

CONSPIRACY BUFFS, SKEPTICS AND THE 2016 US PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

We identified “Conspiracy Buffs” and “Skeptics” based on two conspiracy theory items included in the 2016 American National Election Survey. We then compared these two groups, and the much larger group we called the “Uncertains”, on a large number of closed and open-ended survey items. The Conspiracy Buffs had lower levels of education than the Skeptics, had less facility with language, and were more likely to state that they had not thought much about whether they were liberal or conservative. They expressed strongly angry feelings about Hillary Clinton, often citing the Benghazi incident and her use of a private email server. The Skeptics were just as angry at Donald Trump as the Buffs were at Hillary Clinton, but they did not use arguments drawn from conspiracy theories. They referred to his widely acknowledged personality traits and personal behaviors. These traits were also mentioned by many Buffs, but more in disappointment than in anger.

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The New York Times Magazine called 2016 “The Conspiracy Theorists’ Election” and scholars observed that “conspiracy rhetoric seemingly dominated campaign discourse.”¹ These observations refer to the writers, media personalities, politicians and activists on the top of the conspiracy theory pyramid scheme.² Much less is known about the impact of this rhetorical barrage on the voters on the bottom of the pyramid scheme. How many believed the conspiracy rhetoric which came almost exclusively from the Trump side? How did it shape voters’ opinions of the parties and candidates?

The most reliable and comprehensive information on voter thinking comes from the American National Election Survey (ANES), a rigorous national sampling conducted every two years.³ The 2016 survey was done partly in person and partly online, with one wave before the election and one after. It included two conspiracy theory items, a very long list of political items, and four open-ended questions about the candidates and the parties.

The first conspiracy item on the 2016 ANES was: “Did the U.S. government know about 9/11 in advance?”⁴ The same question was asked in the 2012 ANES survey when this theory was more current. This theory was advanced by a well-organized and persistent “Truther” movement that emerged immediately after the attacks in 2001.⁵ By 2008, a *Telegraph* writer ranked it first among the thirty greatest conspiracy theories.⁶ This theory was not, however, prominent in the 2016 election campaign. The Truthers had a generally left-wing, anti-American and anti-Israeli bias, and the 9/11 attack took place during a Republican administration, so this conspiracy theory was not used by Republican partisans.

The responses to this item, in Table One, are similar to those in a great many surveys around the world and show that belief in this conspiracy persisted into 2016.⁷

¹ Charles Homans, “The Conspiracy Theorists’ Election,” *New York Times Magazine*, 27 September 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/magazine/the-conspiracy-theorists-election.html>

² Ted Goertzel, “The Conspiracy Theory Pyramid Scheme,” in Joseph Uscinski, ed., *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*, (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 226-244.

³ The survey is available from the American National Election Studies at <https://electionstudies.org/data-center/>. *Methodological details are available on the web site.*

⁴ The booklet accompanying the interview added the following text: “Did senior federal government officials definitely know about the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 before they happened, probably know about the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 before they happened, probably not know about the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 before they happened, or definitely not know about the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 before they happened?”

⁵ Peter Barber, “The Truth is Out There,” *Financial Times*, 7 June 2008, <https://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/8d66e778-3128-11dd-ab22-000077b07658.html>

⁶ H.E. Hunt, “The 30 Greatest Conspiracy Theories – Part I,” *The Telegraph*, 19 November 2008. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/3483477/The-30-greatest-conspiracy-theories-part-1.html>

⁷ JoAnne Allen, “No Consensus on who was behind Sept 11: ‘Global Poll’,” *Reuters*, 10 September 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sept11-qaeda-poll-idUSN1035876620080910>

“Trump’s New York campaign chair argued that “In the mind of the average American, there is no doubt he is a Muslim. He is not a Christian,” citing as evidence President Obama’s foreign policy positions.”

A survey of a small British sample found this belief correlated with belief in other conspiracy theories, exposure to 9/11 conspiracist ideas, political cynicism, defiance of authority and the Big Five personality factor of Agreeableness.⁸

Table One
“Did the U.S. government know about 9/11 in advance?”

2012		2016	
“definitely”	10.1%	“definitely”	8.1%
“probably”	29.4%	“probably”	28.5%
“probably not”	37.9%	“probably not”	40.7%
“definitely not”	22.6%	“definitely not”	22.7%

The second conspiracy related item in the 2016 survey was “Is Barack Obama a Muslim, or is he not a Muslim?” The 2012 survey asked a related question: “Was the President born in the United States?” These statements assume a conspiracy to cover-up facts, and were used by Donald Trump and his supporters.

