

RADBOUD UNIVERSITY

# Are Conspiracy Theorists Losers?

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A Political Analysis of QAnon and the John Birch  
Society

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## Abstract

The loser theory by Uscinski and Parent is a possible explanation for why people tend to believe in conspiracy theories. It posits that people on the losing side of a political dichotomy, like the one in the United States, are more likely to spread conspiracy theories (Uscinski and Parent 130). This thesis tests that theory against two influential, right-wing organizations that have been accused of spreading conspiracy theories at different moments in history: QAnon and the John Birch Society. The John Birch society seems to adhere to the primary principle of the theory, while QAnon seems to be an anomaly within the loser theory.

*Keywords: Conspiracy, Conspiracy Theory, QAnon, John Birch Society, Conservative, Right-Wing*

## Chapter 1: Introduction and Contextualization

### 1.1 Introduction

Rosanna Boyland was a 34-year old QAnon supporter who tragically died to unknown causes during the storming of the Capitol building on January 6<sup>th</sup>. Her death left her family wondering how someone without an interest in politics suddenly found herself radicalized by a conspiratorial organization, QAnon. She was not the only person to die in the January 6 attack on the Capitol. (Bogel-Burroughs and Hill par 4). In 1962, Newton Armstrong Jr. took his own life. The death of the son of a member of the John Birch Society (JBS) was not accepted by this society. His father, and a large part of the organization with him, believed that Armstrong Jr. was murdered (Mulloy 167). Many officials were accused in letters JBS members wrote to them. Both of these instances surround conspiratorial organizations, the master narratives they peddle, and the damage they can cause. Both of these organizations also still exist today.

This thesis seeks to test these two organizations against an explanatory framework which poses that people in the aftermath of political loss are more likely to fall victim to conspiracy theories in the United States. Due to a two-party system it is quite possible to analyze which of the two political parties holds the most power at the times the JBS and QAnon were most prevalent. The question formulated to aim this analysis is: To what extent are QAnon and the John Birch Society motivated by a lack of political power in the United States Political System?

In this chapter a definition for the terms conspiracy and conspiracy theory will be given to make it clear what is meant with those terms throughout this essay. After that a short literature review will give a historical overview of previous literature that sought to explain who believes in conspiracies and why. Subsequently, this chapter will include what theory will be used to look at conspiracies and why this particular framework was chosen. Finally an overview of the following chapters will be included.

### 1.2 Defining “Conspiracy Theory”

This thesis will be touching on many topics surrounding conspiracies and conspiracy theories. To accurately navigate this, it is important to first define what a “conspiracy” and a “conspiracy theory” actually entail. Although many people get a general sense when hearing or reading those words, there is arguably not even an academic consensus on what exactly

constitutes a conspiracy. Barkun even argues that despite a lot of academic debate surrounding conspiracies, "... the term *conspiracy* has often been left undefined" (3). The definition he gives of a conspiracy belief is "the belief that an organization made up of individuals or groups was or is acting covertly to achieve some malevolent end" (Barkun 3). This definition seems to consist of a myriad of parts. There has to be an organization involved, this organization has to be made up of different groups and they have to be plotting something evil. When dissecting this though, it can be argued that most organizations consist of at least individuals. What then remains of his definition is that a conspiracy belief is the belief that an organization is doing something evil. This arguably is somewhat lacking as this definition is very broad. Van Prooijen has a slightly more specific definition in his book *The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories* which forms a clearer demarcation of what a conspiracy theory is. He specifies five aspects that have to be included in any conspiracy theory, namely: patterns, agency, coalitions, hostility, and continued secrecy (van Prooijen 6). With patterns he means that there are no coincidences when finding an explanation for what a conspiracy theorists deems a suspicious event or course of events. Agency means that there are always conspirators that perpetrate these suspicious events, which is essential for a conspiracy (Knight 15). Coalitions mean that there is always a plurality of conspirators, because without multiple people (or even non-human entities like lizard people or robots) there can be no conspiring. Hostility means these people or entities always have bad intentions and usually represent pure evil. Continued secrecy is essential for a conspiracy theory because after there is evidence, something is no longer a theory (van Prooijen 6). A vivid example is the Watergate incident in the 1970s. What started as the definition of a conspiracy theory, top officials and the U.S. President colluding to spy on their democratic counterparts, later turned out to be the truth. Once evidence is obtained it turns into an actual conspiracy. The term 'conspiracy' itself might also be unclear because perspective matters. When for instance a covert operation is being carried out by an agency like the CIA or MI6, is this in itself always a conspiracy? Knight solved this by including that a group of people come together to perform an "illegal or improper" action (15). As he himself points out however, this is all very subjective. In this case this thesis will therefore wield the more clear-cut definition by Douglas et al. which defines a conspiracy as a "secret plot by two or more powerful actors" (4). This would mean that the answer to the question about covert operations being conspiracies is a resounding yes. Finally, it is important to note that calling something a conspiracy theory does not mean that people whom adhere to that theory are always wrong.

The validity of a conspiracy theory is not necessarily essential for studying who believes in certain conspiracy theories and why.

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework

#### 1.3.1 Literature Review

There is a large amount of indicators of whether someone is likely to believe in or spread conspiracy theories. Much of the research done on the topic originates from Richard Hofstadter's seminal work *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* which dates back to 1964. In it, Hofstadter largely attributes conspiracy to the American conservative right. He defines a conspiracy thinker as someone who sees his opposition as someone with transcendent power who needs to be taken down by any means necessary (Hofstadter 103). What is especially important though is that Hofstadter showed that conspiracy thinking was a state of mind that can be found throughout history. As he states: "The recurrence of the paranoid style over a long span of time and in different places suggests that a mentality disposed to see the world in the paranoid's way may always be present in some considerable minority of population" (Hofstadter 116). His essay shows different (right-wing) conspiracies through America's past to drive that point home. That point is what largely inspired subsequent research and an impressive body of work trying to find reason behind conspiracy.

