Politics and Governance
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 9781
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9781

cogitatio

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

The Conspiracist Theory of Power

Mert Can Bayar [1] and Scott Radnitz [2]

[1] Center for an Informed Public, University of Washington, USA
[2] Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, USA

Correspondence: Scott Radnitz (srad@uw.edu)

Submitted: 14 December 2024 **Accepted:** 3 June 2025 **Published:** 29 July 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Debating Democracy: Concepts, Histories, and Controversies" edited by Claudia Wiesner (Fulda University of Applied Sciences) and Kari Palonen (University of Jyväskylä), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i441

Abstract

In recent years, conspiracy theories have surged in democratic politics, enabling illiberal parties, movements, and politicians to win the votes of constituents who are disillusioned with mainstream democratic politics. Yet scholars of democratic backsliding have not fully grappled with the implications of conspiracism as the basis for a governing ideology. In this article, we argue that challenges to liberal democracy can be better understood by analyzing conspiracism as a theory of power in its own right. Conspiracy theories are formulated to identify the ultimate source of power in society. They attribute the occurrence of major historical and political events to malevolent actors and their secret activities, and their ideas can be fleshed out into a political program. We offer a conceptualization of conspiracism as a theory of power and analyze it alongside liberal and populist theories of power. We examine four facets of political theory—who should govern, who threatens power, what governing entails, and the constraints on power—to identify divergences and unexpected affinities across these bodies of thought. We argue that conspiracism is not merely a critique of power, but an intellectual foundation for a political regime embodied in autocracy, oligarchy, or an alternate technocracy. This analysis informs our understanding of a serious yet under-theorized threat to liberal democracy.

Keywords

autocracy; conspiracy theories; democratic theory; oligarchy; populism; technocracy

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories are theories about power—who has it, how actors wield it, and how they benefit from it. In democratic countries, for most of the postwar period, conspiracy theories have primarily been promoted by those excluded from power. In recent years, however, politicians touting conspiracy theories have

themselves moved closer to the centers of power in democracies around the world. The rhetoric of conspiracy is increasingly part of the standard toolkit of rightwing politicians, parties, and movements and it has been successfully wielded to mobilize coalitions and attract the votes of constituents disillusioned with mainstream politics and conventional democratic governance.

Yet despite the endorsement of conspiracy theories by elites who seek and sometimes gain elected office, conspiracism has not been treated as a set of ideas that can be realized by those in power as part of a political program. This failure to take conspiracism seriously may occur because it is usually viewed as incoherent pablum or, at most, a critique of status quo politics (Fenster, 1999; Knight, 2013) rather than offering a "positive" program. We believe this view is mistaken, as leaders who promote conspiracy theories may believe what they say or feel public pressure to put their ideas into practice. In this sense, conspiracism is similar to populism, often labeled a "thin ideology," or a set of beliefs that "lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent program for solving crucial political questions" (Stanley, 2008, p. 95). Yet this has not prevented analysis of "populist rule" or "populist politics" as meaningful categories that inform our understanding of governance and politics.

In this article, owing to the increased prominence and rapid proliferation of conspiracism in politics, we accord it similar analytic deference. We propose the first conceptualization of a conspiracist theory of power and analyze it alongside existing ideologies that have been more fully examined by scholars. Our analysis presents a conceptual comparison of three ideal types (Weber, 1949): liberalism, populism, and conspiracism. We analyze them as theories of power, which answer four normative questions: who should govern, who threatens power, what governing entails, and the constraints on power. Although there are many ways to approach questions on power (see e.g., Christensen, 2023), for the sake of tractability, we limit the domain of our inquiry to issues of politics and governance. Our conceptualization relies on a broad scholarly literature—from cultural studies to political science, history, and psychology—that has long examined conspiracy theories. We also draw on the work of conspiracy theorists, who may include writers, public intellectuals, journalists, or politicians. Their arguments may be reflected in, and they may draw from, ideas promoted by non-elites that circulate from person to person or are disseminated online (Allport & Postman, 1947). Naturally, the nuances of these arguments vary widely. In this analysis, we emphasize the universality of conspiracist thought, whereby actors, plots, and secrets may change, yet the underlying power dynamics and answers to our core questions remain constant.

From this point, this essay is divided into six sections. First, we justify the importance of studying conspiracism in light of contemporary political developments. We then introduce a typology that lays out how liberalism, populism, and conspiracism consider fundamental questions about the acquisition, exercise, and limits of power. We discuss our conceptualization of conspiracism and identify its distinct characteristics. After establishing points of comparison and difference among the three schools of thought, we lay out three paths of political rule that flow from conspiracist principles: autocracy, oligarchy, and technocracy. We conclude by discussing what our analysis reveals about conspiracism and the challenges it poses to liberal democracy.

2. Why Conspiracism?

We identify two reasons conspiracism has been neglected as a theory of power. First, due to its historical marginality, at least within consolidated democracies, it has largely been viewed as a discourse of the disempowered with some exceptions (e.g., Bayar, 2023; Butter, 2020; Radnitz, 2021; Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019). Conspiracy theories have been considered a form of critique of democracy, reflecting a loss of trust in institutions (Knight, 2013). A surge of belief in conspiracy theories followed in the wake of national scandals in the US, such as Watergate and failures in the Vietnam War (Olmsted, 2019). Psychologists and political scientists have likewise found that conspiracy theorists and believers are typically outsiders, expressing social alienation, cynicism, distrust, paranoia, and generalized powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Douglas et al., 2019).

