Conspiracy Theories and Populism: Analyzing the Trumpian Embrace of Conspiracy Narratives as a Political Instrument

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Összeesküvés-elméletek és populizmus: az összeesküvés-narratívák trumpi alkalmazásának politikai eszközként való vizsgálata.

Absztrakt: Az Egyesült Államok Capitoliumának 2021. január 6-i ostroma precedens nélküli esemény volt az ország történelmében. Sajátosságát fokozta, hogy az összeesküvés-elméletet, miszerint a választás jogsértő módon zajlott le, maga a leköszönő elnök, Donald Trump is terjesztette. A jelen kutatás célja rámutatni, hogy az összeesküvés-elméletek megfelelő politikai eszközök a populisták számára, mivel mindkettő a társadalom megosztottságán alapul, és az elidegenedett, elégedetlen csoportok számára vonzó. A kutatás legfőbb következtetése, hogy a populizmus és az összeesküvés-elméletek a politikai polarizáció miatt terjednek, viszont narratíváikkal maguk is gerjesztik azt. Emiatt az összeesküvés-elméletek populisták által való felhasználása jóformán óhatatlan.

Abstract: The attack on its Capitol on January 6, 2021, was an unprecedented event in the history of the United States. It was made more peculiar by the fact that the conspiracy theory (CT) that the election had been fraudulent was spread by the outgoing president, Donald Trump, too. The purpose of this research is to show that CTs are suitable political tools for populists, as both are based on the division of society and appeal to alienated, dissatisfied groups. The main conclusion of the research is that populism and CTs spread because of political polarization, which, in turn, these narratives themselves deepen. For this reason, the populist use of conspiracy theories is almost inevitable.

On August 30, 2022, Donald Trump shared 18 posts promoting the QAnon conspiracy theory (CT) on *Truth Social*, the website he created after being banned from *X* (formally *Twitter*) in the wake of the Capitol Riot on January 6, 2021. A few weeks later, he shared a picture of himself with the phrases "The Storm is Coming" and "WWG1WGA"[1] (Gilbert, 2022a; Gilbert 2022b). QAnon found a breeding ground on *Truth Social*: between August and April 2022, Trump boosted the posts of 30 different CT accounts who altogether had more than 700,000 followers, and now had their messages broadcast to Trump's 3.8 million followers, too (Brewster, et al., 2022). And his embrace of CTs was not a novelty: he reiterated conspiracy narratives during his presidential campaign, as well as during his tenure. Running for president again in 2024, it is reasonable to suspect that CTs, especially about the elections, will be part of Trump's agenda once more.

This study aims to show that CTs served as valuable political instruments for Donald Trump's populist politics. Comparing the definitions and audiences of CTs and populism, I show that their similarity lies not only in their base narratives of the good people

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[1] "Where we go one, we go all." Both phrases are used by believers of Q.

against the evil elites, but in who they attract, as well. Analyzing Trump's *X* activity, I argue that his populist-conspiracist rhetoric culminated in the storming of the Capitol, and by legitimizing theories such as QAnon, he deepened political polarization in the US.

What are CTs?

Conspiracy theories "are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors" (Douglas et al., 2019, 4). The difference between conspiracies and conspiracy *theories* is their perception as reinforced by "properly constituted epistemic authorities" (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, 33), and not their actual truth value. That is, if actors such as the government, journalists, or scholars determine that a theory is true, it will turn from a conspiracy theory into a conspiracy (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Julien Giry and Pranvera Tika (2021) provide the following important features to characterize CTs: fear of unproven possibilities, thinking that power structures are shaped by secret and harmful plots, the dualism of *us* and *them,* and the disregard of coincidence. Richard Hofstadter's (1964) seminal essay, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, argues that conspiracy thinking is based on a feeling of persecution, brought about by evil forces against whom only the paranoid spokesperson can protect the people.

