

FORUM: FEAR AND LOATHING

The Ingredients for “Voter Fraud” Conspiracies

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On November 13, 2016, when many states had yet to certify the results of one of the closest presidential elections in U.S. history, Gregg Phillips, a volunteer for the Houston-based “ballot security” organization True the Vote, which regularly made wild and unfounded claims of alleged Democratic voter fraud, posted to Twitter: “We have verified more than three million votes cast by non-citizens ... #unrigged.” The following day, Phillips’s claim rocketed through the conspiracy-minded conservative blogosphere, getting picked up by the *Drudge Report* and *InfoWars*; the latter added that “Virtually all of the votes cast by 3 million illegal immigrants are likely to have been for Hillary Clinton, meaning [President-elect Donald] Trump might have won the popular vote when this number is taken into account.”¹ Such outlandish claims are common among the online right, and Phillips’s allegations could hardly be heard above the din of assertions that Clinton was involved with a sex trafficking ring run out of a Washington, D.C., pizza joint or that the “Jade Helm” military exercise was in fact a secret effort to map Americans’ thoughts.²

But then something remarkable happened: The president-elect of the United States endorsed Phillips’s claim. “In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide,” Donald Trump tweeted on November 27, “I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally.”³ Even after it became apparent that Phillips had no evidence to support his allegations, Trump continued to repeat his assertion. In fact, in late January, the then-president upped the ante, telling Americans that “3 to 5 million” illegal immigrants voted in the election, that “They all voted for Hillary,” and promising a “major investigation” to address this threat to American democracy. Television pundits and editorialists mocked the president’s “insecurity” and “obsession” with beating Clinton, and even many Republicans distanced themselves from the president’s claims. But undeterred, Trump established a Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity to study “those vulnerabilities in voting systems and practices ... that could lead to improper voter registrations and improper voting.” He tapped Kansas

¹Mark Murray, “Who Is Gregg Phillips, The Man Trump Name-Checked to Prove Voter Fraud?” *NBC News*, Jan. 27, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/who-gregg-phillips-man-trump-name-checked-prove-voter-fraud-n713186> (accessed Oct. 24, 2017); Philip Bump, “The Twitter-Born Conspiracy Theory Driving Donald Trump’s Explanation for Losing the Popular Vote,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 27, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/27/donald-trumps-new-explanation-for-losing-the-popular-vote-a-twitter-born-conspiracy-theory/?utm_term=.de35ea62d66c (accessed Oct. 25, 2017); Paul Joseph Watson, “Report: Three Million Votes in Presidential Election Cast by Illegal Aliens,” *Infowars*, November 14, 2016, <https://www.infowars.com/report-three-million-votes-in-presidential-election-cast-by-illegal-aliens/> (accessed Oct. 24, 2017).

²“Schooled on Benghazi and Pizzagate, Trump Team Is Heavy on Conspiracy Theorists,” *Washington Post*, Dec. 22, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/powerpost/schooled-on-benghazi-and-pizzagate-trump-team-is-heavy-on-conspiracy-theorists/2016/12/21/53bdb6d6-c7b1-11e6-8bee-54e800ef2a63_story.html?utm_term=.fa96b7599254 (accessed Jan. 17, 2017).

³Jenna Johnson, “The Tale of a Trump Falsehood: How His Voter Fraud Claim Spread Like a Virus,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 31, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-tale-of-a-trump-falsehood-how-his-voter-fraud-claim-spread-like-a-virus/2017/01/30/47081e32-e4ed-11e6-ba11-63c4b4fb5a63_story.html?utm_term=.8bb38f372174 (accessed Oct. 25, 2017).

Secretary of State Kris Kobach, who the ACLU has called the “king of voter suppression,” to lead it.⁴

In just six months, Gregg Phillips’s unfounded tweet had made the leap from paranoid claim to presidential commission. Even in the contemporary United States where, cultural critic Peter Knight asserts, “conspiracy has become a familiar feature of the political and cultural landscape ... part and parcel of many people’s normal way of thinking about who they are and how the world works,” this movement was remarkable. After all, Knight continues, Americans’ popular conspiracism is typically “held in check by a paradoxical, self-ironizing awareness of the diagnosis of paranoia.”⁵ What about Donald Trump’s political coalition, and the types of conspiracy theories he embraces, made it so easy for him to assemble a presidential commission to investigate a transparent untruth? Answering this question sheds light on the complex conditions under which scares, moral panics, and the “paranoid style” thrive in the modern United States.

