

Speaking Truth to Conspiracy: Partisanship and Trust

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ABSTRACT:

What responsibility do party leaders and representatives have to support or rebut conspiracy charges coming from their own constituents and fellow partisans? What we call the “partisan connection” – the bridge parties build between the people and the formal polity -- entails connecting to popular views, sympathizing with citizens’ suspicions and fears (though not recklessly stoking them). But loosening the partisan connection and “speaking truth to conspiracy” is sometimes a moral and political imperative. We consider epistemological challenges that make assessing whether conspiracy claims are warranted difficult, and we consider political challenges to assessing whether conspiracy claims are warranted that are posed by secrecy, misleading partial truths, obscurantism, and lying endemic to politics. Finally, we propose three standards for when responsible party officials should oppose conspiratorial claims: when they are fueled by hatred of certain groups; when they represent the opposition as treasonous and illegitimate; when conspiracism extends to authority generally, especially expert authority, thereby undermining the basic work of government decision-making.

Traditionally, political conspiracy refers to a group scheming in secret to overthrow the regime (perhaps in the public interest, perhaps not). Modern parties and partisanship domesticate conspiracy—denuding it of its threat to the regime. For, minus the secrecy, an opposition party is a conspiracy to take over the reins of government.

The rise of the legitimate opposition took the secrecy out of conspiratorial opposition. Open partisan contestation for rule should thus, in theory, result in the decline of conspiracy and conspiratorial thinking—at least where the partisan conspiracy aims at some notion of the common good and can reasonably expect to solicit popular support.

This, however leaves room for conspiracies that aim to thwart the public and to undermine democracy. Open partisan opposition can succeed only by attracting popular support, and by itself does little to thwart fears that the few are out to subvert government to their own ends and use the very power created by a democratic constitution to undermine it. Open partisanship is no tonic for either grounded fear or paranoia. And, we might say, there is no substitute for principled leadership: democratic officials have a duty to forcefully and factually do their best to dispel conspiratorial fears where such fears have no basis—as federal agencies did in response to accusations that secret parties within the government planned the attack on the World Trade Center, and as Texas officials did not in the summer of 2015, in the face of popular fear that a standard military training exercise was in fact an attempt by the central government to invade Texas and replace democratic institutions with military rule.¹

¹ “World Trade Center Disaster Study,” National Institute of Standards and Technology, available at <http://www.nist.gov/el/disasterstudies/wtc/>; accessed October 10, 2015.

The Military Takeover of Texas

In most contemporary conspiracy theories—those alleging that the federal government plotted the bombing of the World Trade Center in 2001, or that JFK’s assassination was the product of CIA meddling in Cuba, or that the United States invited the bombing of Pearl Harbor—government officials have defended an “official version” of the event, buttressed by extensive official, often bipartisan investigations. But in the summer of 2015, when some Texans came to believe that the U.S. Army was plotting to invade and occupy the state, officials (partisan officials, at any rate) signaled their sympathy for those who suspected conspiracy. This—the alliance of partisan officials in government with those who allege that the government itself is conspiring against the people and the democratic constitution—marks something new in the contemporary landscape of conspiratorial theories and fears.

The Texas Takeover Conspiracy began in April 2015, when the U.S. Army announced that it would be staging a large military training exercise stretching across seven western and southwestern states in the summer of 2015. Called “Jade Helm 15,” the exercise was intended to train special forces to operate in unfamiliar terrain. The Army released a map, preposterous and yet provocative, that colored Texas, Utah, and very southern California (“enemy” territory) red, and Colorado, Nevada, and most of California (“friendly” territory) blue.²

That is exactly how these states appeared in 2008 and 2012 election maps that showed Republican states in red and Democratic states in blue. Thus, the announcement

² Complicating the straightforward analogy to partisan voting, the Jade Helm 15 map colored Arizona (which had voted Republican in 2008 and 2012) light blue for “uncertain leaning friendly,” and New Mexico (which had voted Democratic in 2008 and 2012) brown, for “uncertain leaning hostile.”

and the accompanying map immediately excited conspiratorial suspicions. A Texas talk-radio host, Alex Jones, expertly fertilized such fears with his insistence that the Army planned to take over Texas, disarm the population, and jail key political leaders (who, in a state like Texas, would likely be Republicans). He later refined his charge to hold that the Army was preparing the population for an eventual takeover by habituating people to the sight of soldiers and military equipment in civilian areas. By then the conspiratorial fears had propagated to the point where many ordinary citizens worried that the Army was planning to confiscate guns and impose martial law in Texas and beyond (Parton 2015).

In itself, it is not altogether surprising that a secretive and extensive Army training exercise taking place in civilian areas—a plan accompanied by maps that depict the partisan divide in the country—might arouse suspicion in ordinary citizens. More extraordinary was the reaction of numerous public officials. Leaders such as Greg Abbott, the governor of Texas, did not try to calm popular fears or resist conspiratorial delusions with official (or even alternative) explanations. Instead, they signaled that they, too, had concerns. For instance, Governor Abbott tasked the Texas State Guard with monitoring the military operation on behalf of Texans: “During the training operation,” Abbott wrote to the Guard, “it is important that Texans know their safety, constitutional rights, private property rights and civil liberties will not be infringed” (Svitek 2015). While Abbott’s letter elicited ridicule elsewhere in the nation,³ he was not the only official to express sympathy for conspiratorial fears. As Texas Congressman Louie Gohmert said, “The map of this exercise needs to change, the names on the map need to

³ See Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*, “Fear and Absent Danger,” May 4, 2015 at <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/c54ewk/the-daily-show-with-jon-stewart-to-shoot-or-not-to-shoot---fear-and-absent-danger>;

change, and the tone of the exercise needs to be completely revamped so the federal government is not intentionally practicing war against its own states.”⁴

Parties as Conspiracies

Against Governor Abbott, one might insist that partisan officials have a duty to speak truth to conspiracy: as one former Republican Texas state representative wrote, Governor Abbott should make decisions based on “facts and evidence,” and stop “pandering to idiots” (Council 2015). We agree. But this view, that partisan officials have a simple duty to disseminate justified beliefs and dispel unfounded conspiratorial fantasies, sidesteps the profound difficulties involved in “reasoning with” conspiratorial fears. Also—and importantly for our thesis—it is inattentive to the necessarily ambivalent status of parties and partisanship. This ambivalent status reflects the way that parties themselves might be thought of as conspiracies of a kind.