We can also think of CTs as tools to help reconcile contradictory information with our preexisting ideas about the world (Douglas et al., 2017). The motivation behind this was first studied by social psychologist Leon Festinger (1957), who proposed that when people are presented with information inconsistent with their worldview, they experience psychological stress (cognitive dissonance). To alleviate this negative feeling, they rationalize the received information, or search for alternate facts that reinforce their beliefs. Indeed, it is well researched that individuals are more likely to deem sources credible that are in line with their views, and attribute biases to sources that disagree with them. Negative perceptions also arise when an issue is controversial: a study found that factual reporting on the 1982 Beirut Massacre was perceived as biased by both pro-Israeli and pro-Arab participants (Metzger et al., 2020). This shows that perceptions of trustworthiness are extremely subjective. Avoiding certain news outlets is not a partisan phenomenon, either: conservatives and liberals alike favor information that is in line with their views (Frimer et al., 2017). Nonetheless, most people do not believe, for example, that Barack Obama is a Muslim, or that the 2020 elections were rigged. It follows then that there must be supplementary circumstances or traits that make some more likely to be attracted to CTs.

Those who look for patterns in life, who have a high esteem of their own understanding of complex events, and who desire security and the maintenance of a positive understanding of their community are more likely to believe in CTs (Douglas et al., 2017; Douglas et al., 2019). Attitudes regarding one's group are particularly important

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when it comes to CTs. Studies found that people from countries that exhibit a higher rate of collective narcissism were more likely to spread CTs related to COVID-19 (Hughes & Machan, 2021; Sternisko et al., 2021). Turning to the US, a tendency for collective narcissism – a belief in American exceptionalism – is evident. In 2021, 53% of Americans agreed that "the world would be much better off if more countries adopted American values and the American way of life," along with 73% believing "that the US has always been a force for good in the world" (Cox, 2021). However, there are important differences in opinions when it comes to age, income, and party affiliation: older, more affluent Republicans are likelier to have positive views on the US. In general, the Pew Research Center (2021a) concluded that Republicans are less critical of the standard of living, the health care system, and the military. Those with stronger positive social identities are prone to show signs of positive bias toward their own in-group and negative bias toward out-groups (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020). This means that communities that poll higher on belief in exceptionalism are more susceptible to narratives vilifying out-groups, which is exactly what CTs – as well as populists – do.

Still, it would be hasty to conclude that conservatives are predisposed to believe in CTs. In fact, conspiracy beliefs can be found on both the far right and the far left, and the farther "out" one gets, the more likely they are to believe in CTs. There are multiple explanations for this: both the far right and far left conceptualize the world in Manichean terms, they are more likely to reject ideas that differ form their own, and they are likely to feel politically powerless or unrepresented, which correlates with conspiracy beliefs (Imhoff et al., 2022). Political leanings and psychological factors, therefore, are to be taken as components of a conspiracist mindset.

Feeling threatened or powerless, political alienation, and a lack of trust in the government also exacerbate the spread of CTs. One study found higher rates of conspiracy thinking in countries with a lower democracy index, higher unemployment, and higher levels of perceived corruption (Cordonier et al., 2021). With both affective polarization (disliking those with opposing views) and ideological polarization (widening between ideological standpoints) on the rise, the US is becoming polarized at a remarkable rate, more so than other Western democracies (Boxell et al., 2022; Draca & Schwarz, 2018; Gidron et al., 2020; Iyengar, 2022). Effects of polarization are debated: while some argue that higher polarization leads to less political participation and decreased trust in government, others find that it can lead to greater coherence in the policies of parties, higher voter turnouts, and more non-electoral participation in politics (Layman et al., 2006; Pirro & Portos, 2021). Still, overall, polarization breeds negativity between groups, which makes people feel anxious and underrepresented in politics when the opposing side holds office (Keefer et al. 2019). This destabilizes the social scene and, at its most extreme, leads to the acceptance of conspiracy narratives that demonize those not part of the in-group. Furthermore, polarization is a main cause of populist identity formation, as well.

One more factor to consider: studies show that low-income and less educated individuals are more likely to accept conspiracy narratives, as they lack media literacy skills to interpret the vast amount of information they are faced with (Douglas et al., 2019). Social media in particular is a novel and central aspect of modern conspiracism, and navigating online spaces in terms of what to see and believe in is a challenge voters encounter every day.

To summarize, psychological factors, political alienation, polarization, and sociological attributes correlate with conspiracist beliefs, which are based on "us versus them" narratives. Next, outlining the main features of populism, I aim to show that there is a great overlap between its characteristics and bases, and that of CTs.