A second reason conspiracism has been neglected as a serious theory of power is that it is often subsumed under the category of populism, which frames political competition in Manichean terms, of the people pitted against the elite (Bergmann, 2018; Butter et al., 2024; Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Fenster, 1999; Pirro & Taggart, 2023). But while there is certainly much overlap between the two, the differences have not been carefully drawn out. This conflation of the terms can lead to category errors when drawing conceptual boundaries between populism, conspiracism, and other ideologies. Empirically, lack of clarification may lead to flawed analyses when trying to make sense of the rhetoric, appeal, and consequences of conspiracy-touting politicians.

Political reality reveals that conspiracy theories are not only for the marginalized or disempowered. In recent years, conspiracist politicians have succeeded in winning free and fair elections around the world, pointing to the resonance of their ideas. Most observers would agree that the most prominent conspiracist in power in a democracy—or perhaps anywhere—is Donald Trump, who emerged as a political candidate by accusing then-President Obama of lying about his birthplace. Trump maintained an onslaught of conspiracy claims, large and small, throughout his first term, on topics as varied as immigration, the "deep state," the FBI, Ukraine, windmills, and of course, the 2020 election (Moniz, 2024; Rosenblum & Muirhead, 2019; Tollefson, 2021). He then won the popular vote in 2024.

Other heads of state have habitually espoused conspiracy theories in power in less established democracies. In Turkey, President Erdogan endorsed conspiratorial ideas about the West, the military, and his political opponents (Bayar, 2023). Prime Minister Orban of Hungary has campaigned touting conspiracies about (Jewish) financier George Soros as the mastermind behind the immigration of non-Christians into Europe (Plenta, 2020). More generally, the far right propagates and adapts conspiracy theories across borders to advance common political projects, many of which are directed against liberal successes including constraints on executive power and the advancement of minority rights (Ekman, 2022; Laruelle, 2024). Conspiracism exists on the left as well. Famously, Presidents Chávez and Maduro of Venezuela utilized anti-US conspiracy theories to account for the nation's problems (Andrade, 2020). Yet, right-wing forces have been the main exponents of conspiracy theories as they have surged to power in recent years, posing an urgent threat to liberal democracy in the process (Abrahamsen et al., 2024).

The use of campaign rhetoric is never a perfect guide to how politicians behave in office. Conspiracy theories have many uses and do not necessarily indicate a leader's political platform. They can be used to

create confusion or distract from poor performance in office (Müller, 2022; Pirro & Taggart, 2023). In contexts where such rhetoric is disapproved of, they can signal transgression to win over voters disillusioned with mainstream politics (Hahl et al., 2018). In some cases, the speaker might simply believe his claims are true and aim to convince the public of those beliefs. Yet, whether conspiratorial rhetoric is sincere or cynically deployed as campaign rhetoric, voters may believe the politician's promises and expect them to be realized as a political program. Insofar as acceding to those expectations boosts a leader's popularity or enhances his power, he may find it expedient to transform rhetoric into reality.

3. Theories of Power

In order to illuminate what conspiracism as a theory of power reveals, we identify its foundational principles and interrogate it alongside competing theories of power. For our purposes, a theory of power must do three things: (a) describe the workings of power, (b) diagnose the system's pathologies, and (c) prescribe remedies for those problems. That is, a theory of power is necessarily descriptive, positing how power operates and identifying flaws in the status quo, as well as prescriptive, in imagining how power should ideally be allocated and wielded.

We build on the scholarly literature on conspiracy theories, as well as on the works of several well-known conspiracy theorists, to first explain how a conspiracist theory of power answers descriptive questions about who holds power and how. At the ideational level, conspiracist thinking revolves around the problem of powerful global conspirators engaging in secret plots, whose machinations must be stopped by any means. Based on this diagnosis, we can then assess the concrete remedies conspiracism implies to counter these malevolent actors: regimes that embrace autocracy, oligarchy, or alternative technocracy. The conspiracist diagnosis and prescription of power thus go beyond mere critique; rather, they provide both descriptive and normative answers to fundamental political questions. This makes it possible, and analytically fruitful, to conceptualize conspiracism as a theory of power in its own right.

To identify what distinguishes conspiracism, we analyze it alongside three ideal types of theories of power: classical democratic theory, liberal (elitist) theory, and populist theory. We select classical democracy because it embodies the foundational ideal of popular sovereignty; liberalism because it has dominated twentieth-century debates on how to institutionalize and constrain power; and populism because it stands as the principal contemporary challenger to that liberal consensus and is often conceptually intertwined with conspiracism. We ask how each theory of power diagnoses and purports to solve fundamental social and political problems. Our purpose is not to portray these ideologies monolithically, but rather to compare and contrast them as ideal types, holding them accountable to their fundamental premises. This comparative exercise reveals stark divergences—especially between populism's mass-centered empowerment and conspiracism's epistemic elitism—and unexpected affinities, such as the shared skepticism of popular sovereignty in both liberalism and conspiracism. Table 1 summarizes the answers each theory provides to central questions of power. We explain how these points are derived, and the differences among them, throughout the analysis that follows.

Table 1. Approaches to power.

Theory	Who should govern?	Who threatens power?	What does governing entail?	What should constrain power?
Classical/majoritarian democracy	The majority of the people	Oligarchy, tyranny	Acting for the common good	No constraints on the will of the people
Liberal/elitist democracy	Political entrepreneurs	Misguided masses, arrogation of power	Exercising skill and intellect with attention to public opinion	Institutionalized checks and balances
Populism	Leader who embodies the people	Corrupt elites, unelected bureaucrats, gatekeeping institutions	Acting as the voice of the people	Changes in popular will, in principle
Conspiracism	Enlightened outsiders turned epistemological insiders	Global malevolent forces	Acting in pursuit of the truth	None

3.1. Democratic Theories of Power

Two ideal types stand out in democratic theories of power: classical and liberal. The classical view, drawing on thinkers such as Rousseau, Bentham, James Mill, and J. S. Mill, holds that power belongs to the people. In this view, citizens are the sole sovereigns, exercising direct democracy in pursuit of the common good, without rule-based restrictions on their sovereignty (Pateman, 1970, p. 18; Rousseau, 1968; Schumpeter, 1942).