In the historical transition from cabal to democratic institution, the emergence of parties is the complement to developments in civil society. There too, we see the transition from secret societies to a vast array of voluntary associations that have legal standing, declared aims, open rules, and publicized standards of membership. Even radical political oppositional groups are above ground, publicly propounding their ideas and seeking to expand their support. Closed and secretive membership groups (paramilitary groups, Masons, the Klan, certain hereditary and elite societies) are viewed not only as undemocratic but also as dangerously antidemocratic precisely on the grounds of being closed and secretive. Their leadership and membership and funding are

⁴ Louis Gohmert, “Gohmert Statement on Jade Helm Exercises,” at <http://gohmert.house.gov/news/email/show.aspx?ID=RARJ62LPUKCT7BNM7ZBA3QA2VM>.

concealed. They are sometimes organized as military hierarchies and employ the “grammar of violence.” In fact, exclusion and maintaining secrecy may be the principal business of some of these groups. In challenging the public ethos of democratic equality, they invite the charge of conspiratorial aims. They are frequently monitored by government agencies and by organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Civil society, in short, is a vast sphere of “combinations”—of public openness and secretive closedness, political advocacy, and political suspicion. The rise of legitimate party opposition in government and the respectability of partisan contestation in modern democracy have not foreclosed on the existence of secret combinations: the principle of openness is an incomplete achievement. Many continue to view even parties with suspicion. Parties can, even now, seem like the sort of factions about which *The Federalist* warned. On that view, if parties are not combinations advancing sinister interests opposed to the common good, they are enterprises designed to advance the office-seeking ambitions of the few. And they do this by introducing divisions in the people and mobilizing political sentiment along these lines of division.

Elsewhere we have argued that democratic theorists too often fail to fully appreciate the moral and political virtues of parties and partisans, and we argue that the reasons for valuing parties are consistent with the traditional view that parties and partisanship represent a threat to aspirational wholeness (Muirhead 2014; Rosenblum 2008). The claim that parties challenge the unity and integrity of the political order and introduce divisions is essentially correct. Parties always argue, in a sense, for a part over the whole. Partiality and opposition are their *raison d’etre*. And their object is power, as

Madison rightly said. So it is not surprising that party and partisanship have retained something of their traditional opprobrium: although they work in the open, they remain akin to conspiracies insofar as they would sacrifice the presumptive natural unity of the nation for the sake of advancing the interests and opinions of a part. They create and exacerbate divisions. They bring unceasing conflict to political life.

Moreover, key achievements of parties have lent themselves to the charge that their leaders and supporters are conspiratorial. The triumph of parties in normalizing peaceful rotation in office without civil war or *coups d'état*, for example—that is, the institution of regular elections that result in turning over the reins of power—can be taken (especially in a two-party system) as a sign of collusion among the major parties. The manipulation of the electoral process to effectively exclude smaller rival parties and to deny them an electoral foothold (via districting and rules for ballot access, for example) can be seen as another sign of collusion. The iteration of competition between or among entrenched parties amounts to a conspiracy against open political competition; it amounts to a deliberate suppression of parties that are carriers of emergent or minority public views.

To take another example, the ever-increasing promise of “transparency” excites charges of bad faith. After all, a good deal of political decision-making within and among parties in government is done in secret. Parties may not be cabals, but they have closed legislative caucuses whose business is deliberately off the record. Partisans make deals and compromises with one another and with the opposition, often without public scrutiny or adequate explanation, even after the fact. Moreover, the operation of government as a whole is so complex as to be opaque. This is in the nature of democratic politics, but the

often-proclaimed, overarching value of publicity and transparency draws attention to inconsistent stands and broken political promises. It fuels charges of hidden, nefarious purposes and the betrayal of supporters; such charges sometimes bleed from discrete betrayals (of campaign promises or principles) to total betrayal of the Constitution, or treason.

The respectability of party is an incomplete achievement, then. That fact is irremediable and might reflect something healthy about partisanship. In particular, the tincture of disrespectability that continues to attach to partisanship reflects the way parties are what they ought to be: reflections of and constructors of conflicting interests and opinions and, in this way, connected to the attachments, beliefs, mores, values, fears and prejudices of actual citizens. This, “the partisan connection,” is what allows parties to perform their vital service to democracy. It is the partisan connection that tethers a scattered citizenry to the distant and formal institutions of government. Parties bridge the informal democracy (the people) with the formal polity (the institutions of government established by the Constitution). The partisan connection entails acknowledging the suspicions harbored by citizens and affirming the necessity of “eternal vigilance.” It entails, too, accommodating popular perceptions of conspiracy that are, for better or worse, entrenched in American political life—accommodation, that is, within limits we shall try to set out.

The Partisan Connection

Without parties, the formal polity might seem too remote, too uncontrollable, to elicit either trust or affection. This is what the Anti-Federalists thought would be suffered by

the government erected by the 1787 constitutional proposals; to a large degree, it is what the central government in fact does suffer, more acutely today than in many decades. People do not trust a government they cannot control, or, more modestly, a government that does not seem responsive to them, and whose intricacies they cannot fully comprehend or that they think of as cover for nefarious dealings. What remedied the weakness diagnosed by the Anti-Federalists was not only the “good administration” of government (as touted by Hamilton and Madison in 1788): it was parties (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2012). Parties, as they were developed by Van Buren in the early decades of the nineteenth century, were at once local (embedded in the city, town, and neighborhood) and national (the organizing principle of the national legislature and the force that could unify the separated powers of the federal government). Parties were what made the institutions of the central government legible and trustworthy.

