

Political Paranoia, Anti-intellectualism and Conspiracy Culture in American Politics and Society

Exploring how conspiracy theories have infiltrated American society and politics.

HANNA SVARDAL

SUPERVISOR

Alf Tomas Tønnessen

University of Agder, 2022

Faculty of Humanities and Education

Department of Foreign Languages and Translation

Abstract

This thesis explores conspiratorial thinking in American politics and society. In light of recent and troubling events in the United States like the storming of Congress, conspiracy theories about the COVID19 virus and vaccines, and the rise of extreme conspiracy cults like QAnon, the thesis investigates how the Republican party has moved sharply to the right in recent years and why there is an ideological asymmetry in conspiratorial thinking.

Although many assume that belief in conspiracy theories is a new trend in American politics and society, Richard Hofstadter has provided historical evidence that conspiracy beliefs have a long history in America dating all the way back to the 1700s. However, with the emergence of the Internet, conspiracy theories are more easily spread, and the media can capitalize on the fear and paranoia of the people.

Converging Richard Hofstadter's theories on *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* and *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, this thesis aims to explain how and why conspiratorial thinking is such a salient concept in contemporary American politics and society.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Associate Professor Alf Tomas Tønnessen, for your encouragement, expertise and guidance throughout this project. Your knowledge of American history and politics has been truly inspiring.

To my amazing family, thank you for your emotional support and for always believing in me. Thank you Sigve, for making me laugh every single day and making these last few months endurable.

Finally, I would like to thank all my dear friends and fellow students at UiA. Thank you for endless hours at 46, for our frequent coffee breaks, for interesting discussions, encouragement, tears, and laughter. Thanks to you, the last five years of my life have been an absolute blast.

Kristiansand, May 2022

Hanna Svardal

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Research Question	4
2. American Right-Wing Movements: Past and Present	5
2.1 The John Birch Society	5
2.2 The Rise of the Tea Party Movement	6
2.2.1 The Influence of the Media	8
2.2.2 Billionaire Funding.....	9
2.2.3 Fears of American Decline	10
3. Theoretical framework.....	12
3.1 Hofstadter’s Essay on the Paranoid Style.....	12
3.2 Anti-intellectualism in American Life	20
4. Discussion	24
4.1 The Paranoid Style in Contemporary America	24
4.1.1 Dispossession	25
4.1.2 A Changing Enemy	30
4.1.3 A Battle Between Absolute Good and Absolute Evil	32
4.1.4 Projection.....	32
4.1.5 Feeling Powerless.....	34
4.1.6 The Politics of Paranoia.....	35
4.1.7 An Ideological Asymmetry in Conspiratorial Thinking.....	37
4.1.8 The Paranoid Style as a Political Strategy.....	40
4.2 Anti-intellectualism in Contemporary America.....	40
4.2.1 The Death of Expertise.....	41
4.2.2 The Impact of Christian Fundamentalism	43
4.2.3 A Post-Truth Society	43
4.2.4 Disinforming the Masses: The Rise of the Anti-intellectual Politician.....	45
4.2.5 The Lack of Conservative Gatekeepers.....	47
5. Conclusion	49
6. References.....	52

1. Introduction

On January 6, 2021, the world witnessed an event that shook the foundations of American democracy. After a pro-Trump rally where the president held a provocative speech urging his supporters to “fight like hell” to prevent Congress from certifying Biden’s victory, thousands of far-right conservatives and conspiracy theorists stormed the U.S. capitol, displaying an unprecedented disdain for democratic institutions. At least five people lost their lives as the mob attacked the Capitol, broke into the Senate Chamber, vandalized offices, and occupied the U.S. seat of power for several hours (Norman, 2021, p. 4). This came after weeks of false conspiracy claims by the president and his associates that the election was stolen. People all over the world were shocked at how such a terrible attack could occur in one of the world’s leading democracies. What has happened to American politics, and can we accept that politicians disseminate false conspiracy theories that can have fatal consequences?

The aim of this thesis is to explore how and why conspiracy theories, like those purported by Donald Trump and his associates, have become such a prevalent phenomenon in American politics and society. Conspiracy theories have long infused politics and other realms of American culture. Though not a uniquely American phenomenon, the United States has proved to be a hospitable climate for a wide selection of conspiracy theories. Throughout their history, Americans have established high levels of distrust towards authority and their political elites, and these suspicions often go past a general distrust of government and encapsulate fears of greater, secretive conspiracies (Oliver & Wood, 2014, p. 952). In the present American society, in which fake news and misinformation are spread quickly and effortlessly through social media platforms, belief in conspiracy theories is prevalent. Research shows that more than 50% of Americans endorse at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver & Wood, 2014, p. 956). The contemporary era abounds with relevant examples of conspiracy theories, like the “birther” movement asserting that President Obama’s Hawaiian birth certificate was fake, and the popular QAnon-conspiracy which conceives that former President Trump is combatting a “deep state” cabal of Democratic saboteurs who worship Satan and traffic children for sex or for their blood (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021, pp. 1-2).

There are many troubling effects of conspiratorial thinking for society, including antisocial behavior, hostility against outgroups, rejection of science, decreased trust in government, and

a lack of civic engagement (van der Linden, Panagopoulos, Azevedo & Jost, 2021, p. 24). Consequently, it is crucial to recognize and understand the sociocognitive factors that shape public belief in conspiracy theories. Based on reviews of theoretical and empirical literature on conspiracies, Abalakina-Paap and colleagues propose five types of reasons why people believe in conspiracies: they are alienated, they feel powerless, such conspiracies simplify a complex world, conspiracies can be used to explain their problems and such beliefs provide an outlet for their hostility.

Increasingly, researchers are coming to value the role of political ideology in fostering conspiratorial thinking. A high percentage of conspiracy theories are political in nature, and it is thus beneficial to investigate the effects of political ideology. Imhoff and Lamberty suggest that conspiracy mentality is a generalized political attitude that is “intrinsically tied to the sociopolitical realm” (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018, p. 911). A recent study found that there is an ideological asymmetry in conspiratorial thinking and that conservatives in the United States are more likely than liberals to espouse conspiratorial worldviews (van der Linden, 2021, p. 23). This empirical discovery is consistent with previous research linking conspiracism to right-wing conservatism. Pew Research Center found in September 2020 that roughly four-in-ten Republicans who have heard of QAnon (41%) say it is a good thing for the country (Pew Research Center, 2020). Furthermore, there is a correlation between belief in QAnon’s fictions and the conviction that armed conflict would be necessary (Russonello, 2021). With the upsurge of the Tea Party movement, the Republican Party is becoming more radical, and whites in America have moved strongly to the right. This is particularly true in the southern states, and between 1952 and 2000, among high-school educated whites in the South, there has been a 20 percent increase in Republican voters (Hochschild, 2018, pp. 11-12).

Contemporary American politics have seen the rise of far-right politicians like Marjorie Taylor Greene, who in November 2020 won the House race to represent Georgia’s 14th district in Congress. Her campaign was distinguished by racist, anti-Semitic and Islamophobic statements in addition to her public backing of QAnon, a conspiracy theory that the F.B.I. has labeled a potential domestic terrorism threat (Salcedo, 2020). Greene has previously released videos endorsing QAnon and its anonymous leader “Q”, stating: “I’m very excited about that now there’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take this global cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles out, and I think we have the president to do it”. A supporter of Trump’s ambitions to overturn his loss to Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election, Greene has continually and

untruthfully claimed that Trump won the election in a landslide victory that was stolen from him. Furthermore, in light of the COVID19-pandemic, Greene has stated that: “children should not wear masks”, calling recommendations by the Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention and other public health officials “unhealthy for their psychological, emotional, and educational growth”, and “emasculating for boys” (Rogers, 2020). She opposed any form of mandatory mask-wearing, compulsory vaccination, or lockdowns in response to the pandemic.

These trends are alarming and demonstrate how conspiracy thinking and anti-intellectual beliefs are infiltrating American politics and society. Although they may seem like new developments, historian and scholar Richard Hofstadter warned about similar mindsets in the political climate of the 1950s and 1960s, worrying specifically about right-wing movements of his contemporary time. In his influential essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965), Hofstadter provides several examples of political paranoia and conspiratorial thinking in American society and politics, dating all the way back to the 1700s. Hofstadter noted that there was a *paranoid style* used by conspiratorial individuals throughout history. What practitioners of the paranoid style have in common, Hofstadter proposed, is that they believe they are living at a “turning point”, and “see the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms” (Hofstadter, 1965, pp. 29-30). Furthermore, they constantly warn their supporters that the status quo is in danger and appeal to people’s fear of losing their way of life. Hofstadter’s essay has been highly influential, and most serious contemporary analysts of conspiracy theories cite Hofstadter (Bratich, 2008, p. 4).

Although *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* provides much insight into conspiracy thinking, Hofstadter has also created other works that may help understand why conspiracy theories are so popular in contemporary America. In 1963, Hofstadter published an award-winning book called *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*. This book explores how intellectuals in America have lost their status and influence, and how narratives about the self-made man have led many Americans to value practical knowledge over academic knowledge. Showing how intellectuals and experts have lost some of their authority, the spread of conspiracy theories may flourish. Academically robust, Hofstadter’s book is still used to define and track signs of anti-intellectualism in American society.

1.1 Research Question

In his two influential academic works, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* and *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, Hofstadter describes long traditions of conspiratorial thinking and anti-intellectualism in American society and politics. This thesis aims to demonstrate how these two theories, combined, may provide a deeper understanding of how and why conspiratorial thinking is so rational to many Americans. The research question of this thesis will therefore be:

How can Richard Hofstadter's theories about *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* and *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* help us make sense of the enduring paranoia and anti-intellectualism of present political times in the U.S., where conspiracy theories have moved into the political and media mainstream?

2. American Right-Wing Movements: Past and Present

Because Hofstadter was concerned with the influence and conspiratorial mindsets of minority movements on the right, this chapter will provide a short overview of the John Birch Society, a right-wing movement founded in 1958 by Robert Welch, and the contemporary Tea Party Movement. There are several similarities between the movements, and the Tea Party is strongly influenced by the ideas of the John Birch Society. Although there have been numerous right-wing movements in American history, the scope of this thesis only allows the exploration of two.

2.1 The John Birch Society

In the early 1960s, many liberals were concerned about what became known as “the Radical Right”, which included organizations like The John Birch Society. Members of such organizations were often labeled “conspiracists” because they saw subversive activity everywhere, including in the federal government (Bjerre-Poulsen, 2013, pp. 29-30). With roughly 60,000 members, the John Birch Society’s primary concern was domestic subversion. The Birchers believed that America had already become “60-80% Communist” and that the war had been lost. Some years earlier, its founder – retired candy manufacturer Robert Welch Jr. – had notoriously accused President Dwight D. Eisenhower of being a “conscious, dedicated agent of the Communist Conspiracy” (Bjerre-Poulsen, 2013, p. 30). Welch was convinced that even the communists were merely tools for a far larger conspiracy, and according to him, the world was controlled by “insiders”, most likely the Bavarian Illuminati in collaboration with the Rothschilds, Rockefellers, and Bilderberg Group (Bjerre-Poulsen, 2013, p. 30). Another radical conspiracist who the John Birch Society admired was Willard Cleon Skousen, who wrote several conspiratorial books like *The Five Thousand Year Leap* and *The Naked Communist*. Investigating whether the John Birch Society posed a threat to American democracy, the federal government’s investigation concluded that the Radical Right posed “a far greater danger to the success of this country in its battle against international Communism than the domestic Communist movement” (Bjerre-Poulsen, 2013, p. 30).

The Radical Right presented a severe challenge for a conservative movement seeking intellectual respectability and a prominent place in American politics. Leading political

figures such as William F. Buckley Jr. desired the passion of the Birchers and their ability to mobilize on grass-root levels, but also realized that the organization was “a Mecca for every crackpot in America”, as National Review publisher William A. Rusher put it (Bjerre-Poulsen, 2013, p. 31). After seeing what damage the label of extremism had done to Barry Goldwater’s campaign in 1964, Buckley and his associates finally concluded that any connection with The John Birch Society and other “Radical Right” organizations could lead to the party’s downfall. In 1965, they finally accepted their duty as ideological gatekeepers. With the argument that “Conservatism cannot triumph if it allies itself with ideologies which bear no relationship to responsible conservative thought and action”, the leadership of the American Conservative Union cancelled participation of the Birchers. This type of ideological gatekeeping was seen as necessary for conquering the Republican Party (Bjerre-Poulsen, 2013, p. 31)

2.2 The Rise of the Tea Party Movement

In the aftermath of Barack Obama’s inauguration as president in 2009, the Tea Party’s emergence on the American political scene was astounding. Although traces of the Tea Party had appeared at Republican rallies during the 2008 presidential campaign, the passion of those mobilized by the Tea Party movement; their anger, and their very numbers was shocking (Rosenthal & Trost, 2012, p. 1). It helps to remember the political climate of late 2008 and early 2009 to grasp the shock of the Tea Party’s emergence. Since 1980, the conservative movement, which had been primarily in control and setting the boundaries of American political debate, appeared to have come to a halt, perhaps terminally. Things had gone disastrously wrong socially, economically, and even in foreign affairs after eight years under the most conservative president in history – six of which included a Republican majority in Congress (Rosenthal & Trost, 2012, p. 1). A general attitude held that, after thirty years in power, American conservatism had worn out its welcome. Its electoral prospects were squandered, and Republicans were condemned to be a rump or regional party in a changing American demographic landscape. Intellectually, its beliefs were exhausted. We were seeing “The Death of Conservatism”, as Sam Tanenhaus phrased it in his early 2010 book title (Rosenthal & Trost, 2012, p. 3). The Tea Party overturned the prevailing common thought. Instead of fading into the sunset, the right was louder than ever, quickly emerging as the Obama presidency’s most notable political phenomenon. In a stunningly short period of time, American conservatism not only survived but also reorganized and moved dramatically

to the right. Tax Day rallies and Tea Party showdowns at congressional town hall meetings heralded a new and unexpected chapter in American conservatism. The Tea Party reintroduced issues that had been dismissed as too extreme by mainstream conservatism forty years earlier (Rosenthal & Trost, 2012, p. 3).