Political leanings are an interesting place to start: do ones political leanings have any bearing on whether they are susceptible to believing in conspiracy theories? Richard Hofstadter certainly seemed to think that they did, and since his essay in 1964, some empirical research has been done to test this hypothesis. The results are not necessarily consistent however. One study researched correlation between conspiracy thinking and political leanings by interviewing a Swedish audience about conspiracy theories, and they found the opposite of what Hofstadter ascertained: namely that left-leaning people were more likely to hold conspiracy beliefs (Krouwel et al. 448). A study with a comparative methodology found the exact opposite however, and seemed to determine that right-wing oriented people were more likely to hold conspiracy beliefs (van der Linden et al. 44). It is thus not entirely clear whether political orientation is a clear indicator, although both studies do agree that political extremists are more likely to believe in conspiracies than moderates (Van der Linden et al. 44; van Krouwel et al. 449; Oliver and Wood). This arguably makes logical sense, like the assertion that people are more likely to believe in conspiracies about the other side of the political spectrum (Van Prooijen 11). Others challenge this and say that it is not necessarily just the ones that are excluded from power that hold on to conspiracies, but that the people in

power peddle conspiracies (Knight 19). A good example of this is fascists who scapegoat minority groups as a way to maintain power. These conclusions give some indications to who might be inclined to believe in conspiracies, but it does not offer an explanatory framework. It does not clarify whether conspiracy thinkers move towards the fringes of politics, or that extremists tend to believe in conspiracies. They also show that people from all around the political spectrum can and have spread conspiracy theories (Oliver and Wood 964).

It is also important to discuss whether there is an increase of conspiracies over time to ascertain motivation. Although it might seem likely due to the visibility of conspiracy theories nowadays, there is no real proof that there is a stable increase in conspiracy theories over time (van Prooijen 19). The internet might seem like a catalyst, but there is a case to be made that it is not as bad as one might assert. Conspiracy websites are not visited regularly, information on the internet concerning conspiracies is often negative towards them, and there is no real evidence that there is a rise in conspiracy beliefs since the invention of the Internet (Douglas et al. 15). While a conspiracy theory or conspiratorial worldview like QAnon might originate on the internet, there is no evidence that the emergence of such a theory increases the amount of people that believe in conspiracy theories.

### 1.3.2 Applied Theories

The theory through which the John Birch Society and QAnon will be analyzed is Uscinski and Parent's theory that posits that "conspiracy theories are for losers" (130). This is not meant in a way to attack conspiracy theorists personally. They simply assert that many conspiracy theories are political in nature, and that conspiracy theories are more likely to spring from the party that is not in power. According to van Prooijen people have an instinct to assume the worst in people, especially people who are powerful. (27). Power asymmetry is said to be the driving power of conspiracy theories, and they differentiate two large ones: Asymmetry between domestic political groups and power asymmetry between the United States and foreign actors (Uscinski and Parent 133). They claim this based on their own quantitative research of villains accused in letters written to the *New York Times*. From 1897 to 2010 they looked at letters with a conspiratorial opinion to compare who was accused, and this led them to the conclusion that conspiracies were primarily aimed at the party in power.

Although both the JBS and QAnon presumably have some things in common, they were started and most active in completely different time period and have different interests. Therefore QAnon will be analyzed through a mostly domestic lens, while the JBS will be analyzed both domestically and internationally for power asymmetry. Although their theory

deals largely with the absolute volume of conspiracies, it is noteworthy to analyze if both of these rather large and arguably influential organizations follow their model. Their domestic model looks at three institutions to determine a faction's political power: the Presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court (in that order) (Uscinski and Parent 134). This thesis will thus look at the moments of founding and prime influence of the JBS and QAnon to look whether they were actually motivated by domestic and foreign political losses.

#### 1.4 Methodology

The research will consist of testing the theory of Uscinski and Parent against the large right-wing conspiracy organizations that are QAnon and the John Birch Society. Both organizations will be looked at in terms of political alignment and influence. Afterwards the political situation in the United States during the founding and the peak of these movements will be ascertained which will look at whether these political organizations were actually 'losers'. This means the political alliance, whether Democrat or Republican, of the Presidency, Congress, and Supreme Court will be looked at. If it turns out that these organizations are actually aligned with the party in power; alternative possible sources of fear will be shortly theorized about. Afterwards both organizations will be compared to see if a universal theory to explain conspiracy theorizing like that of Uscinski and Parent holds water in this specific instance.

#### 1.5 Overview of Chapters

In the second chapter of this thesis QAnon first be examined in terms of background and what they stood for. How large is this organization, how influential is it, and when were they most influential? After this the political situation in that period will be analyzed to determine whether they fit into the applied theory.

In the third chapter the same will be done with regards to the John Birch Society. This conspiratorial organization will also be discussed in terms of their beliefs, influence, and period of importance.

In the fourth chapter both organizations will shortly be compared in the way of structure, types of conspiracy, and in what seems to motivate them in terms of 'losing' or fear. As these conspiratorial organizations are both classed as right-wing organizations it might be interesting to see whether their motivations aligned and whether history is repeating itself contemporarily with QAnon. This chapter will also offer a short conclusion.

## Chapter 2: QAnon and Losing

In this chapter special attention will be designated to the organization that is known as QAnon. First some background will be given about QAnon to discuss what kind of organization it is and what kind of conspiratorial beliefs they hold. Afterwards the size and influence of the movement will be discussed. Then the political system will be discussed to see who had the power during the time of QAnon to determine whether the movement fits into the loser theory by Uscinski and Parent.