But for parties to do that, they have to connect to popular views on the ground. In part this is a matter of political organization: elected officials and party leaders are organized territorially to connect to constituents and partisan supporters “all the way down” from national arenas to street-corner society. They must listen and be responsive not only to an undefined “public” but also to particular groups and associations, their individual constituents, their supporters and potential supporters. In this, party officials have to look and sound as if they share popular sensibilities. The “mirror” view of democratic representation, however imperfect and incomplete, is true enough.

This puts the partisan representative in a difficult position when conspiratorial fears are in the air and widely shared. On the one hand, the official needs to represent the government to the people, and explain the truth of the matter; this is especially so when

belief in conspiracy relies less on publicly available evidence than on a nihilistic skepticism that draws its energy from traditions of antigovernmentalism and anti-internationalism endemic to American democracy. When it is crazy to think that the military is planning to take over Texas, democratic representatives need to say so, plainly and forcefully. On the other hand, these same party leaders need to maintain a connection to the street; they need to show they understand (and to some extent can share in) the views, feelings, and interests of everyday citizens.

They need to do this to get re-elected and to stay in power, of course, which raises the question whether party leaders and representatives mean what they say. When are they acting in bad faith? When are partisans engaging in cynical deference to their supporters' arrant suspicions? When are they pandering to and exploiting popular fears? When are they peddling stories they know are false? The Texas example confronts us with these questions, and with the more fundamental question of when we should hold partisan officials accountable for fueling or legitimizing or even just ignoring the conspiracy theories abroad in political life.⁵

A healthy democratic culture requires a partisan connection—but it requires the partisan connection to work in two directions. Party officials reflect and reiterate but also create public narratives that evoke dire threats, name opposition representatives and officials as enemies, invoke violence. When Democrats called Newt Gingrich's Republican "Contract with America" a "Contract on America,"⁶ or when Republicans talk of using "terrorist tactics" or "the nuclear option" and blowing up the government,

⁵ The question of exploiting and pandering arises too in the case of weak political groups and third parties that aim at agitating the system; they are particularly inclined to represent major parties in and out of government as engaged in a conspiracy to silence challengers or as unavowed agents of some hated group.

⁶ Cited in Rosenblum 2008, 373.

we should not slough it off as “mere” rhetoric. We understand that this language is an attempt to provide an electric jolt, to overcome complacency, lethargy, or indifference, and to indicate that partisans are serious, committed, poised for incendiary action. But such language connects them not only to the popular fears expressed by many citizens—citizens to whom partisans must attend—but also to the political pathologies that make impossible any argument and discussion (indeed, any communication) and undermine democracy. Conspiracy charges and (importantly) the message that the appropriate response to conspiracies to subvert democracy is to prepare for violence or “militancy” (a code for violence) can move from the dark underside of “uncivil society”—from hate groups, private militia, secret societies—to the center of politics, even to the political center:

Any suggestion of conspiratorial evil against a prominent politician, no matter how extreme the charge or how scanty the evidence, glides from the margins of politics to the center, on a sort of media conveyor belt that carries it from the rantings of the fringe groups of the right and left into the respectable zone of public discourse.⁷

These cautions suggest moral and political limits on partisans who think that they can benignly reflect or reinforce conspiratorial thinking; even more so, these cautions point to limits on those who recklessly create and stoke fears of conspiracy. If democratic politicians need to exhibit some sympathy with the fears of their constituencies for parties

⁷ Michael Kelly, “The Road to Paranoia,” cited in Rosenblum 1998, 280.

to perform their necessary function (namely, to link the informal polity with the formal one), still, partisans should pause before accommodating or refusing to take notice of conspiratorial charges. This places democratically elected partisans in a hard position. They need to educate citizens about government and offer true explanations of governmental action, while refuting unwarranted ones. At times, they need to defend even their opponents against dangerous, damaging accusations. But they also need to convey that they can share in the views of those they represent, or aspire to represent. They need to *connect*. The more skeptical and suspicious their constituents are of government generally or certain political actors specifically, the more partisans will need to exhibit understanding of popular skepticism and suspicion. When it is warranted, they may even need to represent a strong anti-governmental position. Democratic theorists rightly warn that deep and widespread popular mistrust of government is fatal to democracy, certainly to democratic participation; neither can democracy function if representatives are deeply mistrustful of citizens. The balance is difficult to strike and requires a kind of political discipline, and we will suggest some general guidelines for the partisan responsibility to “speak truth to conspiracy.”

Conspiratorial Reasons

Our conclusion—that the partisan connection entails understanding and acknowledging and sometimes even representing fears of conspiracy—would be more troubling if conspiratorial thinking were different in kind from rational thinking: that is, if conspiratorial thinking fell outside the parameters of the basic terms of rational and inclusive democratic deliberation, or if it plainly violated the less onerous requirements

imposed on minimally “reasonable” citizens.⁸ If we could make an analytic distinction between conspiratorial and rational thinking, we might hold parties and partisans—and officials more generally—ethically accountable for standing up in public for rational modes of explanation, even when these contradict widely shared beliefs.

But we believe no analytic distinction can be made that differentiates between unwarranted conspiratorial thinking and rationally justified conspiratorial accusations. To be sure, conspiratorial thinking does have certain defining marks: conspiracy theories often depend on a pervasive skepticism and lack of trust in public institutions; they claim wide explanatory power and purport to be comprehensive because they cover the full range of anomalies that are omitted by official explanations; and conspiracy theories have an unfalsifiable character (contradictory official information is discounted because it is official). In addition, there is a manic tone to conspiracism: the task of unveiling is urgent and ceaseless. For those in the grip of a conspiracy theory, there is no such thing as overreaction: the nation is in imminent danger and saving democracy calls on every available iota of energy and passionate persuasion.

