Populists in power and conspiracy theories

Abstract: The populist use of tropes such as conspiracy theories play an increasingly important role in their politics. Populism and conspiracy theories present a number of common traits – Manicheanism, a sense of victimhood, and an ambivalence towards representative politics – and populists’ use of conspiracy theories is politically purposeful. Targeting a conspiring elite serves to vilify real or fictional opponents and/or shield populists from hostile attacks. Looking at three cases of populists in government – Orbán in Hungary, Trump in the United States, and Chávez in Venezuela – we examine the definition of conspiring elites (who), the circumstances under which conspiracy theories are propagated (when), and the ultimate purpose of conspiratorial framing (why). We demonstrate how populists in power use conspiracy theories to demonise and delegitimise their opponents, to promote or prolong a sense of crisis, and to rally support while distracting from possible failure.

Keywords: populism; conspiracies; government; power; tropes

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Introduction

There is an undoubtied rise in interest in both populism and conspiracy theories, but a parallel dearth of empirical research on their connection (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 530; Bergmann and Butter, 2020: 333). From an electoral perspective, populism is in the ascendant and we can see the geographical expansion of this phenomenon (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017). By now, many populists have entered into governments and into the political mainstream (Akkerman et al., 2016; Taggart and Pirro, 2021). At the same time, conspiracy theories have also become a feature of contemporary mainstream politics: they have ostensibly moved out of the narrow niches of extremist politics also due to populists’ own conspiracism and growing prominence. Both concepts have generated their own academic literatures. And while we generally seem to know little about the link between populism and conspiracy theories (cf. Taggart, 2018; Bergmann, 2018; Bergmann and Butter, 2020; Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2020; Balta et al., 2021), the connection between the two is important as conspiracism has been defined as a ‘populist theory of power’ (Fenster, 2008: 8) centring on ‘who has [power] and what do they do with it when no one can see’ (Uscinski, 2019: 48). Our article breaks down the architecture of populist conspiracism to understand what lies at the intersection of these phenomena and examines populists’ use of conspiracy theories in power. It particularly aims to identify the targets, conditions, and function of populist conspiracism in government, as the exercise of power provides an important test for the relevance and resilience of conspiracy theories in populist politics.

Not all populists invoke conspiracy theories and not all conspiracy theorists are populist. While some authors have deemed conspiracy theories rooted in and emerging from the logic of populism (Müller, 2016: 32), they have been more often interpreted as a ‘trope’ or secondary and non-necessary feature of populist discourse (Taggart, 2018: 80–81; Bergmann and Butter, 2020: 334). The connection between the two may be limited but it can also be illuminating. There are indeed a number of elements bringing together populism and conspiracy theories that justify their overlap, both conceptually and empirically. Most notably, they share a deep-seated antagonism towards the established political order (Uscinski et al., 2021). Populists’ decision to draw on given conspiracy theories provides a crude but genuine measure of their style of politicking and their uneasy relationship with power. Part of our concern lies with the purpose of conspiracy theories, for an increasing number of populists in government – ranging from Viktor Orbán in Hungary to Donald Trump in the US – use them ‘to discredit the opposition and win votes’ (Douglas et al., 2019: 23)
and as a key part of their appeal to their constituencies. Populists have a tendency to blame conspiring elites for their failure in government and use these alleged machinations to portray themselves as the underdogs (Müller 2016: 42). The case of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey aptly exposes the dilemma of populism when it becomes entrenched in power; relying on conspiracy theories might help populists divert attention from their ‘establishment’ status and preserve their ‘outsider’ quality while sitting in government (Balta et al., 2021). For this reason, conspiracy theories have been also interpreted as an ‘innovation’ of populists in power (Enyedi, 2020). We therefore argue that populist conspiracism is politically purposeful; targeting a conspiring elite serves to vilify real or fictional opponents and/or shield populists from hostile attacks.

The article connects populism with conspiracy theories, addressing how populists use conspiracy theories to cope with the pressure of government. We do this by first elaborating on the overlap between populism and conspiracy theories and advancing a framework to understand the use of this trope in populists’ exercise of power. We then present three prominent cases of populist conspiracism in government, drawing on left-wing and right-wing populism. We conclude with a discussion of the who, when, and why of populist conspiracism in power and the implications of populists’ use of conspiracy theories.

