**Background Notes for September 29, 2022**

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**Examining a Conspiracy Theory: Why So Many Americans Believe Trump’s Big Lie and What Can Be Done About It**

Introduction

1. Definition of conspiracy theory: a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by unusually powerful conspirators.
2. The Big Lie: a gross distortion of the truth as a propaganda strategy. The term “Big Lie” used by Hitler in *Mein Kampf* to falsely accuse Jews of lying about German deportment in World War I. An American psychologist used it in an intelligence briefing for the U.S. government to describe Hitler’s strategy to demonize Jews. Yale historian Timothy Snyder used it to describe Trumps claim that the election was stolen. Later Trump himself used the term to claim the 2020 stolen election will ever be known as “The Big Lie.”
3. Trump’s Big Lie: the 2020 election was stolen from him by massive fraud. Held by about 30% of Americans including many republicans running for office in 2022: for example, J.D. Vance, Senate candidate in Ohio.
4. This Big Lie poses an ongoing serious threat to democracy.

*I. Examining Conspiracy Theories* cf Karen Douglas, professor of social psychology in the U.K.

1. History
2. They have always existed. For example, Emperor Nero blamed the 94 A.D. fire that destroyed two-thirds of Rome on the Christians which initiated the first persecution of Christians. Hitler blamed the Jews for Germany’s loss of WWI leading to the Holocaust. In the U.S. the Nativist prejudice claimed Catholics would subvert our government and that if John Kennedy were elected president the pope would rule the White House.
3. Today over a third of Americans believe global warming is a hoax; over half think Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone in assassinating JFK; 19% believe the U.S. government was behind 9/11 attacks.
4. A common conspiracy theory among Catholics is that conservatives poisoned Pope John Paul I who served as pontiff only 33 days.
5. Main motives
6. Epistemic or Cognitive: Seeking causal explanations of events in a crucial part of building up a stable, consistent understanding of the world. We look for causal explanations when in specific circumstances: information is unavailable; reducing uncertainty is difficult; information is conflicting; events seem random; and our beliefs are challenged by alien explanations. In these situations, conspiracy theories are attractive because they presume actions hidden from public scrutiny, involving multiple actors and are resistant to falsifications because arguments against are part of the conspiracy. The desire for cognitive closure is stronger when the events are especially disruptive, cause a great deal of stress and lack a clear official explanation. People with lower levels of education are more likely to accept conspiracy theories, according to some recent studies. Americans who believe the Big Lie presumed Trump would win because he drew bigger crowds, won in 2016, was a better candidate than Biden, and was ahead late election night. Massive fraud is the most likely explanation.
7. Existential motives: Human beings need to feel safe and secure in their environment and to have some control over their lives. Conspiracy theories offer “compensatory satisfaction.” Rejecting official narratives can offer a sense of control, knowing something of the conspirators may make them less scary. Research suggests that turning to conspiracy theories may actually make individuals more insecure, less likely to take constructive actions that might increase their autonomy and less likely to participate in civic organizations and the processes that could strengthen them. It could be disempowering to think that hidden malevolent forces are so powerful. Trump supporters may feel the Big Lie gives them greater control over a chaotic, complex world where elites treat them as “deplorables.” Naming the enemy and claiming massive fraud may mitigate the pain of defeat and provide a measure of security.
8. Social motives: Human beings are social beings who seek fulfillment in groups or communities and who value a positive image of self within the group. Conspiracy theories are appealing to persons who belong to groups which have lower social and economic status and feel that elites look down upon them. Conspiracy theories blame others for their lower status thus alleviating culpability. This strategy tends to decrease trust in government, politicians and scientists which in the long run frustrates the need to see themselves as valuable members of morally decent collectives. For the Trump supporters who feel alienated from mainstream structures, the long rallies, the MAGA logos, the familiar slogans offer a sense of solidarity, of belonging to a powerful group.
9. Trump’s use of language – *A Field Guide to Trump’s Dangerous Rhetoric*  by Jennifer Mercieca, prof at Texas A & M
10. Trump is a “rhetorical genius” who has consistently used three rhetorical strategies that ingratiate him with his followers: *Ad populum*, praising his followers as great, good patriotic, loyal; Paralipsis, for example, in re-tweeting a racist comment while denying he agrees with it; American exceptionalism, he alone is the hero who can make America great again by defeating corruption. He was uniquely qualified to “drain the swamp” because once he was an insider and sacrificed that position of power to become the outsider.
11. He also used three alienating strategies to define himself and his followers from everyone else: 1. *Ad hominem* arguments: for example, mocking a reporter with a physical disability suggesting his report of Trump’s lies was as impaired as his body; 2. *Ad baculum* or threats of force or intimidation, for example, he repeatedly said Hilary Clinton would take away their guns leaving them defenseless against rapists and murderers; 3. Reification, he described Muslim refugees as a “Trojan Horse,” planning to attack America. In general, he uses language not to persuade but to gain compliance, to “accumulate power” a typical strategy used by authoritarians to erode democracy.