Yet none of these features, on their own, make conspiracy theories unwarranted or *prima facie* irrational. Some conspiracy theories will be true. And as Ward Churchill writes, contemporary conspiratorial fears are,

in large measure, a natural response to a half century of steady escalation of governmental secrecy, disinformation, and invocation of “plausible deniability.” All too frequently, what is being officially denied, lied about, and

⁸ For examples of minimalist accounts of citizen rationality, see Popkin 1991 and Fiorina 1981.

hidden turns out to be just as twisted—or almost so—as anything the conspiracy mongers are claiming. The CIA did, in fact, run a top-secret program, MK-Ultra, in which mental patients, prison inmates, and occasional random bystanders were subjected to all manner of grotesque psychotropic, psychosurgical, and sensory deprivation experiments. The purpose? To discover methods of mind control. (Churchill 2003, 66)

To consult the recent history of actual governmental conspiracies —Iran-Contra, Watergate, or Tuskegee, for starters—is to confront the fact that “there *are* elements of treachery in the contemporary political and economic order” (Fenster 1999, xv; see also Cutler 1992; Walsh 1997; Heller 1972; and Jones 1993).

Furthermore, on a philosophic level, no analytic distinction can be made to identify which conspiracy theories might be the basis of justified belief, and which are crazy or absurd. As Brian L. Keeley (1999) has argued, what distinguishes those susceptible to conspiratorial fears from those who are more skeptical of stories of nefarious subversion is not that one commits a philosophic mistake while the other demonstrates philosophic virtues. The structure of conspiratorial explanations is not on its face irrational (as juxtaposed to non-conspiratorial explanations that are presumptively evidence-based and rooted in factuality). Those who tend to conspiratorial explanation may harbor a strong belief in an ordered universe—and thus believe (more than those who are skeptical) that events can be controlled and that every event can be explained

and every fact accounted for. Those who resist conspiratorial explanations may attribute more incompetence and powerlessness to government authorities, more chance and uncertainty to human and especially political affairs. They may better tolerate incomplete explanations and the persistence of “errant facts” and behavior that cannot be made sense of and fit into the causal narrative. They may hold to what Keeley calls—exaggeratedly—the contrasting “absurdist image of the world” according to which governments cannot master events (Keeley 1999, 124).

If conspiratorial thinking cannot be dismissed on the basis of a firm analytic distinction or on philosophic grounds, then one can challenge conspiracism only provisionally, on a case-by-case basis, from a careful examination of the facts, the context, and the character of the political actors as they are known, and in terms of an interpretation that is necessarily incomplete—one that leaves remainders. This means that persuading citizens that any given conspiracy theory is false ultimately depends on trust; evidence and proof will never be sufficient to move us beyond justified belief to certain knowledge.

This trust depends on the electoral connection that open partisan contestation makes possible. This connection, in turn, is sustained by partisans, which is why partisans may need to convey an appreciation of conspiratorial thinking, which comes, after all, with the demand for “eternal vigilance.” If the government were in fact wholly trustworthy and all conspiratorial thinking were false, things might be different: we could attribute all conspiratorial thinking to paranoia or bad faith. But since some conspiracy theories are true, partisans need to be attuned to, and even to represent, conspiratorial

thinking. Only then will parties and partisans have the popular trust that enables them to assuage fears and convince citizens that a particular conspiracy theory is indeed false.

The Conspiracist Repertoire

The epistemological difficulty involved in distinguishing reasonable from unwarranted conspiratorial thought is not easily overcome. This difficulty has a political counterpart—the essentially contested, defining characteristics of American (or any) democracy, the terms of true republicanism. For the most common conspiratorial charge is that the party in office (or the opposition) is subverting democracy, and the measure of subversion depends on a theory of democracy.

Partisan charges of conspiracy are rarely simple, discrete, and tied to a single event or policy. Rather, the charge is that a particular action or speech or policy is just a small bit of evidence, a fragment of a larger plan. The plan is to breach constitutional limits. To create an imperial presidency or an omnipotent regulatory agency. To give away popular sovereignty. To encroach on liberties. To institute the rule of some few, or tyranny. The repertoire of conspiracy theory in American politics is familiar; the details change but the underlying narratives do not.

Whether crazy or grounded, conspiracism most often revolves around contested notions of rights, of the limits of constitutional authority and the purposes it serves. The conspiracist claim is that partisans do not just disagree about the bounds of authority and the contours of the national welfare, but that they are aware of the limits that ought to constrain them and are cognizant of the true common good. They are actively trying to conceal or misrepresent their transgression of authority and their sinister interests. They

slyly manipulate democratic processes to exclude rival parties. Or they mobilize masses of democratic citizens openly, but with coded messages and the unacknowledged intent of insurrection against the established order.

Conspiracy theories offer explanations of events. They connect the dots. They tell a causal story about action (or inaction) that links partisan intentions and predicts consequences. They are rooted in situational particulars, in assessments of specific men and women and specific measures. But conspiracism is also a mindset, a disposition and way of thinking that goes beyond particular cases. Apart from the specifics of conspiratorial explanations, this mindset itself is dangerous for democracy. It is fatal when the political opposition is consistently represented as an enemy to be not only defeated electorally but criminalized and erased. It is fatal when the numbers of citizens who are pervasively mistrustful reach a certain threshold so that we have massive popular withdrawal from public life on the one hand and threats of violent opposition by a few on the other. It is fatal when mistrust focuses on a specific group of citizens as the cause of our problems and on the partisans who are their presumptive agents. Taken together, the conspiratorial mindset and the repertoire of conspiracy theories are politically corrosive.

Our claim is not that the United States is a fragile democracy, vulnerable to wholesale internal disruption by conspiracies or false charges of conspiracy. But it can be (and has been) weakened by conspiracism (as well as by actual conspiracies, of course). What expressions of conspiracism must be challenged? What is the responsibility of elected officials and party leaders to do this challenging? Why do parties and partisans have to distinguish unambiguous threats from ones that are concocted from whole cloth?