Most sources credit CNBC on-air editor Rick Santelli's tirade on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange on February 19, 2009, as the birth of the Tea Party movement and the remarkable anti-government rage across the country. Notably, Santelli's rant took place early in Obama's presidency, and at the time, he enjoyed approval ratings of over 60 percent (Mayer, 2016, p. 165). Santelli accused Obama of "promoting bad behavior" by offering to "subsidize the loser's debts" in response to the Homeowners Affordability and Stability plan which was established to provide relief to mortgage holders (Rosenthal & Trost, 2012, p. 9). "This is America!" Santelli exclaimed as he turned to the dealers on the floor. "How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills?" Met with applause, he continued, "It's time for another tea party. What we are doing in this country will make Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin roll over in their graves." (Rosenthal & Trost, 2012, p. 9). By mid-April 2009, there were at least six Tea Party factions with a nationwide scope, and on the second series of "Tax Day" Tea Party rallies, there were 300 000 participants (Mayer, 2016, p. 180). During the summer of 2009, these establishments, along with many other local organizations, focused their sights on mobilizing conservative Americans around a new target of rage: the Obama administration's proposed health-care overhaul. Tea Party activists targeted congressional town hall events designed to discuss planned healthcare changes with constituents. Members of Congress were yelled out by enraged and occasionally threatening protestors for supporting "socialized medicine" and government-sponsored "death panels" (Rosenthal & Trost, 2012, p. 11).

While some Tea Parties sought to build a nationwide coalition, others sought to change the Republican Party from the inside by pushing it further to the right. Instead of forming a distinct third party, whose candidates would have a difficult time winning in a two-party system, Tea Party members like Eric Odom counseled, "Use the Republican to your advantage. Move in and take it over" (Rosenthal & Trost, 2012, p. 13). Riding a new wave of Tea Party rage, the GOP did exceedingly well in the 2010 midterm elections, retaking control of the House but not the Senate. Republican leaders, such as Speaker of the House John Boehner, took advantage of Tea Party enthusiasm by portraying Obama as a dangerous leftist

in order to stir conservatives into an electoral hysteria (Kruse & Zelizer, 2019, p. 310). Two years after his inauguration, Obama's party would lose control of the House of Representatives, thereby terminating his capacity to bring about "change you can believe in", as he had promised throughout his campaign. Arguably, the dramatic downhill fall began that day (Mayer, 2016, p. 165). The combative style of politics continued to pay off at the polls, and the Republican Right's strength was cemented in the 2014 midterm elections. Republicans now held roughly two-thirds of all governorships and state legislatures at the state level. On a national level, the Republicans retook the Senate for the first time since 2006 and increased their seats in the House. With their ranks continuously drifting to the right, Republicans now had the greatest majority in the House since the eve of the Great Depression (Kruse & Zelizer, 2019, p. 324).

2.2.1 The Influence of the Media

The escalating disagreement and divide between Democrats and Republicans exposed an alarming new trend in American politics. The two parties were increasingly not only deriving different conclusions from the same facts; they were starting out with dramatically opposing views of what those facts were in the first place. In a candid interview after his retirement, Boehner stated, "It was modern-day media, especially social media, that kept pushing people further right and further left." "People began to realize," Boehner noted, "that they could select where they got their news." In this way, people go to places where they agree, increasing the split further (Kruse & Zelizer, 2019, p. 310). Since its inception, the Tea Party has stirred endless debate. The Tea Party was covered extensively in the traditional print media, talk radio, network and cable television, and numerous blogs. The movement had a special relationship with Fox News, a national television network that went to great lengths to help plan and advertise Tea Party activities (Rosenthal & Trost, 2012, p. 3). Fox News is the most popular cable news channel with twice as many prime-time viewers as CNN or MSNBC. Given the opposing reactions it elicits on the right and left, data show that Fox News is both the most trusted and the most distrusted media outlet in America (Jouet, 2017, p. 68). With their extensive coverage of the rallies, Fox News fueled the Tea Party anger (Kruse & Zelizer, 2019, p. 305).

Glenn Beck, a fiery right-wing Fox News television host who was a Tea Party superstar at the time, contributed to the movement's wrath. Beck claimed that scheming leftists had been pushing America toward totalitarianism and warned that radicals ready to kill 10 percent of

the U.S. population had entered the federal government (Jouet, 2017, p. 68). He even contended that “Obamacare” covers health insurance for pet dogs. Beck, whose beliefs were influenced by W. Cleon Skousen, a fringe theorist whose political paranoia inspired the John Birch Society, had a daily audience of two million people. Frank Lutz described the impact as historic. “That rant from Santelli woke up the upper-middle class and the investor class, and then Glenn Beck woke up everyone else. Glenn Beck’s show is what created the Tea Party movement”, he claimed, adding, “It started on Tax Day 2009, and it exploded at town hall meetings in July. You can create a mass movement within three months.” (Mayer, 2016, p. 183). It was later revealed that FreedomWorks, a tax-exempt organization, had quietly cemented a deal with Glenn Beck. On Fox News, Beck read “embedded content” created by FreedomWorks personnel for an annual payment that eventually reached \$1 million. They told him what to say on air, and he smoothly incorporated the promotional material into his monologue, making it appear like his own perspective (Mayer, 2016, pp. 182-183).

2.2.2 Billionaire Funding

In her book *Dark Money*, Jane Mayer offers the first comprehensive examination of how right-wing billionaires, most notably David and Charles Koch, have systematically infiltrated and influenced America's major centers of power. Some of the country’s wealthiest businessmen, who had laboriously built up the “counter-establishment” since the 1970s, regarded the public turmoil as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to mobilize popular support for their own objectives (Mayer, 2016, p. 168). Their goal was to undo not just Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society and Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, but Teddy Roosevelt’s Progressive Era too. In taking on this difficult duty, they were in many ways refigting wars that their fathers had lost (Mayer, 2016, p. 59). The Koch brothers have, since the 1970s, given well over \$100 million to dozens of supposedly independent organizations targeted at promoting their radical ideals, much of it concealed. Their front groups vilified the U.S. government, portraying it as an enemy rather than a democratic representation of the people (Mayer, 2016, p. 58). Through the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, the Koch brothers have quietly offered local Tea Parties significant financial and organizational support. Because the public record is still insufficient, only the Kochs know precisely how much they spent on this vast political enterprise. The Kochs made the true scope of their political “investment” difficult, if not impossible, to identify by funneling much of the money through a maze of nonprofit organizations. In 2008 alone, the three main Koch family foundations provided money to thirty-four distinct political and policy organizations, according to public

tax documents, three of which they founded and several of which they directed (Mayer, 2016, p. 147). In this way, Obama was up against a new kind of perceptual campaign. It was waged not by politicians but by wealthy individuals who were able to fund their own private field operations to sabotage the election's outcome. During the Obama years, so-called outside money – money spent by individuals and organizations outside of campaigns – surged (Mayer, 2016, p. 169).

2.2.3 Fears of American Decline

Although the rapid rise of the Tea Party seemed like a “new strain” in American politics, history demonstrates that comparable conservative forces had attacked nearly every Democratic president since Franklin D. Roosevelt. From the Liberty League to the John Birch Society, previous business-funded right-wing movements have all painted Democratic presidents as traitors, usurpers, and threats to the Constitution (Mayer, 2016, p. 167). The unmistakable racial animosity that pervaded many Tea Party gatherings was an ancient and shamefully persistent theme in American politics. Tellingly, 52 percent of Tea Parties believed that too much had been made of black people's problems, compared to 28 percent of the general public. Another study revealed that Tea Parties “are overwhelmingly white, but even compared to other white Republicans, they had a low regard for immigrants and blacks long before Barack Obama was president, and they still do” (Jouet, 2017, p. 189).

Set within a broader context of globalization and fears of American decline, the Tea Party emerged out of a unique economic and political moment marked by the aftermath of a near financial meltdown – the likes of which had not been seen since the Great Depression – and the first African American to assume the presidency. Outrage over the Obama administration's response to the economic crisis and questions about the legitimacy of Obama's presidency are vital ingredients for the political brew known as the Tea Party (Rosenthal & Trost, 2012, p. 9). Certainly, the far right's numbers had risen. The Liberty League, an anti-New Deal branch of the Tea Party in the 1930s, has been estimated to have had 75,000 members. In comparison, the John Birch Society's core membership was reported to exceed 100,000 in the 1960s. At its peak, the John Birch Society had a 5 percent approval rating in the United States. The Tea Party movement, on the other hand, was estimated by the New York Times to have garnered support from 18 percent of the population at the highest. At its core were some 330,000 activists who had signed up with six national organizational networks (Mayer, 2016, pp. 195-196). If the estimates are right, the number of hard-core Tea

Party activists was not very large by historical standards. However, the professionalization of the underground infrastructure, the emergence of sympathetic and, in some cases, financed media outlets, and the concentrated money that pushed the message from the margins to the center stage were truly significant (Mayer, 2016, p. 196).

3. Theoretical framework

In this chapter, two academic works from Richard Hofstadter will be applied as theoretical outlines. This thesis aims to prove that Hofstadter's influential publications *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* and *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, both written in the political climate of the 1960s, may help us understand important patterns and developments in American politics and society, and how conspiracy thinking has become such a prevalent phenomenon. In order to navigate the complex field of contemporary conspiratorial thinking, this thesis applies theory triangulation in the widest definition of the term, which refers to "using and correlating multiple theoretical strategies" (Fusch, Fusch & Ness, 2018, p. 22). The reason for this choice is that I believe there are several relevant theories that, when combined, provide a clearer understanding of the perplexing nature of conspiracy beliefs.

To assess whether Hofstadter's theories can be employed as a theoretical framework, one must first obtain an understanding of both concepts and how Hofstadter applied them to describe issues in American history and his own contemporary time. In this way, we may compare Hofstadter's historical examples of the paranoid style to contemporary American conspiracy beliefs and utilize the concept of anti-intellectualism to explain why conspiracy theories seem rational to so many Americans. Together, these academically robust theories will build the structural framework for the discussion and help make sense of the conspiracy culture seen in America today.

3.1 Hofstadter's Essay on the Paranoid Style

Richard Hofstadter's widely cited essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* was first printed in Harper's Magazine in 1964 and published in its final form in 1965. The essay documents a long history of "paranoid" thinking that contributed to right-wing political movements in the United States throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. When Hofstadter presented his famous thesis, he was already one of the most highly regarded and versatile scholars of United States history. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1956 for his work *The Age of Reform*, comparing Progressives, Populists and New Dealers, and would go on to win a second Pulitzer Prize for *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* in 1964 (Olmsted, 2018, p. 38). As a Professor at Columbia University, Hofstadter was also one of the most eminent members of the so-called New York intellectuals – a collection of academics who shaped

scholarly debate and tried to suggest solutions to the political problems of their day (Olmsted, 2018, p. 38). In the introductory pages of the essay, Hofstadter describes that there has been room for “uncommonly angry minds” in American politics. Hofstadter grew worried in the years leading up to this essay, because he had seen how these “angry minds” among radical right-wingers had mobilized through the Goldwater movement and gained much political leverage through the “animosities and passions of a small minority” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 3).

With *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Hofstadter was the first contemporary historian to treat societal paranoia systematically, applying what was then known about paranoia to the history of social movements (Robins & Post, 1997, p. 37). Hofstadter knew that his use of a clinical term for mental illness would provoke controversy, and sought to make clear that his use of *paranoid* was metaphorical rather than clinical:

“I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind. In using the expression “paranoid style”, I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes.” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 3).

Indeed, he claimed that, unlike the clinical paranoid, the political paranoid supposed that the plot is aimed not against himself or herself personally, but “against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 4). In this way, the political paranoid is somewhat more rational than the clinical paranoid, and his logic that his political passions are selfless and patriotic “goes far to intensify his feeling of righteousness and his moral indignation” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 4). The paranoid style is readily recognized, and its users imagine that a vast and subtle conspiracy exists to destroy their entire way of life. Hofstadter points out that it is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 4). The ultimate goal of the thesis was to inspect the psychology of politics in the U. S., to establish the reality of the paranoid style in American politics and to illustrate its frequent historical recurrence.

The paranoid style is not a new aspect of politics in the U.S., but distinctive and remarkably consistent over time. Hofstadter offers four examples of the usage from different eras of American history. The first illustration is a speech by Senator Joseph McCarthy in 1951,

analyzing America's foreign policy problems with the Korean War under way and the presidential campaign of 1952 beginning:

“How can we account for our present situation unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy, a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man (...) (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 7).

