

Mapping the Misinformation

Understanding the Origins, Evolution, and Media Reporting of 2020

US Election Conspiracy Theories

Hanna Lücking (s2799707)

Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences

Master Thesis Communication Science

1st Supervisor: Prof. Dr. M. D. T. de Jong

2nd Supervisor: Dr. A. van der Zeeuw

University of Twente, Enschede

March 12, 2025

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Abstract

Purpose

The 2020 US election conspiracy theories were not only polarizing at the time, but have also had a lasting impact on current and future political and societal discourse, fueled by the media. By reconstructing a timeline and creating an overview of the main proponents and their arguments, this study aims to answer the research question, *How did conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election arise and develop over time?* Another research question, *How are the conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election presented in the news media by CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC?* will compare reporting styles and highlight the importance of responsible reporting to combat misinformation.

Method

A content analysis of news articles was employed to identify and interpret the claims and their supporting and opposing arguments, main proponents, as well as legal decisions about the 2020 US election fraud claims. A coding scheme was applied in Atlas.ti, providing insights to construct a timeline and an overview, and also compare the media's reporting.

Results

Donald Trump's premature victory claim evolved into 2020 US election conspiracy theories, persisting despite lacking evidence. Dismissed legal charges and narratives fueled by the media led to Republican efforts to turn over the election results. While Fox News initially amplified election fraud claims, CNN and MSNBC debunked them, highlighting media framing, and contributing to the spread and resilience of 2020 US election fraud narratives.

Conclusion

Misinformation developed into conspiracy theories and resulted in violent action. The persistence of false claims highlights the interplay between populism, political polarization and media influence in the context of political misinformation. Findings underscore the

media's role in reinforcing false narratives, emphasizing their responsibility for transparency to protect democracy and political integrity.

Keywords

conspiracy theory, election fraud, disinformation, misinformation, media framing

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1. Introduction

Triggered by conspiracy theories about the 46th presidential election, rioters stormed the Capitol of the United States of America on January 6, 2021. The electoral event on November 3, 2020, turned into a contest of competing narratives once claims of election fraud questioned its integrity and legitimacy. The riot was the culmination of eroded trust in democratic processes driven by false narratives and misinformation. Fueled by the media, conspiracy theories infiltrated American society (Swenson et al., 2023), fostering skepticism, and polarization (Räikkä, 2009). These sentiments were violently expressed in an attack on democracy and are present to this day.

The conspiracy theories surrounding the election centered on unsubstantiated accusations that the election was framed by extensive voter fraud in favor of the Democrat Joe Biden. The Republican candidate Donald Trump and his supporters claimed that the election was stolen, as some voting results would be unlikely or impossible if the election were conducted fairly (Eggers et al., 2021). Allegations attempting to cast doubt on the election results ranged from rigged voting machines, miscounts of ballots, and illegal voting. Extensive investigations and legal proceedings found no evidence supporting these claims (Eggers et al., 2021). However, Donald Trump refused to concede his loss (Wallenfeldt, 2021), despite official results determining that Joe Biden was the 46th president of the United States by more than seven million ballots. Approximately two-thirds of Republicans are still in “election denialism” (Viala-Gaudefroy, 2024), perceiving Trump as the victim of a corrupt system and continuing to believe that he is the legitimate president (Viala-Gaudefroy, 2024).

The widespread acceptance of Trump’s claims led to the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Trump supporters caused unrest, violence, and even deaths (Eggers et al., 2021; Wallenfeldt, 2021) following Trump’s call for a “Save America March” (Wallenfeldt, 2021). This incident, often described as an attempted coup (Wallenfeldt, 2024), served as an example that people incite violence and destabilize democracy based on false information

they received (Swenson et al., 2023), for instance, from news media. Thus, media plays a powerful role in the spread of information and beliefs, providing the ground for the cultivation and propagation of information (Xiong & Liu, 2014). Media actors have been criticized for amplifying false narratives to serve agendas or interests. Viala-Gaudefroy (2024) even argued that Trump and his allies used media for their disinformation strategy: overwhelming the press and public with false information, so that it becomes difficult to distinguish the truth from the lies.