Why do they have to make the effort to recognize in the surface noise of democratic politics genuine crisis situations (Runciman 2013)?

Three expressions of conspiracism, we believe, require officials to loosen the “partisan connection” and aggressively address public fears despite the risk—even the certainty—of electoral defeat.

The first element in the conspiracy repertoire is the theory fueled by hatred (usually of a minority group). The danger this poses to democracy does not require much explication. In these theories, an entire group—Muslims, “liberals,” Jews, blacks, Japanese at the outset of World War II—harbors ambitions that are radically antithetical to popular democratic aims. These theories arouse fear of the secret power of this group, its actual, hidden control of government or its plan to alter the regime.

Here, partisan officials have a basic duty to use the power of their electoral connection to resist and defeat such theories. A history replete with governmental secrecy and mendacity gives us fertile empirical ground for taking seriously the possibility that *some* conspiratorial fears are sometimes justified. But there is no historical basis for extending conspiratorial fears to entire social groups: no *group* has (at least, in the American context since the Civil War) systematically conspired to overthrow the regime or to secede from the nation or to abet foreign enemies or to radically alter the economy and society, and the logic of collective action relegates such conspiracies to the realm of fantasy. Conspiracy theories that cause people to believe in such a prospect—that agitate and arouse and name the subversive group—are instruments of violence, not modes of explanation. They are deliberately intimidating. They create a toxic atmosphere of fear. They cause not only the targets of their hate but also many others to withdraw from

political life. Partisans in a democratic polity have a straightforward duty to resist and refute such theories, even if in doing so they strain the electoral connection to the breaking point and risk ending their careers.

For example, at a New Hampshire campaign stop in September 2015, Donald Trump was asked about the Muslim “problem” in the United States and the “training camps growing where they [Muslims] want to kill us.” The questioner was alluding to the well-worn theory that Muslim communities in the U.S. harbor training camps where Muslims are taught how to conduct terrorist raids. Notwithstanding the absence of any scrap of evidence for the idea—and in spite of the fact that some Americans in the grips of the theory have themselves plotted to attack Muslim communities (Novacic 2015)—Trump refused to speak truth to conspiracy, and instead said, “You know, a lot of people are saying that, and a lot of people are saying that bad things are happening out there. We’re going to be looking at that and plenty of other things” (Johnson 2015). Such cowardice cannot be excused by the necessity of cultivating a partisan connection. Rather, it revealed Trump’s unwillingness to leverage the connection he had cultivated with the Republican electorate and use it for the sake of respecting the good faith and equal citizenship of all Americans, regardless of their religion.

The second kind of conspiracy thinking that officials often have a responsibility to challenge arises when one moves beyond the perfectly standard claim that the policies of the party in government undermine the public good and instead accuses a party (or partisan officials) of treason. Often the charges center on foreign policy, and the claim that a certain act of international aggression (or failure to act) is not just ineffective or immoral but designed to weaken domestic security and harm national interests. These

conspiracy theories implicate outsiders—not merely foreigners, but enemies—who, it is feared, have insinuated themselves in a domestic party and made it their agent. The domestic group or party that the “foreign element” has coopted is not “really” a democratic party, so the conspiratorial accusation goes. It is a front for foreign agents or for alien groups, and is directed, dominated, disciplined, and controlled by a malicious outside force: Moscow in the days of Communist fears; Arab Muslims today; Jewish financiers, past and present.

Of course, sometimes parties do in fact aim to overthrow the established regime. Here, the party as conspiracy comes full circle. Originally parties simply *were* conspiracies: groups, operating in secret, aiming to overthrow and replace the regime. The advent of open partisan contestation and the rise of the legitimate opposition, which took the secrecy out of party, removed much of the sting from conspiracy: “open conspiracy” is now part of the normal operation of government, and is the sign of a free and fair democratic procedure. But when parties turn (secretly) against the country *and* the government, they reacquire their classical status as conspiracies. The key example in twentieth-century U.S. politics was the Communist Party, which assumed the party form and entered elections opportunistically as the tool of the Soviet regime; historical evidence suggests that if successful the CP would have used the power of office to undermine democracy. However, what was true at one point about the Communist Party is not true about the parties that populate American democracy in general, and generally partisans have a duty to restrain and correct the kind of rhetoric that would classify their political opponents as existential enemies.

Whether a party is in fact a conspiracy against democracy in a classic sense, and whether as a result it should be legally banned, is a contextual question that depends on the party's avowed goals, a political community's particular history (the German constitution's ban on the Nazi party, for example), and the stability of the democratic state in question. As we have argued elsewhere, the criteria for banning parties is not amenable to "stable regulative principles," and the reasons that bear on the case for banning a party in a particular regime "are difficult matters of political judgment" (Rosenblum 2008, 415; see also Issacharoff 2015).

But the issue is not just the legal standing of a political party. It extends to less-extreme measures than an outright ban, such as vicious attacks on its supporters and political obstacles to its candidates' participation in the electoral process. At issue is the intention to delegitimize it as a force in democratic politics: to urge citizens to reject the party, its candidates, and its supporters so decisively and in terms of its dangerousness to the public good that it is not just unsuccessful, but that its capacity to compete in elections in the future is destroyed, effectively obliterating it.

The political judgment involved in delegitimizing a party's participation in democratic politics operates mainly at the level of constitutional essentials that define the basic terms of the regulated rivalry within which political parties compete for office. As such, the determination to systematically exclude a party from the normal political process threatens to impugn that process at its core and render the political community itself unstable. This reaches a pitch when, in place of the fear that a party is subverting democratic institutions, is the existential fear so often linked to group hatred and attempts to close down a party that represents a hated group's interests. The threat that a hated

group's partisans pose to survival, in this view, is not, ultimately, that they are working to undermine governing institutions, opening the country to violent overthrow or takeover by foreign powers. Rather, the threat is something at once more dire and more elusive: altering national identity and integrity. It is a conspiracy, for example, to secede or to claim a degree of constitutionally unrecognized autonomy. Or a conspiracy that aims to alter America as a Christian nation or to "mongrelize" it as a white nation, or to cede its sovereignty to the leaders of a "new world order." Such charges raise classic questions about the nature of a nation, its identity in the largest sense. The claim is familiar: party officials and their partisan supporters are using the electoral process and government office to transform political identity, to create a rival society: an alien nation.