Connecting populism with conspiracy theory

Conspiracism often has a pejorative connotation in both public and scholarly debates (e.g. Knight, 2000; Bratich, 2008). The analysis of conspiracy theories has been often concerned with the deviance and irrationality of individuals (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; van Prooijen and Jostmann, 2013; Douglas et al., 2017). Evidence moreover suggests that people tend to buy into conspiracy theories when driven by uncertainty and insecurity – elements which all feed into a spiral of scepticism (Douglas et al., 2017). In their most extreme and dramatic examples, conspiracy theories have inspired deadly terrorist attacks in the US, New Zealand, and Germany. But while these cases speak to the broader sources and outcomes of this phenomenon, relatively little attention has been paid to the use of conspiracy theories by contemporary parties, movements, and leaders. For instance, much attention has been paid to the myth of ‘Eurabia’ and how it has informed the vision of Norwegian far-right terrorist Anders Behring Breivik. In contrast, the adoption of the same conspiracy theory by the populist radical right Alternative for Germany in
Looking at populism allows us to examine the rationale and political appeal of some conspiracy theories. We consider populism to deliver a specific worldview that juxtaposes two monolithic blocs – the virtuous people and the bad elite – and regards the will of the people as the only rightful parameter of political action and actual goal of politics. Populism can attach itself to different sets of ideas: from nativism (populist radical right) to democratic socialism (populist radical left), alternatively presenting exclusionary or inclusionary features (Mudde, 2007; March, 2011; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Most authors agree that conspiracies are secret plots orchestrated by a malevolent group of powerful actors (Cubitt, 1989; Keeley, 1999; Pidgen, 1995; Barkun, 2013) and conspiracy theories accusatory and suspect explanations of events, not adopted by the proper epistemic authorities, citing such plots as main causal factors (Uscinski, 2019). Locating our enquiry at the intersection of populism and conspiracy theories, we are concerned with the way that these theories are used and spread by populist actors, and whether politicians are likely to propose the existence of a conspiracy as a fundamental feature of their rhetoric. We can identify a propensity for populists to resort to conspiracy theories to vilify opponents and shield themselves from hostile attacks. This is particularly relevant for populists in power that are called on to reconcile their rejection of the ‘establishment’ with the spoils of government.

While acknowledging that conspiracy theories can be ‘bottom-up’ (whereby conspirators act against the social order) as well as ‘top-down’ (whereby elites qualify as the conspiring actors) (see Butter, 2020), and therefore identify other malevolent actors beyond a treacherous elite, these distinctions tend to blur when their chief advocates are populists in power. Populists will strive to portray themselves as the underdogs and locate themselves outside of the establishment. Populists in power are likely to claim that a power bloc is acting behind the scenes to frustrate their governmental action or trying to subvert the constituted order, no matter populists’ own entrenchment in the establishment. Moreover, their dualistic framing of the world will bring them to conflate malignant actors with the elites and present a narrative able to convince populist supporters that they are not part of the power structure (Barr, 2009). And while some authors also agree on the instrumental nature of conspiracy theories (e.g. Müller, 2016; Balta et al. 2021; Uscinski et al., 2021), assessing their genuine subscription to these theories cannot be ascertained conclusively and remains beyond the scope of this article. We remain here concerned with outlining the political rationale and implications of populist conspiracism.
Considering the literature on conspiracy theories, we draw five main elements to guide us through their identification, but also their distinction from fake news. First, it is vital that the actions of the conspiracy are intended for it to qualify as a fully-fledged theory (Popper, 1987: 351). What makes conspiracy theories distinct is a clear ascription of agency to those who are involved with the conspiracy. Seeing intentionality where others see complexity, even randomness, is therefore a key feature of conspiracism. Second, it is essential to this agency that it is collective and not individual. Because there are a number of individuals and/or groups involved in setting up a plot, it requires them to act in concert, to coordinate, and therefore to conspire. Collusion reinforces the importance of the collective nature of the conspiracy and the differentiation from an individual with overweening power. Third, for the collective agents to conspire and to work together, this must not be an open process (Cubitt, 1989; Barkun, 2013). This secrecy may extend from simply keeping actions hidden to actively trying to obfuscate reality by sowing discord. Fourth, conspiracies are essentially monistic. Politics is seen in a non-pluralistic way and there is the inherent assumption that a conspiring and powerful elite and a deceived and powerless people are both unified entities. Notions of conspiracy theories advancing among the voiceless date back to the work of Richard Hofstadter (1964) and are substantiated by feelings of powerlessness among the public at large (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999). This reinforces a tendency for politics, in this way of thinking, to be both dualistic and potentially polarised. Finally, conflict is portrayed by conspiracy theorists as a wider moral struggle between good (the people) and evil (the elites) (Barkun, 2013). The belief that the world is subject to polarising battles and that the unfolding of specific events can be attributed to the machinations of malevolent groups is intrinsic to the paranoid style of the mass public (Oliver and Wood, 2014).

Conspiracy theories essentially provide unorthodox explanations for the occurrence of real-world events. Such theories frame specific events as the product of deliberate plots by covert forces, which are seen to reproduce asymmetrical power – and, by implication, knowledge – relations within society. And it is precisely the adversarial posture of populists that makes them prone to use these theories, be they in government or in opposition.

There is a widespread tendency to conflate conspiracy theories with fake news and political misinformation (Bergmann and Butter, 2020). While populists can indeed be found propagating fake news as much as conspiracy theories (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2019), the first essentially consist in ‘the deliberate publication of fictitious communication, often spread for a political
Terms of convergence

As some of these aspects already make clear, populism and conspiracy theories share a number of features. Conspiracy theories have long been linked to populism and they seem more and more common to a number of contemporary populist actors. As Hofstadter (1955: 70) noted ‘[t]here is something about the populist imagination that loved the secret plot and conspiratorial meeting’ and populists are particularly prone to conspiracy theories (Wiles, 1969: 167). More recently, Paul Taggart (2018) described conspiracy theory as a ‘trope’ of populism, David Runciman (2018: 65) as ‘the logic of populism’, and Catherine Fieschi (2019: 160) as ‘the currency of populism’. This means that conspiracy theories are not always present with populism but in populism’s difficulties with politics (its ‘unpolitics’), conspiracism appears as an alternative to politics that populists frequently resort to (Taggart, 2018).