### 2.1 What is QAnon: A Short History

QAnon is a conspiracy 'organization' which originated online and espouses a wide range of mostly debunked beliefs (Moskalenko and McCauley 142). To be more specific: QAnon began on the internet board 4chan when someone who went by the name of Q started sending messages claiming to have top level security clearance. After this first message, the messages have travelled through other online boards like Q based websites, Reddit, 8chan, and 8kun. Q<sup>1</sup> pushed beliefs about a satanic pedophile ring which is being run by the elites within the US government (Papasavva et al. 1). This is the main conspiracy that QAnon seems to build on, and it mostly targets Democrat politicians and those who are sympathetic towards them like celebrities or main stream media institutions. (Chandler 8). The conspiracy also includes an in-group in which you can take part by joining Q in the fight against these satanic pedophiles. Donald J. Trump, the Q-team, and anyone who joins by deciphering hidden messages are the good guys who are trying to stop the cabal.

In October 2017 the first message by Q was released on 4chan. This 'Q-drop' as would be referred to them later, re-iterated the conspiracy known as Pizzagate<sup>2</sup> and first introduced the concept of a fight against this cabal. That fight was led by the 45<sup>th</sup> President, Trump. This message can be constructed as reactionary to the probe by Robert Mueller into the 2016 election. Many early Q-drops asserted this was a cover for Mueller and Trump to work together so they could bring down this ring of pedophile elites (Wendling par 12). This was supposed to culminate in an event called 'the Storm' in which all those involved would get their reckoning. Basically anyone that opposed President Trump or supported presidential candidate Hillary Clinton would be among those that would be imprisoned or worse

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is still unknown who Q is, evidence (Aliapoulios et al. 2) suggests that Q is not one person, but that multiple people have sent messages from the Q tripcodes.

<sup>2</sup> Pizzagate is the theory that children were being trafficked and abused by, among others, Hillary Clinton from the inside of a pizza restaurant. This culminated in a gunman who visited Comet Pong Pizza Shop to do his own research. Nobody was harmed.

(Bellingcat par 7). The attacks are however not confined to the United States. International politicians like Angela Merkel are also seen as part of the problem (Chandler 8). Although the theory revolves around a globalist pedophile ring, it seems that most of the attention of QAnon still focuses on domestic politics, organizations and politicians. The Storm, for instance, is also American and repeatedly mentions Guantanamo Bay (Bellingcat par 7). This is only a tip of the iceberg concerning all the beliefs that QAnon holds, because their theorizing is extensive to say the least.

The Storm seemed to have died down however, as QAnon was quite reliant on two Presidential terms of Donald Trump. After the unsuccessful January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection and the inauguration of Joseph R. Biden on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January, the prime prediction of a reckoning seemed to have been shaken. This inauguration of the 46<sup>th</sup> President was never supposed to happen, according to QAnon (Garry et al. 161). Many of them believed after the election results were in, that Trump would still somehow come out on top because the election results were illegitimate. This is a conspiracy which is now freely peddled by prominent actors within the GOP. QAnon is a conspiracy that moves rather freely, so while there have been no new Q-drops since December of 2020, Q-based websites are still active and have largely moved on to covid-19 and vaccine based conspiracies (Hannah par 38).

The role of Donald Trump as a central part of QAnon is something which makes this conspiracy theory somewhat unique. As Zuckerman points out: "... QAnon departs from the pattern of conventional conspiracy theories in some novel ways. Traditionally the audience for conspiracy theories are those who feel marginalized from ordinary politics and are disengaged. Now the most prominent conspiracy proponent is, arguably, the world's most powerful person" (par 14). Although Trump is a central part within the QAnon movement, he himself has never come out and said anything about the theory itself. The most engaged he has been with the conspiracy is saying that Q supporters "... are people that love our country" (Rogers and Roose par 1) and he asserted that: "If I can help save the world from problems, I am willing to do it. I'm willing to put myself out there" (Rogers and Roose par 4). This is not the critical outlook one might desire from a President regarding a baseless conspiracy theory. It seems however more like the behavior of a shrewd politician who does not want to lose votes than of somebody who actually subscribes to the Q conspiracy. His involvement and central position do two things however. It makes QAnon fully and unapologetically political in nature and positions the conspiracy theory on the political right.

## 2.2 How Influential Is QAnon and Does It Endanger the American Political System?

According to polling done by the Pew Research Institute, 20% of American people believed QAnon to be ‘good’ or ‘very good’ for the country. (Pew Research 1 par 7). A NPR/Ipsos poll found that 17% of Americans thought that “A group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media” (Ipsos par 9). These are staggering numbers considering Q’s claims are largely baseless and, could be argued, objectively absurd without evidence. According to the same Ipsos poll, thirty-nine percent of Americans think there is a so-called ‘deep state’ which works to undermine President Trump. (Ipsos par 10). Although this is more broad conspiracy which has been repeatedly echoed by the President during his four years in Office, it is also a belief which is core to the QAnon conspiracy. ‘Q’ was also listed in *Time Magazine* of 2018 as one of the top 25 most influential people on the internet (Chandler 2). The most influential QAnon book: *QAnon: An Invitation to the Great Awakening*, which was written by members of QAnon, even reached number two on Amazon’s best-seller list (Papasavva et al. 1). Meanwhile QAnon has even found its legs politically with 66 candidates who have expressed some degree of acceptance for its ideas running for Congress in 2020 (Amarasingam and Argentino 42). The most prominent are Lauren Boebert and Marjory Taylor Greene who won seats in the House of Representatives. Especially Taylor Greene has expressed sympathies in the past by talking about ‘Q’ as a patriot and talking about the elections as a chance to take out a cabal of pedophiles and Satanists (Bellingcat par 14).