Conspiratorial charges of this sort, linked to hated groups—along with moves to ban parties or their candidates, or to prohibit electorally successful candidates from taking office—that is, to limit democracy in the name of preserving not only democratic institutions but also the character of the nation—demand skepticism. For the fact is that the composition of modern democracies—demographic, religious, cultural, etc.—is not static. The role of parties, and often the object of contestation among them, is to understand these changes and to incorporate new groups and new interests and opinions into political life. When that is seen as a conspiracy to fundamentally alter the nation, democracy is aborted.

Of course, ordinary partisans have an interest in demonstrating that the opposition does not deserve to govern. Partisanship just is a matter of undermining the ideas and claims of the opposition, thus smoothing one's own path to power. But that differs from delegitimizing the opposition, denying its part in democratic competition, indeed

claiming that its participation is a danger to democracy or national identity. The burden of proof is severe, and the occasion for weighing the reasons at stake and deciding whether the burden should be met would ideally be removed from the heat of an election campaign. The decision to ban parties, at least ideally, should be situated in a constitutional convention (or, in some cases, in higher courts), not in the hurly-burly of ordinary politics and electioneering. When, in the case of ordinary politics, the charge is made that a certain party is really a conspiracy, that it is dominated by powers that would overturn the regime itself or alter the identity of the nation, that it is “really” not what it says it is but a front for a foreign interest or alien presence, the charge should be openly, aggressively challenged. In short, the presumption should be that such charges are false. Such charges *are* likely to be false, because every party has a standing interest in denying political and moral standing to its opponents, leading to an overproduction of such charges.

But apart from that likelihood, the charge itself is corrosive of the degree of toleration and the norms of fairness that make the democratic contest for office possible in the first place. Democracy depends on a contest, which means that every party must encounter (and tolerate) opposition. The effort to neutralize one’s opponents by denying them the baseline legitimacy that would entitle them to compete fairly for popular support threatens to destroy the background conditions of regulated rivalry that make democracy possible. Unless one’s opponents avow violence or are closely allied with armed groups—and thus threaten to refuse to abide by the terms of regulated rivalry—they should be tolerated, and their right to exist and to compete defended. The responsibility to defend the right of one’s opponents to oppose, and to resist the

conspiratorial accusations that would deny them such a right, is the responsibility of every democratic official, and every partisan who aspires to elected democratic offices.

The third occasion when officials have a responsibility to resist conspiratorial charges arises when rampant mistrust of political actors and institutions extends to every authority, and in particular to expert authority. Diffuse and global distrust is part of the repertoire of conspiracism. From this standpoint, every government office, professional group, and institution designed to provide reliable information and to serve as watchdogs of distortion in the free flow of information is seen as the problem. This mistrust of expertise applies to natural science, of course; mistrust and denial of the complex science of climate change is potentially catastrophic. But mistrust extends to the whole cast of experts who work within government agencies (OSHA or the Congressional Budget Office or the NIH) and to professional organizations outside government that provide research and define, collect and interpret data: economists, political scientists, physicians. Wholesale mistrust of expertise does not owe to the epistemic difficulty (and sometimes controversy) inherent in selecting and interpreting the findings of research in order to make and justify political decisions. Rather, it entails the rejection of any representation of authority based on education and specialized knowledge.

Contemporary conspiratorial explanation is a mode of legitimation: it aims to delegitimize certain official explanations for events, and legitimate explanations that would otherwise be unthinkable. Insofar as some conspiratorial accusations are true, conspiratorial thinking can be a healthy force that expands the terrain of political discussion and strengthens democratic control of government administration. But when conspiratorial thinking takes a hyperbolic form that tries to delegitimize *all* forms of

expert authority, it has the opposite effect: it disempowers democracy. It denies decision makers the credibility that comes with gathering the knowledge necessary to govern.

Policy makers and administrators *must* rely on expert authority, and the charge that they are thereby hostage to sinister, esoteric elites undermines the basic work they must do.

At the same time, wholesale depreciation of specialized knowledge exalts untutored democratic (that is to say, popular) judgment. It puts credence in purely personal and anecdotal experience. It encourages unwarranted independence in thinking about even the most complex matters, insisting that we must rely on ourselves. It exalts “common sense.” It abhors educated expertise. In a sense, this is the cognitive counterpart of the extremist claim that the political institutions designed to protect us—professionalized bureaucracies, independent courts, and legislatures subject to periodic elections—are biased or nefarious or captives of some set of elites so that only ordinary citizens, (at the extreme, citizen militia) can preserve liberty against tyranny.

Citizens will often distrust government agencies and government itself, if only because government’s lies have been so abundant. Yet responsible partisans need to cultivate the nuanced appreciation that a government that lies some of the time does not lie all of the time. The same Center for Disease Control that lied in the Tuskegee experiments is not lying when it publicizes proof that vaccines do not cause autism.⁹ Partisan officials have a responsibility to speak that truth to conspiracy. When Senator Rand Paul (a doctor) answered a Republican debate question in the fall of 2015 about the spurious vaccine-autism link, he refused to speak this truth: “I’m all for vaccines,” Paul said. “But I’m also for freedom” (Miller 2015). Senator Paul presumably knows about

⁹ “Vaccines Do Not Cause Autism,” Center for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed at <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/autism.html>

herd immunity, which requires that a high proportion of a community be vaccinated, and he knows the vaccine-autism link is fraudulent. His stand for “freedom”—the freedom, perhaps, to ignore all expert advice and all science—was an abdication of the partisan’s civic responsibility.