A more systematic account of the communication of Donald Trump in the US and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands showed that both right-wing populist leaders blame the elites for concealing the truth and that evil forces are at play to damage them (Hameleers, 2020). ‘To make a musical analogy, one could maintain that if populism is the *theme*, then many conspiracy theories are *variations* on the theme’ (Castanho Silva et al., 2017: 425). But this link has been made somewhat casually and never quite developed in much depth (cf. Fenster, 2008; Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Bergmann and Butter, 2020).

One recent exploration of populism and conspiracy theory by Eiríkur Bergmann (2018) offers a comprehensive overview of conspiracy theories, but is somewhat less elaborate in its consideration of populism and suffers from some definitional problems. Bergmann tends to conflate far-right politics with populism; this means that a portion of conspiracy theories covered really belongs to the realm of anti-democratic extremist politics, rather than populism per se. As a
result of this conflation, a portion of conspiracy theories deployed by populists of other ideological persuasions (i.e. not right-wing) is not considered. Reflecting on their unsystematic overlap, populist actors can be found describing their opponents as an elite conspiracy (Hawkins, 2009, 2010).

Overall, we define populist conspiracism as the act of propagating conspiracy theories by populist actors and argue that there are three terms of convergence between populism and conspiracy theories: Manicheanism, victimhood, and an ambivalence towards representative politics. First, both populism and conspiracy theories tend to interpret the world according to a binary scheme, pitting ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’, or the conspirators against the conspired, and see this conflict as both political and moral (Castanho Silva et al., 2017). Yet, the preference for Manichaean narratives and the reduction of events to a struggle between good and evil (Barkun, 2013; Oliver and Wood, 2014), is only one part of the story. While the populist worldview defines the people as good and pure, and the elite as bad and corrupt (Mudde, 2004), conspiracism sees this division between an unknowing people and a conspiring elite (van Hauwaert, 2012). The Manichean element in populist conspiracism reflects an ‘epistemic cleavage’ between the lies of the outgroup and the truths of the ingroup (Hameleers, 2020: 7). Conspiracy theories therefore reinforce the anti-elitist moral dualism underlying populism. Both populism and conspiracy theories tend to funnel circumstances through a monocausal logic, essentially holding a small malevolent clique responsible for all the ills of the world.

Second, conspiracy theories and populism both side with the (alleged) losers of sociocultural and economic conflicts. This particular framing blames conspiring elites or groups, with access to powerful resources, for the state of victimhood of ordinary people (Castanho Silva et al., 2017: 427). At the most basic level, both reproduce a specific theory of power, whereby believers and audiences (the victims) are subject to the plots of a secretive ‘power bloc’ (the perpetrators) that controls society and aims at global takeover (Fenster, 2008). Populist conspiracism is concerned with imbalance or ‘power discrepancy between the people and the elites’ (Hameleers, 2020: 4), which is part of a general charge that the people are not getting (to know) what they deserve.

Third, populism and conspiracy theories both feed on and foster distrust towards the status quo (Hameleers, 2020: 4). The underlying logics of populism and conspiracy theory are essentially majoritarian, identifying the source of morality in the deceived/excluded many, as opposed to the deceitful few. While useful to mobilise group support and activate anti-establishment orientations
(Uscinski et al., 2021), populist conspiracism may ultimately disrupt the existing political order (e.g. Atkinson and DeWitt, 2018). Questioning the prevailing order poses a threat to established institutions and has the potential to erode liberal values (Fenster, 2008: 84). Picking up on populism’s democratic character and reflecting on its strained relationship with representative politics, it can feed illiberal tendencies by drawing on conspiratorial manipulation. But populist conspiracism might be ‘on to something’ by singling out forms of power concentration and unaccountability. It can indeed raise issues that need to be addressed (Douglas et al., 2019: 17) and it may at times provide answers ‘to an unjust political order, a barren or dysfunctional civil society, and/or an exploitative economic system’ (Fenster, 2008: 90).

**Populist conspiracism: who, when, and why?**

Populists use conspiracy theories to put alternative narratives in the public debate, highlight elite corruption, and create powerful secret enemies. In advancing a framework for analysis, we break down the architecture of populist conspiracism and consider three elements: the who (the targeted elites), when (the set of conditions), and why (the functional utility) of populists’ use of conspiracy theories. By factoring in populists’ contentious relationship with power, moreover, we problematise how populists sustain their antagonistic posture and their Manichean anti-elite discourse in government.