Conspiratorial fears that foreign nations or shadowy groups are scheming to seize power and deprive other citizens of their rights predate the Republic. In his illuminating, now classic *The Fear of Conspiracy*, David Brion Davis gathered leading theorists and a wealth of primary sources documenting the phenomenon from the colonial period through the civil rights era.⁶ Davis, Richard Hofstadter, and other founding scholars of U.S. conspiracy studies agreed that all groups have proven susceptible to conspiratorial thinking, from early nineteenth century anti-Masons to 1950s Black Muslims. All that is needed to develop such thinking is some form of social conflict that allows for the articulation of an “us” and a “them” and participants’ willingness to employ the “paranoid style.” Considering that conspiratorial thinking could pop up anywhere among any group, Davis encouraged social scientists to “give adequate attention to chronology and changing situations.”⁷ In that vein, I posit that the rapid movement

⁴Abby Phillip and Mike DeBonis, “Without Evidence, Trump Tells Lawmakers 3 Million to 5 Million Illegal Ballots Cost Him the Popular Vote,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 23, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/01/23/at-white-house-trump-tells-congressional-leaders-3-5-million-illegal-ballots-cost-him-the-popular-vote/?utm_term=.c0ea378eaa4a (accessed Oct. 25, 2017); Aaron Blake, “Donald Trump Claims None of Those 3 to 5 Million Illegal Votes Were Cast for Him. Zero,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 26, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/01/25/donald-trump-claims-none-of-those-3-to-5-million-illegal-votes-were-cast-for-him-zero/?utm_term=.d02f59141073 (accessed Oct. 25, 2017); Jenna Johnson, “Trump Seeks ‘Major Investigation’ into Unsupported Claims of Voter Fraud,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 25, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/01/25/trump-seeks-major-investigation-into-unsupported-claims-of-voter-fraud/?utm_term=.92b7d07a4a01 (accessed Oct. 25, 2017); White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Presidential Executive Order on the Establishment of Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity,” May 11, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/11/presidential-executive-order-establishment-presidential-advisory> (accessed Oct. 24, 2017); “Kris Kobach, The ‘King of Voter Suppression,’ Will Lead Trump’s Sham Voter Fraud Commission. Be Afraid, Very Afraid,” *American Civil Liberties Union*, May 12, 2017, <https://www.aclu.org/blog/voting-rights/kris-kobach-king-voter-suppression-will-lead-trumps-sham-voter-fraud-commission> (accessed Oct. 24, 2017); Ari Berman, “The Man Behind Trump’s Voter Fraud Obsession,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/magazine/the-man-behind-trumps-voter-fraud-obsession.html> (accessed Oct. 25, 2017). In early January 2018 the President abolished the commission in the face of many states’ refusal to share voter data. See “Trump: Democrats Sabotaged Voting Fraud Panel,” *Roll Call*, Jan. 4 2018, <https://www.rollcall.com/news/politics/trump-voting-fraud-panel-was-sabotaged-by-democrats> (accessed Jan. 17, 2018).

⁵Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (New York, 2000), 2.

⁶David Brion Davis, ed., *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca, 1971), xv–xvii. Several subsequent historians have noted a shift in the target of paranoid thinking from the aforementioned “them” to the federal government in the late twentieth century. See Knight, *Conspiracy Culture*; Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (New York, 2009).

⁷Several journalists and scholars have ignored this advice and posited that the paranoid style is a trans-historical American character trait or the psychological affliction of certain sub-groups. In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, many African Americans’ embrace of black elected officials’ claims of state repression, as well as journalist Gary

of Gregg Phillips's claim from paranoid tweet to presidential commission is a product of the confluence of four distinct developments in post-1960s U.S. politics: a decades old GOP campaign against "voter fraud," the explosive growth of a conservative news media that has amplified these claims, white citizen's fears of multiculturalism from above and below, and the rise of Donald Trump himself.