This would all suggest that QAnon is extremely large and influential, but there are counterarguments to be made. Uscinski and Enders have polled Americans about conspiratorial worldviews since 2018 and they have concluded that “... support for QAnon is quite low and stable over time” (par 4). They say support for QAnon is comparable to that for White Nationalists or even ideas like lizard people (Uscinski and Enders par 7). The numbers thus do not necessarily side with the how big the media has been making QAnon and the large focus they have put on them according to this polling. Their polling does however agree with that of NPR/Ipsos in that they both seem to confirm that the underlying ideas which are associated with QAnon are very popular. Their poll finds that American people massively overestimate the amount of trafficked children and believe in large numbers (35%) that elites from Hollywood and the government are involved in large sex trafficking rings (Uscinski and Enders par 8-9). This seems to point at QAnon being more of a fringe group which enjoys massive media attention. It builds upon conspiratorial ideas which are more widely believed in American society, and are not at all exclusive to QAnon.

This does not mean however that QAnon is not a danger to the American political system. Multiple critics point to the potential hazard that the organization can still cause. Mostly due to the content of the QAnon conspiracy theories, individuals that intent to follow its ideals could pose a security threat and even lead to domestic terrorism (Amarasingam and Argentino 42). Hannah argues that, in part, the insurrection that took place on January 6<sup>th</sup> is already a shining example of this (par 36). The high number of QAnon participants in the storm of the Capitol building is a logical consequence of former President Trump's rhetoric regarding the Presidential elections, combined with QAnon supporters' excessive admiration for him. QAnon supporters seem to see themselves as fighters of righteousness who are combatting an ultimate evil (Garry et al 160). In this they fit the pattern of most conspiracies in which there is a struggle between good and evil, in which evil must eventually perish and good will eventually prevail (Barkun 2). When people actually opt in to the beliefs of a satanic, pedophilic cabal, the bar to perpetuate violence to banish that evil becomes comparatively low, which will always makes conspiratorial beliefs like this dangerous for any political structure. Furthermore, QAnon seeks to discredit most country leaders, democratic institutions, news media, and academia. Garry et al. argue that this is comparable to the ways terrorist organizations seek to discredit democratic institutions (162). So although QAnon might have limited reach in absolute numbers; the media attention they garner combined with their dangerous rhetoric and their link to related conspiracies still make them dangerous to the United States political system.

### 2.3 The American Political Environment during QAnon

The theory by Uscinski and Parent asserts that the Presidency has the most effect on attracting conspiracy talk because the President is both the most powerful and most visible domestic political actor (133). As discussed previously QAnon founds its origins in October 2017, and peaked towards the later stages of 2020. In 2017, President Donald Trump was right in the middle of his first term in office. Not only is Donald Trump a conservative, nationalist President which would be associated with the right side of the political spectrum, he is also the all-powerful object of QAnon's affection. This seems to directly contradict the assertion that this conspiratorial organization is for "losers" as the right held the most powerful political office in the country. Despite attempts from the Democrats to impeach and remove the 45<sup>th</sup> President, he remained President for the entirety of his term and thus during the main peak of QAnon's popularity at the end of 2020.

Congress also enjoyed a Republican majority in 2016. Both the House of Representatives and the Senate were in Republican hands when the first 'Q' drop appeared in

2017. This situation changed noticeably over time because of the 2018 mid-term elections in which the Democrats won the House of Representatives by a decent margin. This usually allows the party to block, filibuster, and fight the legislation that the majority party wants to push through, but it still did not give the Democratic Party any real power to craft a lot of their own legislation or gain any real significant power with the Presidency and Senate still in the hands of the Republicans. So although Congress was split at the time that QAnon was arguably most influential and most 'present' in American society, it still did not translate in real power for the Democrats which conspiracy theories should want to oppose according to Uscinski and Parent (132).

The Supreme Court is the institution of which partisanship is the hardest to measure because they are technically and legally a politically independent branch. This means that they are non-biased on paper and should not belong to either the Republican or the Democratic Party. Supreme Court judges are appointed by the President however, which means that ordinarily judges are appointed that seem to favor the stances of the party the President belongs to. This can matter significantly for long-term policy favoring the incumbent President's party (Krehbiel 238). The media usually creates a split to determine whether a judge is more liberal-leaning or more conservative-leaning based on who appointed the judges and their decisions over time. This is perhaps most important in shaping the opinions of the broader audience on where the power lies in the Supreme Court, and is thus the most important thing to measure for this theory. There have been three appointments during the tenure of President Trump, namely Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett. Even after the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh, most Americans still believed that the court was ideologically quite centrist according to polls conducted by *Pew Research Center* (Hartig, par 2). After the appointment of the Christian conservative Amy Coney Barrett in 2020 to succeed notoriously liberal judge Ruth Bader Ginsberg, the court undeniably shifted farther to the right. The media reports of a conservative majority when it comes to the Supreme Court now, with some reporting six out of nine Supreme Court justices have conservative leanings. (Deveaux and Bronner). If anything, with Donald Trump's ability to appoint three conservative-leaning judges during his tenure, the Supreme Court has become more weighted towards the right wing during the peak of the QAnon movement.

#### 2.4 Discussion and Agreement Loser Theory

The loser theory of Uscinski and Parent and the reality do not line up at all in the case of QAnon. QAnon is a dangerous conspiracy that seems to attack actors that do not really

carry much political power in the traditional American political arena. The Democrats did not have control of the Presidency, the Senate, and lost ground in the Supreme Court in the time the QAnon conspiracy started spreading. If anything, it seemed like the Trump-based conspiracy has been punching down during the entirety of the time Trump has been in office. This seems counterintuitive because it begs the question how people that do not hold any actual political power be responsible for the heinous acts QAnon accuses them of?