Table Two
Responses to Obama items

2012		2016	
Definitely born in US	51.5%	Obama is not a Muslim	70.1%
Probably born in US	25.8%	Obama is a Muslim	29.9%
Probably born in another country	16.8%		
Definitely born in another country	5.9%		

By 2016, Donald Trump had reluctantly abandoned the claim that Barack Obama was not born in the United States, which may be why the ANES dropped the item.⁹ The issue of Obama’s religion persisted, although it was well known that Barack Obama had long belonged to a Christian church and had always asserted Christian beliefs. It was a claim about Obama’s “true” beliefs that he supposedly conspired to conceal. Trump’s New York campaign chair argued that “In the mind of the average American, there is no doubt he is a Muslim. He is not a Christian,” citing as

⁸ Viren Swami, Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, and Adrian Furnham, “Unanswered questions: A preliminary investigation of personality and individual difference predictors of 9/11 conspiracist beliefs,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 24, no. 6 (2010), p. 749-761.

⁹ “Trump finally admits it: ‘President Barack Obama was born in the United States’,” *CNN*, 16 September 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/15/politics/donald-trump-obama-birther-united-states/index.html>

evidence President Obama’s foreign policy positions.¹⁰

These two items reflect different uses of conspiracy rhetoric, and Table Three shows that they had different political correlates. The belief that Barack Obama is a Muslim was strongly correlated with presidential vote and with self-identified conservative ideology. By contrast, the 9/11 conspiracy item was not meaningfully related to either presidential vote or political ideology. The ideological extremes (self-identified) were not more likely to believe this theory, as I had hypothesized, although support was slightly higher on the left than on the right.¹¹

Table Three
Conspiracy Items, Presidential Vote and Political Ideology

	Clinton	Trump		Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Cons.	Conservative	Extremely Cons.
Government Knew About 9/11?										
Definitely knew	57%	43%	100%	9.3%	10.8%	9.5%	7.9%	5.1%	5.6%	5.4%
Probably knew	54%	46%	100%	24.0%	25.4%	27.3%	33.2%	30.6%	21.8%	25.3%
Probably did not know	52%	48%	100%	39.2%	37.8%	43.1%	43.0%	42.2%	44.4%	29.2%
Definitely did not know	52%	48%	100%	27.5%	25.9%	20.1%	15.9%	22.1%	28.2%	40.2%
				100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Is Barack Obama Muslim?										
Muslim	15%	85%	100%	7.2%	7.5%	16.5%	24.8%	33.4%	51.6%	70.5%
Not a Muslim	69.5%	30.5%	100%	92.8%	92.5%	83.2%	75.2%	66.6%	48.4%	29.5%
				100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table Four shows that respondents who believed the government definitely knew about the 9/11 attacks in advance were less likely to vote, less satisfied with life, and more alienated from political elites than respondents who did not have this belief. They were not significantly more religious. Belief that Barack Obama is a Muslim, on the other hand, was strongly related to religiosity and to belief that the Bible is the literal word of God.

Table Four
Conspiracy Items, Likelihood of Voting, Life Satisfaction, Religiosity and Political Alienation (row percents)

	Not Likely at all to Vote	Not Satisfied with Own Life	Religion Imp Resp’s Life	Bible Literal Word of God	Strongly Agree People Have No Say	Strongly Agree Public Officials Don’t Care
Government Knew About 9/11?						
Definitely knew	17.8%	17.5%	67.4%	32.3%	35.2%	41.3%
Probably knew	10.6%	12.9%	65.4%	30.3%	20.6%	23.5%
Probably did not know	7.6%	11.2%	65.3%	26.5%	13.5%	17.6%
Definitely did not know	6.6%	9.9%	62.7%	25.3%	12.7%	16.3%
Is Barack Obama Muslim?						
Muslim	10.3%	13.4%	76.1%	41.4%	20.8%	25.0%
Not a Muslim	7.7%	11.1%	58.5%	20.9%	15.7%	19.4%

Conspiracy Buffs and Skeptics

The two ANES items reflect different uses of the conspiracy meme and the correlation

¹⁰ Will Bredderman, “‘No Doubt’ President Obama Is a Muslim, Donald Trump’s New York Campaign Chair Says,” *Observer*, 4 August 2016, <https://observer.com/2016/08/no-doubt-president-obama-is-a-muslim-donald-trumps-new-york-campaign-chair-says/>

¹¹ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, André Krouell and Thomas Pollet, “Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, Vol. 6, no. 5 (2015), p. 570-578.

