

Panel

**(De)Politicization as the undercurrent of the creeping autocratization in the United States II  
Epistemological diversification and the delegitimization of policies, politics and polity**

As Part of the Section

*Rigging the System – Righting the System:  
Dimensions of a constitutional, political and societal crisis in the United States*

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Even more clearly than on January 6, 2021 itself, the year after the attack on the US Capitol has demonstrated that a new, single division – emanating from former President Trump’s ‘big lie’ of election fraud – has come to structure the political arena in the United States. Underneath this dichotomy, common organizing principles of liberal representative democracies have begun to sway; traditional separations between branches of government and their respective functions and logics, between facts and fiction, and between issues outside and within the bounds of partisan controversy are increasingly blurred. In recent public discourse as well as scholarly analyses, the most radical and violent actions and actors and those around the former president have so far taken center stage. Yet, in order to grasp this creeping autocratization more fully, it is essential to examine the promotion and justification of a broader foundation in which major trends of deinstitutionalization, anti-liberalism and anti-science are being anchored in the political system, in the media and in society.

The sister panels on “(De)Politicization as the undercurrent of the creeping autocratization in the United States” zoom in on these developments to study them as processes of politicization and depoliticization that can strategically and significantly (re)define, (re)form, (de)stabilize and (de)legitimize the social, discursive and institutional context in which societal interactions, political conflict and decision-making can legitimately take place. This perspective also allows us to inquire into the particular knowledge(s), information or rationalities that these processes of (de)politicization rely on and that they (in)validate in turn.

Against this backdrop, this panel inquires into the relationship between knowledge production, (dis)information, public communication and the democratic political system in the United States. Given their growing relevance and increasing influence in the political and media arenas, the panel will focus on (groups promoting) fringe ideologies, conspiracy theories and religious knowledge. This allows to address their expression in the Republican Party’s official communication, their underlying mechanisms and functions as well as their implications for electoral politics and intra-societal relations more broadly.

## Hyperdemocracy in America: Tocquevillian Perspectives on the Democratic Crisis

*Stephen Welch, Durham University*

While crisis has been a prominent theme in commentary on democratic politics of late, under generic headings such as 'populism', it is in the United States (where indeed the phenomenon of populism originated) that the crisis is most visible. Hence there is need for analysis which captures the specificity of this case without obscuring its more general theoretical implications. A model for such an approach is Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

The present crisis is multidimensional, but a unifying feature is its epistemic character: it arises from the complex and contested relationship between knowledge and democracy. We can see it as the extension of the democratic principle that people should make up their own minds into an arena not previously (except in the case of 'freedom of conscience') thought subject to it: to the production and acceptance of facts. Facts such as the result of a presidential election or the efficacy of a vaccine against a deadly pandemic disease strike one immediately as emblematic of this novel problem, dwarfing even the issues examined under the heading of 'post-truth' several years ago. Epistemic questions also underlie current concerns about both broadcast and social media. Democratic theory is no longer dominated by the optimistic theory of 'cognitive mobilization', whereby rising education and more rapidly circulating information would extend and entrench democracy. But it is not yet clear what paradigm should succeed it.

While Tocqueville's most famous doubt, about democracy's 'tyranny of the majority', merely restated classical fears of demagoguery, his principal explanatory factor 'equality of condition' yielded more original insights. Its strong epistemic dimension is illustrated in Tocqueville's famous formulation of his project, 'When I compare the Greek and Roman republics to these republics of America, the manuscript libraries of the first and their coarse populace, to the thousand newspapers that crisscross the second and the enlightened people who inhabit them ... I am tempted to burn my books so as to apply only new ideas to a social state so new.' Juxtaposing today's far more massive flow of information with the political coarseness seen on 6 January 2021, we see the need for further innovation, but here too Tocqueville offers cues: 'there is a sort of ignorance that is born of extreme publicity. In despotic states men do not know how to act because they are told nothing; in democratic nations they often act at random because they are told everything'.

Much has changed that Tocqueville could not anticipate, in the fields of media, science, religion and jurisprudence that constitute the epistemic dimension of democracy. But his view of democracy as a complex and emergent socio-political (and not merely governmental) phenomenon, containing its own contradictions and resulting dynamics, is a model for a similarly broad rethinking of democratic theory today. Developing arguments I made in my book *Hyperdemocracy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), I focus on Tocqueville in order to examine the democratic roots of the present crisis of democracy, and to assess the extent to which the American case is exemplary.