President Trump's claims of millions of illegal votes in the 2016 election may have lacked evidence, but Trump was on sound *political* ground. In a pre-election poll, fully 60 percent of Republican respondents expressed their belief that non-citizen immigrants voted in U.S. elections. Though Trump had made such a claim repeatedly on the stump, he could not take credit for GOP voters' widespread embrace of the idea.⁸ Republican functionaries had been claiming for more than half a century that voter fraud, ostensibly by African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, undocumented immigrants, possibly even felons, all supported by the Democratic Party and ignored by the mainstream media, was rampant.

Since the 1960 presidential election, when the Kennedy/Johnson ticket eked out a razor thin victory over Nixon/Lodge, Republican political operatives have been seized by the fear that Democrats were engaged in a conspiracy to steal elections. They have, in turn, engaged in their own counter conspiracies, hatching a half century of "voter integrity" and "voter security" programs that have, over and over again, been exposed not as efforts to ensure fair elections, but to suppress Democratic constituencies.

Drawing on Republican Party efforts to suppress the black and Latino vote in Maricopa County, Arizona in the 1950s, during the 1964 presidential election the Republican National Committee created Operation Eagle Eye, an ambitious effort to challenge minority Democratic voters in every precinct in the country. Thousands of volunteers mobilized to demand purges of voter lists, photograph and challenge voters at the polls, and bring media attention to Republican allegations of fraud. Program Director Charles Barr expected that "1.25 million voters" would either be "successfully challenged or discouraged from going to the polls" by his volunteers.⁹ Over the course of the next decade and a half, GOP enthusiasm for voter suppression ran from hot to cool. While the 1968 Nixon campaign worked to field an even larger army of volunteers than had flooded precincts in 1964, the 1976 Gerald Ford campaign's Project Integrity limited its activities to instructing volunteers in the intricacies of election law and gathering allegations of fraud from state and local Republican organizations, and (bizarrely) Lyndon LaRouche's U.S. Labor Party.¹⁰

The GOP's narrow margins of victory in the 1980 election redoubled the conviction among many Republicans that more robust ballot security efforts would be necessary in the years

Webb's allegations that the CIA was connected to the importation of drugs into the United States via the Contra rebels, moved some commentators to argue that African Americans were uniquely susceptible to conspiracy theory. See "Though Evidence Is Thin, Tale of C.I.A. and Drugs Has a Life of Its Own," *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 1996, A14; Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism: Principles for a Multiracial Society* (New York, 1996). For studies of black Americans' uses of rumor or embrace of conspiratorial thinking that do not attempt to pathologize their subjects, see Patricia A. Turner, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine: Rumor in African American Culture* (Berkeley, CA, 1994); George Derek Musgrove, *Rumor, Repression, and Racial Politics: How the Harassment of Black Elected Officials Shaped Post-Civil Rights America* (Athens, GA, 2012).

⁸Sam Corbett-Davies, Tobias Konitzer, and David Rothschild, "Poll: 60% of Republicans Believe Illegal Immigrants Vote; 43% Believe People Vote Using Dead People's Names," *Washington Post*, Oct. 24, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/10/24/poll-60-of-republicans-believe-illegal-immigrants-vote-43-believe-people-vote-using-dead-peoples-names/?utm_term=.bec58142058a (accessed Oct. 25, 2017).

⁹The RNC tested Operation Eagle Eye in the 1962 election in several large cities around the country. Chandler Davidson, Tanya Dunlap, Gale Kenny, and Benjamin Wise, "Republican Ballot Security Programs: Vote Protection or Minority Vote Suppression - or Both?" (Center for Voting Rights and Protection, 2004), 25–39.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 25–44; Folder Ballot Security, box 1, Robert Visser Papers, Gerald Ford Library, Ann Arbor, MI; folder Ballot Security, box D2, General Counsel's Office, President Ford Committee Records, Gerald Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

ahead. In 1981, the RNC-sponsored National Ballot Security Task Force requested purges of the voter rolls in New Jersey and Virginia and, in the former, sent volunteers, many white off-duty police officers still wearing their firearms, to patrol polling places in majority black precincts.¹¹ When a federal judge deemed such activities discriminatory and forbade the *national* party from engaging in them again, the RNC decentralized the program, farming it out to state and county parties that it supplied with instructional booklets, technical support, and grants. Small-scale voter suppression efforts proliferated as a result, and by the late 1990s the Department of Justice was swamped with complaints about what one exasperated lawyer called “all of these ... ballot security moves ... [which] all targeted minority voters.”¹²