“An initial impression is that the Skeptics write better than the Buffs and show more complexity of thought. This is not surprising, given that the modal Skeptic is a college graduate, while the modal Buff has no more than a high school education.”

between answers to them was weak ($r = .13$). It would not be justified to combine them into a two-item scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .19$). Of course, we can use them as separate items, as we did in the tables above, and one methodological study found that a single item conspiracy “scale” had satisfactory psychometric properties.¹² Belief in both of them, however, suggests a more generic belief in conspiracies. We measured this by selecting out the respondents who had extreme scores on both items, which we interpreted as an (imperfect) measure of a generalized conspiracy mindset. This was possible because a third ANES item asked “How sure is the Respondent that Obama is/isn’t a Muslim?” This enabled us to isolate respondents whose beliefs about President Obama’s presumed Muslim beliefs were very strong. Table Five gives results from combining these two items.

Table Five

	Muslim	Not a Muslim
Extremely sure	16.7%	39.2%
Very sure	18.7%	17.4%
Moderately sure	34.8%	21.1%
A little sure	16.6%	10.1%
Not sure at all	13.3%	12.2%
	<u>100%</u>	<u>100%</u>
N =	1032	2414

As defined in this way, only 64 of the 3558 respondents answering the items qualified as Conspiracy Buffs, or 1.8 percent. Skeptics, as defined here, are more numerous at 414 or 11.5 percent. The remaining respondents, whom we have labeled Uncertains because they had some uncertainty about at least one of the conspiracy items, were much more numerous at 3080 or 87.6 percent. Of course, these percentages would be different with different conspiracy-related items. Both of these conspiracy theories have been extensively refuted in the mainstream media, so it is not surprising that 11.5 percent of the respondents were certain they were wrong. It is perhaps more

¹² A. Lantian, D. Muller, C. Nurra, and K.M. Douglas, “Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: Validation of a French and English single-item scale,” *International Review of Social Psychology*, Vol. 29, no. 1 (2016), p. 1–14. The English version of the item was “I think that the official version of the events given by the authorities very often hides the truth.”

surprising that 86.7 percent of the respondents had at least some uncertainty about one of the items. But people are understandably not certain of their knowledge about a great many things and admitting one's uncertainty is reasonable.

While the ANES survey unfortunately included only the two conspiracy theory items, it provides an opportunity to compare Buffs, Skeptics and Uncertains on a very large set of items related to electoral behavior. The Buffs voted overwhelmingly for Trump while the Skeptics were almost as strong for Clinton, with very few voting for a minor party candidate. The Skeptics generally defined themselves as liberal, while the Buffs were most likely to say that they had not given much thought to what their political ideology was. Those Buffs with a defined ideology were more likely to be moderate, middle-of-the-road or conservative. The Skeptics were largely college educated, while the Buffs were most likely to have a high school education or less.

The Buffs were angry at, disgusted with and fearful of "the Democratic candidate." The Skeptics were angry at, disgusted with and fearful of "the Republican candidate." I was surprised to see how the two groups mirror imaged each other on this and several other items. The Skeptics were strongly supportive of stronger restrictions on guns and allowing unauthorized immigrants to remain in the country. The Buffs were less strong on either of these items. The Uncertains were fairly evenly divided in their voting behavior and their opinions on most of the items.

The feeling thermometer items on the ANES measured the respondents' feelings towards various social groups on a scale from 0 to 100. The Buffs and Skeptics were divided, along predictable liberal/conservative lines, in their feelings towards: Christian Fundamentalists, Feminists, Liberals, Big Business, Conservatives, Gay Men and Lesbians, Muslims, the Tea Party, Transgender People and Black Lives Matter. Both had warm feelings towards Poor People. Both had cold feelings toward Congress. Both were warm towards Christians, Jews, Police and Scientists.

Monological or Dialogical Thinking

There has been some discussion in the literature about the suggestion I made in a 1994 paper that conspiracy thinkers may be more monological than dialogical in their reasoning.¹³ This is a hypothesis about the dynamics of reasoning so it is difficult to answer with survey data collected at one point in time, although there have been some attempts to do so,¹⁴ As philosophers have argued, it may be unfair

¹³ Ted Goertzel, "Belief in Conspiracy Theories," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 15 (1994), p. 733-744.

