

Why Do So Many Americans Think the Election Was Stolen?

[nytimes.com/2020/12/05/opinion/sunday/trump-election-fraud.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/05/opinion/sunday/trump-election-fraud.html)

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There have been few surprises this past month in how Donald Trump has dealt with the reality of his electoral defeat.

Anyone familiar with his career could have predicted that he would claim to have been cheated out of victory. Anyone watching how he wielded power (or, more often, didn't) as president could have predicted that his efforts to challenge the election results would be embarrassing, ridiculous and dismissed with prejudice in court. And anyone watching how the Republican Party dealt with his ascent could have predicted that its

leaders would mostly avoid directly rebuking him, relying instead on the inertial forces of American democracy, the conscientiousness of judges and local officialdom, and Trump's own incompetence to turn back his final power grab.

So far, so predictable. But speaking as a cynical observer of the Trump era, one feature of November did crack my jaded shell a bit: not his behavior or the system's response, but the sheer *scale* of the belief among conservatives that the election was really stolen, measured not just in polling data but in conversations and arguments, online and in person, with people I would not have expected to embrace it.

The potency of this belief has already scrambled some of the conventional explanations for conspiratorial beliefs, particularly the conceit that the key problem is misinformation spreading downward from partisan news outlets and social-media fraudsters to the easily deceived. As I watch the way certain fraud theories spread online, or watch conservatives abandon Fox News for Newsmax in search of validating narratives, it's clear that this is about demand as much as supply. A strong belief spurs people to go out in search of evidence, a lot of so-called disinformation is collected and circulated sincerely rather than cynically, and the power of various authorities — Tucker Carlson's show or Facebook's algorithm — to change beliefs is relatively limited.

But what has struck me, especially, is how the belief in a stolen election has spread among people I wouldn't have thought of as particularly Trumpy or super-partisan, who aren't cable news junkies or intensely online, who didn't even seem that invested in the election before it happened.

Others have taken note of the same phenomenon: At National Review, Michael Brendan Dougherty writes that “friends who I did not know were political are sending me little snippets of allegations of voter fraud and manipulation.” At The American Mind, the pseudonymous Californian Peachy Keenan describes watching a passel of lukewarm Trump-supporter moms in her Catholic parish suddenly “get MAGAfied” by election conspiracy theories. (As a fraud believer herself, she thinks that's a good thing.)

Drawn from my conversations in the past few weeks, here's an attempt at a taxonomy of these unlikely seeming fraud believers.

The conspiracy-curious normie

I say “normie” to reflect the reality that being open to the possibility of conspiracies is itself extremely normal and commonplace. There is nothing unusual, statistically speaking, about believing that a Cold War-era deep state assassinated John F. Kennedy or that the government is concealing evidence of U.F.O.s. Conspiracy theories are common among Democrats as well as Republicans: Witness the polling on Russia's supposed tampering with vote totals in 2016 or George W. Bush's supposed foreknowledge of the Sept. 11 attacks; recall the voting-machine theory spun to explain John Kerry's narrow defeat in 2004.

This means you don't need a complex story about Facebook or Fox News to understand

why a person who isn't intensely political might nonetheless be open to the idea that an election settled by tens of thousands of votes in a few key states was actually fixed for the winner. That kind of openness is just human nature — and not the worst part of human nature, either, given that conspiracies and cover-ups exist (the military really has been hiding weird evidence of U.F.O.s!) and even wrongheaded theories often partake of a reasonable skepticism about elite malfeasance, from the Gulf of Tonkin era to the Jeffrey Epstein case.

What's happened in the past month with our open-minded normie, though, is that this openness has been validated by the president of the United States and his retainers in a way that other forms of conspiracy curiosity are not. There is a longstanding pattern in both political parties of gently encouraging conspiracizing. (The Diebold-stole-Ohio theories in 2004 were given oxygen by prominent congressional Democrats; MSNBC's Russiagate coverage was not exactly cautious in the theories that it entertained.) But Trump is obviously different — higher-profile and more radical. He's a president, not a cable-TV host or a congressman, and he's shouting allegations, any allegations, with no pussyfooting, hedging or deniability involved.

