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Deep state of denial

Why Republican politicians are particularly susceptible to “deep state” theories and are convinced the press is out to get them

Donald Trump has called frenetic media interest in his dismissal of FBI director James Comey a “witch hunt”. But if he really did ask Comey to halt investigations into former security advisor Michael Flynn’s connections to Russia, that would be perverting the course of justice – a formal basis for impeachment. Trump has also been accused of sharing classified information gained from an allied security service (presumably Israel’s) with the Russian foreign minister and ambassador. Only the fact that the US president may remove classification means this did not break laws governing the sharing of state secrets. It is not just the “mainstream media” that Trump and other Republicans see as enemies of the people; they also believe there is a “deep state” of public officials in ministries and government agencies trying to sink his agenda. This begs the question: is paranoia simply a structural element of exercising high office? Or are the left-leaning, liberal media actually colluding with officials block the actions of elected Republicans?

In a complex world, adherents of conspiracy theories like to blame anything they have trouble explaining on the actions of nebulous puppeteers. The truth is often incredibly complex, and academic research is increasingly driven by personal interests, especially when results and theories are turned into products and services. Many accusations of abuse of power are justified. On the other hand, political debate between competing ideologies and interests does not necessarily have to have a pernicious effect on the search for truth – as long as this debate occurs on the basis of common values and with due readiness to reach compromises. Preliminary hypotheses and plausible causalities are frequently sufficient to start finding solutions for the problems affecting societies.

An increasingly More than classic parliamentary democracies,

dysfunctional US government means voters are turning their back on the political establishment

the American constitutional system is predicated on the ability of the holders of political office to reach compromises. Its strict separation of powers leads to shared responsibilities, while its checks and balances allow the minority party to block measures. Since the 90s, however, politicians have shown less and less willingness to compromise. An increasingly dysfunctional US government means voters are turning their back on the political establishment. Society is becoming increasingly tribalized, with each group unwilling to trust the other. Social media and populist politicians encourage this mistrust, which makes Americans more likely to take statements from their own tribe as gospel.

Having said that, there's some truth in the old adage, "Just because I'm paranoid, doesn't mean they're not out to get me". Of course plots are hatched and agreements made to reach certain political goals. So is there actually a conspiracy between the left-leaning liberal media and the "deep state" of the kind Trump and the Republicans see operating against them?

The evidence for a media conspiracy is that surveys show professional US journalists tend towards the Democrats. However, the majority of the owners, publishers, and editors-in-chief are conservative, or at least pro-business. Given that the latter set the limits of the editorial freedom within which journalists operate, accusations of conspiracy seem spurious. Or, as the American left puts it: "The freedom of the press is the freedom of the person who owns the press." What is more, there are conservative media companies readily recognisable as such, most notably Fox News, whose agenda is far more determined by the political preferences of its owner, Rupert Murdoch, than in the case of most left-leaning outlets. And then there is the way the internet has enabled anyone and everyone to reach readers and viewers: these self-appointed "journalists" come from all over the political spectrum.

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The idea of a conspiracy within the apparatus of the American state is also built on a basis in fact. As part of the progressive reforms around the year 1900, the ability of elected politicians to distribute positions in government agencies to paid-up members of their political parties was limited (although Presidents still get to fill far

more positions with candidates of their choice than European heads of government). The increasing degree of professionalism in state agencies and, later, growth in bureaucracy led to a "permanent government" as many administrative procedures became standardised and were carried out by expert civil servants. It is not just their sheer number that irks Republicans, but many of the programmes they administer, too, especially social welfare systems. Long before Donal Trump promised to "drain the swamp", Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform had already threatened to shrink the state to the size where he could "drown it in the bathtub".

So it is that the Republicans' ideology aligns with the hard-and-fast interests of their wealthy supporters to produce a political culture which is fundamentally sceptical of the state, especially in matters of government. While a majority of Americans are "pragmatic, left-leaning, and liberal" when asked about existing social security programmes (especially state pensions and Medicare health insurance for the over-65s), time and time again, the Republicans manage to mobilise mistrust of new initiatives or expansions to systems in place (see Obamacare). From a European perspective, this is a paradox, because many voters who are unable to afford their own private insurance and who do not stand to profit from tax reductions decide against their own economic interests. A favourite bon mot of Democrats runs that "the Republicans are the party that says government doesn't work and then they get elected and prove it."

Conspiracy theories have been widespread in American politics for some time – well before Donald Trump. Principally, right-wing populists use them to mobilise their supporters, many of whom share the pessimistic approach to politics which is a common indicator of conservative voters. The politics of fear and fury is propped up by conspiracy theories and used to mount attacks on minorities and elites, cementing and then instrumentalising this pessimism. This has now become a clear and present danger to the very fabric of society – in the US and beyond.



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