¹⁴ See the following for a review of this literature: Robbie Sutton and Karen Douglas, "Examining the Monological Nature of Conspiracy Theories," in J. Van Prooijen and P. van Lange, eds, *Power, Politics and Paranoia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 254-272.

to stigmatize conspiracy thinkers in this regard.¹⁵ People whose thinking is “ideologically consistent” may be considered to be monological, yet this is generally considered to be a desirable trait by political scientists, one that is more characteristic of the elite than the *hoi polloi*.¹⁶ Another theoretical perspective that may be useful is framing theory which comes from communication studies.¹⁷ From this perspective conspiracy theories are viewed as a meme or trope used in competition with the more conventional left/right or liberal/conservative trope.¹⁸ There is an increasing diversity of tropes in contemporary political discourse, and people who view the world from a feminist, or a racial, or a nationalist or ethnic worldview may be equally monological.

Given the complexity of conspiracy ideation, some scholars have found it useful to do qualitative analysis of interviews, publications, blog posts, and observations of online and in-person interactions.¹⁹ This is an inductive approach, seeking to form generalizations that describe what the respondents say, rather than a deductive one, testing hypotheses drawn from theory. This approach has generally been used in research on conspiracy theory activists and promoters rather than on samples of the general public. As a contribution to this effort, I have done a preliminary analysis of the answers to the open-ended questions on the 2016 ANES election survey.

These questions were not focused on conspiracy theories, but that is not a problem. Researchers have found that even conspiracy theory activists often resent the label, preferring to think of themselves as “truth seekers” or exponents of “alternative worldviews.” In this case, the open-ended questions simply asked the respondents what they liked and disliked about the Democratic and Republican candidates for President, and then what they liked and disliked about the Democratic and Republican Parties. These items have not yet been coded by the ANES, but the text of the remarks as recorded by interviewers or by the respondents in online interviews are posted on the ANES site.

An initial impression is that the Skeptics write better than the Buffs and show more complexity of thought. This is not surprising, given that the modal Skeptic is a college graduate, while the modal Buff has no more than a high school education. My

¹⁵ Kurtis Hagen, “Conspiracy Theorists and Monological Belief Systems,” *Argumenta*, Vol. 3, no. 2 (2018), p. 303-326.

¹⁶ Caitlin E. Jewitt and Paul Goren, “Ideological Structure and Consistency in the Age of Polarization,” *American Politics Research*, Vol. 44, no. 1 (2016), p. 81–105.

¹⁷ Bradley Franks, Adrian Bangerter and Martin W. Bauer, “Conspiracy theories as quasi-religious mentality: an integrated account from cognitive science, social representations theory, and frame theory,” *Front. Psychology*, 16 July 2013, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00424>

¹⁸ Ted Goertzel, “The Conspiracy Meme,” *The Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 35, no. 1 (January/February 2011).

¹⁹ Bradley Franks, Adrian Bangerter, Martin Bauer, Matthew Hall and Mark Noort, “Beyond ‘Monologicality’? Exploring Conspiracist Worldviews,” *Front. Psychology* (20 June 2017), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00861>

impression is that the Buffs are more intensely angry than the Skeptics, although this may reflect their having less facility in writing about abstract ideas.

There were only 64 buffs, and ten of them did not answer the open-ended items. I coded these responses into the categories in Table Six. For comparison, I coded 80 responses by Skeptics. These are the responses to the questions asking for likes and dislikes of the candidates, In answering the questions about the political parties there was understandably more emphasis on policy issues and less on personality.

Table Six
Respondents' Likes and Dislikes of Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump

	Buffs	Skeptics
Hillary is experienced, knowledgeable, competent, caring	13.0%	66.3%
Hillary s a liar, cheat, corrupt, untrustworthy, or criminal	63.0%	38.8%
Hillary is smug, not likable, hard to know what she feels	0.0%	7.5%
Respondent agrees with Hillary on policy issue(s)	1.9%	23.8%
Respondent disagrees with Hillary on policy issue(s)	18.5%	3.8%
Trump is honest, says what he really thinks	29.6%	0.0%
Trump is immature, misogynistic, divisive, narcissistic, an egotistical buffoon, vulgar, crude, just don't like him	20.4%	61.3%
Trump is inexperienced, not knowledgeable	7.4%	37.5%
Respondent agrees with Trump on policy issue(s)	13.0%	7.5%
Respondent disagrees with Trump on policy issue(s)	3.7%	11.3%
Trump is racist, incites violence, is hostile to minorities	5.6%	18.8%
Trump is a business man, a strong decision-maker	2.5%	14.8%
Trump is a failed businessman, bankruptcies	0.0%	10.0%