## Modeling Trump's Attack on the 2020 Elections and Applying the Model to 2021

*Maria Annala, Finnish Institute of International Affairs*

In 2020, President of the United States Donald Trump launched an unprecedented electoral manipulation campaign to secure himself a second term in office regardless of what the voters decided. In 2021, the Republican Party has followed in his footsteps.

This paper presents a new model to describe Trump's attack on the 2020 Presidential elections. Thereafter, the model is applied to the actions of the Republican Party in 2021 to analyze whether the party has continued to resort to the same electoral manipulation tactics that Trump used in 2020.

The model is primarily based on a database that was constructed by conducting a keyword search in the Washington Post digital archive. The search covered all news reports published in the Washington Post print newspaper from April 1st 2020 to January 20th 2021. New information that has surfaced since then has been taken into consideration when finalizing the model.

The search was limited to one print newspaper to keep the amount of research material reasonable, and one large newspaper was considered sufficient because newsrooms have the custom of quoting or following up on each other's news stories.

Electoral manipulation is analyzed in this paper as a sign of autocratization, which is defined as the process during which a democracy becomes less democratic or an autocracy becomes more deeply autocratic.

According to this study, Trump used seven different electoral manipulation methods: 1) disinformation, 2) voter suppression, 3) intimidation and violence, 4) intraparty pressure, 5) attacking government institutions, 6) breaking democratic norms and 7) attempted collusion with foreign states.

Trump's strategy combined A) old and familiar election rigging methods (1, 2 and 3), B) methods favored in the recent past by democratically elected leaders with authoritarian tendencies (4 and 5) and C) methods taken from the playbook of foreign election meddling (1 and 7). Trump's electoral manipulation campaign does not fit neatly into other electoral manipulation models that have been presented in previous research.

In 2021, the Republican Party has continued to use at least six out of the seven tactics, as it prepares for the midterms and the 2024 Presidential elections. The party has spread disinformation to gain political advantage and enacted new legislation that makes it easier to manipulate future elections. It has contributed to a culture of violence and intimidation, which may deter democracy-respecting citizens from seeking positions as election officials, leaving room for Big Lie promoters to take their place.

All this makes American democracy vulnerable, and the next electoral manipulation attempt may well be successful.

## Conspiracy Theories as a Component of Populist Rhetoric

*Patrick Sawyer, Higher School of Economics Moscow*

What are the functions of conspiracy theory rhetoric used by leaders of populist movements? Whereas many scholars have demonstrated a consistent relationship between conspiracy theory beliefs and support for populist candidates, the mechanisms that explain this relationship remain under-examined. This exploratory study moves in this direction by coding conspiracy theory rhetoric in a large corpus of speeches by Donald Trump using a qualitative content analysis in order to uncover the functions of such references for forging and retaining a strong relationship with the broader populist movement. The authors argue that conspiracy theory rhetoric could serve both a 'demonization' function, for attacking and delegitimizing opponents, and a 'mobilization' function, that can be used to forge a more concrete 'bloc' of supporters. Early results point to a significant amount of evidence of demonizing functions in Trump's rhetoric, such as attacking individual politicians, stereotyping the opposing camp, and delegitimizing political institutions, as well as mobilizing functions, such as coordinating the attention of followers, and reinforcing group identity. Furthermore, conspiracy theory rhetoric of all kinds are found primarily in campaign speeches, and are nearly absent in interviews and prepared speeches, implying that Trump refers to them primarily when speaking directly to his supporters.

## Insurrection as Apocalypse: Charismatic Rupture in Fascism and Authoritarianism

*Sarah Louise MacMillen, Duquesne University*

In the United States, the January 6, 2021 insurrection continues to be legitimized by significant sections of the Right Wing. In the first days of February 2022, as *The New York Times*, described: “Republicans were forced to either explain or denounce a party resolution characterizing the events of January 6<sup>th</sup> as legitimate forms of political discourse” (Epstein and Goldmacher 2022). Epstein and Goldmacher observe that this may only be “preview of the battles ahead, with a series of upcoming primary contests pitting candidates loyal to Mr. Trump against those who, to varying degrees, resist his distortions about the election.”