For many Americans, the term *witch hunt* implies not Salem, Massachusetts, in the seventeenth century but the whole country in the early 1950s and the phenomenon of McCarthyism (Robins & Post, 1997, p. 221). The term refers to Senator Joseph McCarthy's shocking and manipulative behavior and statements during his time as Senator and can be defined as “the attempt to restrict individual dissent or political criticism by claiming that it is pro-Communist or unpatriotic (Schrecker, 1988, p. 197). McCarthyism as a phrase has since passed into general usage as a synonym for anti-communist political repression of the early Cold War (Schrecker, 2004, pp. 1042-1043). The McCarthy scare of the early 1950s followed a classic paranoid pattern of distorting and exaggerating a genuine danger and then finding and victimizing suitable scapegoats (Robins & Post, 1997, p. 222).

Hofstadter precedes to illustrate the paranoid style through a manifesto signed in 1895 by several leaders of the Populist party. In this manifesto, the leaders of the party implied that a conspiracy between gold gamblers of Europe and America existed to “deal a blow” to the financial and commercial independence of the United States (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 8). Furthermore, religion and distant outsiders figured prominently in paranoid rhetoric, and Hofstadter exemplifies this with an extract from a newspaper article from *The Texas State Times* in 1855. This article suggests that European Monarchs and the Pope are “plotting our destruction” by infiltrating their way into the Executive Chamber, and that the president has been “tainted with the infectious venom of Catholicism” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 8). Finally, Hofstadter offers an example from a sermon preached by Reverend Jedidiah Morse at Charlestown, Massachusetts in 1798. In this sermon, the reverend contends that “secret and systematic means have been adopted and pursued (...) by wicked and artful men, in foreign countries to undermine the foundations of this Religion” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 9).

All these examples and quotations prove that the paranoid style has been consistently utilized throughout American history. There are several other historical examples of the paranoid style

being mentioned throughout the essay, such as the anti-Masonic movement, the nativist and anti-Catholic movement and the contemporary American Right-wing. Two of the leading occurrences in our past history that Hofstadter describes as “episodes in which the paranoid style emerged in full and archetypal splendor” happened towards the end of the 1700s and at the beginning of the 1800s, a period of time where there was much fear in American society against Illuminism and Masonry (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 10).

Embedded in the liberal response to Catholic religious intolerance and religious political influence, Illuminism was first established on May 1 in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt, a professor of law at the University of Ingolstadt (Bennett, 1988, p. 23). The term refers to the belief in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century America that the nation was about to be taken over by the evil Bavarian Illuminati. Secret societies known as the Illuminati had spread from the European scene some time before their transplantation in the American republic. Although Illuminism appeared to be just another display of widespread Enlightenment rationalism, conservatism fixated on the “conspiratorial” nature of a secret society marked by various ranks and grades and blamed it for plotting against all established institutions (Bennett, 1988, p. 23). Hofstadter noted in his essay that it was easy to imagine that this mindset was attractive to some radicals “with a conspiratorial cast of mind” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 10). The fear of a plot by this secret Masonic society had been stoked by an earlier literature that sought to depict the French Revolution as the result of an Illuminist conspiracy (Barkun, 2013, p. 46). The two major works on this radical conspiracism were John Robison’s *Proofs of a Conspiracy Against All the Religious and Governments of Europe* (1798) and Abbé Barruel’s *Memoirs, Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (1803). John Robison was a recognized Scottish scientist, who had been a minor supporter of Masonry in Great Britain, but “whose imagination had been inflamed by what he considered to be the far less innocent Masonic movement on the Continent” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 11). According to Robison, the purpose of Illuminism was to depose the European governments, eliminate the religious establishments, and he blamed it for majorly contributing to the French Revolution (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 11). Robison wrote in his book: “Nothing is more clear than that the design of the Illuminati was to abolish Christianity ... and we now see how effectual this would be for the corruption of the fair sex, a purpose they eagerly wished to gain that they might corrupt the men (Robison (1798, p. 203) in Bennett, 1988, p. 24). Hofstadter demonstrates how Robison viewed the political influence and moral character of Illuminism as if he had taken a “paranoid leap into fantasy” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 11). However, this

conception of Illuminism was soon spread through New England, and the reaction against the Illuminati fit perfectly in the social and political climate of New England at the turn of the century where establishment ministers were distressed at the challenge to their authority in a revolutionary age.

Although the “Illuminism conspiracy” thesis could not endure severe scrutiny, Hofstadter noted that it may have opened the way for the anti-Masonic movement of the 1820s and 1830s (Barkun, 2013, p. 46). The anti-Masonic movement took up and amplified the obsession with conspiracy and shares certain characteristics with the turmoil against the Bavarian Illuminati. Hofstadter notes, however, that while the panic of the 1790s was restricted mostly to New England, the anti-Masonic movement spread over many parts of the northern United States (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 14). Politics in the 1820s and 1830s were affected by the movement, and it attracted the support of several politicians who did not necessarily approve of its fundamental philosophy, but “could not afford to ignore it” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 15). The anti-Masonic party played a role in national politics from 1832 and arose from the mass hysteria and speculation following the abduction and presumed murder of William Morgan, a traveling stonemason in Batavia, New York (Bennett, 1988, p. 49). Morgan worked on a book exposing the “secrets of the order”, and the author’s disappearance proved a political sensation. Several investigations were launched, and Morgan’s evaporation was followed by an outburst of similar accusations against Masons of other conspiracies to kidnap or to hold in false imprisonment (Hofstadter, 1965, pp. 15-16).

Because Freemasonry is a secret fraternal order, it has been particularly vulnerable to the projected fears and fantasies of outsiders (Barkun, p. 128). Masons were believed to have hidden lives, and many considered Masonry to be a sinister conspiracy against the republican government. There was an abundance of charges against Masonry, such as constituting a separate imperium within the state and federal government and that they had formed their own jurisdiction, with their own obligations and penalties that could be enforced with the penalty of death (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 16). Masonry was accused of infiltrating the press, and all news that would portray Masonry in a bad light would therefore be suppressed by Masonic editors. All masons were regarded as hostile to republicanism by virtue of both their foreign heritage and their secret rituals and philosophies. People accused Masonry of being a “fraternity of the privileged classes, closing business opportunities and nearly monopolizing political offices” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 17). As Bennet points out: “Like Catholic conspiracy,

Masonic secrecy represented an unpardonable sin in an age of egalitarianism” (Bennett, 1988, p. 50). Hofstadter remarks that not all of these charges and fears must be dismissed as completely without foundation and that there might be some aspects of reality in these views of Masonry. The essential emphasis, however, is “the apocalyptic and absolutist framework in which this hostility to Masonry was usually expressed” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 17). The rhetoric of anti-Masons undoubtedly fits into Hofstadter’s paranoid style of “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness and conspiratorial fantasy” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 3).

Analyzing his own contemporary period, Hofstadter notes that there are some key differences between the nineteenth-century movements and the contemporary right-wing in the use of the paranoid style. The major difference is that the modern right-wingers feel dispossessed. While the voices of the earlier movements felt that they stood for causes that were still in possession of their country, the contemporary right-wing felt that their country had been taken away from them and that their way of life was in danger (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 23). Hofstadter points to Daniel Bell’s explanation of dispossession:

“The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism has been gradually undermined by socialistic and communistic schemers; the old national security and independence have been destroyed by treasonous plots, having as their most powerful agents not merely outsiders and foreigners as of old but major statesmen who are at the very centers of American power. Their predecessors had discovered conspiracies; the modern radical right finds conspiracy to be betrayal from on high.”
(Hofstadter, 1965, p. 23)

Significant modifications in the paranoid style might also be traced to the consequences of the mass media. The villains of the modern right were much better known to the public than those of their paranoid predecessors. Prominent figures like Presidents and Supreme Court Justices were now being accused of conspiracy instead of distant groups and followers of Masonry and Illuminism (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 24). Hofstadter further specifies that global events like the Second World War, the Korean War, and the Cold war gave the contemporary right-wing paranoid a “vast theatre for his imagination, full of rich and proliferating detail, replete with realistic clues and undeniable proofs of the validity of his views” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 24). The fundamental elements of the right-wingers’ beliefs in the 1950s and 1960s can be divided into three. Firstly, they believed that a grand conspiracy existed to undermine free capitalism and pave the way for socialism and communism in the United States. The second view is that

the United States government has been profoundly infused by Communists, resulting in American politics dictated by evil men who were selling out American national interests (Hofstadter, 1965, pp. 25-26). The final argument is that the whole country is so affected by Communist agents that the mass media, the educational system, religion, and the press try to undermine and “paralyze the resistance of loyal Americans” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 26). Senator Joseph McCarthy is perhaps the embodiment of the paranoid style in the 1950s, as Robins & Post note: “the most notorious episode of paranoia and the most infamous “paranoid” leader in United States history (Robins & Post, 1997, pp. 220-221). In 1952, McCarthy delivered an official indictment of Secretary of State George C. Marshall, portraying Marshall as the main character in a betrayal of American interests stretching in time from the strategic plans for the Second World War to the formulation of the Marshall plan (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 26). According to McCarthy, the Marshall plan was an “evil hoax on the generosity, good will and carelessness of the American people” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 27). Hofstadter precedes to explain how Robert Welch, the founder of the John Birch Society, has offered “a full-scale interpretation of our recent history in which Communists figure at every turn” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 27).

In the last chapter of the essay, Hofstadter summarizes the basic features of the paranoid style: “the central image is that of a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy our way of life” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 29). Our past shows that there are indeed conspiratorial acts in history. Still, the unique conception of the paranoid style is that its promoters regard a “vast” and “gigantic” conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events. The paranoid spokesman always feels like they are living in a crucial moment in history and that it is now or never in organizing resistance to conspiracy (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 30). Furthermore, the paranoid is a militant leader, a protector, who believes that they are fighting against absolute evil and nothing but complete victory will do. Hofstadter called the protectors paranoid” because they attribute superhuman qualities to the enemy conspirator; they see him as “a kind of amoral superman... ubiquitous, cruel... deflecting the normal course of history in an evil way.” (Hofstadter, 1965, pp. 31-32). This view of the enemy can be seen as a projection of the self: the paranoid spokesman projects both the ideal and undesirable aspects of themselves onto their enemy. Hofstadter, noting specific examples like Senator Joe McCarthy, dutifully points out that “a fundamental paradox of the paranoid style is the imitation of the enemy” and provides some examples of what he labels “secret organizations set up to combat secret organizations” (Hofstadter, 1965,

p. 32). The Ku Klux Klan emulates Catholicism by developing extravagant rituals, wearing priestly robes, and establishing a complex hierarchy. Similarly, spokesmen of the various Christian anti-Communist “crusades” openly reveal their appreciation for the commitment, discipline, and strategic ingenuity stimulated by communist causes (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 33). Through projection, exponents of the paranoid style can express their concerns about sexual freedom, the enemy’s lack of moral inhibition and other traits they see as immoral or sinful that are, in reality, undesirable features of their own minds.

The paranoid style, Hofstadter contends, is not distinguished by the lack of provable facts but by the “curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 37). Users of the paranoid style find it credible because of its seemingly coherent and careful application to detail and the persistent gathering of what is regarded to be persuasive proof for “the fantastic conclusions” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 37). The paranoid spokesman has little hope that his evidence will convince a hostile world, and he has little intention of two-way communication with those who doubt his views. In possession of all the evidence he needs, the paranoid spokesman considers himself not a receiver but a transmitter (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 38). Although Hofstadter bases his essay mostly on American examples, he clarifies that the paranoid style is an international phenomenon. The reappearance of the paranoid style over an extended period of time and in separate places suggests that a mindset to see the world in a paranoid way may always persist in some significant minority of the population (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 39). Hofstadter suggests that beliefs in conspiracies can be traced to feelings of powerlessness among people who believe that they cannot “make themselves felt” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 39). Lastly, Hofstadter demonstrates that while we are all sufferers from history, the paranoid is a “double sufferer” because he is burdened not only by the real world but “by his fantasies as well” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 40).

In summary, Hofstadter’s essay argues that the paranoid style is a rhetorical style that has steadily been used throughout American history as well as internationally. Providing examples like the opposition of Illuminism in the 1800s, anti-Masonry in the 1820s and 1830s, and Senator McCarthy in the 1950s, Hofstadter illustrates how the paranoid style has been implemented by minorities in the population. The employment of the paranoid style has progressed and changed over time; people linked to the old movements supposed that they were fighting an evil enemy, while the spokesmen of Hofstadter’s contemporary time felt that

their country had been taken away from them. Feeling dispossessed, their main concern was to take their country back and re-establish their way of living. The enemies of the paranoid spokesmen also changed over time. They were no longer simply followers of Illuminism or Masonry but prestigious public figures like politicians, secretaries of state, and Presidents. This made it less challenging for the paranoid charges to spread, as the accused were public figures that most people knew. The paranoid spokesman feels like he lives in a crucial moment in history. Characteristically, the conspiracy is described as already powerful and growing rapidly, and complete and irreversible victory of the conspiratorial group is necessary. The conspirators are absolutely evil, and the opponents of this evil power, members of the paranoid group, see themselves as the force for good. Furthermore, Hofstadter notes that the paranoid spokesman often projects himself onto his enemies. Projecting both his undesirable and positive aspects onto his rivals, the paranoid spokesman models himself after his opponents and often uses their political tactics to spread his message. Users of the paranoid style find it plausible because of the appearance of vigilant, thorough, and coherent evidence but refuse to participate in two-way communication with the world outside their group because they have little faith that their evidence will persuade a hostile world. Beliefs in conspiracies can be traced to feelings of powerlessness, and the paranoids are described as “double sufferers” of history.