The modern state is in large measure a regulatory state: from the food supply and pharmaceuticals to money supply and auto safety—not to mention emissions, working conditions, and so on—the public good requires regulation, and regulation requires specialized (often industry-specific or scientific) knowledge. There is no way citizens individually and collectively (or for that matter any single group with specialized knowledge) could possibly develop the range of industry-specific and scientific expertise necessary to understand each of the domains any effective popular government must address. In each domain, there is no choice but for governments to employ experts charged with contributing to and sometimes stewarding the political discussions that produce policy in the public interest. To delegitimize expertise as such does not empower the people over the experts; it disempowers the people by rendering the government incapable of regulating for the common good—for example, protecting people from threats like *E. coli* infections in the food supply, unsafe workplaces, and dangerous consumer products.

Expertise is often overrated, and the threat to democracy of what David Estlund (2008) calls “epistocracy” and Jurgen Habermas (2015) “technocracy” is not imaginary. It can be right to challenge the reality of expertise in certain cases (Tetlock 2006) or to pay attention to divisions among experts. The proper role of science and scientists, social science, legal experts, and moral authorities in democracy is an old question, raised by

John Dewey but not bound to Progressivism. It does not go away. But when conspiratorial thinking goes further and delegitimizes all expert authority, it corrodes democratic self-government.

One reason for the two-way partisan connection is to make the expert knowledge underlying various regulations legible to ordinary citizens: to represent the government and the basis of its policies to the people. This requires that partisan officials stand up to rebut and resist the kind of unconstrained conspiratorial thinking that would make governing for the common good—indeed, all government—impossible.

Party Responsibility

Examining the warrants of conspiratorial claims, and skeptically and strenuously rebutting unwarranted claims, are, of course, shared common tasks in democracy, one face of democratic vigilance. Whistleblowers take this responsibility on themselves, courageously and at great personal cost, unveiling both conspiracies and false charges of conspiracy within their organizations. We assign examination of conspiracism to specific institutions that are vital to democracy: to the media, public intellectuals, professional associations, social scientists, specialized groups that trace social facts and trends. But, we argue, confronting conspiracism is a particular responsibility of partisans.

Why does responsibility to respond to conspiratorial thinking above all on the three elements of the conspiracist repertoire we identify—charges aimed at categorical groups, charges that delegitimize a party and its supporters, and rejection of expertise—fall to parties and partisans?

As a practical matter, conspiracism requires the support of parties in office if it is to become widespread and effective as an account of actors and measures. Conspiracy thinking moves from the fringe when it enters the state house. It has to be stopped there before it corrodes the conditions of political participation and taints policy. Put simply, without the support of partisan politicians the consequences of conspiracism—real and atmospheric—will be limited. The rejection of conspiracy theory by representatives is, then, the final bulwark against fantastic claims that skew government outcomes and introduce abnormal fear into normal politics.

Rebutting unwarranted conspiracism is the responsibility of partisans for another, related reason. Their business is to advance agendas and programs with accessible reasons, and above all to try to appeal to large numbers, to create majorities. Winning by plurality may be enough for electoral victory, but party democracy aims at support from “the people”—as near as possible to the whole (though it will always be part). In going about this business, when it comes to governing as well as campaigning, parties and partisans create political narratives. We have said that the narrative thrust of conspiracism is its strength: a gripping story with heroes and villains that explains something better than official explanations and does so by arousing fear and pointing to enemies. The partisan story must take up the dots and give us another pattern of connection that addresses and overcomes conspiratorial ones, and in a way that also evokes emotions—not fear but confidence in the good faith of officials and the people, and hope. So our theme, “speaking truth to conspiracy,” requires us to look closely at whether, when, and how much partisan representatives reflect the governing narratives of a political moment and whether, when, and how they create them. Conspiracy thinking is, at its core, story

telling. No political responsibility is more crucial than vigilance against conspiracies that would subvert democracy—gathering the facts and telling the stories that explain the danger—just as nothing is more important for preserving the climate of democratic politics than to address, temper, and finally challenge unwarranted conspiratorial claims.

Finally, responsibility to examine and challenge conspiracism falls on parties and partisans because we care about the character of officials and representatives. Men and women in office, or attempting to get into office, take on the responsibility of protecting democracy from the dangers that conspiracism presents. Moments when conspiracy claims are in the air and fear is palpable test the moral mettle of partisans. For they must be willing to point out the falsifications of conspiratorial thinking even when they occur in their own party, just as they must hold their own party accountable for true conspiracies. They must be willing to loosen or cut the partisan connection.

Secrecy and Lies

An important caveat qualifies this account. The responsibility to speak truth to conspiracy is effective only against a background condition of government veracity. When officials are truthful all or much of the time, partisans running for office and serving in office have a responsibility, especially in the three categories we have described, to represent the truth and to correct misplaced conspiratorial suspicions. But when officials are generally untruthful—when they shade, distort, and misrepresent the truth all or much of the time—speaking truth to conspiracy will be inert, like whistling in the wind. When the responsibility to speak truth has no effect in the moment, the duty does not dissolve, but the motivation to address any particular conspiracy or the dangers of a conspiratorial

mind-set is weakened. One consequence of a toxic atmosphere of secrets and lies is dispiritedness, even among the partisan activists who are usually girded to suspect the opposition and uncover any sinister intent.

Some hold that a general condition of mendacity presently afflicts government, especially the national-security state. For instance, Jonathan Mahler, a *New York Times* reporter, recently surveyed the controversy about the U.S. government's account of Osama Bin Laden's capture and killing in 2011. The official government version of the events, he wrote, exists "in a kind of liminal state, floating somewhere between fact and mythology." We should not be shocked, he argues, if it is eventually revealed that the official narrative is a lie. After all, lying is embedded in the job roles of prominent government officials. "White House public affairs people," according to the Director of the Government Secrecy Project at the Federation of Concerned Scientists, "are representing a political entity inside the United States government. Telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth is not their job." Furthermore, Mahler notes, there are moral and political reasons that mitigate against telling the truth: revealing the assistance of informants or foreign actors (such as the Pakistani government) may imperil individuals and invite political instability. "The more sensitive the subject, the more likely the government will be to feed us untruths," Mahler concludes. "Myths can be projected through an uncoordinated effort with a variety of people really just doing their jobs. Of course, when enough people are obscuring the truth, the results can seem, well, conspiratorial" (Mahler 2015).