The liberal-modern (or minimalist/elitist) view challenges these premises. Famously, Schumpeter defines democracy as a competitive struggle for votes that selects leaders rather than a direct expression of a common good or a unified will (Schumpeter, 1942, p. 269). Here, governance entails institutional procedures—such as checks and balances, electoral competition, and elite accountability—to ensure responsiveness in a complex society (Birch, 1964; Caramani, 2017; Urbinati, 2006).

3.2. Populist Theories of Power

Populism has been extensively theorized, though debates persist about how to define and conceptualize it (Stanley, 2008). Populism is premised on a division of society into "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), and contends that political competition should be democratic—but not liberal. The legitimate means to obtain power is majoritarianism—the manifestation of the popular will as expressed by the majority of citizens (Caramani, 2017). This mechanism aligns with the democratic theory of majority consent, except that populists valorize the majority not only as numerically dominant but also as morally superior to their opponents (Urbinati, 2019). Populists meaningfully diverge from liberals in how power should be exercised. Whereas liberal theory emphasizes institutions that mediate between the public and political officials and constraints on the executive to protect individual rights, populism views these fetters as serving elite interests and unjustly limiting the leader's freedom to act (Lacey, 2019; Moffitt, 2016; Urbinati, 2014).

Populism, with its disdain for constraining institutions and its valorization of the leader, tends to weaken democracy and, in extreme cases, lead to the construction of authoritarianism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2015). Because populists derive their legitimacy from the people, they do not recognize the authority of other officials or constraining institutions to challenge them (Bugaric & Kuhelj, 2018; Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Houle & Kenny, 2018). The exercise of power, therefore, tends toward the tools of executive aggrandizement in the form of pardons and rule by fiat. Thus, in his first term, Trump famously claimed that the Constitution gave him "the right to do whatever I want as president" (Brice-Saddler, 2019).

4. Defining and Conceptualizing Conspiracism

In essence, conspiracism portrays politics as a battlefield where malevolent actors and groups secretly plot against society's interests. In this view, power is not distributed through visible or democratic processes but is instead controlled by hidden forces behind the scenes, pulling the strings in what appears to be nothing more than a puppet show. This spectacle, according to conspiracism, is designed to keep the masses, often disparagingly labeled as "sheep," passive and easy to manipulate.

We consider conspiracism to be a thin ideology that answers both descriptive and normative questions about power in specific ways. Since it does not offer a coherent—let alone comprehensive—set of solutions or preferred policies, like most conceptions of populism, it cannot be considered a "thick" ideology. Yet unlike populism, which typically views society in binary terms—"the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite"—conspiracism distinguishes between a differentiated set of groups. In conspiracist ideation, society is seen as divided into at least three segments, including malevolent forces, victimized masses, and an enlightened few. The malevolent forces are characterized as a secretive cadre that orchestrates events from behind the scenes and wields power for its own ends. In contrast, the victimized masses are portrayed as the unwitting, oppressed majority. Intermingled with these two, the enlightened few claim to have pierced the veil of deception and possess the monopoly on truth; they argue that only those who see the reality behind the manipulation are fit to govern.

There are three plausible trajectories for a regime based on a conspiracist theory of power: autocracy, oligarchy, or alternate technocracy. In an autocracy, power would be concentrated in a single ruler who claims to have unveiled the hidden truths behind the plots of malevolent forces; in an oligarchy, a select cadre of the "enlightened few" would dominate political, economic, and social decision-making; and in an alternate technocracy, authority would be vested in alternative experts whose specialized knowledge of conspiracy theories grants them the exclusive right to determine what is true or right and to act accordingly.

5. The Conspiracist Theory of Power

Conspiracism divides society into three major groups, each of which includes sub-groups within them. First, the malevolent forces include the puppet masters—those who hold real power behind the scenes—as well as their collaborators, the "fifth column," who serve as the domestic foot soldiers of these global actors (e.g., Jews as the masterminds and Freemasons as the fifth column [Barkun, 2013; Pipes, 1999], or Great Powers and minorities [Şahin, 2025]). Second, the victimized masses consist of those who are ignorant of secret plots (i.e., the "sheep" or "sheeple") and are depicted as victims of the plots by malevolent forces. Thus, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., before he entered the US government, wrote about how the government supposedly induces

compliance: "It is not a matter of persuading or convincing people to accept the new 'reality.' It's more like how you drive a herd of cattle. You scare them enough to get them moving, then you steer them wherever you want them to go. The cattle do not know or understand where they are going. (Kennedy 2023, pp. 809–810).

Although conspiracists may acknowledge that within the public there may be individuals or groups who are suspicious of such plots or even believe in certain segments of the truth (conspiracy theories), conspiracist ideation constructs the public as uniformly ill-informed and unprepared to grasp the scope and power of malevolent forces. In contrast, the enlightened few are the intelligentsia of conspiracist ideation: those who write, speak out, and disseminate the "Truth" in an effort to enlighten the masses and prevent the malevolent forces from succeeding. In this societal division, the villains are the malevolent forces, and the heroes are the enlightened few, creating a moral dichotomy of good versus evil (Bayar, 2023). Along these lines, Robert Welch, founder of the anti-communist and conspiracist John Birch Society, declared in his 1958 manifesto, "This is a world-wide battle, the first in history, between light and darkness; between freedom and slavery; between the spirit of Christianity and the spirit of anti-Christ for the souls and bodies of men" (Welch, 1992, p. 28).