To justify these programs, GOP operatives created what Lorraine Minnitte calls “the myth of voter fraud,” an allegation of widespread, Democratic Party–directed fraud based on the slimmest of evidence, and which provided the added bonus of spurring white Republican voters to turn out in closely contested elections. In the wake of the fiercely contested 2000 contest, Americans’ fears of voter fraud by the other side increased dramatically.¹³ With an almost evenly divided Congress at stake, the GOP mobilized this fear to justify several large-scale voter suppression initiatives in 2002 and 2004: Republicans in Congress inserted voter integrity provisions into the 2002 Help America Vote Act, the George W. Bush Administration shifted Department of Justice Voting Rights enforcement toward alleged fraud by Democratic constituencies, and GOP campaign operatives explored a variety of ways to shrink the Democratic electorate. Democrats, in turn, ran voter registration campaigns and created an “election protection” infrastructure to counter Republican efforts.¹⁴ By the election of Barack Obama, many Republicans embraced the notion that Democratic victories were often secured through fraud. This belief made, for instance, the absurd charge that the Obama Justice Department was protecting members of the Philadelphia New Black Panther Party who had allegedly prevented white voters from casting their ballots (at a majority black precinct) in Philadelphia during the 2008 election, a running, four-year “scandal.”¹⁵

Meanwhile, a generation of these white Americans had been imbibing a narrative of American history and politics that deepened their worst fears. Conservatives began building

¹¹Richard J. Meislin, “Jersey Controversy Widens over G.O.P. Patrols at Polls,” *New York Times*, Nov. 7, 1981, 25–6; Adam Clymer, “GOP to Expand to Other States ‘Ballot Security’ It Used in Jersey,” *New York Times*, Nov. 9, 1981, B6.

¹²“Republicans Agree in Lawsuit to Avoid Intimidating Voters,” *New York Times*, Nov. 7, 1982, 52; Thomas B. Edsall, “‘Ballot Security’ Effects Calculated: GOP Aide Said Louisiana Effort ‘Could Keep the Black Vote Down,’” *Washington Post*, Oct. 25, 1986, A1, A6; Michael Isikoff, “Justice Dept. Investigates GOP Mailing to Voters,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 6, 1990, A6; Ron Nixon, “Turning Back the Clock on Voting Rights,” *Nation*, Nov. 15, 1999, 11–7; People for the American Way and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *The Long Shadow of Jim Crow: Voter Intimidation and Suppression in America Today*, (Washington, DC, 2004), 9–11.

¹³Since the 2000 election, journalists, social scientists, and political hacks have penned a mountain of books exploring these vulnerabilities and the ways they could be exploited by the other side. For example, the conservative journalist John Fund has made a veritable cottage industry of this genre. See John Fund, *Stealing Elections: How Voter Fraud Threatens Our Democracy* (San Francisco, 2004); John Fund, *How the Obama Administration Threatens to Undermine Our Elections* (New York, 2009); John Fund and Hans von Spakovsky, *Who’s Counting? How Fraudsters and Bureaucrats Put Your Vote at Risk* (New York, 2012). For more nuanced explorations of the complicated nature of vote buying, absentee ballot abuse, fraud, and suppression, see Lorraine C. Minnitte, *The Myth of Voter Fraud* (Ithaca, NY, 2010); Mary Frances Barry, *Five Dollars and a Pork Chop Sandwich* (Boston, 2016).

¹⁴Minnitte, *The Myth of Voter Fraud*, 1–19.