3.2 Anti-intellectualism in American Life

As mentioned earlier, Richard Hofstadter won the 1964 Pulitzer Prize in Non-Fiction for his book *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*. Hofstadter first expressed his views on the function of intellectuals in society in lectures given at the University of Michigan in 1953. For nearly a decade, he lectured on intellectuals and American responses to them and on the more general features of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism. Egalitarian ideas, especially prevalent in the Deep South, led generations of Americans to grow weary of the influence of the privileged elite (Jouet, 2107, p. 47). When Hofstadter published *Anti-intellectualism in American life* in 1963, he attempted to understand “not only the class of intellectuals recently under attack in the hysteria of the Cold War, but also the history of American hostility to intellect itself” (Tischler, 1997, p. 191). In this book, Hofstadter’s concern about the position and purpose of America’s intellectuals led him to “trace some of the social movements in our history in which intellect has been disserved from its coordinate place among the human virtues and assigned the position of a special kind of vice” (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 47). With its

deep roots in the American past, anti-intellectualism was the vehicle for investigating anxiety, fear, and repression in religion, politics, the economy, and education (Tischler, 1997, p. 191).

Hofstadter provides a well-organized baseline for the term “anti-intellectualism” in his book, defining it as “resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life” (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 7). He feels that anti-intellectualism is widespread in our culture and that “in the United States, the play of the mind is perhaps the only form of play that is not looked upon with the most tender indulgence.” (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 33). Hofstadter suggests that this stems from a mistrust of the intellectual community’s “character.” Rejecting the idea that the American public is “simply divided into intellectual and anti-intellectual factions,” Hofstadter has the impression that the larger part of the public and even a significant part of the intelligent public is plainly non-intellectual; “it is infused with enough ambivalence about intellect and intellectuals to be swayed now this way and now that on current cultural issues.” (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 19). Hofstadter demonstrates the qualities of anti-intellectualism to be character-driven. It is intertwined into an individual’s mentality through cultural norms, driven by social status, personal desires, religious influence, or a combination of these factors. He continues to argue that while anti-intellectualism has always existed in American culture, its intensity is subject to cyclical fluctuations (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 6). Furthermore, he notes that the more moderate and benign forms of anti-intellectualism are documented to be the most widespread, while the most malign forms are found mainly among “small if vociferous minority groups” (Hofstadter, 1963, pp. 19-20).

Anti-intellectualism holds an exceptional weight in parts of America. This peculiar mindset is animated by complete skepticism of education, leading to what Isaac Asimov called “a cult of ignorance,” which promoted “the false notion that democracy means that ‘my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge’” (Jouet, 2017, p. 43). Paradoxically, anti-intellectualism mainly stems from a positive value in American society: equality. Studying the first modern democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville famously found a higher degree of equality in America than in Europe. Although twenty-first-century America is far more unequal than Europe due to its winner-take-all capitalism, the egalitarian ideas of the nineteenth century fostered skepticism towards intellectuals and the advantaged elite (Jouet, 2017, p. 46). Academic education was commonly perceived as meaningless, and several Americans believed that too much learning might set one citizen above another and disrupt the very democratic principles

that education is supposed to promote (Jouet, 2017, p. 47). Hofstadter studied the dilemma of intellect in a democracy, pointing out that “intellect in America is resented as a kind of excellence” (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 51). Some of his most perceptual and still relevant observations are about American education, where socialization outweighs critical thinking, and consensus and good citizenship are often considered as conflicting with questioning and analysis (Tischler, 1997, p. 192). Hofstadter remarked that “ours is the only educational system in the world, vital segments of which have fallen into the hands of people who joyfully and militantly proclaim their hostility to intellect” (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 51). Published in 1963, Hofstadter’s distrust may have increased due to the growing religious right movement, which intensified resentment of secular public schools among Christian fundamentalists, denouncing public education for promoting “liberal” ideas (Jouet, 2017, p. 53).

Lastly, Hofstadter reports that anti-intellectualism has amplified with the development of education away from humanities-based topics to more “practical” and “utilitarian” career training. Business is, Hofstadter argues, “the most powerful and pervasive interest in American life.” He further contends that “since the mid-nineteenth century, businessmen have brought to anti-intellectual movements more strength than any other force in society (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 237). The industrial revolution of the 19th century, combined with the growing approval of stories of the “self-made man,” increased the contempt for formal education and the people who pursued it. Examining nineteenth-century America, Tocqueville observed that Americans appeared solely concerned with the aspects of their trade having “an immediate practical application” (Jouet, 2017, p. 47). This perspective rested partly on the fallacy that a person is either a thinker or a doer and that those who think or know too much lack the ability to act. Hofstadter noted that as popular democracy gained power and confidence, “it reinforced the widespread belief in the superiority of inborn, intuitive, folkish wisdom over the cultivated, over-sophisticated, and self-interested knowledge of the literati and well-to-do (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 154). Educated politicians have had to prove that they are not just thinkers but doers, trying to connect with the public by promoting an image of folksiness and virility. An example of this is Theodore Roosevelt, who suffered from the stigma of his fashionable background as a naturalist, writer, and president of the American Historical Association. However, his experience as a soldier, hunter, and boxer eliminated doubts about his masculinity, and he was eventually praised as a “manly, athletic, vigorous person” (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 193). Although written almost 60 years ago, Hofstadter’s work

continues to serve as the prominent body of material in defining and tracking the signs of anti-intellectualism. Academically robust, and meticulously reviewed, his work offers non-partisan insight on this topic at a level and complexity unequalled since.

4. Discussion

This chapter of the thesis will mainly draw on the theoretical and historical outlines previously presented. However, the chapter will also offer pertinent literature and research that both challenges and illuminates the various aspects of conspiratorial thinking in contemporary American politics and society. Discussing Hofstadter's theories about the paranoid style in American politics and anti-intellectualism in American life, the chapter aims to provide some explanations of why conspiratorial thinking is so prevalent in American culture today.

4.1 The Paranoid Style in Contemporary America

No work has been more significant in debunking conspiracy beliefs than Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Today, over fifty years later, Hofstadter's definition of a "paranoid style" remains influential in scholarly and popular media. As observed by Jack Z. Bratich, "most serious contemporary analysts of conspiracy theories cite Hofstadter. In so doing, they use conspiracy theories as paradigmatic of the 'paranoid style'" (Bratich, 2008, p. 4). Rather than being fringe beliefs held by a small number of people, conspiracy theories have become a fundamental part of how a large number of Americans understand "how the world works" (Knight, 2000, p. 2). American politics are still filled with "uncommonly angry minds" who display a paranoid style of "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 3), and Hofstadter's observations are applicable to contemporary times. But just as even Hofstadter could not have foreseen the grip that conspiratorial thinking now has on American politics, few if any at the start of last year could have foreseen the traumatic paranoid politics about to unfold. Recent events, such as the emergence of conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 vaccines and about a stolen election that culminated in the 2021 Capitol attack, provide evidence that the paranoid style has in fact intensified since 1965. There are numerous reasons for this development, and the scope of this thesis will not be able to address them all. However, the core components of Hofstadter's theory will be applied to the political and social climate of today in order to explain some of the conditions that have led to such a widespread conspiracy culture in the United States.

4.1.1 Dispossession

Hofstadter argued in his essay that the users of the paranoid style in his contemporary time felt dispossessed and that “the old American virtues have been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 23). Feeling like strangers in their country, the right-wing of the 1960s became paranoid and enraged. Similar patterns are undeniably prominent among right-wingers in American politics today. One scholar who was particularly concerned with the anger, mourning, and feeling of dispossession experienced by the contemporary right-wing was sociologist Arlie Russel Hochschild. Applying Hofstadter’s theory on the paranoid style to the political climate of today, Hochschild found astonishingly comparable trends among Tea Party enthusiasts.

In her book *Strangers in Their Own Land*, Hochschild explores what was going on with the far right in the years leading up to Donald Trump’s election. Hochschild, who is professor emerita of sociology at the University of California, spent five years in Louisiana to study enthusiasts from the Tea Party. When she began her research in 2011, she was becoming worried about the “increasingly hostile split in our nation between two political camps” (Hochschild, 2018, p. xi). The two main political parties in the U.S. have undoubtedly split further apart, and political feeling also runs deeper than it did in the past. A 2014 Pew study of over 10 000 Americans showed that the most politically engaged on each side see those in the “other party” not simply as incorrect but as “so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being” (Hochschild, 2018, p. 6). The split in our nation has widened because the right has moved right, not because the left has moved left. As observed by political scientist John Kingdon, “The center in American politics is considerably to the right of the center in the politics of other industrialized countries (Kingdon in Jouet, 2017, p. 16). We live in what the *New Yorker* has called the “Tea Party” era. Although it only has 350,000 active members, a Pew poll demonstrates that 20 percent of Americans – 45 million people – support the Tea Party. The division between the political parties cuts through a vast selection of issues. While 90 percent of Democrats believe in the human role in climate change, only 29 percent of Tea Party advocates believe the same (Hochschild, 2018, p. 7).

Hochschild explains in her book that she carried with her a great paradox on her five-year journey to Louisiana. Across the country, red states are poorer and have more teen mothers, more divorce, worse health, more obesity, more trauma-related deaths, more low-birth-weight

babies, and lower school enrollment. On average, people in red states die five years earlier than people in blue states, and the gap in life expectancy between Louisiana and Connecticut is the same as that between the United States and Nicaragua (Hochschild, 2018, p. 8). Additionally, red states suffer way more from industrial pollution, causing severe health issues and environmental destruction. In light of all these challenges, one might expect people to welcome federal support. However, most people of Louisiana do not welcome federal money, and they doubt the science of climate change. The support for the Republican Party has grown rapidly, and between 1952 and 2000, there has been a 20 percent increase in Republican votes among high-school educated whites in the South (Hochschild, 2018, p. 11).

Working as a professor at the University of California, Hochschild acknowledges that she has her own political perspective and that she comes from her personal “liberal political bubble” (Library of America & The Center for American Studies at Columbia University, 2020, 17:56). As a sociologist, however, she has a keen interest in how life *feels* to people on the right – the emotion that underlies politics. In order to achieve this, she had to imagine herself into their shoes (Hochschild, 2018, p. xi). She further contends that the polarization of the U.S. and the “increasing reality that we simply don’t know each other” makes it too easy to settle for aversion and contempt (Hochschild, 2018, p. xiv). In the end, a healthy democracy depends on a collective capacity to discuss and “hash things out” (Hochschild, 2018, p. 8). To achieve this, we must unravel what is happening in American politics, particularly on the more rapidly shifting and ever stronger right.

One crucial way to gain understanding of another person is to cross what Hochschild calls an empathy wall:

“An empathy wall is an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances. (...) We settle for knowing our opposite numbers from the outside. But is it possible, without changing our beliefs, to know others from the inside, to see reality through their eyes, to understand the links between life, feeling, and politics?” (Hochschild, 2018, p. 5).

On her five-year journey, Hochschild was “humbled by the complexity and height of the empathy wall” (Hochschild, 2018, p. 233). However, in the way that they accepted her into the community, the conservative people she met in Louisiana showed her that the wall can indeed come down. And issue by issue, there is a chance for practical cooperation. In order to

gain a deep understanding of the people of Louisiana and their political convictions, one must realize that just like the “forgotten” right in Hofstadter’s time, the contemporary right-wing also feel dispossessed, forgotten, and left behind by globalization and deindustrialization. Aching from what Hofstadter coined “status anxiety,” white lower-middle-class and working-class Americans saw it progressively harder to gain value from their group membership without partaking in hostile strategies of separation.

Hochschild formulates a metaphor to capture how these people feel. A metaphor is not imposed by reality but seems, to the individual, to *fit* reality. The metaphor is called a deep story, a “feel-as-if-story- it’s the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact.” (Hochschild, 2018, p. 135). Hochschild argues that politics gathers itself around a deep story – a metaphor in motion. We all have a deep story, and such a story allows those on both sides of the political spectrum to “stand back and explore the *subjective prism* through which the party on the other side sees the world” (Hochschild, 2018, p. 135). The core of the radical right’s deep story, as designed by Hochschild, looks like this:

“You have patiently been waiting in a long line leading up a hill (...) you are situated in the middle of this line along with others who are also white, older, Christian, and predominantly male, some with college degrees, some not. Just over the brow of the hill is the American Dream, the goal of everyone waiting in line (...) The sun is hot and the line unmoving. In fact, is it moving backward? (...) Look! You see people cutting in line ahead of you! (...) Through affirmative action plans, pushed by the federal government, they are being given preference for places in colleges, universities, apprenticeships, jobs, welfare payments, and free lunches [Some of the line cutters are black other] women, immigrants, refugees, public sector workers – where will it end? Your tax money is running through a liberal sympathy sieve you do not control or agree with (...) [Everybody] cut ahead of you in line. But it is people like you who have made this country great. You start to feel uneasy (...). You are a compassionate person. But now you have been asked to extend your sympathy to all the people who have cut in front of you (...) Then you become suspicious. If people are cutting in line ahead of you someone must be *helping* them. Who? (...) His name is President Barack Hussein Obama (...) you see him *waving* to the line cutters (...) He is on *their* side. He is telling you that these line cutters *deserve* special treatment, that they have had a harder time than you’ve had (...). You feel betrayed. The president is *their* president, not *your* president (...) the great pride you feel in being an American cannot be conveyed through him (...). You’re not the paranoid type, but it seems to you that either the federal government funded Obama’s education or, even worse, secret strings were pulled. (...) If you can no longer feel pride in the United States through its president, you’ll have to feel American in some new way – by banding with others who feel as strangers in their own land” (Hochschild, 2018, pp. 136-140).

