

The Convergence of Populism, Conspiracy Theories, and Social Media in the Construction of Threats to Democracy

S. HARRIS ALI

Department of Sociology, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Abstract: In our current era, dominated as it is by digitalization in its varied forms, the dynamic interplay of populism, conspiracy theory, and social media has significant consequences for the democratic functioning of society. In this paper I identify and discuss some of these consequences, with an analytic emphasis on how this dynamic may be contributing to the emergence of a contemporary crisis in democracy in both Canada and the United States. In my discussion, I outline the contours of this impending democratic crisis in terms of several developments: the polarization of society and the development of a crisis politics, enhanced conditions for encouraging the expression of political violence, the development of a post-truth society, and establishing the conditions for the rise of oligarchy. I suggest that all these developments impede the proper functioning of democracies in significant ways, paying particular attention to selective affinities between populism and conspiracy theories. If we learn from the American case, Canada is not immune, and we need to take up these concerns seriously if we care about democracy and its future.

Keywords: crisis in democracy, populism, conspiracy theories, social media

Résumé : L'époque actuelle, dominée par la numérisation sous toutes ses formes, l'interaction dynamique du populisme, les théories conspirationnelles et les médias sociaux, a des conséquences importantes pour le fonctionnement démocratique de la société. Dans le présent article, l'auteur présente et analyse certaines de ces conséquences et insiste sur l'apport possible de cette dynamique sur l'émergence d'une crise contemporaine de la démocratie, tant au Canada qu'aux États-Unis. Dans son exposé, il souligne les contours de cette crise démocratique imminente en fonction de plusieurs développements : la polarisation de la société et la création d'une politique de crise, des conditions favorables à l'expression de la violence politique, l'apparition d'une société post-vérité et la mise en place des conditions nécessaires à la montée de l'oligarchie. L'auteur avance que toutes ces situations compromettent le bon fonctionnement des démocraties de manière significative, particulièrement les affinités sélectives entre le populisme et les théories conspirationnelles. Le cas américain démontre que le Canada n'est pas à l'abri et qu'il faut prendre ces préoccupations au sérieux si l'on s'intéresse à la démocratie et à son avenir.

Mots-clés : crise de la démocratie, médias sociaux, populisme, théories conspirationnelles

Introduction

In its most general formulation, populism refers to any political stance that is antagonistic towards elites while claiming instead to champion the voice of the people. Beyond this general understanding, there are identifiable, distinct features associated with populism

(Bergmann 2018). First, populist movements and leaders target and draw support from those who, for various reasons, feel threatened economically and culturally. To politically court such groups, populists frequently adopt ideological stances based on anti-immigrant, pro-capitalist, and authoritarian sentiments. Second, in line with the sentiments implicit in neoliberal ideology, populists argue that the state should not be involved in providing citizens with comprehensive health, welfare and educational services because service provision in these areas is subject to criticism on numerous fronts, largely couched in terms of government bureaucratic “inefficiencies.” As such, populists promote the ideas of privatization and the establishment of a relatively unregulated free market. Third, populism tends to reject (or at least be skeptical of) certain important elements and norms conventionally held in a liberal democracy such as the importance of the rule of law, diversity, openness, human rights, and the free press. For populists these facets of democracy are regarded with suspicion because associated policies and institutions are seen to be used by the establishment elite to suppress or otherwise exploitatively manipulate the people (Mounk 2018).

Of particular interest for this contribution, the growth of populist parties in Western democracies has coincided with the increased spread and prevalence of conspiracy theories (Bergmann 2018). Conspiracy theories refer to explanations of events or situations in which powerful groups or elite actors acting at the international, national, or individual level are believed to secretly collude to achieve malevolent goals. It is often argued that elite actors are secretly controlling or manipulating outcomes which negatively affect the victims of the conspiracy (Bale 2007).

Selective Affinities: Populism and Conspiracy Theories

Populism and conspiracy theories have an affinity, functioning together in a complementary manner. Populist leaders often couch or implicitly make reference to various conspiracy theories in disseminating their own political claims, because they are aware that such messaging will resonate and meet with approval from their base (Hameleers 2021). Strategically therefore, conspiracy theories have now become an institutionalized feature of contemporary mainstream politics and are no longer just sequestered to the narrow domains of those engaged exclusively in extremist fringe politics (Pirro and Taggart 2023). Evidence of this is seen in relation to right-wing populist groups especially, since some conservative leaders refuse to more aggressively root out members who ascribe to conspiracy theories (Fawcett 2021). By refusing to denounce QAnon, for instance, Donald Trump effectively granted an air of legitimacy to this movement’s outlandish conspiracy concerning the machinations of an alleged “deep state,” associated with satanic cannibalistic pedophiles operating within influential elite circles in Hollywood and the Democratic Party. This legitimacy so bestowed upon QAnon in turn facilitated the social media

diffusion and algorithmic incorporation of elements of this rather bizarre conspiracy theory into various other, previously non-aligned, online movements. This included, for instance, those opposed to public health rules aimed at fighting the spread of COVID-19 (Owen 2020).