To be sure, populists may invoke conspiracy theories in opposition as much as in government. The case of the 5 Star Movement in Italy is a forceful reminder that populist conspiracism can be used as a mobilising tool in opposition, but also be discarded in government in a quest to moderate and gain respectability. Yet the use of conspiracy theories in power provides a key resource to dodge the populist dilemma of being, at the same time, against the establishment and entrenched in it. Indeed, populists’ democratic impulse is to shield people and government from conspiracies (Shils, 1956: 99). This means that, when in power, populists may use conspiracy theories to sustain their position in government. Conspiracy theories serve as a ‘cognitive refuge’ of populism when it attempts to overcome the institutional dilemmas it faces in power (Taggart, 2000: 106), and they can help populists explain why they have difficulties with the institutional structures of politics and sustain their fight against the system once they become part of the system (Balta et al., 2021). With the growing occurrence of populists in government, and their seemingly more frequent...
endorsement of conspiracy theories, we should try to make sense of populists’ relationship with power by pinpointing the who, when, and why of populist conspiracism.

Looking at the use of populist conspiracism in power, it is useful to consider which outgroups populists attack and the internal/external location of conspiring elites. Recent work on right-wing populist communication interpreted conspiring outgroups as those working together to conceal the truth and pushing their agenda (Hameleers, 2020: 9). Drawing on this description, and extending it to the whole pool of populist actors, we can, for example, include the mainstream or non-aligned media as well as political elites and opposition parties among internal outgroups. At the same time, we can list various ‘dangerous others’ (e.g. foreign agents and governments, immigrants, etc.) among external outgroups. The nature of these outgroups is shaped by the context within which conspiracy theories are deployed. Conspiracy theories do travel but the definition of a secretive power bloc and the narratives putting them at the heart of conspiratorial plots will vary between countries and regions (e.g. Astapova et al., 2021).

Clearly, such a differentiation is only ideal-typical as internal and external outgroups could be claimed to jointly conspire against the unknowing people. The distinction nevertheless offers a broad sense of the preferred targets of populist conspiracism. Internal outgroups are proximate from a sociocultural and political perspective; propagating conspiracy theories targeting them has the main purpose of sowing discord at the local level. Conversely, external outgroups may be perceived as distant and serve to mobilise the national deceived ingroup against the conspiring outgroup. While populist conspiracism targeting internal outgroups (e.g. opposition parties or non-aligned media) tends to have a partisan character, attempts at ‘rallying round the flag’ using external outgroups is likely to depend on the ‘general’ or ‘ideological’ connotation of conspiracy theories (Oliver and Wood, 2014). On the one hand, ideological conspiracies identify an underlying political motivation in the agency of conspirators. On the other, general conspiracies are those for which no clear ideological position can be appended to the group of conspirators, as could be the case for big industrial groups or secret societies (Mancosu et al. 2017). Therefore, ideological conspiracies are likelier to emphasise the ‘community’ aspect and bring together the national ingroup against an external, politically motivated, outgroup.

The when and why of populist conspiracism in power are closely interrelated. Populist conspiracism may be deployed at a particular time point and in response to specific circumstances. Populists have an issue with being in power when they have arrived in office by attacking those in
power and by portraying themselves as outsiders. Being in government then provides a particular challenge for populists. The propagation of conspiracy theories can be a way to meet this challenge. Populism thrives on a sense of real or perceived crisis (Taggart, 2000; Moffitt, 2015) and we can rationalise their use of conspiracy theories as a way to foster a permanent state of alert or as a more circumscribed reaction to times of difficulty. In the first scenario, conspiracy theories allow populists to continuously insist on the existence of a plot to damage the unknowing people and people’s representatives – i.e. the populists in power themselves. They frame the people and the government of the people as being under constant attack, focusing attention on these threats to potentially maintain public support. In the second scenario, populists’ position in government may be fraught with failures and missteps, as often happens with the exercise of public office. Unlike the majority of political actors, however, populists may respond to these challenges by invoking conspiracy theories as explanations for these failures. The objective might be then to divert attention from political failure and regain public support. These elements are summarised in Table 1.

TABLE I HERE

Populists in government can resort to conspiracy theories in a purposeful manner. They may craft or sustain narratives of conspiring elites as deliberately sabotaging the agenda of populists and, by implication, subverting the will of the people. This is a potentially resonant narrative to justify failure and/or divert public attention while in government, especially in the face of declining popular support. For populists, ‘conspiracy’ may thus qualify as the functional opposite of the ‘heartland’; both are sufficiently vague and profound to invigorate myths surrounding elite rule (Taggart, 2000: 106).

**Populist conspiracism in power: an empirical overview**

Drawing on three cases of populism in power, we can look at the conspirators that populists target, the conditions under which they turn to conspiracy theories, and the functional utility of these narratives. We examine the cases of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Donald Trump in the US, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, who have all been identified as populist and have all used conspiracy theories while in power. These illustrative cases offer us variation in terms of ideology and also regional reach with populists in Europe and the Americas.
These cases all represent populism in government without being encumbered by a coalition. While in the US and Venezuelan cases this is a direct effect of their presidential systems, Hungary is a parliamentary system that has delivered two-thirds supermajorities since 2010. Orbán is currently serving his third consecutive term as Hungarian prime minister (fourth overall), Trump served as US president between 2017 and 2021, and Chávez was president of Venezuela between 1999 and his death in 2013. In circumstances in which populists rule on their own, the decision to resort to conspiracy theories and the scope of populist conspiracism can be attributed to populists themselves, and we can rule out the influence of third parties. At the same time, populists’ status in government allows us to appreciate how conspiracy theories fit within populism’s issues with the exercise of power.