This deep story illustrates the bitterness, anger, uncertainty, fear, and mourning experienced among white rural working-class Americans who no longer feel that the land they love

belongs to them. Waiting in line for the American Dream, the right-wingers see African Americans, women, and immigrants cutting in line ahead of them, assisted by those same elites who disregard them (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 88). They experience status anxiety, remembering a past where they enjoyed high ranks and power. The far-right feels that they are being held back for a mixture of reasons, which leads them to feel frustrated, angry, and betrayed by the government (Hochschild, 2018, p. 146). Hochschild remarks that race is a crucial part of this story. Despite multiculturalism's apparent aim of inclusion, experimental studies propose that it is experiences by whites as a form of status threat that has created more damaging attitudes toward outgroups of all kinds (Mutz, 2018, p. 4332). Because white male Christians are perceived as most prototypically "American," they have the most to lose psychologically if they perceive whites to be no longer dominant in the country. When members of a dominant group feel threatened, numerous well-established reactions help these groups regain a sense of dominance and wellbeing. The ramifications of this status threat involve increased conservatism and greater identification with the Republican Party and the Tea Party, growing opposition to diversity, greater explicit and implicit racial bias, and a stronger preference for interacting with one's own race (Mutz, 2018, p. 4332).

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama explored similar ideas in his book *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*. Fukuyama points at a vital part of the human soul, namely our thymotic desire for recognition by others, either as isothymia, equal dignity to others, or megalothymia, recognition as superior (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 81). Once superior, the white rural working-class of America feel invisible and disapproved, and they crave recognition as superior line-cutting minority groups. The problem with megalothymia, Fukuyama contends, is that for every person recognized as superior, far more people are seen as inferior and do not receive recognition for their human worth (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 21). There is undoubtedly an element of white supremacy in this mindset, and since Trump's rise, white nationalism has moved from a fringe movement to something much more mainstream in American politics.

While pointing a condemning finger downward at ascending minority groups, the angry mourners of the right also point upwards toward elite liberals that help these minorities cut ahead in line. The conservatives also feel like they are being judged by these liberals, who accuse the right's morals of being outdated, sexist, and homophobic without clarifying what "their values are" (Hochschild, 2018, p. 137). This twists our sense of self because "you do

not recognize yourself in how others see you” (Hochschild, 2018, p. 144). Many people spoke of sympathy fatigue - the weariness of feeling sympathy for blacks, women, the poor, and other outgroups. They are tired of liberals telling them what they *should* feel. Feeling scorned, one right-winger said, “People think we’re not good people if we don’t feel sorry for blacks and immigrants and Syrian refugees. But I am a good person and I *don’t* feel sorry for them” (Hochschild, 2018, p. 227).

With a dream of progressing but a reality that perceives them as regressing, the angry mourners become desperate. Slipping backward in the line of the American Dream, the white rural working-class experiences economic distress, which is often perceived as a loss of identity. Diligence should be rewarded, but instead, people who are not willing to play by the rules are granted undue benefits (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 89). The connection between income and status helps to clarify why patriotic or religious conservative groups were more attractive to many people than the traditional left-wing ones based on economic class. Nationalists can interpret the loss of relative economic rank as the loss of identity and status. You have always been a central member of our great nation, but foreigners, immigrants, and your own elite compatriots have conspired to oppress you; your country is no longer your own, and you are not represented in your own land (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 89).

As argued by Diana Mutz, the 2016 election resulted from anxiety about dominant groups’ future status and a candidate who took advantage of this tendency by placing himself closer than his opponent to Americans’ position on status threat-related matters (Mutz, 2018, p. 4337). Racial status threat makes perfect sense happening directly after eight years of leadership by America’s first African American president. For the first time since Europeans arrived in this country, white Americans are being told that they soon will be a minority race, causing anxiety and fear about their upcoming position in society. Those who felt that the hierarchy was being overturned – with whites being discriminated against more than blacks, Christians discriminated against more than Muslims, and men discriminated against more than women – were most likely to support Trump (Mutz, 2018, p. 4338). Conservatism flows along with a nostalgia for the established hierarchies of the past, while modern liberal policies have only set the angry mourners of Hochschild’s book further back in line by inventing an express lane for minorities. A sense of group threat is tough because it is a psychological mindset, threatening our thymotic longing for respect and status. It is psychologically valuable to see oneself as part of a dominant group, and when group members feel threatened,

this prompts defensive reactions (Mutz, 2018, p. 4331). Trump's "us vs. them" rhetoric only fuels this sense of threat and does little to lead whites and minorities or Americans and foreigners to view each other in less hostile ways (Mutz, 2018, p. 4338). This proves that the 2016 election was an attempt by members of already dominant groups to guarantee their continued supremacy in the U.S.

In a digital lecture given at Columbia University in October 2020, Hochschild illustrates how she puts Hofstadter's theory about the paranoid style into her field of expertise – ethnography. Like Hofstadter, Hochschild focuses on analytic history in her book *Stranger in Their Own Land*. She discovered quickly that there was indeed a paranoid style among the hard right, but that one had to understand the *deep story* of the people who carried this style in order to illuminate how it adhered to them. As explained earlier, this deep story is told as a metaphor of Americans patiently waiting in line for the American Dream and minorities cutting in line ahead of them while being cheered on by liberal elites. In time, new chapters are added to this deep story, revealing how paranoia enters in. The rise of Donald Trump is an important chapter, because he fuels the fear and status anxiety of the right-wingers. Through his nationalist rhetoric, conspiracy claims and promises that he will "make America great again," Trump is accessing the white rural working class's paranoia, cutting straight to the heart of their sense of status threat and nostalgia for the stable hierarchies of the past. Hochschild remarks that the Tea Party enthusiasts of Louisiana supported Trump *because of* his penchant for conspiracies, not in spite of it:

"One woman told me of a fellow churchgoer who believes the federal government mandated compact fluorescent lightbulbs because the light makes us easier to control. "Personally, I don't believe that", she added, "but about Obama being born outside the U.S., everyone I know believes that." (Hochschild, 2016).

4.1.2 A Changing Enemy

As noted by Hofstadter, the paranoid style evolved as more people had access to mass media and the villains became more prominent public figures, "The villains of the modern right are much more vivid than those of their paranoid predecessors, much better known to the public" (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 24). Rather than distant groups and followers of Masonry and Illuminism, the new enemies were prominent figures like Presidents and Supreme Court Justices. Hofstadter passed away in 1970, thirteen years before the official birth of the Internet

and 26 years before the creation of Fox News, and was living in an entirely different media universe. Although he predicted many trends seen in society today, he could have never foreseen the Internet and social media like Facebook and Twitter, which have helped propagate the most bizarre paranoid conspiracies in siloed echo chambers (Wilentz, 2021). The ability to evaluate what is credible and what is incredible has been harmed by new types of media technology, particularly the Internet, and the distinction between valid and illicit data is becoming increasingly blurred. American people have practically unrestricted access to both social media and media that capitalizes and popularizes conspiracy beliefs. Since the 1980s, commercial broadcasting has been almost completely deregulated, meaning that American news organizations are fundamentally entrepreneurial actors which strive to maximize profit (Jouet, 2017, p. 69). Numerous television shows and millions of web pages are dedicated to spreading conspiracy theories, whether in support or rejection, and these media outlets reinforce each other, fortifying a conspiratorial interpretation of world events.

Consistent with Hofstadter's argument, enemies of conspiracy believers today are prominent public figures like politicians and powerful elites. An example of this is the QAnon conspiracy which accuses renowned Democratic politicians and elites of feeding off the blood of children. Its predecessor, Pizzagate, was another social media conspiracy alleging that Hillary Clinton was operating a child-trafficking scheme from Comet Ping Pong pizzeria (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021, p. 4). These rumors spurred Edgar Maddison Welch to go to the restaurant with an AR-15 to look for the non-existent basement, where in December 2016 he fired shots into a door that led to a server closet (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2020). This proves that the antagonists of modern conspiracies are well-known politicians and elites, rather than distant enemies of the Illuminati and anti-Masonic conspiracies.

Furthermore, popular belief in conspiracy no longer requires the presence of an alien "other" aiming to infiltrate and subvert the masses; the enemy to be defeated is our own system of power. While the conviction that an alien "other" is attempting to infiltrate and overthrow the American government still exists, and has recently been exploited by fringe Tea Party members, the belief that the establishment itself is conspiring against the American people is based on uncovered examples of corporate and governmental malfeasance like Watergate and Iran-Contra. A large segment of the public now cast a cynical eye toward officials and their "authorized" version of events. "In the eyes of many Americans, the only safe bet is that there *might well be* a conspiracy, for all the public at large know or are likely to ever know", Knight

describes (Knight, 2000, p. 27). The burden of proof has shifted, and the authorities must now prove beyond a reasonable doubt that there has been no initial conspiracy or subsequent cover-up.

4.1.3 A Battle Between Absolute Good and Absolute Evil

Hofstadter illustrated that the paranoid style is based on Manichean politics. In the eyes of the paranoid, they are a militant leader and a protector who is fighting a battle against absolute evil. Furthermore, the paranoid spokesman always feels like they are living in a crucial moment in history, and it is now or never in organizing resistance to conspiracy (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 30). These features may also be found in paranoid style users today, with Donald Trump serving as an excellent example. Trump's rhetoric about a battle between good and hardworking Americans against evil and dangerous enemies fuels the paranoia of conspiracy believers. The battle must be fought and won immediately, and in his 2016 campaign Trump contended that there was no middle ground; if he did not win, the country would become more dangerous. One reason that conspiracy theories are so popular is that they appeal to our sense of heroism. A brave individual against a great conspiracy is a motif as old as the many legends of heroes themselves (Nichols, 2017, p. 58). When a prominent politician recognizes this heroism, conspiracy beliefs may be reinforced. It is precisely this recognition of heroism that stoked conspiracy believers and far-right groups to attack the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Inspired by Trump's conspiratorial speech about the absolute evil Joe Biden's fraudulent election victory, paranoid and "heroic" protestors stormed the Capitol to fight an urgent and critical battle.

4.1.4 Projection

The absolutist view of the enemy as evil, Hofstadter argued, can be regarded as a projection of the self, with the paranoid spokesman projecting both the ideal and undesirable characteristics of themselves onto their enemy. Projection is an aberration of the relatively normal state of shame. A person who is unable to withstand a painful feeling projects it onto his peers and disowns it. The goal of projection is to take unpleasant feelings and project them to the environment (Robins & Post, 1997, p. 12). While Hofstadter used the Ku Klux Klan and Senator Joe McCarthy as examples of projection, contemporary conspiracy cults like QAnon may be said to do the same. Through projection, exponents of the paranoid style can express their concerns about sexual freedom, the enemy's lack of moral inhibition and other

traits they see as immoral or sinful that are, in reality, undesirable features of their own minds (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 34).

Another way the politically paranoid imitates their enemies is through their seemingly coherent and careful application to detail and the persistent gathering of what is regarded to be persuasive proof for “the most fantastic conclusions” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 37). Hofstadter argues that:

“The typical procedure of the higher paranoid scholarship is to start with such defensible assumptions and with careful accumulation of facts, or at least what appears to be facts, and to marshal these facts toward an overwhelming ‘proof’ of the particular conspiracy that is to be established. It is nothing if not coherent – in fact, the paranoid mentality is far more coherent than the real world, since it leaves no room for mistakes, failures or ambiguities (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 36).

In essence, Hofstadter contends that conspiracy theories try to appear intellectual by marshaling data to support their claims. Every piece of contradicting evidence, every disparity among witnesses, and every potential source of conflict must be discounted, omitted, or rejected in order to make such an argument, which all are traits attributed to conspiracy narratives. Conspiracy theories are frustrating precisely because they are so complex. Hofstadter observed that the more sweeping the claims, the more “heroic the strivings for ‘evidence’ to prove that the unbelievable is the only thing that can be believed” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 36). Paradoxically, conspiracy theorists insist on being judged by the same standards of proof employed in the world of academia and the intelligentsia, the very world they despise and distrust. Conspiracy theories, for all their populist promises, crave to be welcomed to the domains where it imagines the conspirators themselves to dwell (Barkun, 2013, pp. 28-29). The obsessive quest for proof, however, masks a deeper problem: the more widespread a conspiracy theory’s claims are, the less meaningful evidence becomes. Conspiracy theorists will alter any actual evidence to match their theory, but they will also use the lack of evidence as even stronger proof. This paradox arises because conspiracy theories are nonfalsifiable at their core. After all, what greater indicator of a truly successful conspiracy than the complete absence of any evidence that the conspiracy exists? (Nichols, 2017, pp. 55-56).

In his book *A Culture of Conspiracy*, Michael Barkun delves deep into America’s contemporary conspiracy subculture. Based on Hofstadter’s ideas, he shows that conspiracy theories today also mimic mainstream scholarship. It does so by appropriating scholarly

infrastructure in the form of extensive citations and bibliographies. The most common demonstration of pedantry is a fondness for reciprocal citation, in which authors gladly cite one another (Barkun, 2013, p. 28). As a result, the same sources are used over and over again, which produces a kind of pseudoconfirmation. If a source is cited repeatedly, it must be reliable. Because conspiracy theorists' statements are mainly unfalsifiable, the multiplication of sources can give the impression of validation without truly putting any proportions to the test of evidence (Barkun, 2013, p. 28).