Scholars emphasize that the spread and the belief in conspiracy theories damages trust in the democratic process, and fosters polarization in American society (Eggers et al., 2021; Schlipphak et al., 2022; Viala-Gaudefroy, 2024). Experts on extremism also fear the threat of politically motivated violence in upcoming political events, such as election campaigns (Swenson et al., 2023). Elections are the core of democracies, and their fairness, legitimacy, and integrity are the basis for a stable political system and people's confidence and reliance on that system. However, the riot on January 6, 2021, demonstrated that elections can cause violent conflicts (Mukhopadhyay, 2022).

While the 2020 US elections and their fraud claims are still being discussed, existing research primarily focused on specific aspects, such as the psychological factors driving the acceptance of false beliefs (Räikkä, 2009; Sutton & Douglas, 2020) or the effects of misinformation on public opinion (Botvinik-Nezer et al., 2023; Calvillo et al., 2021). Most of this research is quantitative, examining survey data or the frequency of fraud claims. Since false beliefs are nowadays often spread on social media platforms, studies such as those by Murdock et al. (2023), Sharma et al. (2022), and Xiong & Liu (2014) analyzed their role in amplifying conspiracy theories and how they are perceived online. However, there remains a need for a systemic analysis focusing on the constellation of the election fraud narratives surrounding the 2020 US election. By tracing the origins, reconstructing the development of fraud claims, and analyzing media coverage, this study seeks to fill this gap. The significance

of this study lies in its potential to provide a deeper understanding of the narratives that fueled election denialism and to enhance the understanding of how media influence the public perception of these narratives.

To understand the origins, evolution, and media reporting of 2020 US election conspiracy theories, this study aims to answer the first research question: *How did conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election arise and develop over time?* It will help to trace the chronological sequence and content developments of the narratives. Because the conspiracy theories were shaped by different factors, sub-questions will focus on their key arguments and their evolution, as well as the main actors. The sub-question *What are the key narratives and arguments of conspiracy beliefs surrounding the 2020 US election?* aims to identify the main claims and their reasoning, for assessing their persuasiveness and significance. To investigate the alterations of the narratives due to external factors throughout the considered period, the second sub-question is posed: *How did the narratives of these conspiracy theories evolve in response to counterarguments, court decisions, and events?* Considering opposing arguments, judicial decisions, and public reactions offers a comprehensive, yet nuanced overview of the development of the 2020 US election conspiracy theories. As it is important to identify the key actors who raised and spread these narratives, the third sub-question asks: *Who are the primary proponents and disseminators of these conspiracy theories?* Understanding who played a role in this provides insights into motives and power dynamics. The second research question focuses on the role of media in shaping public perception. Asking, *how the conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election are presented in the news media by CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC?* examines differences in media coverage and framing of election-related conspiracy theories. This will demonstrate the media's attitudes and contributions to the spread of misinformation about the 2020 US election conspiracy theories.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section will explain the underlying theoretical concepts of the study. First, election fraud and stolen elections will be discussed. As they result from misinformation and disinformation, the two terms will be distinguished and connected to conspiracy theories. The idea of conspiracy theories, their characteristics, and their consequences will be explained. Therefore, their connection to populism and political polarization can be illustrated and both concepts will be discussed. Agenda-setting and framing theories will be presented, and their influence on the concepts introduced will be illustrated. The case of the 2020 US election in regard to the theoretical framework will be introduced, and state-of-the-art research about this case will be presented.

2.1 Election Fraud and Stolen Elections

Elections are an important element of democratic societies. They grant legitimacy and authority to an elected leader. However, these qualities are only attributed if the election is conducted fairly, and there is growing concern about electoral fraud and manipulation of electoral processes (Levin & Alvarez, 2012).