‘Pizzagate’ is the conspiracy that some of QAnon is built on. This was a conspiracy peddled during the 2016 elections to discredit Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. At this point in time when Democrat Barack Obama was still the President and Hillary Clinton was favored to win the Presidency (FiveThirtyEight-1). The Republicans did control Congress, but the Presidency was still favored to remain with the Democrats as Donald Trump was seen as a fringe candidate. When looking at this moment as the birth of the beliefs of QAnon, it fits better with the theory by Uscinski and Parent (132). It still does not explain why QAnon remained so popular throughout the four years of the Trump Presidency, in two of which the Republicans also controlled Congress completely.

The first ‘Q’ drop started during the Mueller investigation into Donald Trump and most of the early drops contained conspiracies relating to the Russia investigation (Wendling par 11). This is significant because it could be a means by which GOP<sup>3</sup> supporters feel attacked despite holding the political power. The Russia investigation was widely discredited by Trump and his supporters as a ‘hoax’ and an attempt by the Democrats to steal the Presidency (Ye Hee Lee). This is not the only case in which the right-wing media or Trump tried to accuse the Democrats of attempting to grab power. It is a well-known theme throughout Trump’s Presidency that he blamed anyone and everyone for any misfortune or critique that came his way. So much that Friedman and Fireworker (22-29) published a list of him attacking everything from the media, to celebrities, to Democrats. This victim mentality, which Uscinski and Parent assert did not work for Obama because he was arguably the most powerful man in the world (133), does somehow work for Trump in breeding conspiracy theories about the Democrats and their cohorts.

This might be because Trump lost the popular vote for Presidency and has been unpopular throughout his term. The approval rating for Donald Trump, a measurement used by the media to determine one’s popularity, has never been over 50%, while his disapproval rating was over 50% for virtually his entire Presidency (FiftyThirdEight-2). This means that

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<sup>3</sup> Stands for “Grand Old Party”, which is the acronym which is used by the Republican Party.

although Trump held the power, his supporters could still perceive themselves as the underdog. There were more people that voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 elections as she won the popular vote despite losing the Electoral College. QAnon gaining in popularity in 2020, with the Presidential elections approaching, might be construed as a reaction to the fear of losing political power. These could all be seen as arguments that the loss of political power or perceived weakness can still be a catalyst for conspiracy theories, but it shows that the base for politically based conspiracy theories might be more complicated than: 'who is in power at any given time'.

### **Chapter 3: The John Birch Society and Losing**

This chapter will look at the John Birch Society. This was also a right-wing oriented organization which was home to many conspiracies. The depth of these conspiracies and some background of the organization will be discussed. After this the size and influence that the JBS held during the late 1950s and early 1960s especially will be examined. The JBS technically exists until this day, but this research will focus on its peak, which was between its founding in 1958 and 1966. Finally the agreement the JBS had to the loser theory by Uscinski and Parent will be considered.

#### **3.1 What is the John Birch Society: A Short History**

The John Birch Society is an organization that was formed by Robert H.W. Welch Jr. in 1958. After inviting eleven prominent conservatives, Welch delivered a speech laying out his anti-communist ideas (Schoenwald 62). This was the start of a closely managed organization which sought to oppose communism in its many forms. Robert Welch, at that time mainly known for being a candy manufacturer, found motivation when his idol Robert Taft eluded the nomination for President in 1952 in favor for Dwight Eisenhower. Taft was one of the most vocal disavowers of the State Department and blamed communist insiders for the United States' failures overseas regarding communism (Lautz 220-221). Welch, who was both a fan of this rhetoric and the general idea behind McCarthyism, became disillusioned when Taft was passed over for President in 1952 and McCarthy was silenced by the Senate in 1954. This is where Welch started complaining that even the Republican Party had become invested by pro-Communists and liberals (Toy 269). These sorts of conspiratorial ideas became emblematic for what would later become the JBS.

Many ideas of the JBS were not uncommon in the framework of more far-right organizations and political viewpoints of the time. There were two central themes that can be seen as the core of the beliefs of the JBS. First was, perhaps unsurprisingly, anti-communist sentiment. Second was a staunch opposition to collectivism and big government (Stewart 428). These have never been uncommon views in the United States, but especially not during the Cold War in which a war was being waged against communism. These beliefs are also connected because it was also believed that more government would eventually devolve into socialism, collectivism, and communism (Lautz 229). They were scared it would impede on their freedoms, which is a thoroughly common right-wing talking point. Mulloy argues that the main difference between an extremist organization like JBS and more acceptable right wing views were "... often a matter of degree and emphasis, rather than basic understanding..." (171). He is of course correct, although the degree and emphasis he speaks of in this case is that JBS was a conspiracy theory-ridden organization.

There were plenty of conspiracies peddled by the JBS between its founding and the end of its mainstream relevancy around 1966. These conspiracies largely originated from its creator: Robert Welch. Perhaps the most controversial and well-known conspiracies that came out of the JBS were those regarding influential and well liked figures in the American Political System like Dwight Eisenhower and George Marshall (Stewart 425). Eisenhower was either an agent to the communists, or he was unknowing about the communist corruption within his government. Either way he supported the communist agenda according to Welch (Lautz 234; Starr 20). Milton Eisenhower, Dwight's brother, was the real brain of the Communist Party according to this theory. John Foster Dulles and Allen Dulles, respectively Secretary of State and CIA Director were also involved in the communist plot (Lautz 234). The JBS tried to explain many foreign missions in an entirely different way than the story the government would offer. This "Orwellian doublethink" as Lautz (231) calls it, caused each event to mean the opposite. The government would support non-communists in Vietnam; Welch would take that to mean that they were trying to get communists in power. The government would miserably fail an invasion of Cuba; this would mean that they were trying to push Castro towards the Russians etc. This meant that any action the government undertook was under conspiratorial scrutiny from the JBS, and Welch in particular. Welch believed that the country was under 60-80% in control of communists (Starr 23), so anything they did had to be a ploy to help communism along.