4.1.5 Feeling Powerless

According to Hofstadter, beliefs in conspiracies may be traced back to sentiments of powerlessness among those who believe that they cannot “make themselves felt” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 39). Hofstadter suggested that conspiracy theories assist people in making sense of a world filled with evil forces beyond their control. Conspiracy beliefs also provide an outlet for the expression of negative feelings: “much of the function of the enemy lies not in what can be imitated but in what can be wholly condemned” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 34). Furthermore, Hofstadter claimed that conspiracy theories provide “seemingly coherent” explanations for complicated social events. (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999, p. 638).

In 1999, Abalakina-Paap and colleagues conducted a study where they tested the hypothesis that beliefs in conspiracy theories would be associated with feelings of powerlessness. The researchers found support for this hypothesis in their results. People who feel powerless may find comfort in conspiracy theories because these theories help them to accept and explain their predicaments (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999, p. 639). Furthermore, beliefs in specific conspiracies allow them to avoid thinking that the world is chaotic. Instead, they can believe that secret forces are in operation, which helps them to understand why they lack the power to control their own lives (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999, p. 644). This view is supported by Robins and Post who noted that feelings of powerlessness and a willingness to follow authoritarian leaders may contribute to beliefs in conspiracies (Robins & Post, 1997, p. 14). Even though both of these works were published in the 1990s, they have been replicated in multiple subsequent studies (e.g., van der Linden et al., 2021, Oliver & Wood, 2014). In this way, Hofstadter's argument regarding powerlessness as a predictor of conspiracism has proved to be valid in modern America as well.

4.1.6 The Politics of Paranoia

Hofstadter made sure to point out in his essay that his use of the word *paranoid* was metaphorical rather than clinical. Contrary to Hofstadter, some have claimed that the clinical and political may intersect. In their 1997 book *Political Paranoia*, Robert Robins and Jerrold Post assert that political paranoia encompasses a wide range of exemplars, including clinical paranoids James Forrestal and Joseph Stalin; borderline paranoids whose “delusion is likely to involve exaggeration and distortion of genuine events and rational beliefs rather than pure psychotic invention” (Robins & Post, 1997, p. 19). According to Robins and Post, when political leaders suffer from the paranoid style, it can lead to hostility and a lot of bloodshed (Robins & Post, 1997, p. 302). For these scholars, conspiracy theories are erroneous, seductive, and harmful because they operate on the assumption that there is a proper or rational way to understand history and current events, as opposed to an improper or irrational view. They also describe societies in which conspiracy theories have become a culturally defined norm, asking the question: If paranoia is the norm for an entire society, can we call it paranoia? “One way of evaluating whether a behavior is pathological is simply to accept the society’s own evaluation of it: a behavior is mad if the society believes it to be so and sane if that pattern is locally accepted” (Robins & Post, 1997, p. 53). Conspiracism thus straddles a blurred and shifting boundary between pathology and normalcy.

According to estimates, more than half of all Americans endorse at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver & Wood, 2014, p. 952). The contemporary era abounds with conspiracy theories, like the “birther” movement and the new and popular QAnon-conspiracy. 17% of surveyed U.S. adults believe the Q-conspiracy theory about a satanic cabal of pedophiles running the media government, and four-in-ten Republicans who have heard of QAnon say it is a good thing for society (Bloom & Moskalenko, 2021, p. 188; Pew Research Center, 2020). If this tendency continues, it could be argued that conspiracy theories are becoming a culturally defined norm in the United States. According to Robins and Post, the only way of determining if a society is paranoid is to accept the society’s own evaluation of it. If conspiracy thinking is accepted as sane in American society, there are no grounds for labeling the behavior as paranoid. In this way, it could be argued that societal paranoia has infiltrated the United States and its population.

The result of introducing such terms as *paranoid* into the discussion of conspiracism is double-edged. On the one hand, the association – whether metaphorical or literal –

encapsulates the belief that conspiracy theorists have detached important ties with a realistic and accurate understanding of the world. On the other hand, the word paranoid has an unmistakable negative connotation. Indeed, Hofstadter appears to have used it precisely because of its judgmental nature. Its overtones are such that, even when used carefully, it risks simply labeling people whose opinions we disagree with (Barkun, 2013, p. 9).

Imhoff and Lamberty investigated the distinction between paranoia and conspiracy belief, proposing that paranoia is first and foremost a self-referential phenomenon while conspiracy belief is a sociopolitical phenomenon (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018, p. 911). One of many explanations is that a paranoid individual is fascinated with the concept that people are attempting to harm him or her, whereas most conspiracy theorists are concerned more with society as a whole. Conspiracy theories are thus more particular in terms of who the untrustworthy source of evil is, but more universal in terms of who is harmed by this evil. Paranoia, on the other hand, considers that there is a worldwide source of evil that is affecting oneself in particular (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018, p. 911). Regardless of their accuracy, conspiracy theories frequently challenge official accounts distributed by social institutions such as the mainstream media or politicians. This lack of trust in social institutions could have far-reaching consequences also for the societal transmission of “knowledge” and epistemic trust in authorities. Imhoff and Lamberty explain that:

“a highly complex society requires a basis of societal trust: trust that scientists provide unbiased evidence in the absence of conflicts of interest, trust that the newspapers report events as they happened without selecting or suppressing certain information, trust that if one votes for a political party, this party will keep its electoral promises once elected” (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018, p. 923).

This social contract of trust has been broken by conspiracy theorists. However, this does not automatically imply that they are insane, paranoid, or mentally challenged, but rather that they are more disillusioned, distrustful, and possibly less naïve about society. They are also more likely to embrace prejudices against groups they perceive as powerful, less likely to stop global warming, and more likely to decline crucial medical treatments like vaccines, in addition to displaying these arguably good types of skepticism (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018, p. 923). Therefore, when applying a term such as *paranoid* into the debate on conspiracism, it is important not to use it to merely attack something you do not agree with (Wilentz, 2021).

4.1.7 An Ideological Asymmetry in Conspiratorial Thinking

When comparing Hofstadter's paranoid style to the current conspiratorial mood in American society, there are many intriguing factors to consider. The lack of symmetry in the paranoid conspiratorial style across the political spectrum is one of them. It is frequently asserted that conspiracy theories are accepted with equal fervor across the left-right ideological spectrum. There are, however, significant historical, philosophical, and scientific reasons to dispute this claim, dating all the way back to Hofstadter's essay on the paranoid style. A research paper published in 2021 in *Political Psychology* entitled "The Paranoid Style in American Politics Revisited: An Ideological Asymmetry in Conspiratorial Thinking", investigates this asymmetry and hypothesizes that "conservatives in the United States would be more likely than liberals to exhibit a conspiratorial mindset (van der Linden et al., 2021, p. 27).

In his majorly influential essay, Hofstadter documented a long history of paranoid thinking that contributed to right-wing political movements in the United States throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, including anti-Masonic organizations, the John Birch Society, and the "Red Scare" that motivated Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist purges. Hofstadter outlines several ways in which "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" contributed to a wide range of right-wing movements that he labeled "pseudo-conservative" because they "believe themselves to be conservatives and usually employ the rhetoric of conservatism" but "have little in common with the temperate and compromising spirit of true conservatism in the classical sense of the word" and "show signs of a serious and restless dissatisfaction with American life, traditions, and institutions (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 3). In contemporary American politics, many conservatives believe that proof of manmade climate change is the result of a massive conspiracy involving scientists, liberal politicians, and foreign countries. Over the years, President Trump has promoted numerous conspiracy theories, including assertions that Barack Obama is a Muslim who was born outside of the United States and that global warming is a hoax. Trump supporters consistently push conspiracy theories about liberals and Democrats to deflect criticism over Russian meddling in the 2016 Presidential election, the impeachment case against Trump, and his administration's mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 (van der Linden et al., 2021, pp. 24-25). However, conspiracy theories are not limited to President Trump's inner circle. According to a YouGov poll conducted in 2019, 70% of Republicans believe a covert "deep state" network is working to destabilize President Trump. Furthermore, many self-

identified conservatives hold significant skepticism about scientists, as well as government officials and journalists, whom they often accuse of “liberal bias” (van der Linden et al., 2021, p. 25). This mindset is recognized in Hofstadter’s *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, and will be debated in more depth later in the discussion.

The researchers of this study propose that when it comes to conspiratorial thinking, there may well be a substantial and underappreciated ideological disparity, at least in the context of the United States. This asymmetry is consistent with mounting evidence that conservatives in the United States and other Western countries score higher on measures of dogmatism, cognitive rigidity, intolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty, self-deception, and threat sensitivity – and lower measures of need for cognition, integrative complexity, cognitive reflection, intelligence and analytical reasoning – when compared to liberals (van der Linden et al., 2021, p. 26). Conservatives in the United States appear to be more susceptible to “fake news”, and citizens who consumed more right-wing news held more false beliefs about the pandemic. (van der Linden et al., 2021, p. 26). Tellingly, there were more unvaccinated adults in conservative states than in liberal states.

Right-wing news outlets like Fox News and Breitbart were much more likely than mainstream news outlets to spread misinformation, including conspiracy theories about the SARS-2/Covid-19 pandemic. According to research, rumors, misinformation, and conspiracy theories travel more quickly and rapidly in the social networks of conservatives than in the networks of liberals, at least in the United States. Consequently, although many social scientific perspectives claim that motivated reasoning, flawed information processing, and conspiratorial thinking are equally common among leftists and rightists, there are numerous empirical grounds to doubt this notion. The fact that “conspiracy theories are not just for conservatives” does not imply that liberals and conservatives embrace conspiracies on the same scale or intensity, nor that conspiracy theories on all sides are equally damaging, erroneous, or motivated by paranoid ideation (van der Linden, 2021, p. 26).

Numerous previous studies have found a positive and linear relationship between conspiracy theories and authoritarianism and right-wing extremism. Conspiracy theories have been employed frequently against popular targets of right-wing prejudice in the past, including Jews, Blacks, leftists, feminists, and sexual minorities. The question of whether there is an ideological asymmetry is thus crucial, not only for political psychology research, but also for

a practical knowledge of how, why, and when conspiratorial thinking shapes public consciousness – and how actions might be developed to counteract it (van der Linden, 2021, p. 26).

In four studies based on diverse samples and a broad constellation of measures of political ideology and conspiratorial thinking, the researchers discovered that, although it is realistic to believe that both liberals and conservatives are prone to conspiratorial thinking, there are significant psychological differences between leftists and rightists. Van der Linden and colleagues discovered a reproducible ideological imbalance when it comes to the adoption of a conspiratorial mindset in general, which is consistent with Hofstadter's historical observations regarding "the paranoid style in American politics" – as well as past research linking paranoia to right-wing conservatism. Overall, there was a positive, linear, and statistically significant association between conservatism and conspiratorial thinking (van der Linden et al., 2021, pp. 43-44).

Noting constraints of their research program, the scholars remark that the study concentrates on the United States just before and during Donald Trump's presidency. This could be significant because, according to cross-national studies, the correlation between political conservatism and doubt about global warming is higher in the United States than in other countries. It is worth noting that Hofstadter's findings on the "paranoid style" of pseudo-conservative thought were limited to the United States – despite the fact that he was writing about a very different historical period (van der Linden et al., 2021, p. 45). Nevertheless, the findings can resonate in nations where right-wing authoritarianism is on the rise, such as Hungary, Austria, Poland, Turkey, Israel, and Brazil. Right-wing conspiracy theories blaming liberals, Jews, immigrants, foreigners, journalists, academics, and other secret cabals for domestic and international problems – including the alleged "replacement" of the White Christian population with non-White Muslims – have gained political currency throughout Europe (van der Linden et al., 2021, p. 45). It would be vital to determine the extent to which left-right ideological asymmetry exists in situations outside of the United States in future research, both for theoretical and practical reasons.

4.1.8 The Paranoid Style as a Political Strategy

As remarked by Jouet, the paranoid style is more than a mentality. It is also a political strategy. Republican leaders enraged much of the country by hysterically claiming that Obama had radically raised taxes when he took office, even though his economic stimulus plan cut income taxes for 95 percent of working families. Despite their fixation with high taxes, only 2 percent of Tea Party supporters were aware that taxes had decreased, while 44 percent believed that Obama had raised taxes (Jouet, 2017, p. 70). Although tax rates in modern America have not escalated towards all-time highs, Rush Limbaugh declared “Obamacare” to be “the largest tax increase in the history of the world”. Ted Cruz went on to say that it was “the biggest job-killer in this country”, causing millions of people to lose their jobs, even as the unemployment rate fell. Donald Trump chimed in, claiming that the true unemployment rate might be as high as “42 percent” (Jouet, 2017, p. 70). This disinformation regarding the Obama administration’s policies is a clear example of the paranoid style of “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy”, utilized by Republican leaders to instill fear and paranoia into the electorate. Frank Furedi exemplifies this political strategy, calling it “politics of fear”. This term contains the implication that politicians purposely manipulate people’s anxieties in order to achieve their goals. There is little doubt that they see fear as a valuable tool for getting their message heard and scare tactics can be effective in undermining opponents and gaining voter approval (Furedi, 2005, p. 123).