Scholars describe electoral fraud as a deliberate action intended to manipulate the will of an individual or group of voters by election officials or other selected actors (Lehoucq, 2003; Levin & Alvarez, 2012). Lehoucq (2003) highlights electoral fraud as a multifaceted phenomenon deeply rooted in political, institutional, and social factors. Examples of election fraud include manipulating or misusing election equipment or ballots, ballot-stuffing, vote buying, and preventing opposition candidates from running (Lehoucq, 2003). An intense political competition or a polarized environment increases the temptation to engage in fraud. In such cases, candidates or parties may consider fraud as a means to secure power (Lehoucq, 2003). In the case of a weak institutional framework, in addition to the lack of independent electoral oversight, socio-economic or cultural factors can also foster fraud (Lehoucq, 2003;

Levin & Alvarez, 2012). The consequences of election fraud and even election fraud claims extend beyond the immediate election, affecting democratic legitimacy, stability, and governance (Lehoucq, 2003). Fraudulent activities in political events erode democratic legitimacy through public mistrust in governmental institutions, and political instability is provoked by polarization and political protests. Due to the complexity of elections, there is an increased likelihood of electoral fraud, and the detection of deception or manipulation thereof is almost impossible (Levin & Alvarez, 2012).

As a consequence of election fraud, a stolen election constitutes a manipulated, revolutionary event that alters the political discourse (Kuntz & Thompson, 2009). Elections that are considered stolen are those in which someone purposefully hinders the opposition's actual or apparent victory by falsifying the count and annulling the results (Kuntz & Thompson, 2009). Hasen (2021) describes three potential mechanisms by which election losers may be declared winners. One is the unlawful appropriation of presidential elections by state legislatures purporting to exercise constitutional authority. Another reason could be fraudulent or suppressive administration of electoral processes, such as vote counting by law- or norm-breaking officials. Or, a violent action can not only disrupt but also prevent voting procedures and interrupt the assumption of power by the actual winning candidate (Hasen, 2021). Kuntz & Thompson (2009) argue that stolen elections can be "triggering events" (p. 6) and motivate people to engage in anti-regime actions. Additionally, more people are becoming less serious about elections, because the stealing occurs without their notice (Ollmann, 2005). In a feeling of being cheated on, exaggerations and political unrest occur. Due to the progressive development of revolutionary potential, stolen elections seem to have a greater impact compared to other political movements or events. Only rigged elections provide an opportunity for the public and opposition leaders to assess the regime's vulnerability in all political matters (Kuntz & Thompson, 2009).

2.2 Misinformation and Disinformation

People learn about news that gets translated from journalists into news articles, TV reports, and social media posts. To understand the origins, evolution, and media coverage of conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election, it is necessary to analyze how news is translated and disseminated by journalists and their news articles. The way these platforms reported on election-related claims influenced public perception and shaped the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Both terms, misinformation and disinformation, refer to the incorrect, inaccurate, or misleading publication of content but differ in their intention (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021; Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2022).

Misinformation is false information shared accidentally or unintended (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021; Guess & Lyons, 2020; Palfrey, 2024). If no further details of an incident have been released or existing facts have not yet been verified, misinformation arises (Palfrey, 2024). Misunderstandings or mediocre journalism are also reasons for the emergence and distribution of misinformation (Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2022).

Contrarily, disinformation is false information deliberately shared seeking to mislead or disregard the truth (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Palfrey, 2024). Because of their efforts to cover up their identities and activities, it is difficult to assess the personality and motives of those who disseminate misinformation (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021; Guess & Lyons, 2020). Producers of disinformation can be politically motivated organizations, profit-driven businesses, media, or citizens (Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2022). With this variety of actors comes a broad range of motivations to spread these false narratives. Political actors aim to manipulate public opinion, discredit opponents, divert attention from critical issues, or gain political power. Others aim to achieve ideological objectives or obtain financial benefits (Guess & Lyons, 2020; Palfrey, 2024). Media would benefit from sensationalism, the lack of fact-checking, and ideological biases linked to disinformation, while citizens contribute to the spread, often unintentionally, by sharing interesting stories. Mechanisms to distribute