Defining Populism

Populism is a form of political activity, attitude, or discourse without a fixed belief system that can be attached to left-leaning, as well as right-leaning ideologies (Bugaric & Kuhelj, 2018; Oswald et al., 2022; Tushnet, 2019). Because the phenomenon's ambiguity, its definitions are often contested. At its core, populism offers a simplified view of society: that it is made up of two groups, where the corrupt elites disenfranchise the morally good people (Molloy, 2018). It is anti-status quo, as it advocates the reform of this system. The sole defender of the people is the populist leader, who acts as the voice of their grievances. It is against mediated politics, is anti-pluralist, projects a "frontier of antagonism" (Arato, 2019, 1107) onto the out-group, and, importantly, can remain within democratic boundaries (Oswald et al. 2022).

Ernesto Laclau's *On Populist Reason* (2005) describes the logic behind populist identification. He argues that individual grievances, consolidated in a larger "stable system of signification," (74) become popular demands, creating the base for the identity of the people. This identity, which arises from a break within society, is unfixed, allowing for its continuous reconstruction. Comparably, István Benedek (2021) writes in a study of electoral autocracies, that populism is a symptom of failure in democracies. Modern democracies have become overly bureaucratized systems, with no real political alternatives, while globalization has created a world order where nation states are more and more powerless in certain areas of policymaking due to the immense economic and political influence of corporations. The perceived loss of national sovereignty and the feeling that there is no possibility for meaningful political involvement breeds contempt in citizens, which populists exploit by promising a transparent system of direct representation. The implementation of this new system, however, requires a stark break from the previous order. Therefore, the populist rejection of the establishment depends on voters' total alienation from politics. The two authors underline personal and social grievances in their study, highlighting that populism is not a problematic phenomenon in democratic politics in and of itself, but because it is a result of underlying

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systemic failures. Populism reconstructs the political field, destroying previous norms, but it is able to do so only when the field itself is already damaged.

Less educated and lower-income individuals who find it harder to navigate the modern job market, often called economic left-behinds, are likely to feel marginalized and unrepresented in society. Their feelings can be well instrumentalized by populists. Eurosceptics, for example, found bases in these left-behind groups, placing blame for the decline of low-skilled workers' living standards on immigrants and the policies of the EU (Abts & Baute, 2022). In summary, economic or sociocultural grievances and institutional failures of democracies act in tandem (Berman, 2021). Therefore, it is not enough to speak only of economics, or of cultural issues when studying the nature of populism: a complex explanation requires a multifaceted approach to what at first seems to be a purely political issue.

Contrasting CTs and Populism

CTs and populism both operate on the Manichean assumption that society is made up of two homogenous groups, where the corrupt out-group is actively working to hurt the virtuous in-group. The status quo is the result of this conflict, therefore, both narratives are strongly anti-establishment, providing simplified solutions for complex issues: the conspiring elites need to be removed from power for the salvation of the community. Moreover, for both, the existence of a strong leader is crucial, as they embody the struggle for morality. Both are based on dissatisfaction and antagonism. Problems in society or politics construct group identities for those who are dissatisfied, while at the same time excluding others. This construction-exclusion process, however, itself deepens polarization, leading to further movement to the fringes in opinions.

The experience of fear or anxiety due to possible future events is a central component of CTs. The immediate threat of named Others (e.g. immigrants, undercover agents) incites fear in the audience, while the overarching narrative of unseen threats looming over society creates a general atmosphere of anxiety. As for populism, it is not relative vulnerability or deprivation itself that motivates voters, but perceptions of disadvantage (Spruyt et al., 2016). That is, voters do not actually need to be in vulnerable positions to be attracted to populist politicians, it is enough if they feel themselves to be disadvantaged. This means that populists are politically motivated to utilize fear to create cohesion within the in-group, while fueling adversity toward out-groups. This constructed anxiety allows them to remain within a populist framework of politics indefinitely: the elites do not disappear simply because they are removed from politics, as there is always a more threatening group that takes their place. As CTs are excellent vehicles to deliver these narratives, it is only logical that populist politicians would gravitate toward them.