4.2 Anti-intellectualism in Contemporary America

“There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that “my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge” (Isaac Asimov, 1980)

The influential mindset of anti-intellectualism has undoubtedly affected American politics and society in the years after Hofstadter’s publication *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* in 1963. This section of the thesis will discuss how the ideas of anti-intellectualism have fostered conspiratorial thinking in the United States. Anti-intellectualism holds an exceptional weight in parts of America, and this peculiar mindset is fueled by a full distrust of education. Although the American Founding Fathers were Enlightenment thinkers who believed that good government necessitated educated individuals, the rise of modern democracy in America

developed a populist attitude that saw education as a sign of elitism. Many people in the United States have come to believe that cultivating one's mind is both useless and arrogant because "common sense" is considered to be sufficient for making money and understanding politics (Jouet, 2017, p. 43). With the explosion of mass media, many politicians have shared or exploited this mentality by peddling absurd propaganda and conspiracy theories. American society cannot be understood without studying this curious mindset, as it impacts the opinions of millions of Americans (Jouet, 2017, p. 44).

4.2.1 The Death of Expertise

In his 2017 book *The Death of Expertise*, Tom Nichols condemns what he describes as the numerous forces attempting to undermine the authority of experts in the United States.

According to Nichols, we are living in perilous times. Never before have so many people had such easy access to so much information and yet been so resistive to learning. People in the United States and other industrialized countries, who are otherwise intelligent, disparage intellectual achievement and disregard professional counsel. This trend risks destroying centuries of accumulated knowledge as well as the practices and habits that allow us to acquire new knowledge (Nichols, 2017, p. 3). Nichols argues that this is more than a natural skepticism towards experts:

"I fear we are witnessing the *death of the ideal of expertise itself*, a Google-fueled, Wikipedia-based, blog-sodden collapse of any division between professionals and laypeople, students and teachers, knowers and wonderers – in other words, between those of any achievement in an area and those with none at all" (Nichols, 2017, p. 3).

The death of expertise is not just a rejection of existing knowledge. It is, at its core, a rejection of science and dispassionate rationality, which are the bedrocks of contemporary civilization. Nichols illustrates that society has come full circle from a premodern era where folk wisdom filled gaps in human understanding, through a period of rapid development focused mainly on specialization and expertise, and finally to a postindustrial, information-oriented world where everyone believes they are an expert on everything (Nichols, 2017, p. 5). Most people's first instinct when confronted with the death of expertise is to blame the Internet. While not entirely untrue, this reasoning is overly simplistic. Attacks on knowledge have a long history, and the Internet is merely the latest tool in a problem that has previously used television, radio, the printing press, and other innovations in a similar way (Nichols, 2017, p. 6).

The concept of “the death of expertise” can be linked to Hofstadter’s work on anti-intellectualism in many ways. In 1963, Hofstadter wrote that “the complexity of modern life has steadily whittled away the functions the ordinary citizen can intelligently and competently perform for himself” (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 34). He further argued that this overwhelming complexity caused citizens to feel helpless and angry as they realized they were increasingly at the mercy of brighter elites. Hofstadter warned that:

“What used to be a jocular and usually benign ridicule of intellect and formal training has turned into a malign resentment of the intellectual in his capacity as expert. Once the intellectual was gently ridiculed because he was too needed; now he is fiercely resented because he is needed too much” (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 34).

Little has changed since Hofstadter’s time, and law professor Ilya Somin wrote in 2015 that the “size and complexity of government” have made it “more difficult for voters with limited knowledge to monitor and evaluate the government’s many activities. The result is a polity in which the people often cannot exercise their sovereignty responsibly and effectively.” (Somin in Nichols, 2017, p. 19).

In many ways, the death of expertise is rooted in American society’s long history of anti-intellectualism. As a result, these two concepts can help explain the abundance of conspiracy theories that the American people endorse. Theories asserting that President Obama is a secret Muslim who was born in Africa. President Bush was part of the plot to attack America on 9/11, and the US government is spraying mind-controlling chemicals in the air through the exhaust ports of jet aircraft (Nichols, 2017, p. 57). Today, conspiracy theories are reactions mostly to the economic and social dislocation of globalization. When it comes to expert engagement with the public, this is not a minor issue: nearly 30 percent of Americans, for instance, believe “a secretive elite with a globalist agenda is conspiring to eventually rule the world”, and 15 percent think media or government add secret “mind-controlling” technology to TV broadcasts (Nichols, 2017, p. 59).

Conspiracy theories are not harmless. At their worst, conspiracy theories can cause moral panic, resulting in the harm of innocent people. Hysteria gripped the United States in the early 1980s, for example, when many parents believed Satanic sex cults were operating inside children’s daycare centers. Faux “experts” added to the hysteria by misinterpreting every confused utterance from a toddler as confirmation of the most bizarre form of abuse. It goes

without saying that child abuse exists, but a grandiose conspiracy – which more than anything else reflected the fears and guilty feelings of working parents – captured the American imagination, destroying many lives and temporarily clouding better approaches to a very real but far more limited problem (Nichols, 2017, p. 60). A similar hysteria occurred when extreme far-right groups and supporters of fringe online conspiracy theories like QAnon broke into buildings on Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021. This riot was sparked by Donald Trump’s baseless conspiracy theories about a rigged election and resulted in complete chaos and five casualties (Healy, 2021).

4.2.2 The Impact of Christian Fundamentalism

Jouet argues that Christian fundamentalism fosters anti-intellectual, black-and-white, retrograde, authoritarian, and harmful mindsets. Fundamentalists frequently make up their own facts by resorting to disinformation and conspiracy theories since their extremist ideals do not square with reality (Jouet, 2017, p. 174). These are also characteristics of Donald Trump, which help explain why, despite his immoralities, he attracted millions of evangelicals. Trump defeated Hillary Clinton by 81 percent to 16 percent among white evangelical/born-again Christians in the 2016 election. In *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Hofstadter described how religious ultratraditionalists are drawn to “men of emotional power or manipulative skill (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 55). The fact that evangelical support for the irreligious Trump perplexed ordinary individuals and experts alike exemplifies much of American society’s narrow conception of religion. Religions are more than just places of worship; they have the power to profoundly shape people’s thinking (Jouet, 2017, p. 112). Sean Wilentz echoes this argument, contending that the massive political mobilization of white conservative evangelicals since the late 1970s is one of the major reasons why the paranoid style seems ever dominant today (Wilentz, 2021).

4.2.3 A Post-Truth Society

America appears to have developed into a “post-truth society”, as political scientist Francis Fukuyama characterizes it. Millions of Americans are unable or unwilling to accept basic facts and on the Internet and in the media, naked propaganda has become standard. As an example, Donald Trump not only engaged in constant disinformation and conspiracy-mongering to win the presidency. He also tended to systematically take self-contradictory positions, thereby enabling his supporters to hear what they wanted to hear (Jouet, 2017, p. 79). Fukuyama contends that a post-truth society is a reflection of something deeper: the

decline of authority of institutions across the board (Stanford, 2016, 1:10). Fewer people trust these institutions and technology plays an inevitable role in this because institutions are much more transparent.

A post-truth society fosters conspiratorial thinking in many ways. Lacking trust in both professionals and the government, Americans are increasingly conducting their own research through the Internet and other sources to discover their individual truths. When it comes to where Americans place their trust as they gather information before making an important decision, 81% say they rely a lot on their own research while only 31% say they rely on professional experts (Turner & Rainie, 2020). As pointed out by Nichols, Americans now believe that having equal rights in a political system means that each person's viewpoint on anything must be accepted as equal to anyone else's (Nichols, 2017, p. 5). With the rise of the Covid19 pandemic, The World Health Organization recognized vaccine hesitancy as the world's top threat to public health safety (World Health Organization, n.d.). In a post-truth society where individuals search for their own truth, many Americans refused to get vaccinated due to a lack of knowledge, anti-vaccine misinformation and conspiracy theories. The Internet is, without doubt, a great achievement that continues to change our lives for the better by allowing more people more access to information – and to each other – than ever before in history. But it also has a dark side that is exerting important and deeply negative influences on the ways people gain knowledge and respond to expertise (Nichols, 2017, p. 108). Because the Internet has expanded the variety and amount of accessible information, people often fall into echo chambers, a condition in which beliefs are amplified or reinforced through communication inside a closed system and protected from rebuttal (“echo chamber”, n.d.). By participating in an echo chamber, people can seek out information that confirms their existing ideas without encountering opposing perspectives, potentially resulting in an accidental exercise of confirmation bias. Conspiracy theories are the most extreme examples of confirmation bias, and in a post-truth society, conspiracy theories are easy to discover and offer simple explanations for complicated events (Nichols, 2017, p. 58).

Hofstadter illustrates in *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* that American society has been severely influenced by narratives of the “self-made man”. These narratives, combined with the 19th-century industrial revolution, intensified public contempt for formal education and the people who pursued it. As popular democracy gained power and confidence, Hofstadter noted that “it reinforced the widespread belief in the superiority of inborn, intuitive, folkish

wisdom over the cultivated, over-sophisticated, and self-interested knowledge of the literati and well-to-do (Hofstadter, 1963, p. 154). Today, these narratives are still an integral part of American society and values, and winner-take-all capitalism has made twenty-first century America very unequal (Jouet, 2017, p. 46). Practical knowledge is in many ways valued over academic knowledge, and educated politicians still have to prove that they are not just thinkers but doers. Nowadays, uncultured politicians' appeal is sometimes viewed as modern decadence, despite the fact that they represent a longstanding mindset. When Sarah Palin mocks Obama, stating, "We need a commander in chief, not a professor of constitutional law giving us a lecture", and Herman Cain adds, "We need a leader, not a reader", they are echoing historical stereotypes about inadequate intellectuals whose minds are dulled by worthless knowledge (Jouet, 2017, p. 48).

4.2.4 Disinforming the Masses: The Rise of the Anti-intellectual Politician

The deep roots of anti-intellectualism in American society have paved the way for know-nothing politicians like George W. Bush, Sarah Palin, Donald Trump and Marjorie Taylor Greene. These populist politicians appeal to the masses because they take pride in not being "thinkers" but "doers". In recent years, these prominent political figures have made shockingly anti-intellectual statements. Although he took pride in his quick action to declare "war against terrorism" after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Bush made a series of bizarre assertions like: "You know, one of the hardest parts of my job is to connect Iraq to the War on Terror (Jouet, 2017, p. 61). Given his privileged upbringing and access to the best educational opportunities, Bush could only have been an anti-intellectual by choice. The two-term president portrayed himself as a regular guy "the kind you can have a beer with", a political tactic facilitated by his lack of intellectual curiosity (Jouet, 2017, p. 61).

Mainstream politicians in both the Democratic and Republican Parties laid the path for the rise of the Tea Party and Trump's election in 2016 by fostering anti-intellectual politics for decades (Jouet, 2017, p. 63). Throughout history, demagogues and extremists have been virulently anti-intellectual. Their rhetoric thrives on ignorance, fear, emotion, and prejudice, whether they are on the left or the right. Disinformation, or the purposeful transmission of false information in order to sway public opinion, is one of their key techniques (Jouet, 2017, p. 63). In a democratic society like the United States, disinformation largely relies on repeating falsehoods to make people believe them. Anti-intellectualism has therefore aided

disinformation by encouraging irrationality, gullibility, and distrust of education in the United States. This helps to understand why, during the Obama years, conspiracy theories and outright deception became increasingly important as a progressively far-right opposition resorted to propaganda on a scale unprecedented in contemporary Western democracies (Jouet, 2017, pp. 63-64).

Both Sarah Palin and Donald Trump were proponents of the “birther” conspiracy that alleged that Obama had not been born in the United States and thus was not a “natural-born citizen” eligible for the presidency. Being born in Hawaii, Obama tried to put the issue to rest by disclosing his birth certificate, which public officials authenticated. Using the social media platform of Twitter, Trump pressed the issue for the next four years. “An ‘extremely credible source’ has called my office and told me that Barack Obama’s birth certificate is a fraud,” he asserted in 2012 (Kruse & Zelizer, 2019, p. 333). Along came reports that an increasing proportion of Islamophobes mistook Obama for a Muslim, even though his Christian faith had been well publicized. The conspiracy theories about Obama being a closet Muslim became so viral that Obama chose not to visit Amritsar’s Golden Temple, a Sikh sacred site, during his visit to India. Obama would have to wear a turban, and his administration was anxious that a photo of him wearing one would fuel conspiracy theories about his alleged Islamic beliefs (Jouet, 2017, p. 64). A whole 54 percent of Republicans were convinced that “deep down” Obama believes in Islam (Jouet, 2017, p. 65). By the time of the 2016 election, more than six out of ten Trump supporters believed Obama was a foreign-born Muslim. “We’re led by a man that either is not tough, not smart or he’s got something else in mind”, Trump said after the heinous terrorist attack on an Orlando gay club, implying that Obama is a jihadist sympathizer. He later argued that Obama is “the founder of ISIS” (Jouet, 2017, p. 65). Substantial proportions of Republicans were indeed prepared to believe that Obama “wants to use an economic collapse or terrorist attack as an excuse to take dictatorial powers (41 percent), is “anti-American” (41 percent), “is doing many of the things Hitler did” (38 percent), and “may be the Anti-Christ” (24 percent) (Jouet, 2017, p. 68).

Another conspiracy theory that is supported by national political figures, including Donald Trump, is the “hoax” of climate change. The global impact of climate change has elevated the issue to a national and worldwide concern. Climate change has been subjected to strong, and often inflexible, policy positions from national political elites, causing political division across the country. To millions of U.S. conservatives, climate change is “junk science”

invented by devious, know-it-all scientists, an attitude entrenched in anti-intellectualism and illogical conspiracy theories (Jouet, 2017, p. 71). Fueled by top politicians and right-wing conspiracism, climate change skepticism is extremely influential in America. In this way, baseless conspiracy theories proposed by prominent anti-intellectual politicians have made pure sophistry a huge national issue in America and can explain why conspiracy theories are endorsed by so many Americans.