disinformation are, for example, traditional media, digital platforms, and interpersonal networks (Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2022). Despite differing motives, spreaders of disinformation aim to see their false narrative reach a wide audience (Palfrey, 2024). Even if the information was initially shared without an ulterior motive, the content can easily be misused and purposely distributed to mislead (Palfrey, 2024). Hence, disinformation is a purposive lie often found in cases of deception (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021; Lecheler & Egelhofer, 2022; Palfrey, 2024;). Therefore, it “threatens the virtue of knowledge” (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023, p.76) when people accept and believe in misleading, mistaken, or fraudulent information that suspects the truth (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023). The spread of misinformation and disinformation has become more prevalent in public discourse. It also raises concerns about growing populism (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021), for example, due to their undermining of trust in institutions, simplification of complex topics, or destruction of critical thinking. Disinformation intersects with propaganda and can be used as a persuasive practice and, thus, as a political strategy (Freelon & Wells, 2020). The targeted creation and dissemination of disinformation has become a powerful and strategic tool for those seeking to influence political contexts (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Palfrey, 2024). The strategy is used by states, political actors, and other influential entities to undermine political opponents, shape public opinion, or disrupt democratic processes. False narratives can deteriorate trust in competitors, governments, and media, manipulate public sentiment on key political issues, and weaken democratic legitimacy if the spread of confusion fosters distrust in electoral systems. It can contribute to polarizing societies and keeping people from making informed decisions (Freelon & Wells, 2020).

2.3 Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories can be described as a system of thinking. Starting as misinformation, these theories are then reinforced by disinformation campaigns that aim to

mislead the public. Amplifying mistrust and distorting perceptions of reality, conspiracy theories are a widespread phenomenon (Reid, 2024). These theories attempt to explain harmful or significant events as the result of covert actions by a small, powerful group working to achieve their goals while obscuring their role (Radu & Schultz, 2017; Reid, 2024). Conspiracy theories often emanate from an innovator and are disseminated by agents of change, such as journalism, and accepted or rejected via communication channels depending on the perceived characteristics, with time and social environment also playing a crucial role (Radu & Schultz, 2017). Hence, these theories may act as work hypotheses for investigative journalism (Radu & Schultz, 2017), as they question what is commonly accepted about certain events and emerge from an intrinsic impulse to make sense of alarming societal forces (Reid, 2024). Conspiracy theories identify invisibly malicious forces as the source of abnormal social and political incidents (Reid, 2024) and view the claimed conspirators as evil. The idea that there exists a powerful, intelligent, and successful network that seeks to execute wicked acts describes a conspiracy mindset (Hagen, 2017). To defend these perceptions, terms opposite the truth, like lies, manipulation, dissimulation, or secretiveness, are used (Renard, 2015). Despite failed predictions, conspiracy theories offer a simplistic explanation for complex situations that would have been explained as “a series of accidents, intended by nobody” (Räikkä, 2009, p. 197). Conspiracists frequently believe that “almost nothing happens by accident, only by agency” (Hagen, 2017, p. 25). Because official sources are distrusted, their justifications, for example, in news media reporting, may be taken as more proof of the conspiracy. Conspirators are seen to be highly effective, leaving minimal opportunity for flaws, failures, or doubts about their narratives (Hagen, 2017). This makes conspiracy theories usually resistant to falsification (Räikkä, 2009; Reid, 2024).