Earlier we mentioned the notion that conspiratorial thinking is "a natural response" to the steady escalation of government secrecy. Secrecy, lies, and conspiracy

are entirely separable, of course, but in politics they exist on something like a continuum. Consider the spectrum: to begin, there is the automatic and uncoordinated classification of documents, information, and records of decision-making as “secret,” without much regard to any reason for concealment. Then, there is purposive classification of information as secret—a coordinated effort at concealment for an identifiable political purpose, sometimes reasonable, sometimes unwarranted, but always contestable. Then, moving along the spectrum, there are lies and misleading half-truths composed and communicated by officials, sometimes justifiably and often in connection with official secrecy. Lies and misleading partial truths almost always accompany secrecy if only because keeping things concealed in the face of challenges requires it. Then, finally, there is organized lying for a sinister purpose—“conspiracy” proper.

Partisans and their supporters will be on their guard against the moves that lead from secrecy to conspiracy when officials belong to the opposition; a secret, a half-truth, or a lie may signal another in quick succession. Being alert to the continuum and speaking truth to conspiracy on the part of the opposition and within the party is often, we have argued, a partisan responsibility. It is also the self-assumed responsibility of civic-minded gatekeepers of open public information and probes into official lies. But what about ordinary citizens? What about democratic politics in the large?

It is possible to become inured to secrecy, misleading partial truths, and lying as a normal part of politics; to accept it as inevitable, to be indifferent to it, and to assume that it just is necessary and serves some purpose beyond the self-serving manipulation of their beliefs and understanding of events. If citizens can become or are already inured, the result is a depressed political condition, one of discouraged detachment. If they are not

safely indifferent, citizens will be vulnerable to conspiratorial explanations of the constant dynamic of concealment and revelation, secrets and lies. Neither state of mind—neither depression nor a diet of conspiracism—can support democratic politics.

Secrets, lies, and conspiracism are not analytic categories, and they relate to one another in complicated ways. Our point is that unraveling officials' intentions and purposes where secrecy is standard operating procedure, and sorting out the almost inevitable connection of secrecy to lying and obfuscation, are a necessary but consuming business—one that underscores what can seem like the ceaseless responsibility of partisans to speak truth to conspiracy.

It is subtle work to distinguish between conspiracies and the large numbers of government officials whose job requires them to obscure the truth. When government lying is the norm we can expect conspiratorial thinking to become normal also. And where official mendacity is normalized, conspiratorial thinking—suspicion that the set of secrets and lies before us is evidence of a conspiracy—is perhaps salutary insofar as it preserves a care for truth and truth-telling in a time when untruth is normal. When the background condition of veracity fails to obtain—when we can expect that we will be lied to, when the job of government officials seems to require them to lie to us, all official words, coming from the government, become unreliable—it often becomes hazardous or ineffective to use some (true) official information in order to speak truth to accusations of governmental conspiracy. Because in many public matters there are few (if any) sources of information that might be used to corroborate government narratives but that are wholly independent of the government itself, if it is reasonable to assume that officials routinely mislead and lie, then the difficulty of speaking truth—to conspiracy, or to

anything else—is compounded, and the evidentiary power of exposing unwarranted conspiracy is corroded. These conditions undermine the salutary liberal skepticism that attunes people to the difference between facts and causes that might be corroborated, on the one hand, and fanciful theories that connect all the dots.

We do not concede that the roles of government officials should routinely require secrecy or require them to lie to preserve secrecy, nor do we hold that reasons of state render organized concealment and mendacity necessary. Officials do not have to conceal, obscure, or lie. They can just remain silent. One might say, for instance, “A full accounting of the events surrounding the capture of Bin Laden might reveal our technological capacities to our enemies, or endanger those parties around the world who help us with information and operations. As a result, we cannot relate any details about the mission.” Or, more tersely, “national security requires that I not comment.” It is possible to tell the truth, even when it would be dangerous or self-defeating to tell the *whole* truth. However partial and even misleading, and however much an incitement to both conspiracy charges and reasonable questioning by partisans, media, and civic gatekeepers, official acknowledgment of concealment and of deliberate partial truth-telling is needed to preserve the power of speaking truth and to keep alive the possibility of a rational politics.

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Our theme cannot be bracketed off from democratic politics in the broadest sense. It draws our attention to a basic feature of partisan democracy, reminding us of the drama

and volatility of politics: the unceasing partisan conflict, the temptation to delegitimize the opposition and transform the political competition into an enemy, and hence the discipline required to accept the opposition and terms of regulated rivalry.

What we call the discipline of regulated rivalry, when it is civil and deliberative, is real. Electoral politics and policy-making as usual—where intentions are not questioned in their democratic essentials—is a constraint, and it is experienced as one. There is temptation to throw it off. Recklessness is endemic to democratic politics; we find it not only in the agitated politics of radical reaction and dissent that takes place outside the electoral arena but also at its core. The accusatory language of secrecy and concealment, sinister design and subversion, is central because it is far more effective than inconclusive judgments, no matter that they are the best we have. Nothing is as good at mobilizing partisans or would-be partisans as pointing to the opposition as an enemy with a secret agenda and the urgency of booting them from power. Fear—arousing fear and exploiting fear—is ineliminable in politics, and conspiracy charges are all about fear. Conspiracy thinking aims to maximize political excitement.

Parties are the traditional objects of these charges, and today partisans bear the responsibility of addressing them. Our argument is that conspiracism brings us face to face with both the partisan connection and its limits.

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