In envisioning a moral dichotomy, conspiracism has an elective affinity with populism (Weber, 2002), as both portray the ingroup as victims of the outgroup (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2020). Some scholars in fact posit that conspiracism is simply a form of populism (Fenster, 1999). But there is an important difference of emphasis. Populist ideation is centered on the people, who are depicted as inherently righteous. Their exploitation at the hands of a corrupt elite is what spurs the need for virtuous leaders who can truly represent their interests. Conspiracists, on the other hand, place their emphasis on the perpetrators, whom conspiracists labor to identify and expose. The victims of these plots—the people—are incidental to this work of revelation. Along these lines, British conspiracy theorist and former footballer David Icke wrote: "Look at the structures of government known laughingly as 'democracy'…These structures were designed to give the appearance of freedom while allowing almost limitless control by the few behind the scenes" (Icke, 1999, p. 130).

Conspiracists see the public as a unitary collective, in ways superficially similar to classical democratic theory. Like liberal democratic theorists, conspiracists believe that the public is uninformed and ill-equipped to manage their affairs without good leadership (Fenster, 1999, p. 109). They similarly see themselves as best positioned to provide guidance to the masses. But, whereas democratic elitists consider elites to be trustees responsive to the public's ever-changing majorities (Dahl, 1982; Rokkan, 1970) and responsible for advancing coherent policies on their behalf (Pitkin, 1967, p. 172), conspiracists not only *do not* work as trustees of the people, but they also regard them with disdain. Eschewing democratic governance, they do not claim to represent the public in any formal sense. In fact, their contempt runs deeper: They deny people agency, viewing them as "sheep" who merely follow the herd, unable to discern the big picture or act courageously. This contemptuous orientation toward the masses also distinguishes them from populists, who see "the people" as a fount of wisdom and virtue.

When it comes to the qualities leaders should embody, conspiracists emphasize discernment and the ability to penetrate the veil of power thanks to their access to information and uncanny intellect (Barkun, 2013, p. 33). This confidence in their own acumen makes conspiracy theorists quintessential elitists. Although democratic elitists also emphasize the role of "political entrepreneurs" in shaping public policy (Dahl, 1971), such entrepreneurs are expected to do so with regard for the plural interests of the public (Dahl, 1961), through coalition-building, adherence to procedures and institutions, and under the constraints of the rule of

law (Dahl, 1971; Rosenblum, 2008; Schattschneider, 2003). Conspiracism brooks no such give-and-take. If taken to its logical conclusion, conspiracism idealizes a regime led by a postmodern philosopher-king or an enlightened clique who rule not for the good of the people, but to pursue the Truth.

As for how such a rule would be realized, we can accept the logic of conspiracism on its own terms and consider three types of political regimes that may result: autocracy, oligarchy, and alternate technocracy. Autocracy involves embodying the regime in a single figurehead, which is fitting for a philosopher-king who seeks to manifest power from exclusive knowledge. Yet, the reality of governing may require power-sharing, based on the notion that discerning conspiracies, let alone countering them, must be a collective enterprise. A more ambitious, and far-reaching, project would be to remake the state itself in a conspiracist's image. A conspiracist technocracy involves appropriating and hollowing out the state, before repopulating it with like-minded believers trained to advance the reigning conspiracist ideology. Conspiracist technocracy would come about only after the consolidation of autocratic or oligarchic rule, as the institutionalizing of conspiracism would require extensive commitment but represent a durable solution to the problems conspiracists believe they face. Yet, insofar as the supremacy of a subversive conspiracist worldview over conventional liberal-rationalist epistemology may be the true ultimate goal of conspiracists, the prize—harnessing the power of the modern state to produce and disseminate conspiracist knowledge—may be worth the struggle.

6. Three Conspiracist Models of Rule: Autocracy, Oligarchy, and Technocracy

Unlike populists, who aim to return power to the people (Urbinati, 2019), and democratic elitists who institutionalize power through representative bodies and the separation of powers, conspiracists offer no clear action plan or ideal form of government. They often describe malevolent forces as omnipresent and impossible to truly vanquish as they will always find a way to retain power or will be replaced by other, more sinister forces. Unable to triumph materially, their work therefore involves exposing and publicizing what they know so that the public may overcome its ignorance and see the conspiracies around them. The Sisyphean nature of the project implies that a conspiracist's claim to rule has no clear endpoint. Their unending struggle grants rulers the justification to remain in power in perpetuity, thus making a conspiracist regime inherently anti-democratic.

Conspiracists, like populists, dismiss institutional barriers and political rivals that prevent them from acting on their knowledge and intuitions. But while populists disdain aspects of democracy, conspiracists dismiss the whole enterprise as a sham. Party politics and the elections are performances for the masses to feel empowered, while the real power lies behind the scenes, in the hands of unelected, untouchable forces, wealthy families, and secret groups who control political institutions and determine the fate of the globe. Such groups are seen to control all viable candidates, so that they never lose elections. This political imagination is evident in the rhetoric of far-right figures who rail against conventional (and especially leftist) politicians, whom they depict as puppets manipulated by powerful, hidden entities such as George Soros. Hungarian Prime Minister Orban aggressively promoted this narrative, saying, for example, "Let's not beat about the bush: in order to implement the 'Soros Plan,' across the whole of Europe they want to sweep away governments which represent national interests—including ours" (Hungarian Government, 2017, para. 18). These nefarious masterminds supposedly aim to weaken Western/Christian civilization via schemes such as the "Great Replacement" of democratic majorities by immigrants from the Global South (Ekman, 2022;

Plenta, 2020). French author Renaud Camus coined the term, warning of an impending "genocide by substitution" (Bullens, 2021).