Besides an atmosphere of mistrust, political alienation, and cultural animosity as well as strong group identities are crucial factors for both populist voting and conspiracist beliefs. Lastly, lower education and income correlate with both. It is important to highlight that unemployment and inequality, conditions closely related to lower levels of education, affect rates of political polarization, too (Gidron et al., 2020). Overall, this means that constituents of conspiracism and populism reinforce each other, creating a spiral of political disorder.

CTs and Populism in the US: Then and Now

Both CTs and populism have historical roots in the US, already overlapping in the 19th century. While Andrew Jackson is considered to be the first populist politician of the country (Watson, 2017), Antimasonry, as well as anti-Catholicism were based on anti-elite CTs in the early to mid-1800s. Freemasons were seen as a powerful secret group controlling society (Berlet & Lyons, 2000), while the Know Nothing nativist movement opposed to Catholics was intertwined with conspiracy filled propaganda, such as the claim that priests were sexual predators (Clarke, 2022). It seems that populism naturally "sticks" to other exclusivist ideologies (e.g. nativism), forming strong group identities with the use of conspiracy narratives. Populist actors of the mid-1900s, such as the John Birch Society, the Liberty Lobby, or Alabama Governor George Wallace also employed conspiracy narratives in their politics, declaring a New World Order or that Jewish elites used minorities to undermine state sovereignties (Berlet & Lyons, 2000). Wallace, who ran as an independent in 1968, combined populism and coded racism in his messages tailored to his base of working-class whites who did not agree with the sociocultural changes of the era (Berlet & Lyons, 2000).

Modern media is a valuable tool for politicians. For example, Ross Perot, third-party candidate of the 1992 election, received almost 19% of the popular vote (Berlet & Lyons, 2000), undoubtedly partly due to his use of talk shows and infomercials (Schulte-Sasse, 1993). Today, the role of social media, as opposed to mainstream news sources, is crucial when it comes to CTs and populism. Aspects of social media lend themselves to the creation of opinion bubbles: the ability to decide who to follow and algorithms recommending personalized content to maximize time spent online potentially limit what users see (Clarke, 2022). In the US, conservatives are more likely to get their news from a single source (47% only watch *Fox News*), are more distrustful of mainstream news, and are more likely to hear similar opinions to theirs on *Facebook*, while liberals visit a larger pool of news sources and are likelier to trust mainstream outlets, yet are more prone to end friendships due to political differences (Mitchell et al., 2014), suggesting that their affective polarization is significant.

Social media also nurses post-presumption argumentation, a feature of our post-truth world where the lines between true and false are muddled and opinions are

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"liberated" from factuality. Post-presumption argumentation focalizes the speaker's perceived authenticity in discourse (Montgomery, 2017), instead of the truthfulness of their claims. Presumption, the acceptance that there exists some truth that serves as the starting point for arguments, disappears, conventions on how to argue become void, and "language becomes purely strategic" (Neville-Shepard 176). CTs are excellent examples of post-presumption argumentation: they not only question base-level truths but create closed systems that are impossible to dispute (Neville-Shepard, 2019). No matter what evidence is provided to disprove a CT, it is dismissed as part of the conspiracy itself.

Indeed, as Garrett M. Graff (2020) argues in *The Wall Street Journal,* we live in a new age of CTs that started with 9/11. More than a decade later, surveys found that over 50% of Americans believed that the government was hiding something about 9/11, and that 17% of Democrats and 15% of Republicans believed that US officials "probably" or "definitely" took part in planning the attack (Graff, 2020). "The 9/11 conspiracy movement," Graff writes, "has proven persistent and pervasive without support from mainstream news organizations or political leaders." But, as he aptly points out, some political leaders now embrace CTs. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene has openly endorsed Pizzagate, QAnon, and white genocide CTs, and since Graff's article, the US has seen a midterm election where a total of 291 politicians who contested the results of the 2020 elections ran for office (Blanco et al., 2022). What is more, the former president himself reiterated election subversion narratives. If 9/11 CTs were able to blossom without mainstream support, CTs that a (past) president endorses are sure to be even more widespread.