Some quotes give the flavor of these responses. In quoting from the interviews I have not corrected spelling, I have simply pasted them in. Many Skeptics were supportive of Hillary because of her “strong qualification,” “support of women and children,” “ability to stay calm,” “the most qualified person to run for that office,” “deep experience/dedicated public servant,” “exceptional history of helping others,” “she’s intelligent, she’s knowledable of politics, she has experience in elected office and administrative office,” “accomplished, experienced, reasonably caring”.

More surprising is the high percentage of Skeptics who see Hillary Clinton as dishonest and untrustworthy, even though they said so reluctantly and other answers made it clear they planned to vote for her. In referring to Hillary, the Buffs use emotionally charged terms such as “scandal,” “corrupt,” “crook” and “liar”. Some examples: “seems that everyone who snitches on her dies,” “crook from way back,” “she is a crook and a liar,” “she lies,” “just don’t like her,” “untrustworthy with the emails and all that,” “I simply don’t trust her,” “she comes off as very corrupt,” “scandals emails Benghazi,” “the constant lying, and the one I strongly feel about it is the issue that happened in Bengazi,” “I just think she’s a crooked woman. Im

not against her as a woman, ‘her scandals and all the controversy surrounding her such as email, benghazi, and being a Christian she is prolife and she wants to fund abortion,” “no integrity, got a tax break, pay for play//sold 20 percent of our land Uranian to stock pile// destroyed emails , federal records which is a felony, and if had pneumonia why visits grandkids instead of hospital”, “She’s a liar, Greedy, She believes she’s above the law, got her wealth by dishonest means, low character.”

The Skeptics were much less vehement in criticizing Hillary: “I think she is secretive,” “the question of her trustworthiness,” “she has troubles with the truth,” “does not admit when she is wrong, lies until she is caught,” “I perceive she is not as honest as I might want her to be, there are some trust issues.. “I don’t think she’s always honest, and I think she should have been smarter to know about those emails.”

The Skeptics were often quite vehement in their opinion of Donald Trump: “he is racist biggoted masogistated xenophobic asshole//he is the embodiment of white male privilege thinks women are only valuable if attractive,” “he is a maniacal moron,” “he is untrustworthy, he incites and hatred and violence//he is unfit//He is unknowledgable of the job,” “He’s a fool and if he runs the country like he runs his businesses he will stomp the little people.” “he is an egostatical buffoon.”

Trump’s objectionable personality traits did not go unmentioned by the Buffs. Things they didn’t like about Trump include: “his mouth and mostly his anger,” “trash talk should keep his mouth shut,” “his mouth, his lack of control of his mouth his inability to communicate properly,” “his mouth, the way he treats people, the things he said,” “he is immature, acts before he thinks.” “he is rough around the edges.” These are from respondents who supported Trump despite these weaknesses.

Some of the Skeptics did find positive things to say about Trump as well: “I like his business sense,” “he is different,” “he might get the country out of debt,” “his make America great again enthusiasm is great but not specifics,” “I agree with most of his policies,” “he is knowledgeable about vaccines,” “he is really going to make a change at least he is going to try.” One respondent said “he is not Hillary Clinton, I do like the commitment to build a wall.” This respondent said about Hillary Clinton, “she is perpetually dishonest.”

The word conspiracy occurs only twice in the responses, once in a mention of the “server conspiracy” and from one respondent who explicitly identified himself as a conspiracy believer. There were no other uses of the word “conspiracy” in the responses.

We can go back to when they were in AK when they were laundering drug money, the body count of Clinton, all the conspiracy theories are shockingly true, she has different intentions for the US, she is owned by George Soros, my biggest gripe against her is that she sold 20% of our uranium to uranium 1, so from here on out 20% of our uranium goes to the Russians, that's no secret, government land grabs, like in the OR stand off, that was due to the land deal, //this election has been so corrupt on her side, it's disgraceful, she knows that if she doesn't win Trump will seek her out and make her pay for what she has done wrong, i'm afraid Obama will do a state of emergency for all states, martial law, and stay in office. there has been too much behind the scenes executive order from him that congress hasn't passed off on.. the emails are the least of her worries.