 Orbán: ethnic substitution

Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz returned to power in 2010 after an eight-year stint in opposition. With a two-thirds supermajority in parliament, the Orbán government was able to launch a radical project of legislative reform, which has been commonly described as setting Hungary on an illiberal track (Pirro and Stanley, 2021). After nullifying the rule of law and tilting the playing field in its favour, Fidesz devoted its second consecutive term in government (2014-2018) to the demonisation of migrant populations – to the point that the victory at the 2018 general election was almost exclusively secured through this strategy.

Opposition to Islam has become a mainstay of many contemporary populist right-wing parties but it does not, in itself, constitute a conspiracy theory. Its formulation through the lens of ‘ethnic substitution’ however adds a conspiratorial element to the argument. Ethnic substitution is essentially a narrative of white genocide – once confined to the extreme right – also known as the ‘Great Replacement’ from the writings of Renaud Camus, ‘Eurabia’ from the term coined by Bat Ye’or (born Gisèle Littman), or less frequently ‘Kalergi plan’ from one of the early advocates of European integration. According to this theory, there is a concealed attempt to replace the white Christian population (especially in Europe) by promoting mass migration from African and Arab countries, as well as encouraging their demographic growth. Depending on its advocates, the actors orchestrating such plots had generally been identified with the Clinton Foundation and/or Hungarian-American financier and philanthropist George Soros (through the Open Society
Foundations, OSF) by way of the financial support given to humanitarian NGOs rescuing migrants and asylum seekers. These theories came in from the margins into the mainstream after the 2015 ‘migration crisis’, when replacement and anti-Soros conspiracy theories gained ground globally. Among their chief advocates is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who invested taxpayers’ money in costly campaigns targeting migrant populations and demonising Soros, in an attempt to discredit progressive civil society organisations receiving financial support from OSF and EU representatives allegedly subservient to his interests (Plenta, 2020).

The Hungarian government funded a billboard campaign including slogans such as: ‘Soros wants to transplant millions from Africa and the Middle East’ or ‘Don’t let George Soros have the last laugh!’. This campaign was run within the framework of the 2017 ‘national consultation’, which consisted of surveys sent to Hungarian households by the government and asking leading questions on what was labelled as the ‘Soros plan’. At the final event of the campaign, Orbán (2017) vowed to ‘stand in the way of [Soros’] grand plan and his grand business project’. In light of the political influence exerted over democratisation in post-communist countries and his sustained push for liberal ideas, Soros has often been portrayed as using his wealth for shady purposes. Soros and the organisations receiving financial support from OSF were not only seen to promote social chaos to gain financial returns, but also to work towards the dissolution of nation states and the creation of a United States of Europe (Juhász and Szicherle, 2017). Claiming the existence of a deliberate plot to support groups, NGOs, and smugglers flooding the country with migrants only helped exacerbate preconceptions about the Hungarian-American financier and philanthropist. It is also interesting to note that, while born in Hungary and supporting liberal causes across Central and Eastern Europe (and beyond), Soros had spent most of his life outside of the country and could be portrayed as an external conspirator. In nativist terms, his Jewish origins would be also sufficient to locate him ‘outside the Hungarian nation’ and to provide anti-Semitic undertones to the attacks on him.

Blaming Soros for the migrant crisis and insisting on such a conspiracy framing did in fact serve several purposes. After the 2014 general election, Fidesz put forward a contentious proposal on the taxation of Internet usage (October 2014) and was later embroiled in the Quaestor brokerage scandal (March 2015), which was the biggest financial scandal ever recorded in Hungary. These events led to a sharp decline in Fidesz’s support (Politico, n.d.) and sparked widespread popular discontent (Pirro and della Porta, 2021). In the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks (January 2015), Fidesz started politicising the issue of immigration – an issue previously absent from the Hungarian
public debate – to divert attention from its political failures. With some of its most visible consequences unfolding along the Western Balkan route, the migration crisis of summer 2015 only bolstered Orbán’s ‘political masterpiece’: from the absolute marginality of the issue, one Hungarian in three had come to regard immigration as the most important issue faced by the country in autumn 2015 (Eurobarometer 84).