Democratic discourse relies on, if not a robust consensus in Habermas’ sense, at least common appreciation of “the rules of the game” and “discourse” (Ingraham 2019). This implies a recognition of the legitimacy of the process. But what if a significant number see that process as illegitimate: as “rigged,” or even the “mark of the Beast” (Revelation 13)? This paper will explore some religious logics within QAnon, a driving force in the 2021 Insurrection. It will consider QAnon’s persistence in the American religious landscape. The potency of the religious discourse within QAnon legitimizes the “cause” of political insurrection and coup—and there is no “trumping” the Transcendent claims for authority that religion (or pseudo-religion) conjures up, especially with its authoritarian dimensions (Adorno 2000 [1975]).

In his “1937 article ‘Fascism, Son of Liberalism,’ Jacques Ellul described a shift taking place: from a society based on law to a society based on propaganda and what Ellul terms as ‘technique’” (Rollison 2017). Ellul reflects on how both Leftist and Right-Wing discourse instrumentalize the “masses” via technical apparatuses and psychological mechanisms of polarization. The paper will unpack the political consequences for the polarization of 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians in the political landscape, especially via the “Culture Wars” thesis from Hunter (1991). As Christians try to place themselves in the contemporary categories of Right/Left politics, the result is sometimes feelings of “political orphanhood.” This is precisely the foundation for a turn toward the *anti-establishment (anti-)politics of the charismatic* (Weber 1968), and nostalgic fascist tendencies (MAGA) combined with populism (Adorno 2000 [1975]).

This paper also suggests a call to action, channeling the voices of French theologian and sociologist, Jacques Ellul, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian journalist, Chris Hedges. This is a critical moment for Christians to encounter, confront, and challenge fascistic tendencies within their own communities.

## Pandemic, Politicization, and Post-truth: Conspiracy Theory and the Crisis Nexus in the United States

*Jeremiah Morelock, Boston College*

The current popularity of far-right, authoritarian populism in the United States includes a flourishing popularity of conspiracy theory. Although Trumpism rose several years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, since 2020 many of the right-wing populist outcries have involved the explicit rejection of vaccination, mask wearing, and other preventive measures, framing them as forms of despotic elite interference. In particular, the issue of vaccination has become contentious and highly politicized throughout the pandemic, with stories touted by QAnon and others placing vaccination as a central pivot around the speculated conspiracies in which various government and scientific elites nefariously cooperate to dominate the populace. The sudden enormous popularity of these suspicions begs for explanation. This paper offers a piece of this explanation, centering specifically on crises of legitimation and epistemology. The exposition here is partly empirical and partly theoretical. For the empirical analysis, a variety of descriptive and inferential findings from the 'Vaccination, Health, and Values' survey will be described. The survey was administered over social media in September of 2021, and contains a variety of measures such as the Trust in Science and Scientists Inventory, the Epistemological Style Inventory, Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale, a 3-component Populism scale, the Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale, and a variation on the World Health's Organization's Vaccine Hesitancy Scale. A series of multiple regressions consistently reveal significant associations between populism, right-wing authoritarianism, belief in conspiracy theory, epistemology, and trust in science and scientists. These findings are discussed in relation to a theoretical framework that brings together several concepts that are more typically discussed separately. One of these is the notion of 'epistemic crisis.' The use of the term here is especially informed by the writings of Laudan, but is also informed by recent uses of the term that concern the psychosocial effects of social media. As used in this paper, the concept of 'epistemic crisis' indicates socially chronic doubt on three connected levels: concerning what is true ('the what'), how to decide what is true ('the how'), and who knows or decides the truth ('the who'). Using QAnon and the COVID-19 health crisis in the United States as the central point of reference, this concept is brought into conversation and synthesis with ideas from Habermas and Hofstadter concerning legitimation crisis, the 'paranoid style,' and anti-intellectualism. The epistemic crisis, legitimation crisis, and health crisis are connected elements in what can be understood as a crisis nexus. The crises are useful to discuss as analytically distinct, but they are interrelated culturally and politically, contributing to one another. Epistemic crisis and legitimation crisis meet and mutually activate in the populist distrust of science and scientists, which inspires behavior that contributes to the health crisis. The current popularity of conspiracy theories in the United States occupies this space, where 'scientific elites' are not only distrusted but framed as nefarious or corrupt, and there is widespread destabilization concerning 'the how' or 'the who' that might arbitrate competing claims to 'the what.'