Another conspiracy theory that infiltrated the JBS later was the popular Illuminati conspiracy. The Illuminati is a secretive organization which Welch blamed for trying to

overthrow humanity by making one globalist, socialist super-government This organization has apparently been active since its creation in 1776 to undermine everything people tried to accomplish (Stewart 431). Although this believe only became more prevalent once JBS was losing some influence around 1966, it shows how JBS fits into the more regular conspiracy theorist framework, despite the rigidity of the organization. It is also important to note that these beliefs intensified and became more severe eventually resulting in mainstream conservatism breaking from the JBS (Starr 19).

### 3.2 How Influential Was the John Birch Society and How Was It Structured?

According to estimations, at its peak in the mid 1960's, the John Birch Society had about 100.000 active members across the United States (Stewart 425; Lautz 229; Mulloy 1). The numbers are more difficult to ascertain than nowadays, so it might not be entirely accurate. According to American census data, 188 million people inhabited the United States in 1963. This means that the JBS cannot be called an objectively large organization in the political landscape of the United States, even at its peak. A Gallup poll in 1965 however found that around 79% of Americans knew about the existence of the JBS (Mulloy 3). The influence and reach of the organization thus went further than just the active members. Even with a limited amount of members, the JBS still managed to open around 400 bookstores to help sell its literature, and sent out active speakers that preached its word throughout the country (Stewart 425).

The society Welch created was a secular organization, meaning that there was no religious preference amongst their members. Most right-wing conservative organizations in the United States are often organized from a Protestant base and can hold anti-Catholic sentiments .The JBS did not adhere to this stereotypical make-up. This was largely because the JBS reportedly had a lot of Catholic members, and was even supported by a large amount of Catholic clergy that helped them recruit new members (Wilcox 432). Lautz typifies the average JBS member as white, sub-urban, middle class, with many of them women (229). This is rather typical of a right-wing organization like the JBS, but they did also have Jewish and African-American members. This can be attributed to Welch condemning racism on a national level, but due to how the organization was structured; some local chapters did participate in racist rhetoric (Toy 270). Welch was also conflicted because although he did not want to be associated with the 'klans<sup>4</sup>' and participate in outright racist rhetoric, he did

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<sup>4</sup> Referring to outright racist hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan

oppose the civil rights struggle and desegregation because he felt it opposed states' rights. This combination of Welch holding classic racist positions and especially Southern chapters disobeying the national message and having practicing white supremacists, the JBS was often dismissed as yet another conservative, racist, fringe organization (Lautz 232).

There was a strict top-down organizational structure in the JBS, but local chapters did have some freedom to determine their own agenda. Welch ran his political movement like he did his business. He tried to introduce as much face to face contact as possible, which resulted in these physical chapters and travelling speakers that were recruiting new members (Schoenwald 79). All these chapters held meetings to discuss politics and provide updates on their missions and assignments of writing letters to local and national officials (Wilcox 433). Using this model of recruitment, smart advertising, and smart distribution, Welch was able to spread the movement quickly without being a particularly charismatic leader.

The JBS was influential in American Politics during its peak, especially surrounding the nomination of Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. Besides writing letters to officials, the JBS had other ways of influencing politics. Their harsh stances and conspiratorial politics proved divisive for the Republican Party. Starr writes about the division between what he calls the "Responsible Right" (24) and the JBS. The JBS was stuck to the GOP; this meant their rhetoric was inherently linked to the Republican Party. The JBS was inherently received with open arms by Republicans as an enthusiastic and fresh conservative sound, but this changed over the 1960s. Due to that connection to the GOP and the popularity the JBS enjoyed, Republican politicians had to publicly voice their opinions regarding them. As the beliefs of the JBS, and especially the beliefs of Welch and his cohorts at the top of the society, became more untrustworthy and conspiracy theory-ridden, many politicians had to distance themselves from the society (Starr 19). The JBS was also really active in the run Barry Goldwater made for President in 1964 (Mulloy 1). Goldwater would not distance himself from the JBS and other extremists in an obvious enough manner, which might have contributed to one of the biggest electoral losses in American Presidential history (Starr 21). The JBS seemed to have a negative effect on the mainstream Republican political success, both in this Presidential campaign, as in several governmental races. Despite this Schoenwald maintains that "... [the JBS] played a historically understated role as a faction in the conservative movement, and helped to chart the course of postwar conservatism in America" (98). He makes the argument that the Republicans could shift their ideology farther to the right and bounce it off of the JBS to represent themselves as the less crazy alternative. The

JBS was thus also important because, after some strategizing, the Republican Party used its distance from the JBS as a political weapon.

### 3.3 The American Political Environment During the Peak of the John Birch Society

During the founding and especially the peak of the John Birch Society, there were three active Presidents in the United States.. The Republican Eisenhower was President in 1958, when the JBS was founded. In 1961 he was followed by President John F. Kennedy, who was followed by President Lyndon B. Johnson after his assassination. The latter two Presidents were both Democrats, with Johnson being the former VP to Kennedy. The peak of the JBS coincided with a Democratic Presidency which seems to match with Uscinski and Parent's theory (133). The Presidency is seen as the most important aspect and this was firmly in control by the Presidents between 1961 and 1969, until former President Richard Nixon won it for the Republicans. The founding under Eisenhower can even be explained under this theory because Welch was a huge fan of Presidential candidate Robert A. Taft, who opposed Eisenhower in 1952. This meant that Eisenhower's Presidency still made a political 'loser' out of Robert Welch, even without having to cross party lines.