Since conspiracy beliefs depend on social contexts (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018) and emerge in unstable environments, the growing lack of trust in society is the primary reason for conspiracy theories to rise (Renard, 2015). They are a social phenomenon that

usually involves a small group of powerful people as conspirators who intend to affect a collective (Hagen, 2017). A strong sense of group identity and the feeling of outgroup threat drives the belief in conspiracy theories. Individuals' beliefs stem from their perception of reality. People act according to their beliefs, which is why believing in a conspiracy theory also affects a person's behavior. Even if conspiracy theories are inaccurate, naïve, or highly unlikely to be true, they can potentially have a real-life impact (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018). These beliefs are widespread because questioning others' opinions and being critical of other notions is in human nature. Additionally, emotions and feelings of paranoia are also linked to conspiracy theories (Räikkä, 2009). Intuitive thinking and the frequent anticipation that society is at risk fuel such beliefs. From a different perspective, beliefs that conspiracists find convincing might be seen as crazy or immoral (Hagen, 2017). Due to the bad reputation established by non-conspirators, these theories and the people who support them often suggest not to be taken seriously (Räikkä, 2009).

Societal developments, such as political events, are impacted by conspiracy beliefs. Conspirational views of politics are a widespread tendency across all ideological spectrums (Sutton & Douglas, 2020; Kim, 2022). They play an important role in societal development because the beliefs are associated with disliking powerful societal groups and perceiving them as responsible for undesirable political and economic developments. Conspiracy theories offer explanations for political occurrences (Sutton & Douglas, 2020), even though they may be less satisfactory than other theories (Räikkä, 2009). Especially in elections, conspiracy theories make it more difficult for the losing side to accept their loss (Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Kim (2022) describes conspiracy theories as a subset of political misperceptions, focusing on the behavior of powerful people. The communication of conspiracy theories is driven by shifts in power as a means of countermobilizing out-of-power groups. There is evidence that people endorse conspiracy theories when they lack power or control or when they are political losers, for instance, in an election (Kim, 2022). Losing partisans are

consistently more likely to think there was election fraud than the winning team (Albertson & Guiler, 2020). Thinking a political system or mechanism is somehow rigged affects political attitudes (Albertson & Guiler, 2020). Allegations of electoral fraud often provide fertile ground for conspiracy theories. The claimed manipulation of voters can be presented as part of a larger attempt to undermine democratic processes and influence outcomes (Hagen, 2017). People are more likely to accept a claim if it supports their opinion (Albertson & Guiler, 2020). However, “when a belief is embraced by an individual, it is because there are strong reasons for that belief to be held” (Renard, 2015, p. 71), underlining the ideological relevance of a conspiracy belief.

2.4 Populism and Political Polarization

The concepts of populism and political polarization are central to the understanding of the origins, evolution, and media reporting of conspiracy theories (Sutton & Douglas, 2020) about the 2020 US election. As populism is a driving force behind the spread of conspiracy theories, its rhetoric often amplifies distrust in governments and media, framing them as corrupt or rigged. Political polarization intensifies such perceptions and thus, contributes to the spread and development of conspiracy theories and influences ideological processes (Räikkä, 2009).

Populism has become a global phenomenon (Berman, 2020; Urbinati, 2018) that emerged with the process of democratization (Urbinati, 2018). Populism can be described as a form of collective political action aiming to take power (Urbinati, 2018) and emphasizing an us-versus-them worldview in which “us” refers to the people and “them” to elites, minorities, or immigrants (Berman, 2020). It can be conceptualized as a strategy centered around charismatic leader figures and employed by political leaders to establish a close link to their followers (Bergmann & Butter, 2020). Populist movements are, therefore, attempts to form a collective unit through consent and to question a social order in the name of a larger majority.

People are of central importance for populism (Bergmann & Butter, 2020), as it addresses ordinary people who feel their concerns are being disregarded (Guriev et al., 2024; Urbinati, 2018). Populists argue that the antagonism between the two groups dominates society, although politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Bergmann & Butter, 2020). This perception is based on the idea that the existing political system has ignored, neglected, or outright worked against the people's interests (Berman, 2020). Controversially, while populists stress the inclusion of the people, it also comes with the exclusion of the political establishment (Urbinati, 2018). Populists claim to be democratic but understand democracy in majoritarian or illiberal terms (Berman, 2020). Drawing from democratic principles of majority rule and popular sovereignty but distorting them, it celebrates one subset of “the people” while marginalizing others. Hence, populism arises when democratic representation is perceived to fail, for example, because of corruption (Urbinati, 2018).