A conspiracist's knowledge of insidious plots would lead them to distrust established institutions and parties, as they would invariably be infiltrated by malevolent forces–a "deep state." Recapturing political institutions might necessitate revolutionary purges before repopulating them with loyalists who pledge to act in service of the "truth-tellers" and for the benefit of humanity. This restoration of the state would lead to these institutions' ultimate obedience to a chosen leader. Consequently, a conspiracist regime would evolve into an autocratic or oligarchic system, with a select few controlling the state apparatus and demanding absolute loyalty. Such an atavistic model of governance may seem ill-suited for the (post-)modern technological age, yet some conspiracists argue that an autocrat is required to solve the otherwise intractable problems of the times (Wilson, 2024). A vivid, and prominent, statement of this vision can be seen in a Trump speech at a 2024 campaign rally:

> That's true, we are a failing nation, we are a nation in decline and now these radical left lunatics want to interfere with our elections by using law enforcement. It's totally corrupt, and we won't let it happen. 2024 is our final battle with you at my side. We will demolish the Deep State, we will expel the warmongers from our government, we will drive out the globalists we will cast out the Communist Marxist fascists, we will throw off the sick political class that hates our country and we will route the fake news media. We will defeat crooked Joe Biden and we will drain the swamp once and for all. (Roll Call, 2024)

How might a conspiracist leader be selected? Unlike populists, who view legitimate power as the manifestation of the popular will expressed by the majority of citizens (Caramani, 2017), conspiracists believe the people are not capable of choosing their leaders. Nor would rulers inherit power through dynasty, since conspiracist legitimacy has little to do with legacy or inheritance. Instead, the credentials to lead come from exceptionally penetrating intelligence and the courage to speak the truth. The path to the conspiracist pantheon is sui generis. Once the protagonist clearly sees reality (in internet-era parlance, he is "red-pilled"), they join a rarified club of those who have undergone a similar process of self-discovery and acquire the self-image of being among the elect. The conspiracist self-narration is inward-looking rather than public-facing. It involves a progression from ignorance to disillusionment to unexpected discovery to revelation and enlightenment (Barkun, 2013; Tripodi, 2022). This process of personal development resembles a religious conversion, like Paul on the road to Damascus or the Buddhist path of discovery (James et al., 2003). Narratives such as these are common to adherents of the Qanon movement, in which the notion of a "Great Awakening" is central (Greer & Beene, 2024).

It is important to note that this self-selection need not be perceived as broadly legitimate, as the public's assent is irrelevant. If a leader must justify their claim to power, it is based on their self-assessment that they have revealed the Truth and the recognition of this fact by the select few who are equally in the know, or "epistemological insiders." Insofar as the revelation of conspiracies is a collective activity of information exchange, theory building, and moral reinforcement (Starbird et al., 2023), there may be a pool of insiders deemed worthy of leadership. When applied to government, the mutual recognition of conspiracist talent may result not in autocracy, but oligarchy.

What does governing entail? For conspiracists, it means the relentless pursuit of Truth: exposing covert threats, dismantling the hidden forces that obscure reality, and embedding that Truth into the very capillaries of the state apparatus. Such an undertaking demands both epistemic and political consolidation. The leader—or a tight-knit circle of enlightened oligarchs—must concentrate power as both a means and an end, which would likely involve violence, a move beyond what most populists see as necessary to achieve their aims. Trump, accordingly, used violent metaphors when discussing how to thwart his enemies, once saying, "In 2016, I declared I am your voice. Today, I add: I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed: *I am your retribution*" (Hutzler, 2023, para. 5). The primary objective of a latter-day inquisition would be to eliminate malevolent forces with epistemological insiders positioned as ultimate arbiters of truth unencumbered by due process or the rule of law. Repression and purges can be legitimized by labeling elements of resistance a "fifth column" colluding with "the enemy." To pursue their enemies, they cultivate a culture of surveillance and suspicion. Loyalty to this regime and unwavering belief in its righteousness become essential markers of belonging to the political community, reinforcing the elite's power.

Another facet of conspiracist rule involves the institutionalization of alternative forms of knowledge. Expert authority has come under attack in democracies in recent years, as a result of factors such as rising globalization, rising inequality, and the fragmentation of the mass media (Eyal, 2019). The populist critique of epistemic authority takes on a sharper edge when articulated in the language of conspiracism. Credentialed experts are seen as collaborators of malevolent forces who forge or conceal evidence to aid their secret plots (Harambam & Aupers, 2015). Scientists bury evidence of the (obvious) flatness of the earth or work with pharmaceutical companies to manufacture viruses and profit off new vaccines–which themselves are harmful (Merkley & Loewen, 2021). A conspiracist regime running a bureaucracy may be content with exposing these plots and ridding the government of those involved. Yet they may go further and build a new set of institutions that embody their conspiracist ideation: a conspiracist technocracy.

A technocracy is defined as a form of representation that emphasizes the importance of expertise in identifying and implementing objective solutions to societal problems (Caramani, 2017, p. 55). Power in a technocracy, therefore, derives from abandoning neutrality in favor of a merit-based, expert-led initiative (Caramani, 2017, p. 60). A conspiracist technocracy involves summoning a class of *alternative* experts in public health, history, international relations, politics, elections, journalism, and economics. In recent years, we have seen online networks of conspiracy theorists and conspiracy enthusiasts sharing and propagating alternative accounts of what "actually" happened in the US 2020 election or the Covid-19 pandemic (Moran et al., 2024; Starbird et al., 2023). Proponents of these heterodox views lack relevant educational training and are not credentialed by professional associations, yet they claim to be the "real" experts on these issues and persuade followers that their version of reality is the correct one.