At the same time, placing Soros at the centre of a conspiracy theory on ethnic replacement responded to two long-standing objectives of Fidesz: winning far-right voters and spreading Euroscepticism among the larger public. On the one hand, Soros can be rightfully defined as the bogeyman of the post-communist far right (Ramet, 1999). Hungarian nativists have repeatedly vilified him since the 1990s and much dislike has to be attributed to the Jewish origins of Soros. These theories could be partly interpreted as an anti-Semitic dog-whistle form of politics. On the other hand, Fidesz kept up a strained relationship with the EU since it came to power in 2010 – especially given the government attacks on civil rights and the rule of law – and the anti-Soros conspiracy theories helped craft a new enemy of the nation and deflect criticism from the EU (Plenta, 2020). In the run-up to the 2019 European Parliament election, another billboard campaign featured Soros – this time pictured with then-President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker. The poster read: ‘You have the right to know what Brussels is planning to do!’, essentially suggesting that EU representatives were following Soros’ orders regarding the introduction of compulsory resettlement quotas and deliberately increasing migrant inflows into the continent. The EU and its representatives were thus framed as part of the conspiring network around Soros and acting against the Hungarian government and the interests of the Hungarian nation. According to Zoltán Kovács, Hungary’s Secretary of State since 2010, there is ‘an effort of Soros-related NGOs and organisations to take over European institutions … the content of decisions, the content of debate, the design of different elements of policy are being run by Soros-affiliated organisations’ (Gotev, 2019). Conspiracism under Orbán’s rule has thus moved from the margins to the mainstream, and was steadily embedded into Fidesz’s mode of governance.

Trump: deep state and QAnon

The Trump presidency looks to be suffused with examples of conspiracism. Trump constructed his appeal as a candidate and as a president through active demonisation of various groups – be they immigrants, Muslims, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Democrats, Black Lives Matter
activists, China, or others. Those groups were ascribed by Trump as acting duplicitously and with hidden motives. COVID-19 was therefore labelled as the ‘China virus’ by Trump. The attempt at impeachment by the Democrats was labelled as an ‘illegal, partisan attempted coup’, the FBI investigation into Russian links a ‘witch-hunt’, and the 2020 election as a stolen election. The language of conspiracy and the label of conspiracy theories are everywhere in describing Trump, his voter base, and his links with the voter base. Trump himself was often not the active initiator of the conspiracy theories but it is invariably the case that, where conspiracy theories existed, Trump associated himself with them, albeit indirectly. His appeal has been built on those associations. In practice, it often appears that he ascribed agency and ulterior motives to the actions of those he opposed.

Here we focus on two conspiracy theories used by Trump and his administration. The first is the ‘deep state’, an idea that predates Trump (Hellinger, 2019) but that has been picked up by his administration, particularly Steve Bannon in the early days of his presidency. The idea of the deep state is functional for a president in office – especially one relying on small majorities, or even minorities, in the lower or upper house – as it portrays institutionalised opposition within the state and serves as an explanation of why a politician is unable to deliver on their promises. It has, inherent within it, the association with collusive and coordinated activity covertly used to forward a particular agenda or to thwart an existing agenda. Bannon departed the administration in 2017. But it is notable that the deep state idea remained. It surfaced again in relation the COVID-19 pandemic, with Trump implicating the US Food and Drug Administration and even Anthony Fauci, his chief epidemiologist, as part of the deep state.

The second conspiracy theory is QAnon. According to this theory, there is a shadowy network of people that worked to frustrate the Trump administration. QAnon is an umbrella term for internet-based theories that argues the existence of a Satan-worshipping network engaged in global child sex-trafficking ring (New York Times, 20 August 2020). The network includes top Democrats (like former US president Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton), various celebrities (like Oprah Winfrey), and world figures (such as the Dalai Lama). Like the deep state theory, the idea predates the Trump administration but was amplified by his implications of support. While Trump has not advocated the QAnon theory directly, he has praised the movement and noted their support of him, and QAnon images have been used by the Trump campaign in 2020 (Washington Post, 2 August 2020).
The storming of Capitol Hill in January 2021 saw the culmination and effects of the conspiracy theories with QAnon supporters and advocates of the deep state theory prominent among the rioters. Of course, the discourse and election denial of Trump in the wake of the November 2020 election was a clear catalyst. However, Trump’s assertion of a stolen election does not itself amount to a conspiracy theory; the alleged conspirators were the Democrats and the alleged plot was hardly secret but a brazen attempt to oust Trump and undermine his supporters, according to his narrative. What the episode shows is the power and cumulative potential effects of conspiracy theories.

Overall, Trump’s sustained negativity, demonisation, and polarisation towards his enemies means that much of what passes for conspiracy theory is often an extreme hostility towards his opponents and tendency to assert nefarious motives and means to them but actually stops short of identifying a conspiracy. There are however two incontrovertible cases of conspiracy theories which involve the invocation of a sustained network actively and secretly conspiring: the deep state and QAnon. What is notable about the use of these conspiracy theories is the timing. The roots of the deep state theory mostly but not exclusively lie in the first few months of Trump’s presidency and can be seen as a continuation of Trump election campaign theme about taking on the Washington establishment and ‘draining the swamp’. The QAnon theory surfaced in the latter part of his presidency and, again, this timing coincided with the campaign for re-election and came to fruition with the storming of Capitol Hill. Trump’s use of conspiracy theories therefore appears to be linked to his propensity for negative campaigning rather than as a mode of governance.

Chávez: US plots

Instances of populist conspiracism denouncing US plots abounded during the presidency of Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) – and, since 2013, by his successor Nicolás Maduro. During his time in government, Chávez propagated conspiracy theories ‘at a staggering rate’ (Carey, 2019: 445). Several claims were made by the Venezuelan government, according to which the US and the CIA conspired against Chávez and planned his assassination to prevent the fulfilment of the Bolivarian revolution and attain socialism in Venezuela.