The Senate and House of Representatives were also firmly in control of the Democrats between 1958 and 1966. In 1958 the Senate and House division was close, with forty-nine registered Democrats against forty-seven registered Republicans<sup>5</sup>. But after the congressional elections in 1959 the Democrats controller sixty-five seats against the thirty-five Republicans. This distribution was maintained throughout the '60s so Democrats had firm control in the Senate (United States Senate). The House of Representatives was in a similar position. During the founding of the JBS, the Democrats had control of the house with 232 Democrats against 203 Republicans. In the 1959 elections a landslide victory had the Democrats at 282 representatives<sup>6</sup> against 153 Republicans. This sort of distribution was continued through the 1960's; with the Democrats even controlling 290 seats after the 1965 elections (The House of Representatives). Uscinski and Parent's theory would see this amount of control in Congress as a period where right-wing oriented conspiracies could run wild. The Democrats seemed firmly in control. ‘

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<sup>5</sup> These amounted to 96 seats in the Senate, because Alaska and Hawaii had not been granted statehood until the 1959 elections.

<sup>6</sup> And one independent Democrat

It is more difficult to determine the allegiance of the Supreme Court in the entire period the JBS was most active. There were many changes in the Supreme Court during that time, and in total five Supreme Court Justices have been appointed by Eisenhower. All the others were appointed by Democrat Presidents (Supremecourt.gov), which would imply that for most of this period, Democrats would have had the upper hand. The Warren Court, named after Chief Justice Earl Warren who was Chief Justice from 1953-1969, did have a reputation for being progressive. Despite Warren himself being an Eisenhower appointee, they ruled against school desegregation<sup>7</sup>, expanded voting rights and renewed the criminal justice system (Schmidt 294-295). This would suggest that the Supreme Court was also more progressive than conservative. All branches of government therefore seemed to find some form of agreement with the loser theory.

The John Birch Society also gained prominence in a time where the Cold War was becoming 'hotter' for the United States. The Vietnam War, The Korean War, the creation of Soviet atomic weapons and Soviet's Sputnik I and II all brought a general sense of legitimacy to a threat that might not have had it before (Mulloy 137). In other words, the perceptive failure to dominate over the Soviets in different areas might have also induced a new fear and a sense of 'losing' that might have inspired conspiracy theorizing. Especially when you consider that in the case of the JBS, many of their conspiracy theories involved plots by secret communists (Stewart 425). Their conspiracy theories also involved both globalist and domestic plots to overtake the United States. A threat from communism was however not an uncommon fear when placed in the zeitgeist of the 1960's.

### 3.4 Discussion and Agreement Loser Theory

The peak of the JBS came at a time where all the power was at the partisan opposite of the aisle. The JBS was founded under the Republican President Eisenhower, but from 1961 on, the control of all branches of government had basically been with the Democrats. This affirms the loser theory by Uscinski and Parent (130). The JBS was started by a man who was dissatisfied about a Republican Presidential candidate, Robert Taft, losing out over another Republican (Dwight Eisenhower). This could, as previously mentioned, even explain that one of the largest motivators to create the JBS was being a political loser. The only difference in this case would be that the losing did not cross party lines.

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<sup>7</sup> Brown v. Board of Education is the most notable case regarding desegregation

The JBS had a good organizational structure due to the businessman Robert Welch. The organization grew quickly, had influence on the larger political landscape, and even arguably granted new direction to the GOP (Schoenwald 98). This was all possible despite the organization being often known and branded as a fringe, conspiratorial mess. (Stewart 425). The sudden growth, notoriety, and popularity of the JBS can partially be explained due to smart entrepreneurship by its leader, but it also came as the perfect time as the right was losing their foothold in American politics.

Due to the Cold War, Democratic Presidents and a Democrat Congress, conspiracies regarding communism and communists within the State Department were never far away. American people on the opposite aisle of the political spectrum would have arguably felt feelings of powerlessness and fear, which among other things resulted in the growth of the JBS, despite its conspiracy theories. The longer the Democratic reign held on, the more farfetched the master conspiracy became in the form of the Illuminati controlling everything (Lautz 231) and the globalist cancer of collectivism that sought to make everyone into a communist (Stewart 429). The JBS eventually lost influence near the end of the 1960's because the mainstream conservatives felt it was smarter to distance themselves from these increasingly less believable conspiracy theories. The organization nevertheless still exists to this day in a far diminished capacity and even has a website on which they deny all claims of conspiracy (John Birch Society).

The JBS as influential, conspiratorial, right-wing organization is thus in full agreement with the loser theory by Uscinski and Parent. Not only was their domestic loss for conservatives, but internationally the 1960's were a turbulent time for the United as well. The dominance from the Democratic Party in both Houses of Congress, the Presidential election victory by Kennedy and the landslide Presidential win of Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, the progressive-minded Supreme Court and an ongoing fights with communist forces made this period especially ripe for conspiracy theorizing. It would have arguably partially disproven the loser theory if there was no significant right-wing conspiratorial thought to speak of during this period.

#### **Chapter 4: Comparison and Conclusion**

In this chapter the two right-wing conspiratorial organizations, QAnon and the JBS will be compared on a few important topics. This is relevant to determine whether comparing QAnon and JBS under the loser theory is a fair comparison. Looking for differences and

similarities can also lead to a short conclusion which can analyze why the theory does or does not work in the cases of the JBS and QAnon respectively.