Trumpian CTs and Populism

Social media served as an important outlet for Donald Trump's thoughts during his tenure, allowing him to reach voters directly and constantly. Importantly, not all of his populist messages were imbued with CTs. Through an examination of his rhetoric related to trade relations with China, the anti-pluralist, protectionist nature of populism, its appeal to economic and social grievances, and its demand for an alternative way for political participation become clear. The following tweets demonstrate Donald Trump's stance on the issue:

> The United States has an $800 Billion Dollar Yearly Trade Deficit because of our "very stupid" trade deals and policies. Our jobs and wealth are being given to other countries that have taken advantage of us for years. They laugh at what fools our leaders have been. No more! (Trump, 2018a)
>
> Why should I, as President of the United States, allow countries to continue to make Massive Trade Surpluses, as they have for decades, while our Farmers, Workers & Taxpayers have such a big and unfair price to pay? Not fair to the PEOPLE of America! $800 Billion Trade Deficit… (Trump, 2018b)

According to Trump, global politics is a zero-sum game. The term *trade war* takes this notion even further: politics is a conflict that ends in the destruction of one state and the dominance

of another, and making bad economic decisions is a deadly mistake. China is a foreign adversary, an aggressor within this framework. The threatened in-group, whose interests must be protected are the American people, who suffer because of unfair trade deals, i.e., the immorality of some actors that superimpose Chinese interests over American ones. However, the actors who are to blame are not Chinese people or politicians. In reality, it is the US establishment that has willingly sacrificed Americans and gave their wealth to other countries. Why should I allow this, Trump asks, centering himself, as populist leaders do, as the one to bring about change. The final words of the first tweet emphasize the need for the total restructuring of the political scene.

His indictment of the status quo often converged with his disdain for mainstream media. Out of his 2,002 tweets with some form of the word news, almost half, 984, also contain some form of the word 'fake'. Undermining the legitimacy of some news sources and orienting his followers toward others, Trump encouraged the formation of opinion bubbles. As discussed, a lack of trust in mainstream institutions is a key in the case of political polarization, and institutional mistrust is a strong motivator for both populist voting and belief in CTs.

Trump's rhetorical style, particularly when referring to his political opponents, further reinforced his anti-elite stance. The *Trump Twitter Archive* (n.d.) collected a list of insults Donald Trump tweeted at various public figures, including politicians, journalists, and celebrities. The list, which is only a sampling of Trump's less complimentary tweets, includes a total of 206 names. It is worthwhile to note that the President's scorn was aimed at not only his opponents, but members of his own party, too. This shows that his criticism targeted the establishment as a whole: a true populist, Trump wanted to change the entire political field. By breaking with rhetorical norms and adopting an unconventional, blunt style of speech, he legitimized his position as the politician of *the people* (Ostiguy & Roberts, 2016). This legitimacy is crucial in the politics of the post-truth world to gain authenticity in the eyes of voters.

Populism and CTs Collide

The subtle conspiracism of the trade war narrative, implying that elites deliberately sold out Americans for their own interests, is certainly not to be underplayed. At the same time, Donald Trump did openly embrace conspiracy theories, too, for example questioning the birthplace of Barack Obama (McIntire et al. 2019). A 2019 investigation by *The New York Times* found that, at the minimum, 23,000 accounts following Donald Trump on *X* had some reference to QAnon in their profile, that Trump himself retweeted the now-suspended neo-Nazi account @WhiteGenocideTM, and that he platformed multiple Pizzagate conspiracists (McIntire et al.). In a true post-truth fashion, over his four-year presidency, he made a total of 30,573 false or misleading claims according to *The Washington Post*'s fact checking (Kessler, 2021). Many of these claims in his last months in office were about the 2020 elections.

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It is important to understand why Donald Trump would combine populist and conspiracist narratives. As previously established, Republicans generally poll higher on rates of national narcissism. Moreover, political alienation and feelings of underrepresentation or antagonism motivate both populist and conspiracist identification. Studies show that voting preferences in the 2016 election were primarily determined by social issues, and "feelings of cultural anxiety, or threats to white Americans' sense of dominant group status fueled [support] for Trump" (Baker et al., 2020, 274). Identity and racial issues were just as, if not more, important in voting as economics (Noland, 2020). Furthermore, those with a lower education were more likely to vote Republican both in the 2016 and 2020 general elections, as well as in the 2018 midterm elections (Pew Research Center, 2021b). Therefore, the utilization of conspiracy narratives, in addition to populist ones, was a logical choice on Trump's part.