12. Trump’s repetition of the Big Lie is crucial to its appeal
13. Trump warned of the possibility of fraud before the election and since has repeated constantly in tweets, interviews, and rallies that the election was “stolen,” a word that resonates with people who feel their status, influence and power has been stolen from them.
14. The Big Lie has gained support by repetition through social media and like-minded news outlets like Fox News.
15. Republican leaders have repeated the Big Lie in various ways. After the January 6 insurrection, 147 Republican House members refused to certify Biden’s election victory. Most Republicans running for office in 2022 have embraced the Big Lie and have won primaries on that stance.
16. Podcasts played an especially influential role in spreading the Big Lie. While some conservative media outlets owned by Rupert Murdock urged Trump to accept defeat, individual podcasters like Steve Bannon, Rudy Giuliani, Mark Levin and Sean Hannity felt free to promote wild theories of voter fraud including rigged Dominion voting machines and machinations by Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez. After the Nov 3, 2020 election the role of these podcasts increased dramatically with total audiences on Twitter and YouTube reaching tens of millions.
17. Religious Leaders: Franklin Graham said Trump was right on so many issues, he presumed he was right on the election. Many evangelical pastors have promoted the Big Lie in their churches. Individual Catholic clerics have supported the Lie, Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano known for his harsh criticisms of Pope Francis, published a public letter accusing the “deep state” of carrying out “the most colossal election fraud in history,” to deprive Trump whom he called “the final garrison against the world dictatorship,” At a public rally Fr. Frank Pavone, director of Priests for Life, prayed for God to bless Trump’s campaign “as it fights voter fraud.”
18. Repetition in a variety of contexts can produce a “web of support” based on the illusion that the Lie is accepted by those with various viewpoints while in fact they all represent the same allegiance to Trump himself.
19. Characteristics of election deniers
20. Fear of being replaced. A January 2022 article “Insurrectionists Aren’t Who You Think They Are” by Robert A. Pape, political science professor at University of Chicago, studied 716 people arrested on charges for Jan 6th attack on the Capital, finding more than half are business owners or have white collar occupations, including doctors, lawyers, architects and accountants. Only 7% were unemployed and only 14 % were militia members. The key common characteristic is they come from counties where the white share of the population is declining rapidly. The right wing conspiracy theory “the great replacement” popularized by Fox commentator Tucker Carlson, holds liberal leaders are engineering white demographic decline especially through immigration policy. About 75% of Jan 6th insurrectionists believe the great replacement theory. They also believe that violence is justified to resist their replacement. Recall the Charlottesville rally with the chant “Jews will not replace us.”
21. Election deniers tend to have an apocalyptic view of the world. We are in a great struggle between good and evil. Anti-Trumpers of both parties are the enemy. Defending Trump and his Lie is their core conviction, essential to their very identity. Challenges to their position feels like a personal attack. The fate of our democracy and our country is at stake, threatened by the 2020 massive fraud.
22. Researchers at the University of Texas who interviewed 56 elected election deniers, drew these conclusions. They do not exist in “tightly sealed right-wing echo chambers;” a majority do not subscribe to multiple conspiracy theories; election night media coverage with fluctuating numbers created doubts; rally sizes were influential as were other influential elections deniers; among deniers there are shades of belief, some very firm, others showing degrees of uncertainty; the stage is set for more election deniers in upcoming elections.
23. Deniers are organizing to claim victories in 2022 and 2024
24. Republican deniers have won primaries in battle ground states for governor, secretary of state, attorney general and offices which oversee elections.
25. Election deniers are running for governor in Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania.
26. Georgia is the exception where election deniers were defeated.
27. The Conservative Partnership Institute, a right-wing non-profit is coordinating a national effort to gain control of election administration by electing deniers and recruiting poll workers.
28. This situation is a real threat to the integrity of the 2024 presidential election.
29. The Big Lie has encouraged states to pass restrictive voter laws in 19 states.
30. According to the Center for Election Innovation and Research, the six states where it is most difficult to vote are Alabama, Connecticut, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire and South Carolina because they require a reason to vote absentee by mail and do not offer universal early voting options.
31. New Georgia Law Republicans say it expands voter opportunities, Democratics say it is restrictive. A BBC study made these points. The law does not make voting hours more restrictive, counties can still set the hours between 7 am and 7 pm. There will be fewer drop boxes than in 2020, down from 38 to 8 in Fulton Co. but before 2020 and the Covid crisis there were no drop boxes at all. The new law does not eliminate Sunday voting (as earlier drafts of the bill did) and it allows early voting on two Sundays. The law does prohibit giving food or water to people standing in line to vote; an offense punishable by a year in jail and $1,000 fine.
32. It is not clear that these new restrictive laws will actually affect turnout.

