are colloquially marked by their perceived lack of truth-value, the “conspiracy theory” label is most likely to be selectively—and pejoratively—applied only to those ideas that the labelers find distasteful, fanciful, or just plain false. “Conspiracy theory,” as it is popularly wielded by journalists, politicians, and scholars is, in this sense, a not-so-creative mechanism for denigrating ideas with which one disagrees (e.g., Thalmann 2019). It is a discursive weapon in such efforts, not a concept that invites dispassionate analysis. Like related epistemological terms such as “misinformation,” “conspiracy theory” can allow one to double down on one’s own pre-given ideas by writing off other views as delusional rather than trying to understand how those views gained acceptance (Walker 2018). Thus, one implication of our analysis is that using the term both pejoratively and selectively is likely to aggravate political polarization by activating and entrenching the political identities and ideologies that are at its heart.

We also contend that an underdeveloped understanding of conspiracy theorizing will hinder efforts on the part of researchers and policymakers to curtail the pernicious behaviors and other outcomes frequently associated with conspiracy theories and misinformation, too. An interdisciplinary community of social scientists has been working diligently through the Covid-19 pandemic to develop strategies for addressing conspiracy theories and misinformation. Unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably, the resulting literature shows that these researchers often succumb to the same epistemological errors that afflict journalists and political leaders: they frequently apply such terms as *conspiracy theory* and *misinformation* pejoratively and selectively, and frequently treat all manner of dubious ideas as “conspiracy theories” or “misinformation” in need of correction or suppression, even when they have not dispassionately evaluated those ideas.

Moreover, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and fears prompted by the QAnon movement and the January 6 Capitol riot, activists, academics, and politicians have only become more determined to alter or eliminate Section 230 of the 1996 Telecommunications Act in order to hold social media websites liable for content shared on their platform, and to use other legislation or public pressure to require social media companies to censor supposedly dangerous “conspiratorial” content and alter definitions of protected speech (e.g., Sunstein 2021). They have also proposed the creation of federal agencies designed to combat conspiracy theories and other misinformation on the grounds that our

“muddled, chaotic information system” has led to a “national reality crisis” that may demand “something like a reality czar” in response (Roose 2021). Yet those who would create and staff such agencies are unlikely to be unbiased arbiters of reality, rather than partisans with their subjective interpretations of reality.

Like the journalism and scholarship that has failed to attend to the subjectivity of the self-evidence criterion that is in play in pejorative dismissals of “conspiracy theories” as such, these policy proposals tend to stem from a failure to recognize the tenuous, tentative nature of political “truth.” If society is truly devolving into a state of “post-truth,” it is not because conspiracy theories and misinformation have replaced facts, but because our desire to sharply dichotomize political claims into fact and fairytale has obscured the reality that it is not just our political opponents who live in epistemic bubbles.

## NOTES

1. We note that the definitions used by scholars do tend to vary and that some definitions are more detailed, such as the one put forward in Uscinski 2020.
2. Some possibilities go in the opposite direction; for example, a conspiracy theory that most consider to be true or well-evidenced—and is therefore usually labeled a “conspiracy”—may actually be false.
3. Consider this example: “Some find themselves believing in elaborate conspiracy theories about Bill Gates, 5G wireless technology, vaccines and masks, which researchers say are in part pushed by an algorithm and shared community members that group all of the theories together. Within days, they begin to believe that President Donald Trump is waging a secret war to save trafficked children from a cabal of Satan-worshipping baby eaters who control the United States government” (Collins 2020).

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