The lead up to the attack of the Capitol serves as a prominent example of the marriage of populist and conspiracist narratives by the former president. Trump shared doubts about the legitimacy of the election multiple times, for example claiming that voting machines changed Republican votes to Democrats, or that vote-counters were unable to fulfill their duties due to meddling (Kessler, 2021). As it was becoming apparent that Joe Biden would become the next leader of the US, Trump became more proactive. Talking to local and state officials, he tried to convince them to overturn election results (Kumar & Orr, 2020), while at the same time taking to *X* to reach his voters by asking leading questions with unverified claims. The Stop the Steal campaign was on full force. He tweeted, for example:

> Why haven't they done signature verification in Fulton County, Georgia. Why haven't they deducted all of the dead people who 'voted', illegals who voted, non Georgia residents who voted, and tens of thousands of others who voted illegally, from the final vote tally? (Trump, 2021a)

The week before January 6, he shared multiple posts supporting the March for Trump. Initially, his tone was vigorous, urging people to voice their concerns about the election. He tweeted:

> Washington is being inundated with people who don't want to see an election victory stolen by emboldened Radical Left Democrats. Our Country has had enough, they won't take it anymore! We hear you (and love you) from the Oval Office. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN! (Trump, 2021b)

On the day of the March, in a now deleted tweet he roused protesters against Vice President Mike Pence, saying he

> didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth! (Singman, 2021)

However, as events escalated, he became more peaceable, writing "I am asking for everyone at the U.S. Capitol to remain peaceful. No violence! Remember, WE are the Party

of Law & Order–respect the Law and our great men and women in Blue. Thank you!" (Trump, 2021c). Nonetheless, by that time the crowd was uncontrollable.

One of the most iconic images of the Capitol attack was of the "QAnon shaman" with his fur hat and flag painted face, but the crowd was full of other QAnon symbols, too. With flags, T-shirts, and signs declaring "Q sent me," protesters showed that one motivation behind their mobilizing was the CT (Seidel, 2022). Overall, the conspiracy at the time was not as fringe as many would think: a 2020 survey found that 17% percent of the respondents believed that "a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media," with another 37% saying they "did not know" if this statement was true or not (Rose, 2020). QAnon emerged on *4chan* in 2017 when an anonymous user shared claims about a vast network of Satanist pedophiles controlling politics across the globe (Aliapoulios et al., 2022). The "whistleblower," claiming to be an official with the highest security clearance in the US government, asserted that it was only Trump and his allies who were fighting these evil conspirators. The conspiracy then grew, with hundreds of new "leaks" from Q that his followers worked hard to decode (Aliapoulios et al., 2022).

Leading up to the March for Trump, Donald Trump had not explicitly allied himself with the movement. During a press conference in August 2020, he stated that he "did not know much about the movement other than [he] understand[s] they like [him] very much, which [he] appreciate[s]," and that he has only "heard these are people that love our country" (Trump, 2020). Then, in October, he said that he only knew that "they are very strongly against pedophilia, and I agree with that" (Gabbatt, 2020). When pressed to comment on the content of the conspiracy, that is, the existence of a Satanic pedophile ring, Trump answered "I have no idea, I know nothing about that" (Gabbatt, 2020). Q's followers took his lack of condemnation to be confirmation of his support (Kunzelman, 2020). Indeed, combined with the perpetuation of other anti-elite CTs, it is justifiable that QAnon believers would take the absence of firm disavowal to be a sign of embrace. Trump's vagueness on the issue played into the conspiracist tendency to look for hidden signs and meanings in politics. Studying the consequences of the populist-conspiracist merge in Donald Trump's political rhetoric, the culmination of the event, the forced entry into the building and the ensuing mayhem, was not surprising. January 6 is a concrete example of the repercussions of conspiracist populism.

Conclusion

This work outlined the complex relationship between populism and conspiracy theories, establishing that Donald Trump, as a populist politician, embraced the use of CTs as political tools. CTs, this study found, are adequate instruments for populist politicians to deliver their Manichean narratives, especially in times of high political polarization. In turn, CTs and populism themselves lead to polarization, creating a spiral

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of populist conspiracy thinking. These claims are supported both by a holistic analysis
of the theoretical work on the nature and workings of the two phenomena, as well as the
specific case study of Donald Trump's *Twitter*-politics and the events of January 6.

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