¹⁵Krissah Thompson, “2008 Voter-Intimidation Case Against New Black Panthers Riles the Right,” *Washington Post*, July 15, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/07/14/AR2010071405880.html> (accessed Oct. 25 2017); Ryan J. Reilly, “His Poll-Watching Video Became a GOP Obsession. Now He Wants Trump to Rein in ‘Rigged’ Election Talk,” *Huffington Post*, Oct. 19, 2016, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/new-black-panthers-donald-trump_us_5806805be4b0dd54ce35edc8 (accessed Oct. 24, 2017).

an alternative news media capable of counterbalancing what they argued was the “liberal bias” of the mainstream press in the 1950s. From its small beginnings with the magazines *Human Events* and *National Review*, the conservative news has grown into an industry behemoth with the highest rated shows on talk radio (Rush Limbaugh), cable news (Fox News), and one of the most trafficked news aggregator sites on the internet (*The Drudge Report*).¹⁶ Despite a diversity of views and pet concerns, nearly all of these news organs have blamed all manner of crises, real and imagined, on scheming and shadowy bands of liberals. In the first two weeks of July 2010 alone, for example, Fox News aired ninety-five segments on the New Black Panther Party voter fraud story, amounting to a combined eight hours of airtime spread across six prime-time shows.¹⁷

A subtext for much of the post-civil rights era coverage in conservative media was that a growing multiculturalism, ostensibly created from above by liberal elites through public policy and below through illegal immigration and minority demands for “political correctness,” as transforming white Americans into an oppressed minority. This sentiment could be seen as early as the mid-1960s when opponents of desegregation argued that civil rights laws disadvantaged whites. It became a politically potent wedge issue in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as conservatives crusaded against affirmative action, welfare, crime, and immigration, and exploded into a mass white phenomenon in the early years of the new millennium as the census forecast that the United States would become majority minority before 2050 and Barack Obama became the first non-white person to win the presidency. By 2011, researchers at Tufts and Harvard found that “average” white respondents believed that anti-white bias was more of a problem than anti-black bias.¹⁸

And then there is Trump. The President has seamlessly fused a comfort with untruths and an inexhaustible desire to smear his critics with conservatives’ increasing belief in Democratic conspiracies and white Americans’ blossoming fear of multiculturalism and globalization.¹⁹ For five years Trump tested this approach (and inserted himself into the national political conversation) by peddling the theory that President Barack Obama was born in Kenya, a claim he only abandoned late in the 2016 campaign when aides feared that it might undermine his support from Republican moderates. Since, his employ of the paranoid style has remained so profligate that the *Los Angeles Times* has dubbed him the “Conspiracy Theorist in Chief.”²⁰

Though President Trump is a gifted fabulist, his ability to transform paranoia into policy is less the product of his talents than of five decades of racial and economic transformation and the GOP’s use of the same to build a white voting majority. White Republican fears that the

¹⁶Nicole Hemmer, “The Conservative War on Liberal Media Has a Long History,” *Atlantic*, Jan. 17, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/the-conservative-war-on-liberal-media-has-a-long-history/283149/> (accessed Oct. 24, 2017); David Brock, *The Republican Noise Machine: Right Wing Media and How It Corrupts Democracy* (New York, 2004).

¹⁷“Fox News Has Hyped Phony New Black Panthers Scandal at Least 95 Times,” *Media Matters for America*, July 16, 2010, <https://www.mediamatters.org/research/2010/07/16/report-fox-news-has-hyped-phony-new-black-panth/167811> (accessed Oct. 24, 2017).

¹⁸Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2000); Ian Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York, 2014); Michael I. Norton and Samuel R. Sommers, “Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6, no. 3 (May 2011): 215–8; Hua Hsu, “The End of White America?” *Atlantic*, Jan.–Feb. 2009, 46–55.

¹⁹Marie Brenner, “How Donald Trump and Roy Cohn’s Ruthless Symbiosis Changed America,” *Vanity Fair*, June 28, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/06/donald-trump-roy-cohn-relationship> (accessed Oct. 25, 2017).

²⁰Charles Homans, “The Conspiracy Theorists’ Election,” *New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 27, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/magazine/the-conspiracy-theorists-election.html> (accessed Oct. 24, 2017); “Conspiracy Theorist in Chief,” *Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 6, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/projects/la-ed-conspir-theorist-in-chief/> (accessed Oct. 24, 2017).

country is imperiled by widespread voter fraud took years to create and, I fear, they will be with us long after the current occupant of the White House returns to New York.

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