II. What Can Be Done

1. Legislation
2. Congress must pass legislation to ensure that state legislatures cannot overturn the actual vote count.
3. On July 20, 2022 a bi-partisan group of senators led by Susan Collins and Joe Manchin after months of negotiations introduced two bills to reform the Election Count Act of 1887 to ensure that the electoral vote accurately reflect each states vote for president. The first one is “The Election Count Reform Act.” The second bill the “ Enhanced Election Security and Protection Act” doubles the penalties for threatening or intimidating election officials, poll workers, voters or candidates; aims to improve the handling of election mail by the Postal Service; enhances cyber security; increases penalties for tampering with election records. Hearings are now being held on the hill.
4. There are two other bills before Congress, The John Lewis Act and Freedom to Vote Act, designed to safeguard our elections.
5. It seems reasonable that Congress will pass meaningful reforms.
6. Voting out election deniers
7. Some Republican leaders, including former New Jersey Governor Christi Todd Whitman, are urging “rational remnants of the Republican Party” to join forces with Democrats to defeat election deniers. They are part of the larger Renew America Movement calling for “collation campaigning” to defeat deniers.
8. Individual voters should examine candidate’s character, competence, policy positions and at this time when democracy is threatened, their position on the Big Lie. The ballot box is a powerful weapon in the battle to preserve our republic. To find out about candidates and their positions consult ***ballotpedia.org***, a non-profit nonpartisan organization that publishes candidates answers to some 15 questions; for example, what are 3 key message of your campaign (there is no direct question about the Big Lie).
9. According to the *Washington Post*, liberal groups like the Strategic Victory Fund and the Democratic Alliance and big doners like Linked In founder Reid Hoffman are raising “tens of millions of dollars” to defeat deniers in swing states and to protect ballot access and tabulation in 2024 (WAPO June 22, 2022).
10. Public efforts to counter the Big Lie; some possibilities
11. Donate to candidates opposing deniers.
12. Write a letter to the Editor.
13. Have your book club read and discuss a book on the topic; one possibility is *The Big Lie:* *Election Chaos, Political Opportunism and* *the State of American Politics After 2020*  by Jonathan Lemire (Flatiron Books, 2022).
14. Host a group to discuss my September 2022 Reflections titled *Saving Democracy: The Fight* *for Truth.*
15. Encourage your parish to provide opportunities before midterm elections to discuss the American bishops document “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” for example, lectures, seminars, small group discussions, and quotes in bulletins. The document emphasizes forming our conscience in accord with “Gods truth.”
16. Personal efforts dealing with family and friend deniers
17. Cognitive psychology and neuroscience tell us that we are wired to reject new knowledge that contradicts our worldview. Our brain chemistry makes us feel threatened, personally attacked and causes us to harden our position. Likewise, new information that confirms our bias makes us feel good, stronger. We should work hard to keep an open mind, to consider various perspectives, and to modify our opinions based on objective, verified evidence. This suggests some advice: do not assume deniers are all hard core believers, impervious to rational argument; do not attack them personally; do not think of them as among “the deplorables”; ask questions that may suggest how hard core their allegiance to the Big Lie is (for example, is there anything that would change your mind?) or that would support small areas of agreement (do you think our democracy is at risk?) or find out if there is some Republican they respect who believes the election was fair / what do you think of Bill Barr, Mitch McConnell, Karl Rove, George W. Bush, Jeb Bush, Maryland Gov Larry Hogan, Mitt Romney; ask how it was possible to change 80,000 votes in Pennsylvania.
18. In many situations, it is better to say nothing to coexist with deniers in relative harmony, to talk family affairs and avoid politics. We need the virtue of prudence to guide us.
19. For many people today politics has replaced religion as the normative guide. For example, the story is told of a white evangelical father who would rather have his daughter marry a Catholic than a democrat.
20. Make a deal with a denier to watch Fox News for a week or two if they will watch CNN. Some deniers who follow only conservative media have not heard the main arguments against the Big Lie: over 60 court cases brought by Trump and allies failed; Attorney General Bill Barr said the Big Lie has no basis in fact; Dominion has sued Giuliani, Fox News and Sydney Powell, whose defense in court was that no reasonable person would take her claims as facts; no top election official reported any major instance of fraud; recounts in Republican states like Georgia affirmed Biden’s victory.
21. In trying to counter the Big Lie we would do well to recall the traditional wisdom “Pray like everything depends on God; work like everything depends on us.”
22. Dealing with “epistemic stubbornness” and resistance to new knowledge that challenges our established view
23. A common problem for all of us.
24. We all should strive to improve our drive to understand our knowing process.
25. Schools have the task of helping students develop intellectual skills, to become critical thinkers, and to evaluate truth claims.
26. Advice from the great Canadian Jesuit philosopher Bernard Longergan
27. Be faithful to our innate desire to know.
28. Seeing is not necessarily knowing, common sense can be wrong. Eye witnesses to murders and violent crimes are often wrong in describing perpetrators. Just because we can see a distant star by telescope does not mean it exists since it may have burned itself out years ago. Just because millions of citizens think the 2020 presidential election was stolen does not make it true.
29. Specific advice: Be attentive; for example, find a denier who might be open to dialogue. Be intelligent; for example, look for possible areas of agreement. Be reasonable; for example, have arguments at hand to debunk the Big Lie. Be responsible; for example, be prepared for further discussions. Be loving; for example, treat the denier with respect during and after the encounter no matter the outcome.