If you are biased against conspiracy theories, this shouting is ridiculous. If you're somewhat open toward them, though, and somewhat right-of-center, it provides encouragement. It's not that the curious normie listens to Trump and thinks that everything he says is true. It's that Trump is providing validation for the belief that something *might* be true, that where there are so many claims of fraud a few might be accurate, that where there's so much smoke there might be a blaze or two as well.

Of course there are also lots of pure Trump loyalists who trust his claims absolutely, and a certain number of QAnon-type fantasists who embrace any theory no matter how baroque. But the voter-fraud narrative is pervasive on the right because you don't have to be a loyalist or a fantasist to take something from Trump's rants — not belief itself, but the permission to believe.

The outsider-intellectual

The next category of believer consists of extremely smart people whose self-identification is bound up in constantly questioning and doubting official forms of knowledge. Conservatism has always had plenty of this sort in its ranks, but the consolidated progressive orthodoxy in elite institutions means that more and more people come to conservative ideas because they seem like a secret knowledge, an account of the world that's compelling and yet excluded from official discourse.

This, in turn, instills a perpetual suspicion about anything that seems to have too much of a liberal consensus defending it, especially any idea that gets mocked and laughed at more than it gets rebutted. And it creates a strong epistemological bias toward *what you can only find out for yourself*, as opposed to what Yale's experts or Twitter's warning labels or The New York Times might tell you.

In many cases the outsider-intellectual's approach generates real insight. (Anonymous right-wing Twitter was way out ahead of the coronavirus threat, for instance, at a time when official liberalism was still fretting more about xenophobia than the virus itself.) But it also tends to recapitulate the closed-circle problems of the official knowledge it rejects.

Thus the outsider-intellectual type looks at the no-voter-fraud consensus and immediately goes out in search of cracks in the pillar of official truth, anomalies that official certainty elides. A lot of the supposed evidence of fraud that circulates online comes from these efforts — not from grifts or lies (though grifters and liars do pick them up) but from sincere analyses of election data, which inevitably turn up anomalies here and there, which confirm the searchers' assumptions, which closes the circle and convinces them that the official narrative is false and voter fraud is real.

The recently radicalized

This final camp includes many of the people reading and circulating the outsider-intellectual analyses — people on the right whose perceptions of what liberal institutions and actors are capable of doing have been altered by the coronavirus era.

Many liberals have spent the Trump years worried about a kind of Reichstag Fire moment, a crisis that Trump might use as an excuse to consolidate authoritarianism. But a lot of conservatives experienced May and June of the Covid era as a mirror image of those anti-Trump fears — as a crisis that seemed to be deliberately exploited for revolutionary purposes by politicians and activists of the left.

Their story of the spring and early summer starts with our country's leaders and experts calling for unprecedented sacrifice, with lockdowns and closures that disproportionately affected small businesses, churches and families with children — all conservative-coded groups and institutions — while liberal professionals on Zoom were in better shape and the great powers of Silicon Valley expanded their influence and wealth. Then, based on a single activist-amplified case of police brutality, the same experts and politicians suddenly abandoned restrictions for the sake of left-wing protests ... which the official media pretended were peaceful even when they cut a violent swathe through American cities ... which included a wave of iconoclasm against key symbols of American history ... even as a new ideological vocabulary seemed to suddenly take over elite institutions ... and dissenting figures were purged ... and in the background the world's elites loudly announced that they were seeking a "Great Reset," a post-coronavirus new world order.

For the radicalized, all this felt stage-managed, prearranged — both as a further escalation in the establishment's battle against Trump, a successor to the Mueller investigation and the impeachment push, and as an attempt to use the weirdness of the Covid situation to consolidate radical power within elite institutions. Experiencing and interpreting the summer of 2020 this way primed people to expect further escalation in

the fall: After all, if liberals exploited a pandemic to stage-manage an ideological revolution, why *wouldn't* they exploit all the weird features of pandemic voting to stage-manage the election outcome?