Populism and conspiracy theories are often seen as reactions to pressing or triggering societal issues. Both phenomena are described as a threat to democracy due to their fine line to extremism and are sometimes cast as the opposite of proper politics. Populists and conspiracists share a worldview that proposes a conflict between good and bad: the people and the elite. While populism stresses the innocence of the people, and conspiracy theories start with people’s lack of knowledge about a secret plot, the most important common factor of the two concepts is the distrust of elites. Both engage in othering and denying the complexity of political reality, and scholars argue that there can be no populism without conspiracy theories (Bergmann & Butter, 2020; Sutton & Douglas, 2020). Serving as a mobilizing tool, conspiracy theories allow populist leaders to explain the problems their movement is facing. Even though not all followers believe in them, conspiracy theories are widely spread in many populist movements (Bergmann & Butter, 2020). Populism, especially

fueled by conspiracy theories, can lead not only to economic negligence and democratic instability but also to increased polarization (Guriev et al., 2024).

Divergent political views toward extreme ideologies can be referred to as political polarization. This is a cause of “the global crisis of democracy” (Schedler, 2023, p. 335) and affects the quality of public policy, as well as political engagement. It is a condition in which two groups define themselves by setting up a border between them. Consensus can only be found within political parties themselves, as the strict border creates a point of identification and confrontation (Political Polarization, n.d.). Polarization is not driven by the presence of self-declared enemies of democracy but by the fear of perceived enemies of democracy. Hence, a defining criterion for polarization is the presence of antidemocratic parties. It is characterized by debates about the democratic institutions of key political players from a variety of ideological backgrounds. Polarization is, therefore, the breakdown of democratic trust and a form of political conflict (Schedler, 2023). As in the case of conspiracy theories, people tend to disregard information that contradicts their ideological identity. This becomes especially striking when citizens reject notions that are commonly considered facts backed by evidence. A problem with polarization is that it is commonly believed that a democratic debate over policy requires at least some basic agreement on facts based on the idea that scientific inquiry is the basis for informed policymaking (Rekker, 2021).

2.5 Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories

Especially in social movements, the meaning-making process plays a central role. The agenda-setting theory discusses how media creates a certain image or opinion in the public’s mind (Zain, 2014). In the case of the 2020 US election, agenda-setting is reflected in four years of continuous reporting about election fraud claims, keeping the narrative alive and relevant for today’s discussions. Hence, agenda-setting, particularly in mass media, has an impact on public perception of the importance of a topic (Weaver, 1981). This, in turn, can

affect people's behavior and reactions to events (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007; Scheufele, 1999). For example, Zain (2014) found that the agenda-setting theory can explain how mass media alters patterns in political behavior during elections. The public's concerns, governments, or politicians decide on the agenda of mass media, as they have to follow the demands of public interest in their coverage.

Through measures such as framing, media can influence how the audience considers or feels about the chosen topics (Zain, 2014). As agenda-setting refers to the correspondence between media coverage of "the world outside" and "the pictures in the head," the media does not tell what to think but what to think about (Moy et al., 2016). As a result, agenda-setting has real-world consequences, shaping collective priorities and driving societal change (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2007).