#### 4.1 Comparing QAnon and the John Birch Society

The organizational structure of QAnon and the John Birch Society differ on a fundamental level. The JBS prided itself on spreading their message with as much face-to-face contact as possible (Schoenwald 79). They believed that this would help spread their message faster. Their entire structure was built upon active members who would come together physically to discuss solutions to the globalist, communist conspiracy. QAnon was very different in that respect, their entire platform is built upon anonymous members. They almost exclusively operate online on a number of message boards. There have been live meetings by Q-members and the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on the Capitol show that they are not just 'keyboard warriors', but the internet is where they primarily reside. The age of Social Media and new media has given QAnon a new, and arguably easier, way to spread conspiracy theories and misinformation.

This makes it seem like these are two organizations on entirely opposite sides of the spectrum, but ideologically there are clear similarities. The JBS did not include many conspiracies on satanic pedophiles, but besides that the underlying messages of both organizations are very similar. They both believe in a democrat-led globalist conspiracy. Although the JBS largely accused communists at the start, even they eventually switched to calling the conspirators "insiders" (Mulloy 186). These insiders were fighting against the best interests of the United States. QAnon took it one step further by including a narrative about pedophile sex traffickers, to make the good versus bad dichotomy even clearer. This Manichean duality can often make conspiracy theories even more attractive to the general public because they give believers the sense that they are heroes combatting evil (Oliver and Wood 954). The organizations have also both formed master conspiracy narratives. This means that both the JBS and QAnon seek to explain every current and historical event through the lens of conspiracy. This made both of them end up at the illuminati as one of the perpetrators of the violence against the state (Lautz 231; Roy and Nemos 178). The similarity between both of these conspiracy narratives shows that although QAnon and the JBS are dissimilar in the way they are set up, the ideas in 1965 are very similar to ideas peddled at the later end of the 2020's and thus shows continuity in conspiracy theories.

One other striking similarity is that both organizations blossomed at a time where conspiracy ran amuck in the mainstream political arena. The Cold War and the United States

rhetoric that surrounded it were ridden with all sorts of conspiracies regarding the communist threat. The JBS took the conspiracy one step further and saw a lot of communists within the State Department. It was nonetheless not uncommon to accuse Soviet Union communists of unproven, sinister behavior (Mulloy 175). The recent history in which QAnon was most active has also been marked as a “post-truth” era by some (Neville-Shepard 176; Lewandowsky et al. 354). This term coined by blogger David Roberts suggest that perception of what is true or false has become more important than fact when it comes to politics. Donald Trump and his allies have been exceedingly active in spreading lies and conspiracies in his political career (Neville-Sheppard 180). QAnon parrots many stances of Donald Trump, like the stolen election or cases of internal opposition against Trump’s agenda. QAnon’s theories often take the conspiracies Donald Trump introduced and make the opposition even more powerful and objectively evil. Instead of power they seek world domination; instead of wealth they seek the blood of children to maintain their youth. This similarity between the JBS and QAnon seems to place both these organizations as branches from the tree of political mainstream conspiratorial thought.

## 4.2 Conclusion

The loser theory by Uscinski and Parent offers one possible framework to analyze why people are more likely to flock towards conspiracy theories. The propensity towards grand conspiracies between good versus evil has been ingrained in both the American history as in world history. Uscinski and Parent hypothesized that most American conspiracies are based on political opposition. When a party is not in power, their supporters are more likely to peddle conspiracy theories (130). This thesis sought to explore this claim by testing the theory against two inherently right-wing organizations: the John Birch Society and QAnon. Although both of them still exist today, the JBS found its peak in the 1960’s, and QAnon very recently between 2017 and 2021. The organizations have fast differences in how they are structured, the way they operate, and the time in which they blossomed. It is therefore useful to use two influential conspiracy-based operations whose primary similarity comes from their political alliance, to test a theory based on politics.

The JBS, created by Robert Welch in 1958, seemed to fit the bill regarding the loser theory. The Democrats had a firm hold of national politics, while there was also a considerable communist threat perceived to be hanging over the United States internationally (Mulloy 173). Nationally especially, JBS members could be perceived as political losers. The organization was even politically engaged and backed, among other regional candidates,

Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater who lost to former President Lyndon B. Johnson in one of the more sizable victories in the history of the Electoral College. Their conspiracies, which according to some media "... saw communists behind every tree and under every bed" (Stewart 425) make them fit the mold of an influential conspiratorial organization that formed out of political loss. Robert Welch even became more politically engaged and conspiracy-prone after one of his heroes, Robert Taft, lost the Presidential nomination to former President Eisenhower (Toy 269). The JBS as a solitary case study would thus support Uscinski and Parent's loser theory.

QAnon is however an entirely different story. They formed and showed their influence at a time where Republicans were largely in control of most branches of the American government. The formation of a primarily online conspiratorial organization seems to be somewhat new territory, thus it follows that Q supporters might not fit into the mold of existing theories. There are other mitigating factors, like Donald Trump being an unpopular President (FiveThirtyEight-2), or many conspiracies originating when Democrats still held more power, or Donald Trump's propensity to withdraw into the role of victim (Friedman and Fireworker 22-29). The fact remains that QAnon does not seem to fit into the theory by Uscinski and Parent, which largely considers the political aspects of conspiracy theorizing.

The loser theory was never meant to explain every single conspiracy theorist, so QAnon not fitting its mold does not entirely devalue the theory. The beliefs about sex trafficking and conspiracies within the government that are at the core of QAnon are however arguably widespread (Uscinski and Enders par 8-9). It would thus make sense that these would spring in a time where the Democrats would hold more political power following the theory. QAnon seems to at least not be motivated by a lack of political power, but perhaps of a perceived lack of political power. It nevertheless means that Uscinski and Parent's theory might have some limitations, especially in the face of more modern conspiratorially motivated organizations.

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