No doubt some of my liberal readers will find this question too ridiculous to even merit an answer. *You can't argue someone out of a conspiracy theory*, a common axiom goes, which means the only appropriate response to these ideas is condemnation and a kind of quarantine — to be achieved, presumably, through better Facebook algorithms, the comprehensive political defeat of the Republican Party and some sort of “have you no sense of decency, sir” courage from news anchors and political leaders whenever right-wing paranoia re-emerges.

I don't see any way that these efforts will work. (Certainly on the evidence of 2020, the Republican Party isn't going anywhere, let alone about to be “burned to the ground” as some anti-Trumpers hoped.)

Of course the alternative — actually trying to argue with people in the camps I've just described — may not work either, especially given the curated virtual realities that the internet increasingly enables us all to inhabit. But I've been argued in and out of a few outré theories in my life. (Only the best outré theories, I assure you.) And if you accept that there's more *reasoning* involved in conspiracy theorizing than official wisdom suggests, then once such theories achieve a certain prominence, there's an obligation to actually make the case against them rather than just laugh them away.

My own attempts at argument have run as follows: To the conspiracy-curious Republican whose curiosity is validated by Trump's allegations of fraud, I've suggested that the place to look for fire amid the smoke is in claims that the president's lawyers are actually willing to advance in court, as opposed to in news conferences, semiofficial hearings and on Twitter. Those lawyers — especially now that it's mostly just the Rudy Giuliani show — have every incentive to blow a fraud case wide open. If their *legal* claims don't actually allege fraud or they fall apart under scrutiny, then so should your assumption that the president's blustering must have some real-world correlative.

To the outsider-intellectuals fascinated by anomalies in ballot counts or ballot return patterns, I've argued that anomalies indicating fraud would have to show up in the final vote totals — meaning some pattern of results in key swing-state cities that differ starkly from the results in cities in less-contested states, or some turnout pattern in a swing state's suburbs that looks weird relative to the suburbs in a deep-blue or deep-red state. But where claims for those kinds of anomalies have been offered, they've turned out to be false. So until a compelling example can be cited, anomalies in the counting process should be presumed to be error or randomness, not fraud.

Finally to the radicalized, I've tried to convey, based on my own knowledge of how liberal institutions work, that what looked stage-managed to outsiders in the May and June disturbances actually reflected organic upheaval and division, sincere antiracism and disorganized Trump-phobia, a crisis in the mind of liberalism, a dose of religious

revival, plus a chaotic revolt by city-dwellers against a lockdown experience that fell heavily on them. Hypocrisy and radicalism alike there was in plenty, but literally nobody was in charge, except sometimes for activists in the younger generation who sensed a professional opportunity, and any supposed “plan” or “reset” was just a hapless attempt by elder statesmen to get woke. Put more succinctly: The liberal establishment that I watched stagger through May and June could not plan a sweeping voter-fraud conspiracy to save its life.

Have I persuaded anyone with these arguments? Maybe not, and as a columnist for a noted establishment organ, I’m probably not the best person to make them anyway. That distinction belongs to people more enmeshed in the conservative universe, scribes for National Review and talk-radio hosts and conservative media critics, all of whom are the more important arguers for an intra-Republican debate.

But I am certain that these issues are connected to a larger and more important question for the future of the right. At the moment, the voter-fraud narrative is being deployed, often by people more cynical than the groups I’ve just described, to help an outgoing president — one who twice lost the popular vote and displayed gross incompetence in the face of his administration’s greatest challenge — stake a permanent claim to the leadership of his party and establish himself as the presumptive Republican nominee in 2024. And it’s being used to push aside the more compelling narrative that the Republican Party could take away from 2020, which is that Trump’s presidency demonstrated that populism can provide a foundation for conservatism, but to build on it the right needs a very different leader than the man Joe Biden just defeated.

That’s the most important argument for the next four years — and one I’ll be making firmly, passionately, right up until the Republican Party nominates Trump again in 2024.

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