The US has been repeatedly involved in Latin American affairs in order to prevent the instatement, or to try to attain the removal, of uncongenial regimes. The coup against Guatemalan president
Jacobo Árbenz in 1954, leading to the dictatorship of Carlos Castillo Armas (1954-1957), or the Bay of Pigs invasion (Cuba) in 1961, as well as the assassination attempts against Fidel Castro, are some examples of US-backed military interventions against Latin American governments. The history of US involvement in the region therefore provides a rich reservoir of conspiracies focusing on foreign interference, but their recent proliferation in Venezuela is particularly indebted to a combination of military dictatorships, civilian and military coups breeding a culture of suspicion. In this type of context, ‘coups are a quasi-acceptable form of political dissent … primarily because coups occur through real conspiracy against a government, and second because, when power is taken by force, fears instinctively emerge that another group of plotters will try to take that power’ (Hooper, 2020: 662). The resulting tension between anti-imperialist politics and the tyrannical tendencies attributed to the US thus fed into several theories targeting US presidents, agents, and aides. This is all the more resonant when placed in the context of ‘missionary politics’, whereby a charismatic leader leads a chosen people ‘toward redemption and salvation’ in the struggle ‘against all-powerful and conspiratorial enemies’ (Zúquete, 2008: 92).

In Venezuela, Chávez denounced the corruption of the old Punto Fijo regime (i.e. the informal system of party cooperation emerged after the country’s transition to democracy in 1958) and US-led international capitalism. Read through this ideological lens, both the US and the Punto Fijo system ultimately aimed at subverting the interests of the Venezuelan people (Hawkins, 2010: 45) and both deserved a revolutionary response. At the heart of Chávez’s project lay the realisation of ‘twenty-first-century socialism’, which proposed a radical transformation of the pre-existing corrupt system and a redemptive path towards dignity and justice. From these premises, it is possible to understand the scope of Chávez’s diffuse conspiracism. It was a narrative designed to sustain the mobilisation potential of popular support while in power and a central aspect of his style of government. ‘For Chávez, the will of the people is always seen as juxtaposed against, indeed subverted by, the efforts of a conspiring minority that pursues its own interests at the expense of the whole’ (Hawkins, 2010: 61).

On numerous occasions, the Venezuelan leader blamed US president George W. Bush for anything malicious that could happen to him (Pérez Hernáiz, 2008; Zúquete, 2008). Aside from the several – more or less substantiated – claims concerning US plots to kill the president, Chávez’s own illness and eventual death by cancer in 2013 were also the object of widespread conspiracism, suggesting that US agents used ‘nano weapons’ and inoculated cancer into the Venezuelan leader as early as 2005. These would of course add to the broader attempts by the US and the local
oligarchy to wage economic war against the government, so as to bring down the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) (Carey, 2019).

The conspiracy theories used by populists in Venezuela resonate with the ideological underpinnings of their politics as well as with the anti-American mass mobilisations in their support. Americanismo or anti-imperialism is a crucial ideological component in the articulation of the radical democratic model advocated by PSUV and their attack on foreign political intervention (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). While fostering a continuous source of support around leaders at home, conspiracies involving US plots fed into populist attacks on the elites of Latin American systems, at the same time fuelling populist aspirations of radical or revolutionary democracy (de la Torre, 2010; Hawkins, 2010; Zúquete, 2008).

Discussion and conclusions

We started our article noting conspiracy theories’ entry into the political mainstream and the seeming entrenchment of these narratives in some populists’ discourse. Populists’ attempt to activate conspiratorial attitudes can indeed be a part of their strategy in power (Balta et al., 2021). With this contribution, we sought to highlight their terms of convergence and their relevance, theoretically as much as empirically.

We first defined populist conspiracism as politically purposeful in that it helps populists sustain their antagonistic role. To target a conspiring elite is to vilify opponents and/or shield populists from hostile attacks. In their use of conspiracy theories, populists highlight at least three terms of convergence with this trope – Manicheanism, a sense of victimhood, and an ambivalence towards representative politics. It is also the case that conspiracy theories serve particular functions in the populist playbook. The definition of conspiring elites (who), the circumstances under which conspiracy theories are propagated (when), and the ultimate purpose of conspiratorial framing (why) tend to reveal important aspects of populist politics and their relationship with power.

Upon closer inspection, ideologically diverse cases across a range of regions such as Orbán in Hungary, Trump in the US, and Chávez in Venezuela shared a number of features. First, populist conspiracism unequivocally helped demonise and delegitimise enemies (i.e. the conspiring elites), feeding into the moral dichotomisation at the heart of populists’ worldview. The conspiring elites
however varied according to the ideological orientation of the populists. Chávez, who had put anti-imperialism at the core of his socialist revolution, relentlessly targeted the US as the source of personal and national ills. Orbán, who has decidedly steered towards the far right since coming back to power in 2010, framed opposition to migrants in terms of ethnic substitution, blaming Soros and his agents in Hungary and abroad as the chief responsible for the looming threat. While enemies for both generally qualified as external as the targeted elites are not ‘part of the nation’ (Mudde, 2007), the deep state conspiracy (and at least in part QAnon) advocated by Trump defined enemies that are internal to the state. Although the existence of a covert network controlling the state and frustrating governmental action is common to other populists in power in Poland (Jarosław Kaczyński) or Turkey (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan), the right-wing character of this conspiracy holds as long as targeted elites are identified as ideological opponents (i.e. left-wing and progressives). There is however no reason to assume that left-wing populists should not turn to similar conspiracy theories.