Algorithmic intervention promotes select conspiracy theories by essentially establishing the online linkages needed to grow the populist movement at an alarmingly rapid (or should we say, viral) rate. The effect of this is to undermine the relatively slower, but more careful and nuanced manner in which deliberative dialogue unfolds in relation to the decision-making processes in democracies. The careful and considered face-to-face discussion in democratic fora is also undermined by the very nature of communication on certain social media platforms. This is because platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) promote feeds tend to work against coherent rational discussion, while concurrently enabling floods of emotion and affect-based messaging that adopt highly simplified narratives predicated on clear polarities of good and evil (Papacharissi 2015; Bouvier 2020).

The extent to which social media are used in the mobilization of conspiracy theorizing, especially when it comes to the pursuit of political objectives, such as manipulating public opinion and voting behaviour, should not be underestimated. Thus, it is not surprising to learn that one study conducted by *The New York Times* found that Trump on average used his social media account twice a day to promote various conspiracy theories to his 7.9 million followers (Bedi et al. 2024). These involved sharing posts of conspiracy theories related to at least ten different themes, including those pertaining but not limited to: a global conspiracy headed by George Soros, a “rigged election,” the deployment of undocumented immigrants to vote and sway the election, and references to the replacement theory (i.e., a white supremacist conspiracy theory that claims that powerful forces are trying to replace white people with non-white people).

In Canada, news coverage of remarks by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a United Nations conference were cast in a similar light, drawing on conspiracy theories to misrepresent his remarks. Specifically, Trudeau’s observation that the pandemic could be used as an opportunity to “reset” and reimagine economic systems to address challenges such as climate change and poverty, were immediately picked up and refashioned as evidence to support the claims of the Great Reset conspiracy theory – that is, the belief that the pandemic was being used as an opportunity by a secret global elite to impose a radical restructuring of society, economy, and global governance to enable it to control the masses (Askanius et al. 2024). Such messaging was quickly picked up and spread widely on QAnon message boards, thus significantly expanding the reach of this particular conspiratorial theorizing (Owen 2020).

Conspiracy theories today are more widely deployed as a political tactic in Western democratic states than any time in the past, or at least we could say they are much more impactful on larger swaths of the population (again because of the affordances provided

by the Internet to reach large numbers instantaneously). All this has contributed to the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories within political discourse which can in and of itself be considered a significant threat to the pursuit of the democratic ideal today. Indeed, awareness of the potential dangers and pitfalls of this development has been identified as a major concern by some governments themselves. For instance, in the aftermath of the pandemic, concerns about the impacts of conspiracy theories prompted Elections Canada to commission a study (N = 2,582) by the firm Leger to investigate how widespread a “conspiratorial mindset” was and how this affected the level of trust Canadians had in the electoral process (Taylor 2021). Among their findings, it was revealed that 17 percent believed that the government was trying to cover up the link between vaccines and autism, while 30 percent felt that new drugs or technologies were being tested on people without their knowledge, and 40 percent believe that certain big events (such as the pandemic) were the result of a “small group who secretly manipulate world events” (Elections Canada 2021). In another poll (N = 1,500), conducted by Abacus Data, it was found that 11 percent believed that vaccines contained “secret chips” to control people, while 37 percent held the view that native-born Canadians were purposefully being displaced by immigrants for politically motivated reasons (Coletto 2022).

The Convergent Workings of Populism, Conspiracy Theories, and Social Media

In the recent past, there have been dramatic manifestations of the societal impacts stemming from the dynamic interrelationship between populism, conspiracy theories, and social media in democratic societies. Emblematic of major politically dramatic and cataclysmic events are the storming of Capitol Hill Building in Washington, DC, on 6 January 2021 and the Freedom Convoy blockade that took place at the end of January and into February 2022 at Parliament Hill in Ottawa. In both cases, social media played a pivotal role in spreading populist and conspiratorial sentiments and galvanizing different types of right-wing groups, ultimately contributing to the provocation of political violence.