The answers focused much more on personality than on policy issues. But a respondent can also like or dislike a candidate because of the policies he or she advocates. The Buffs frequently mention abortion and gun control, a few mention immigration and opposition to Obamacare. The question about the Democratic Party evokes more policy issues from the Buffs, e.g., “their lack of support for our military, their ideas of how to relieve the national debt,” “they want to control my life,” “their deceitfulness, they think the American public are stupid and uninformed,” “They seem to care less about family values or more traditional family, they seem too quick about getting into national debt issues without having a way to deal with the debt.” The Skeptics also frequently cite policy issues, most frequently the Democrat's advocacy of better access to health care and Hillary's advocacy for children.

Conclusions

The 2016 Presidential election in the United States was part of a global wave of authoritarian populism which has made conspiracy theories “mainstream rather than marginal beliefs” in Britain, Poland, Italy, France, Germany, Portugal, Sweden and Hungary as well as in the United States.²⁰ Conspiracy ideation has been a central part of this movement as David Hirsch observed:

Politics in our time is about defending democracy against an array of related attacks that we might call ‘populist’. Each populism is at heart an irrational conspiracy fantasy. Each insists that democracy is fake and each populism blames some group of our fellow citizens for all our troubles,

²⁰ Joel Rogers de Waal, “YouGov-Cambridge research shows the extent to which conspiracy theories are now mainstream rather than marginal in a number of Western countries,” 14 December 2018, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2018/12/14/brexit-and-trump-voters-are-more-likely-believe-co>

demonizing them as ‘enemy of the people.’²¹

In the 2016 presidential election, conspiracy theories were used by the Trump campaign and its supporters to demonize Hillary Clinton and the liberal, Democratic establishment that she symbolized. This was a quite deliberate use of the conspiracy meme as a trope or rhetorical device, and it continues as we approach the 2020 elections. Donald Trump is quite unapologetic about this, proudly making claims based on “a little bit of a hunch and a little bit of wisdom” and arguing that a claim that creates controversy must be valid because, if not, “nobody would have cared about it.”²²

Conspiracy theories are elaborated by right-wing, conspiracist web sites such as Infowars, then propagated by Fox News and Trump allies. Trump’s mass of supporters, his “base,” is not interested in the details of conspiracy argumentation. They use selected conspiracy memes to justify and rationalize their anger. The conspiracy meme is one of the tools populist demagogues use to manipulate and channel mass frustration. This accounts for the persistence of belief even in conspiracy memes, such as Barack Obama’s foreign birth, that have been thoroughly debunked and have no direct relevance to the 2016 election.

Interestingly, the people we identified as Skeptics were almost as angry at Donald Trump as the Buffs were at Hillary Clinton. And there are conspiracy theories that might have been used to justify this anger, Trump could have been denounced as a tool of “the billionaires” or “the corporations.” The Hillary Clinton campaign did not resort to these arguments, but they would have been used if Bernie Sanders had been the nominee. The Skeptics expressed their anger at Donald Trump by referring to his apparent personal traits and behaviors. Hillary Clinton, on the other hand, is generally cautious and well-mannered in her speech and in her personal behavior. When she did make a slip in her rhetoric, such as her remark about the “deplorables” and her poorly phrased remark about the decline in coal mining jobs, it was repeated endlessly by Trump propagandists. But these were exceptions, so the conspiracy theories filled the gap by offering additional reasons for hating her, as displayed by the chants of “lock her up” at Trump rallies.

Of course, conspiracy memes are only one part of a complex electoral process, and Conspiracy Buffs as defined here were a small part of the electorate. Trump’s Electoral College victory was facilitated by the concentration of these voters in

²¹ David Hirsh, “Why antisemitism and populism go hand-in-hand,” *Jewish News*, 16 May 2019. <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/why-antisemitism-and-populism-go-hand-in-hand/?fbclid=IwAR2RJHsedDebwhm5CKoxENVttnCHMGhm-MJiyecJKBY0S8pXLCJHxYkOOOKA>

²² Mark Mazzetti, “Another Inquiry Doesn’t Back Up Trump’s Charges. So, on to the Next,” *New York Times*, 10 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/09/us/politics/trump-ig-report.html>

certain states and many other factors. Conspiracy memes are one of the tools that advocates and politicians may choose to use based on their judgment of the political conjuncture in their country at a given point in time.