Framing is considered a significant aspect and extension of agenda-setting (Scheufele, 1999). Through framing, one reality shifts to another by communicating how the reality is perceived and practiced (Handelman, 2006). Hence, framing can be seen as a construction of social reality, as a frame suggests the essence of an issue. Framing emphasizes an aspect (Moy et al., 2016) by selecting some aspects of a story and highlighting them in a way to promote a particular problem, event, recommendation, or opinion (Entman, 1993 in Scheufele, 1999). A framing effect occurs when such adaptations in the presentation of an issue or an event evoke changes of opinion. This can happen because alternative phrasing of the same issue significantly alters its meaning to respondents (Chong & Druckmann, 2007). Consequently, opinions can be manipulated by how issues are framed. In communication, a frame gives meaning to a series of events and encourages certain definitions and interpretations that shape everyday life. Strong frames are those that emerge from public discussion as the best rationales for contending positions on the issue (Chong & Druckmann, 2007; Scheufele, 1999). Framing can have multiple effects on people. It can make new beliefs about an issue available, make certain available beliefs accessible, or make beliefs strong in people's

evaluations. Thus, frames affect the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences (Chong & Druckmann, 2007).

In media, framing shapes issues into meaningful narratives, affecting and influencing public understanding and opinion (Moy et al., 2016; Radu & Schultz, 2017). Selecting the frame for an issue or event is one of the most important choices for a journalist to make (Moy et al., 2016). Opinions can be manipulated by how issues are framed, even though there is no legitimate representation of public interest anymore (Chong & Druckmann, 2007). Especially because journalists do not randomly select information from what is available but mix ideas and facts they consider the most interesting. It usually happens unaware but can also occur through systematic consideration of a message. A frame can be a phrase, an image, or any rhetorical device used to communicate the essence of an issue. In traditional news media, frames simplify the story-writing process for journalists because they serve as a summary of the most important characteristics and, therefore, help audiences make sense of what they encounter in the news (Moy et al., 2016). The framing process consists of two stages, namely the frame-building and the frame-setting. The frame-building refers to the development of frames and their embedment in news stories. This occurs when journalists construct their storylines. The frame-setting process describes the effect of frames on receivers' beliefs and feelings about issues, problems, and policies. The two stages are linked as journalists aim to gain public acceptance of their narratives (Moy et al., 2016).

Due to their characteristics, both framing and agenda-setting are concepts closely linked to media's influence on public perception, and thus, both play significant roles in the formation and spread of conspiracy theories. A common factor of framing, agenda-setting and conspiracies is perception bias. If news reporting appears to be biased or selective, perhaps due to framing, the audience may become suspicious and more likely to believe in alternative explanations, such as conspiracy theories. Media also often simplify complex stories and, hence, create gaps in understanding. Conspiracy theories try to fill these gaps with

emotionally or ideologically satisfying narratives. By highlighting similar topics, agenda-setting can determine which conspiracy theories receive encouragement, even though they aim to criticize or refute the narrative.

Framing and agenda-setting theories help explain how conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election are presented in the news media. Different news outlets may emphasize or deemphasize certain perceptions, shaping the audience's beliefs. Considering these two concepts reveals how media influences both the perception and transparency of conspiracy narratives. This underlines media's responsibility in forming public opinion, policy-making processes, and public action, also in regard to misinformation and polarization.

2.6 The Case of the 2020 US Election

Donald Trump alleged widespread and unparalleled election fraud as he refused to concede after the 2020 US election (Eggers et al., 2021; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). He also stated that the only way he could lose was through a stolen election (Canon & Sherman, 2021). The claims included fraudulent ballots, dead people voting, and restricting Republican poll watchers from observing the voting process (Eggers et al., 2021; Kerry, 2021; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Absentee and mail-in ballots were labeled as fraudulent, and other allegations accused Russia and Iran of disinformation campaigns and rigged voting machines that switched votes from Trump to Biden (Canon & Sherman, 2021). Proponents of Trump and his arguments not only questioned the win of Joe Biden in public statements but also in lawsuits (Canon & Sherman, 2021; Eggers et al., 2021; Kerry, 2021). Despite courts dismissing charges and confirming Biden's victory (Canon & Sherman, 2021; Kerry, 2021), Republicans were convinced the election was stolen (Eggers et al., 2021): "The common logic behind these claims is that, if the election were fairly conducted, some features of the observed 2020 election result would be unlikely or impossible" (Eggers et al., 2021, p. 1).