Conspiracist governance through technocracy provides a system in which conspiracy theorists become the new experts. At the top is an oligarchic structure within an authoritarian regime where enlightened thinkers preside over conspiracist ministries. Within the state, conspiracist civil servants receive training in parallel educational institutions to learn the methodologies and procedures of conspiracist research. They speak for the Conspiracist State, and their analyses, reports, diagnoses, and policies become officially sanctioned by the reigning authorities. Unlike knowledge produced by the scientific method, which relies on ethical codes, disinterested inquiry, transparency, and replication to acquire public trust, conspiracist epistemologies may

rely on premises such as experiential knowledge, emotions, and personal convictions that do not leave their claims open to critique or refutation (Harambam & Aupers, 2015). Conspiracist technocracy in this sense resembles a religious priesthood more than a scientific bureaucracy.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

In this essay, we have conducted a systematic analysis of three theories of power: one conventional (liberal), one nascent and contested (populism), and one that is not usually considered a theory of power at all (conspiracism). The analysis yielded insights about how, according to conspiracism, power is wielded and by whom, and forward-looking propositions about how a state should be governed. We argued that a polity ruled in ways consistent with conspiracist ideas could be autocratic, oligarchic, or technocratic.

Our analysis revealed unexpected areas of convergence and divergence of conspiracism with its rival political theories. For example, even though conspiracism is often considered an offshoot of populism, or even synonymous with it (Castanho Silva et al., 2017), we suggest that they harbor a foundational difference: whereas populism lauds "the people" as a fount of virtue and wisdom whose interests must be secured, conspiracists view the same body as ignorant masses who are blind to the conspiracies around them and ill-equipped to discern what their own interests are. In a more awkward convergence, conspiracists agree with elitist theories of democracy that the public is incapable of forming coherent preferences and, therefore, requires wise leadership. But then, of course, a divergence is revealed: Democratic representatives are compelled to be responsive to the public and govern on its behalf. To a conspiracist, on the other hand, revealing the Truth is paramount, and there is no imperative to govern and advance the interests of the populace.

Political philosophers, social scientists, and conspiracy theorists have long asked, "Who governs?" Theorists such as Dahl and Schumpeter examine the role of structures and agency in interpreting complex social phenomena, including procedures, elite contestation, and institutions, and reach nuanced conclusions subject to ongoing scrutiny by other social theorists. In contrast, conspiracy theorists selectively pick evidence that fits their narratives, finding secret plots by malevolent actors as an overarching explanation for all important world events. Their approach leaves no room for acknowledging the limitations of their analyses, mechanisms for refutation, or venues to challenge their claims.

A conspiracist theory of power, when put into practice, has features that may superficially resemble democracy and populism but are substantially different. The regime's purpose is not to represent the people but to pursue the Truth. Dissenting voices are not merely distractions but, by casting doubt on a conspiracist's pursuit, are considered inherently subversive. Conspiracism, therefore, cannot tolerate pluralism and has an elective affinity with autocracy. It envisions an enlightened few, led by a postmodern philosopher-king, as the rightful rulers. Their most prized commodity is ownership of the "Truth"—the ultimate means of production—which they aim to disseminate as their *raison d'etre*. They are not anarchists who seek to dismantle the state but are rather like Leninists who want to infiltrate oppressive institutions or build new ones to advance their agendas. A state that produces and certifies conspiracist experts to produce knowledge of how the world "really" works—a conspiracist technocracy—is perhaps the variant of autocracy best suited to the complex and rapidly changing age we live in.

Our analysis, though conceptual, sheds light on phenomena we have already witnessed in recent years. Although conspiracy theories are usually viewed as a cynical rhetorical tactic associated with autocratic rule (Giry & Gürpinar, 2020), new developments indicate that politicians who deploy conspiracy theories can win significant vote shares in freely contested elections (Bayar, 2023; Pirro & Taggart, 2023). The electoral allure of conspiracy theories in an age of disenchantment and distrust of elites is intuitive and has been theorized alongside populist discourses. But it is important to recognize that when conspiracy theories are used as rhetoric to win votes, even opportunistically, they may give rise to *conspiracism* as a foundation for the exercise of power.

There are indications that parties and leaders who strategically invoke conspiracy theories in the electoral arena may, if victorious, take measures to implement conspiracism in office. Due to events like mass immigration from the Global South, the Covid-19 pandemic, the rise of a politically involved billionaire class, and the ever-increasing number of people who get information from social media, we have seen greater demand for conspiracy theories to account for social disruptions and they have correspondingly moved into the mainstream of public discourse. Other parties competing for the votes of the disillusioned masses are waiting in the wings. Whoever gains power, wary of losing votes to even more conspiratorial and illiberal rivals, may take a more literal interpretation of their mandate and follow through on the implications of their electoral promises. Already, since we began drafting this article, the Trump administration has placed conspiracy theorists in critical positions to administer the American state, including Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as head of the health bureaucracy and Kash Patel as director of the FBI. In doing so, he has followed through with a larger project of the far-right to purge the "administrative state" of expertise and make alternative, conspiracist knowledge hegemonic. History books must be rewritten to conform to the new official narrative (Mervosh, 2025). In Europe, once-fringe parties, including neo-fascist ones, have already been included in coalition governments, signaling a violation of European taboos against forming coalitions with the far-right (Henley, 2022). The ascendant Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany spreads conspiracy theories about the postwar order, revives banned Nazi slogans, and has threatened to deport people not born in Germany (Pfeifer, 2024). These examples, and the broader illiberal forces they represent, suggest how conspiracism might work when translated into a political program, and we should not dismiss it as empty rhetoric.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (G-2019–58788), and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (2023–02789).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

Abalakina-Paap, M., Stephan, W. G., Craig, T., & Gregory, W. L. (1999). Beliefs in conspiracies. *Political Psychology*, *20*(3), 637–647.