The rioters involved in the Capital Hill insurrection belonged to a wide assortment of dozens of groups including QAnon supporters, advocates of deep state theory, media figures associated with the far-right, anti-immigrant groups such as the Proud Boys, militia groups and promoters of various conspiracy theories (Scott 2021). During the 6 January rally, Trump repeatedly made false claims about a “stolen election” before exhorting the angry mob to march to the Capitol Building. The event itself was not an overnight development, as Scott notes, but rather “the culmination of a four-year saga—mostly played out on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube—where politicians and online influencers have fanned the flames of disinformation, while social media companies failed to police the most vile content on the internet” (2021). The notion of a rigged election based on unsubstantiated allegations of mass voter fraud, or that election was “stolen” due to the workings of

a “deep state,” was seeded by the president months before the vote, in speeches at rallies and through messaging on social media. This culminated in the Facebook group called Stop the Steal. Created on the morning of the rally it became one of the fastest-growing groups in the platform’s history. Although Facebook had taken down the postings of the group by the afternoon, this was not before nearly half a million comments, shares, likes, and reactions were already transmitted—including some alarming posts calling for a “civil war” or “revolution” with talk of taking up arms and violence (Timberg et al. 2021).

Perhaps drawing from the playbook developed during the online experiences behind the US insurrection on Capitol Hill, the Freedom Convoy (FC) movement recruited similar types of followers, as the lead organizers have been associated with the QAnon conspiracy theory, COVID-19 skepticism, and anti-vaxx sentiment, and with anti-LGBTQI+ and Islamophobic hate groups (Harris 2023). The FC movement began in January 2022 as online campaigns inspired a series of organized blockades aimed at expressing opposition to COVID-19 vaccine mandates for truckers crossing the Canada-US border. It soon expanded into a broader movement based on far-right anti-globalist conspiracies such as the “Great Reset” and the “Great Replacement” that focused on what the movement saw as an erosion of national sovereignty, the imposition of a “liberal” international order, and a rejection of capitalism—developments allegedly pursued through the actions and policies of the “globalist” World Economic Forum (Robinson and Watson 2025). The FC movement thus served to unite a loose coalition of far-right groups under one umbrella. On the political front, the sentiment behind the FC movement was mobilized by the Conservative Party leader Pierre Poilievre as part of a popular campaign against the reigning Prime Minister Trudeau and the “gate keeping elite.” Long after the incident, the Conservative leader continued to engage with many of the groups associated with the FC movement (Harris 2023).

Crisis, Populism, and Conspiracy Theory

The deployment of conspiracy theory by populists occurs at particular points in time and in response to particular circumstances (Pirro and Taggart 2023). Thus, it is not surprising to learn that far-right networks digitally tapped into grievances about the pandemic to build upon existing discontent on political issues, particularly in relation to the distrust of then Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. As Davies et al. (2021) note, certain themes that the far-right engaged with prior to the pandemic, such as those pertaining to distrust in government and ideas about government overreach and betrayal, converged and found new opportunities for expression during the pandemic circumstance. This was because the climate of fear and political tension that arose during the pandemic—as a time of crisis—were conducive to the harnessing of anti-government aggression. Indeed, this was true in relation to other forms of aggression as well, such as that seen with the wave of

anti-Asian racism that erupted, in part stoked by the remarks by Trump that essentially scapegoated people of Asian background (Askanius et al. 2024).

Conspiracy theories represent a way to deal with a challenge that populist movements face. To appeal to voters and sympathizers, populists often portray themselves as outsiders who promise to work against the establishment to address what they conceive of as the urgent issues at hand (Pirro and Taggart 2023). The sense of urgency becomes embedded as an important element within populist strategizing. Since populism is often predicated on a sense that the people are under attack, it tends to rely on the presence of some underlying or perceived crisis (Moffit 2015). Populist leaders then use that cultivated understanding of impending threat to their political advantage to secure voter support. Maintaining the significance of this sense of urgency however becomes challenging once the populist leader is elected to government. To deal with this conundrum, conspiracy theories are mobilized in the rhetoric of populist leaders. This time the propagation of conspiracy theories is adopted to ensure a more permanent or continuing state of alert (Pirro and Taggart 2023).

Social and Political Polarization and Othering

The *Merriam-Webster* (2024) dictionary selected *polarization* as the defining word of the year to acknowledge the ever-widening and intensified divide that was emerging in relation to the population's attitudes towards social and political issues. Societal polarization impacts democratic political culture by introducing barriers to communication between different groups. This essentially curtails the potentialities and possibilities to reach any sort of fair agreement and meaningful compromise on contentious issues based on the free exchange of ideas. One manifestation of this is seen in the way today's election campaigns have become dominated by wedge issues consciously designed to deepen cultural divisions via social media curated messaging (Drache and Froese 2023).