Second, the timing of populist conspiracism reflects populists’ desire to promote or prolong a sense of crisis. Chávez in Venezuela seemed concerned with creating a state of permanent alert against the US threat (with no discernible interruption to note). Orbán’s successful attempt at demonising migrants or Trump’s denunciation of conspirators against his administration were more circumscribed. The conspiracism of Orbán and Trump seemed largely dictated by electoral considerations. Orbán has however presented his government as the bulwark against the Islamisation of Europe far beyond the 2015 migration crisis and waged a prolonged war against liberalism throughout his stay in power. This resonates with Chávez’s own attempt to continually find new enemies to fight, especially once public support started to decline after 2002 (Hawkins, 2010). In a way, the timing and length of populist conspiracism is telling insofar as populists’ mode of governance is concerned. The more relevant and persistent their conspiracism, the greater their aspiration to rule according to emergency powers, and thus the willingness to circumvent the constraints posed by representative politics and the rule of law.

Third, the functional utility of populist conspiracism in power is to rally the people – i.e. the deceived people, the victims – against a common enemy, but importantly around populists in government. In examining populist conspiracism, we differentiated between sustaining and regaining public support. Chávez’s insistence on the presence of US plots would indicate a consistent attempt at mobilising people. The rationale underlying Orbán and Trump’s conspiracism seems conversely reactive and aimed at recovering from declining approval rates. Regardless of
the proactive and reactive logic at stake, populist conspiracism intelligibly helps diverting attention from (possible) failure in government.

Drawing back from the specifics of Orbán, Chávez, and Trump we can make some general observations about the relationship between populism and conspiracy theories that seem to follow from the cases. The first observation is that, if we are precise in our identification of conspiracy theories, it appears that they are less frequently used by populists than we might assume. Populists’ demonisation of their enemies – also by means of fake news – and Manichaeanism leads to the assumption that charges made by populist spill over into conspiracy theories, but this is not often the case in practice. There is nothing incompatible between populism and conspiracy theories, but there is also nothing inevitable about their linkage. There is a parallel here: populism, when defined precisely rather than used in its vernacular sense, is less common than is often asserted. The loose use of concepts leads to over-extension of their application.

The second general observation we can make is that there is something eminently fungible or malleable about conspiracy theories. The very opacity and vagueness of the networks implied in these theories means that conspiracy theories are effective tools when employed for political appeals. Their slipperiness means that they can be easily implied and definitive refutations are hard to come by. This is the reason that populism seems to imply conspiracism as much as it does, but why full-blown populist conspiracism is thinner on the ground.

The final remark we would make is that while populism always has an implied ‘heartland’ (Taggart, 2000), the identification of an evil, manipulative, and powerful network of conspirators is a mirror to the heartland. While the heartland embodies all that is good and that is to be recaptured with populist success, the conspiratorial network embodies all that is bad and threatening to the heartland. Both concepts are similar in that they are essentially vague, ill-defined, but nonetheless heartfelt and powerful mobilising ideas for their constituencies. On these grounds, conspiracism is unlikely to wane, but may progressively acquire the same resonance as the heartland in populists’ discourse. Populists’ ability to deny failure, divert attention, and lay the blame on the bad elites resonates as long as they are able to entrench conspiracy theories as part of their politics of crisis.
References


Orbán, V. (2017) We shall not let Soros have the last laugh. Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister. www.miniszterelnok.hu/we-shall-not-let-soros-have-the-last-laugh/.


### Table 1. Relevant elements for populist conspiracism in power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Scope</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who</td>
<td>Targeted elites</td>
<td>Internal vs. external outgroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When</td>
<td>Set of conditions</td>
<td>Circumscribed vs. permanent crisis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why</td>
<td>Functional utility</td>
<td>Sustaining vs. regaining support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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1 Much more could be said about their different pathways to government, deeds in power, and strategies to hold on to it. However, we are here solely concerned with their conspiracism and the elements underlying it, and believe that their right-wing (Orbán and Trump) rather than left-wing (Chávez) ideological orientation, and geographical location (Europe rather than the Americas) can provide preliminary insights into similarities and differences across the three relevant elements outlined.

2 Soros did in fact outline a plan to rejig the EU asylum system to address the migration crisis, but Fidesz’s campaigning intended to deceive people into regarding it as a fait accompli (see Soros, 2015).

3 Chávez’s own conspiracism draws additional leverage from a failed coup attempt against him in April 2002, which saw the Venezuelan president being ousted from power and then reinstated over the span of just two days.