4.2.5 The Lack of Conservative Gatekeepers

As discussed earlier, there is an ideological asymmetry in conspiratorial beliefs, and it has been proved that conservatives endorse more conspiracy theories than liberals. Anti-intellectual populism obstructs rational decision-making and problem-solving, and this could foster American decline. It also leads to polarization by pushing conservative America to the far right, making compromise with liberal America impossible. The latter has not made a similar shift to the far left, and its opinions in the Western world's political spectrum normally vary from center-left to center-right (Jouet, 2017, p. 74).

When comparing today's Tea Party Republicans to the movement conservatives of the 1960s, many of the same dynamics and tensions emerge. There are, however, some important changes that can explain why conspiratorial thinking has become more prevalent in contemporary American politics. Historian Sean Wilentz explains that the "pressing historical question is how extremist ideas held at bay for decades inside the Republican Party have exploded anew – and why, this time, Party leaders have done virtually nothing to challenge those ideas and a great deal to abet them (Wilentz, 2010). Bjerre-Poulsen suggests that part of the explanation could be that there no longer appears to exist an elite of conservative intellectuals who can act as "gatekeepers" for the movement. There is also less belief in the autonomy of ideas and more focus on political strategy and rhetorical "framing". Similarly, academic respectability does not appear to be a key priority and few conservatives nowadays fantasize about being the defenders of a civilization under attack (Bjerre-Poulsen, 2013, p. 32).

With the birth of the Tea Party movement, the groups that Buckley and his fellow gatekeepers had written out of the conservative movement in the 1960s reappeared. The publications of the John Birch Society and other members of "the Radical Right" have reappeared and garnered a new audience thanks to cable-television host Glenn Beck (Bjerre-Poulsen, 2013, p.

32). Glenn Beck re-introduced the writing of Willard Cleon Skousen to his audience of two million viewers. In the 1960s, Skousen was considered a radical conspiracist and was purposefully marginalized by movement conservatives. Now Glenn Beck declared his works to be a personal political revelation. Within six months of this reappearance, one of Skousen's books had sold more than two hundred and fifty thousand copies and was being analyzed in Tea Party study groups throughout the country (Bjerre-Poulsen, 2013, p. 32). After Buckley died in 2008, the conservative movement lost an activist who had played such a critical role in purging radicals from the party. These developments led Mike Lofgren to quit his position as a congressional Republican operative and lament that his party was "becoming less and less like a traditional political party in a representative democracy and becoming more like an apocalyptic cult, or one of the intensely ideological authoritarian parties of 20th century Europe" (Jouet, 2017, p. 74). Today, the Republican party lacks conservative figures who can function as gatekeepers for the movement and the Republican party continues to turn right.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to explore how and why conspiracy thinking has infiltrated American culture and politics. Research shows that conspiratorial thinking has many troubling effects on society, including antisocial behavior, hostility against outgroups, rejection of science, decreased trust in government, and a lack of civic engagement (van der Linden et al., 2021, p. 24). America has proved to be a fertile ground for the spread of conspiracy theories, and the willingness of people to believe unfounded and conspiratorial explanations for events is both fascinating and troubling. Recent disturbing events in American politics demonstrate that conspiracy theories have real and serious consequences. An attack on democracy on January 6, 2021, provoked by false and conspiratorial statements from former president Trump, ended in five casualties and extreme damage. In the midst of a global pandemic that so far has killed more than 1 million Americans, conspiracy theories about the COVID19 vaccine and virus, founded on skepticism of health experts and the government, have had disastrous consequences.

Although many Americans believe in conspiracy theories, researchers have discovered an ideological asymmetry in conspiratorial thinking. Results reveal that conservatives in the United States were not only more likely than liberals to endorse specific conspiracy theories, but they were also more likely to espouse conspiratorial worldviews in general (van der Linden et al., 2021, p. 23). Contemporary American politics have seen the rise of far-right organizations like the Tea Party movement and conspiratorial and anti-intellectual politicians such as Donald Trump and Marjorie Taylor Greene. Funded by conservative billionaires, the Tea Party movement has infiltrated the Republican Party, and with no conservative gatekeepers, its influence keeps growing.

Concerned with the influence of right-wing movements in his own contemporary time, Richard Hofstadter showed in his famous essay *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965) that conspiratorial mindsets have existed in the United States for centuries. Hofstadter's work has been highly influential, and his essay is cited by most serious contemporary analysts (Bratich, 2008, p. 4). This thesis has used Hofstadter's essay as a theoretical outline and demonstrated how his ideas about a paranoid style are still relevant today. As noted by Hofstadter, the people who were most influenced by the paranoid style often felt dispossessed, feeling like they were becoming strangers in their own country. In her

2018 book *Strangers in their Own Land*, Arlie Russel Hochschild argued that the contemporary American right-wing feels a similar way. Experiencing status anxiety, supporters of the Tea Party movement see minority groups cutting in line in a metaphorical queue toward the American Dream.

Another characteristic of the paranoid style is that the paranoid spokesman believes they are fighting a battle between absolute good and absolute evil, where compromise is not a tolerable result. Conspiracy theorists today also believe that they are fighting a battle against absolute evil and that it is now or never to fight the enemy. Many politicians use the paranoid style to mobilize voters and undermine their opponents. This was the case on January 6, 2021, when Donald Trump provoked conspiracy theorists and far-right groups to attack the Capitol to fight an urgent and critical battle against Joe Biden and his evil associates.

Contemporary research has also proved that Hofstadter's argument that the paranoid spokesman feels powerless is an explanation for conspiracy beliefs today as well. People who feel powerless may find comfort in conspiracy theories because these theories help them to accept and explain their difficulties (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999, p. 639). Furthermore, beliefs in specific conspiracies allow them to avoid thinking that the world is chaotic. Instead, they can believe that secret forces are in operation, which helps them to understand why they lack the power to control their own lives

In addition to demonstrating that Hofstadter's essay on *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* may explain conspiracy theories in American politics and society today, this thesis has also discussed the important impact of anti-intellectualism in fostering conspiratorial thinking. Hofstadter's award-winning book *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (1963) explores how academics and intellectual elites have lost much of their status in society. In contemporary America, anti-intellectualism still holds an exceptional weight. Practical knowledge is in many ways appreciated more than academic knowledge, and politicians must prove that they are not just "thinkers" but "doers." We live in what Francis Fukuyama labels a "post-truth society", and with the rise of the Internet, many Americans rely less on the opinions of experts, and search for their "own" truth. Conspiracy theories about the COVID19-virus and vaccines prove that anti-intellectualism is a fundamental element of American society. Rejecting vital and critical advice from health experts about vaccines, masks, and social distancing, a multitude of Americans displayed an anti-intellectual mindset,

proving that “the death of expertise” is a real phenomenon.

To explain contemporary conspiratorial thinking in American society and politics, this thesis has combined two prominent works by academic and historian Richard Hofstadter. Although Hofstadter’s writings were written in the 1960s, his insights are still valuable for explaining the perplexing nature of conspiracy beliefs in American politics and society. Hofstadter passed away in 1970, and while he predicted many trends seen in society today, he could have never foreseen the Internet and social media which have helped propagate the most bizarre conspiracy theories. Research reveals that beliefs in conspiracy theories can lead to a distrust of government, which is a central component of a healthy democracy (Einstein & Glick, 2015, p. 698). If conspiracy theories continue to infiltrate American politics and society, the democratic principles that the country is built on may collapse.

6. References

- Abalakina-Paap, M., Stephan, W. G., Craig, T., & Gregory, W. L. (1999). Beliefs in Conspiracies. *Political Psychology*, 20(3), 637-647. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3792165>
- Barkun, M. (2013). *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (2nd ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bennett, D. H. (1988). *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Bjerre-Poulsen, N. (2013). Standing Athwart History, Yelling Stop: The Emergence of American Movement Conservatism, 1945-1965. *American Studies in Scandinavia*, 45(1-2), 15-33. <https://doi.org/10.22439/asca.v45i1-2.4900>
- Bloom, M., & Moskalenko, S. (2021). *Pastels and Pedophiles: Inside the Mind of QAnon*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bratich, J. Z. (2008). *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Echo chamber. (n.d.). In *Oxfords Learner's Dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/echo-chamber>
- Einstein, K. L., & Glick, D. M. (2015). Do I think BLS data are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories. *Political Behavior*, 37(3), 679-701. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-014-9287-z>
- Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*. London: Profile Books.
- Fusch, P., Fusch, G. E., & Ness, L. R. (2018). Denzin's Paradigm Shift: Revisiting Triangulation in Qualitative Research. *Journal of Social Change*, 10(1), 19-32. <https://doi.org/10.5590/JOSC.2018.10.1.02>

Furedi, F. (2005). *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Healy, J. (2021, January 11). These Are the 5 People Who Died in the Capitol Riot. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/us/who-died-in-capitol-building-attack.html>

Hochschild, A. R. (2016, November 7). Donald Trump Loves Conspiracy Theories. So Do His Supporters. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/11/07/donald-trump-loves-conspiracy-theories-so-do-his-supporters/>

Hochschild, A. R. (2018). *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. New York: The New Press.

Hofstadter, R. (1963). *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. New York: Vintage Books.

Hofstadter, R. (1965). *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Imhoff, R., & Lamberty, P. (2018). How Paranoid are Conspiracy Believers? Toward a More Fine-Grained Understanding of the Connect and Disconnect Between Paranoia and Belief in Conspiracy Theories. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 48(7), 909-926. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2494>

Jouet, M. (2017). *Exceptional America: What Divides Americans from the World and from Each Other*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Knight, P. (2000). *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*. New York: Routledge.

Kruse, K. M., & Zelizer, J. E. (2019). *Fault Lines: A History of the United States Since 1974*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Library of America & The Center for American Studies at Columbia University [Library of America]. (2020, October 14). *Revisiting Richard Hofstadter in the Time of Trump* [Videoclip]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRLdLVfresI&t=2s>

Mayer, J. (2016). *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*. New York: Doubleday.

Mutz, D. C. (2018). Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote. *PNAS*, *115*(19), E4330-E4339. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1718155115>

Nichols, T. (2017). *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Norman, E. R. Note From the Editor: Storming the Capitol, Political Irresponsibility, and Questions for Democracy. *World Affairs*, *184*(1), 4-7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0043820021992208>

Oliver, J. E., & Wood, T. J. (2014). Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion. *American Journal of Political Science*, *58*(4), 952-966. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12084>

Olmsted, K. (2018). A Conspiracy So Dense: The dubious half-life of Richard Hofstadter's "paranoid style". *The Baffler*(42), 36-45. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26528719>

Pew Research Center. (2020). *Political Divides, Conspiracy Theories and Divergent News Sources Heading Into 2020 Election*. [Data set]. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2020/09/16/most-americans-who-have-heard-of-qanon-conspiracy-theories-say-they-are-bad-for-the-country-and-that-trump-seems-to-support-people-who-promote-them/>

Robins, R. S. & Post, J. M. (1997). *Political Paranoia: The Psychopolitics of Hatred*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Rogers, A. (2020, September 8). GOP House Candidate in Georgia Bucks CDC's Recommendation and Says 'Children Should not Wear Masks'. Retrieved from <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/08/politics/marjorie-taylor-greene-mask-tweet/index.html>

Rosenthal, L. & Trost, C. (2012). *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Russonello, G. (2021, May 27). QAnon Now as Popular in U.S. as Some Major Religions, Poll Suggests. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/27/us/politics/qanon-republicans-trump.html>

Salcedo, A. (2020, November 4). Marjorie Taylor Greene, who Backs QAnon and has Made Racist Remarks, Wins Congressional Seat. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/11/04/marjorie-greene-qanon-georgia-congress-election/>

Schrecker, E. W. (1988). Archival Sources for the Study of McCarthyism. *The Journal of American History*, 75(1), 197-208. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1889667>

Schrecker, E. W. (2004). McCarthyism: Political Repression and the Fear of Communism. *Social Research*, 71(4), 1041-1086.

Southern Poverty Law Center. (2020, October 27). What You Need to Know About QAnon. Retrieved from <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/10/27/what-you-need-know-about-qanon>

Stanford Law School [stanfordlawschool] (2021, April 16). *The Paranoid Style, Past and Present* [Videoclip]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hXgIkHAbSE>

Stanford University [Stanford]. (2016, October 3). *The Post-Truth Society* [Videoclip]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MzezEaOT7aw>

Tischler, B. L. (1997). Re-Thinking Intellect: Richard Hofstadter, the Anti-Intellectual Tradition, and American Popular Culture. *Rethinking History* 1(2), 189-193.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529708596312>

Turner, E. & Rainie, L. (2020, March 5). *Most Americans Rely on Their Own Research to Make Big Decisions, and That Often Means Online Searches*. Pew Research Center.
Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/03/05/most-americans-rely-on-their-own-research-to-make-big-decisions-and-that-often-means-online-searches/>

van der Linden, S., Panagopoulos, C., Azevedo, F., & Jost, J. T. (2021). The Paranoid Style in American Politics Revisited: An Ideological Asymmetry in Conspiratorial Thinking. *Political Psychology*, 42(1), 23-51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12681>

Wilentz, S. (2010). Confounding Fathers: The Tea Party's Cold War Roots. *The New Yorker*, 86(32), 32. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/18/confounding-fathers>

World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Ten Threats to Global Health in 2019*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019>