Abrahamsen, R., Drolet, J.-F., Williams, M. C., Vucetic, S., Narita, K., & Gheciu, A. (2024). *World of the right: Radical conservatism and global order*. Cambridge University Press.

Allport, G. W., & Postman, L. (1947). *The psychology of rumor*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Andrade, G. (2020). Conspiracy mongering in Venezuela: The Chavismo period (1998–2018). *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, *39*(4), 500–512.

Barkun, M. (2013). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America* (Vol. 15). University of California Press.

Bayar, M. C. (2023). *Politics of good and evil: conspiracy theories' role in democratic erosion: The cases of the United States and Turkey* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. State University of New York at Binghamton.

Bergmann, E. (2018). *Conspiracy & populism: The politics of misinformation*. Springer.

Birch, A. H. (1964). *Representative and responsible government: An essay on the British constitution*. Allen and Unwin.

Brice-Saddler, M. (2019, July 23). While bemoaning Mueller probe, Trump falsely says the Constitution gives him 'the right to do whatever I want.' *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/07/23/trump-falsely-tells-auditorium-full-teens-constitution-gives-him-right-do-whatever-i-want

Bugaric, B., & Kuhelj, A. (2018). Varieties of populism in Europe: Is the rule of law in danger? *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, *10*, 21–33.

Bullens, L. (2021, November 8). How France's 'great replacement' theory conquered the global far right. *France 24*. https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20211108-how-the-french-great-replacement-theory-conquered-the-far-right

Butter, M. (2020). *The nature of conspiracy theories*. Wiley.

Butter, M., Hatzikidi, K., Jeitler, C., Loperfido, G., & Turza, L. (2024). *Populism and conspiracy theory: Case studies and theoretical perspectives*. Routledge.

Caramani, D. (2017). Will vs. reason: The populist and technocratic forms of political representation and their critique to party government. *American Political Science Review*, *111*(1), 54–67.

Castanho Silva, B., Vegetti, F., & Littvay, L. (2017). The elite is up to something: Exploring the relation between populism and belief in conspiracy theories. *Swiss political science review*, *23*(4), 423–443.

Christensen, G. (2023). Three concepts of power: Foucault, Bourdieu, and Habermas. *Power and Education*, *16*(2), 182–195.

Dahl, R. A. (1961). *Who governs? Democracy and power in an American city*. Yale University Press.

Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. Yale University Press.

Dahl, R. A. (1982). *Dilemmas of pluralist democracy: Autonomy vs. control*. Yale University Press.

Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichocka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C. S., & Deravi, F. (2019). Understanding conspiracy theories. *Political Psychology*, *40*, 3–35.

Ekman, M. (2022). The great replacement: Strategic mainstreaming of far-right conspiracy claims. *Convergence*, *28*(4), 1127–1143.

Eyal, G. (2019). *The crisis of expertise*. Wiley.

Fenster, M. (1999). *Conspiracy theories: Secrecy and power in American culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

Giry, J., & Gürpinar, D. (2020). *Functions and uses of conspiracy theories in authoritarian regimes*. Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories.

Greer, K., & Beene, S. (2024). When belief becomes research: conspiracist communities on the social web. *Frontiers in Communication*, *9*, Article 1345973. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2024.1345973

Grzymala-Busse, A. (2019). How populists rule: The consequences for democratic governance. *Polity*, *51*(4), 707–717.

Hahl, O., Kim, M., & Zuckerman Sivan, E. W. (2018). The authentic appeal of the lying demagogue: Proclaiming the deeper truth about political illegitimacy. *American Sociological Review*, *83*(1), 1–33.

Hameleers, M. (2020). They are selling themselves out to the enemy! The content and effects of populist conspiracy theories. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *33*(1), 38–56.

Harambam, J., & Aupers, S. (2015). Contesting epistemic authority: Conspiracy theories on the boundaries of science. *Public understanding of science*, *24*(4), 466–480.

Henley, J. (2022, October 14). Swedish parties agree coalition with backing of far right. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/14/swedish-parties-agree-coalition-with-backing-of-far-right

Houle, C., & Kenny, P. D. (2018). The political and economic consequences of populist rule in Latin America. *Government and Opposition*, *53*(2), 256–287.

Hungarian Government. (2017). *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 27th Congress of Fidesz—Hungarian Civic Union*. https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-27th-congress-of-fidesz-hungarian-civic-union

Hutzler, A. (2023, November 2). Trump's 'retribution' campaign theme has apparent roots in old confederate code, new book says. *ABC News*. https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trumps-retribution-campaign-theme-apparent-roots-confederate-code/story?id=104553311

Icke, D. (1999). *The biggest secret: The book that will change the world* (2nd ed.). Bridge of Love Publications.

James, M., Carrette, J., James, W., & Taylor, E. (2003). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. Routledge.

Kennedy, R. F., Jr. (2023). *The real Anthony Fauci: Bill Gates, big pharma, and the global war on democracy and public health*. Simon and Schuster.