In today's social media landscape, Leman-Langlois et al. (2024) note that a key aspect of the "recruitment" strategies of populist movements does not so much involve the objective of adding members to their movement per se, but it is more about securing adherents to a particular type of worldview. Undoubtedly, this process is aided by the algorithmic dynamics of social media platforms, which are well-suited for populists to propagate an oppositional framing based on pitting "we, the people" against "the corrupt and evil elites." This was well-illustrated during the pandemic when populist messaging specifically referred to "bad politicians and leaders" as those who implemented COVID-19 measures versus the "good, politicians and leaders" who refused the measures (Lim and Rigato 2022). Similar Manichean framings were made in relationship to the presentation and treatment of a myriad of other issues such as border controls, international trade and supply chains in Canada. Responses to issues like these by the ruling party were framed

by populists as emanating from a conspiratorial context in which “globalist” elites, such as Trudeau, were engaged in implementing conspiracies such as the Great Reset or the Great Replacement.

Within our current digitally circumscribed world, one powerful way that social media algorithms operate and exert their influence involves bringing together people who would not normally interact and then pit that larger, coalesced group against others who do not subscribe to the populist or conspiratorial worldview. For instance, algorithms picked up and linked various elements of the QAnon conspiracy messaging to a broad assortment of groups who had a more general interest in issues pertaining to conservatism, religion, or the military. Similarly, initially the Freedom Convoy movement appealed to trucking as a “brand” to link it with working-class interests and concerns during the pandemic, thus masquerading their populist movement as a working-class initiative (Lim and Rigato 2022). However, the FC movement soon became a broader movement involving those engaged in a wide range of issues such as anti-globalism, protests over vaccine mandates and world government and so on (Robinson and Watson 2025).

The divisions between groups that undergirds the polarizing effects of populism is also evident in the socially constructed divide between experts versus non-experts, where the former are defined as part of the liberal elite and held in contempt by populist leaders, especially those with credentialed expertise. Examples of this are seen, for instance, in the relationship of Donald Trump with Dr. Anthony Fauci, one of the lead members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force. During the pandemic, Fauci’s advice as a medical expert was frequently contradicted by Trump (Haberman 2020). Trump subsequently alleged that Fauci was trying to undermine his re-election campaign (Lederman and O’Donnell 2020). Furthermore, in this vein, similar animosity was directed by Trump at scientific experts studying climate change during his current administration (Garric 2025).

The populist sidelining of the evidentiary basis of claims based on the objective scientific findings of experts is particularly concerning in regard to the making of sound policy decisions in what has been referred to as today’s post-truth society. That is, there is now a societal context in which subjective opinions and unverified claims rival valid scientific and biomedical facts for their public influence (Ali and Kurasawa 2020). In the post-truth society, the need for evidence to support reasoned arguments becomes downplayed while at the same time social norms that govern how and why people should be held accountable for what they say becomes attenuated. Until recently, the introduction of the post-truth society has spawned a whole industry designed to identify and counter false claims—namely, fact checking. However, with the election of Trump, social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram no longer employ fact checkers (McMahon et al. 2025), thus calling into question the validity of the information and claims circulating on these social media platforms. Without reliable data and information that is readily available and accessible, coupled with the amplification of false information through social media (and

the influence of that on public views therein), deliberative, sound, and evidence-based decision-making in democratic settings becomes jeopardized.

Finally, developments such as those just discussed are related to another type of threat to Western democracy noted by the former US President Joe Biden in his farewell address in January 2025—namely, the impending threat of oligarchy, where a small group of powerful people effectively rule even though they were not duly elected (Bekiempis 2025). Though not mentioning names, there was little doubt that Biden was referring to those having extreme wealth, such as the Elon Musk and the heads of major social media and other digital platforms (Meta, Amazon, Google), and the influence they will have and have already had on decision-making and actions taken by the Trump administration in the first months in power. The warning was prescient. Soon thereafter Musk was appointed as the head of the newly minted Department of Government Efficiency, which went to work in rapidly and dramatically reducing the federal workforce while simultaneously reworking the state civil service to conform to Trump's "anti-woke" priorities (Serfaty et al. 2025). Such ominous developments in the US must be treated seriously in contemplating the future of democracy in Canada in an age dominated by populism, conspiracy theories, and the social media.

Harris Ali is a sociologist at York University who teaches courses on environmental issues, disaster and emergency management, social theory, and health. He has recently published on the role of social media and social movements and during the pandemic. He is currently the Director of the CITY Institute at York University. His most recent book coauthored with Roger Keil and Creighton Connolly is entitled *Pandemic Urbanism* (Polity Press) and focuses on the disease ecology and socio-political dimensions of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases under the conditions of contemporary globalization and heightened urban inequality.

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