Knight, P. (2013). *Conspiracy culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*. Routledge.

Lacey, N. (2019). Populism and the rule of law. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, *15*(1), 79–96.

Laruelle, M. (2024). Introduction: Illiberalism studies as a field. In M. Laruelle (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of illiberalism* (pp. 1–40). Oxford University Press.

Merkley, E., & Loewen, P. J. (2021). Anti-intellectualism and the mass public's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *5*(6), 706–715.

Mervosh, S. (2025, March 14). Oklahoma proposes teaching 2020 election 'discrepancies' in U.S. history. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/14/us/oklahoma-2020-election-Education.html

Moffitt, B. (2016). *The global rise of populism: Performance, political style, and representation*. Stanford University Press

Moniz, C. (2024). *Donald Trump has spread 2020 election conspiracy theories 500 times on Truth Social*. CREW. https://www.citizensforethics.org/reports-investigations/crew-investigations/donald-trump-has-spread-2020-election-conspiracy-theories-500-times-on-truth-social

Moran, R. E., Swan, A. L., & Agajanian, T. (2024). Vaccine misinformation for profit: Conspiratorial wellness influencers and the monetization of alternative health. *International Journal of Communication*, *18*, 1202–1224.

Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Müller, J. W. (2015). Parsing populism: Who is and who is not a populist these days? *Juncture*, *22*(2), 80–89.

Müller, J. W. (2022). What, if anything, do populism and conspiracy theories have to do with each other? *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, *89*(3), 607–625.

Olmsted, K. S. (2019). *Real enemies: Conspiracy theories and American democracy, World War I to 9/11*. Oxford University Press.

Pateman, C. (1970). *Participation and democratic theory*. Cambridge University Press.

Pfeifer, H. (2024, September 1). AfD's Björn Höcke: A "fascist" wins election in Thuringia. *DW*. https://www.dw.com/en/afds-bj%C3%B6rn-h%C3%B6cke-a-fascist-wins-election-in-thuringia/a-67990287

Pipes, D. (1999). *Conspiracy: How the paranoid style flourishes and where it comes from*. Simon and Schuster.

Pirro, A. L., & Taggart, P. (2023). Populists in power and conspiracy theories. *Party Politics*, *29*(3), 413–423.

Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The concept of representation*. University of California Press.
Plenta, P. (2020). Conspiracy theories as a political instrument: Utilization of anti-Soros narratives in Central Europe. *Contemporary Politics*, *26*(5), 512–530.
Radnitz, S. (2021). *Revealing schemes: The politics of conspiracy in Russia and the post-Soviet region*. Oxford University Press.
Rokkan, S. (1970). *Citizens, elections, parties: Approaches to the comparative study of the processes of development*. Universitetsforlaget.
Roll Call. (2024). *Speech: Donald Trump holds a political rally in North Charleston, South Carolina—February 14, 2024*. https://rollcall.com/factbase/trump/transcript/donald-trump-speech-political-rally-north-charleston-south-carolina-february-14-2024
Rosenblum, N. L. (2008). *On the side of the angels: An appreciation of parties and partisanship*. Princeton University Press.
Rosenblum, N. L., & Muirhead, R. (2019). *A lot of people are saying: The new conspiracism and the assault on democracy*. Princeton University Press.
Rousseau, J.-J. (1968). *The social contract*. Penguin Books.
Şahin, S. (2025). From heroism to victimhood: Sèvres narrative and trauma of victimization in Turkey. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, *13*, 189–213.
Schattschneider, E. (2003). *Party government: American government in action*. Routledge.
Schumpeter, J. A. (1942). *Capitalism, socialism and democracy*. Harper & Row.
Stanley, B. (2008). The thin ideology of populism. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *13*, 95–110.
Starbird, K., DiResta, R., & DeButts, M. (2023). Influence and improvisation: Participatory disinformation during the 2020 US election. *Social Media + Society*, *9*(2). https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177943
Tollefson, J. (2021). How Trump turned conspiracy theory research upside down. *Nature*, *590*(11), 192–193.
Tripodi, F. B. (2022). *The propagandists' playbook: How conservative elites manipulate search and threaten democracy*. Yale University Press.
Urbinati, N. (2006). *Representative democracy: Principles and genealogy*. University of Chicago Press.
Urbinati, N. (2014). *Democracy disfigured: Opinion, truth, and the people*. Harvard University Press.
Urbinati, N. (2019). Political theory of populism. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *22*(1), 111–127.
Weber, M. (1949). "Objectivity" in social science and social policy. In E. A. Shils & H. A. Finch (Eds.), *The methodology of the social sciences* (pp. 49–112). Routledge.
Weber, M. (2002). *The protestant ethic and the "spirit" of capitalism and other writings*. Penguin.
Welch, R. (1992). *The blue book of the John Birch Society* (24th printing). Western Islands.
Wilson, J. (2024, December 21). He's anti-democracy and pro-Trump: The obscure 'dark enlightenment' blogger influencing the next US administration. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/21/curtis-yarvin-trump

About the Authors

Mert Can Bayar is a postdoctoral scholar at the University of Washington's Center for an Informed Public. He studies political behavior and internet research, focusing on conspiracy theories and democracy. His research employs surveys, social media analysis, and large language models to explore the dynamics between political behavior and information ecosystems.

Scott Radnitz is the Ellison professor of Russian and Eurasian studies in the Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington. He researches topics including conspiracy theories, disinformation, authoritarianism, and informality. He is the author of *Revealing Schemes: The Politics of Conspiracy in Russia and the Post-Soviet Region*, and co-editor of *Enemies Within: The Global Politics of Fifth Columns*, both from Oxford University Press.