Their false accusations constituted misinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2021) and polarized American society (Kerry, 2021). The efforts to spread false narratives culminated in the violent attacks on January 6, 2021 (Canon & Sherman, 2021; Kerry, 2021), demonstrating the real-world consequences of election misinformation (Canon & Sherman, 2021). Many of the Trump supporters storming the Capitol believed they were defending democracy by overturning the allegedly stolen election. Due to such misinformation, a large part of US society continued to believe in election fraud (Canon & Sherman). Before Donald Trump sparked the idea of election fraud in the 2020 US election, the United States have been a role model for democratic elections. With these allegations, the election became a subject of global debate (Kerry, 2021). In this context, the term “election integrity” was replaced by “election fraud”, “opacity” and “irresponsibility”. Therefore, this case served as an eye-opener for those who believe in the credibility of US elections (Kerry, 2021).

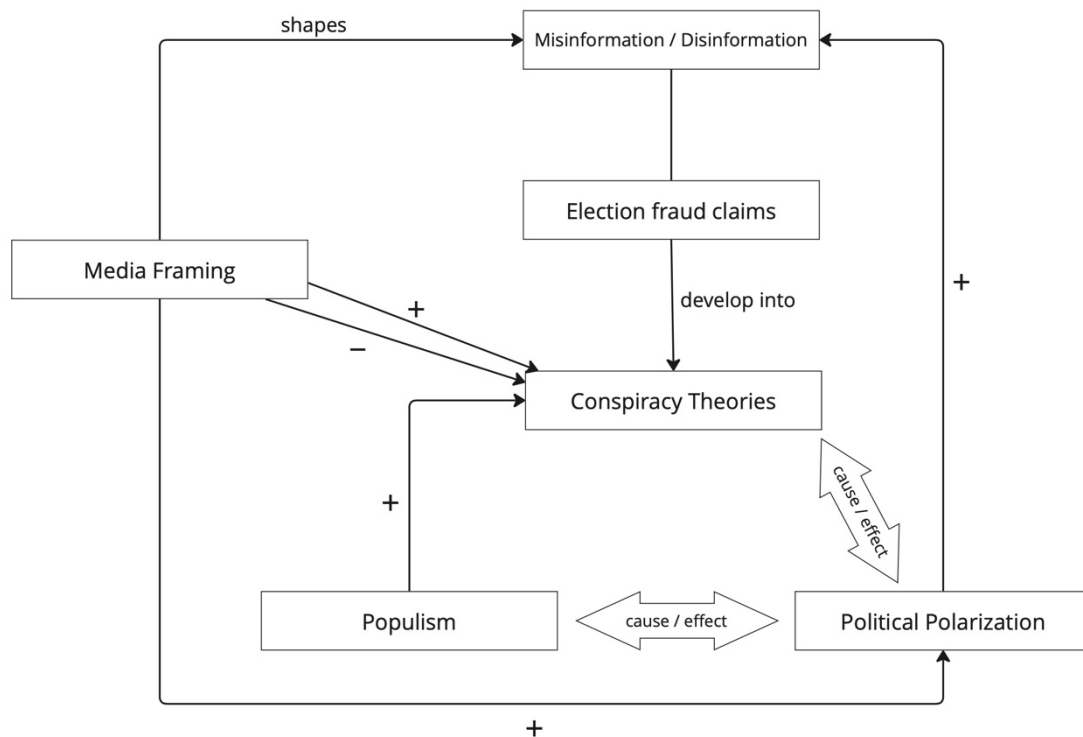
Because the 2020 US elections and their fraud claims are still being discussed, various research about that topic has been conducted. Scholars investigating the effects and influencing factors of conspiracy theories found that beliefs in election fraud are dependent on political identity, political knowledge, and trust in government (Botvinik-Nezer et al., 2023; Calvillo et al., 2021). Räikkä (2009), Sutton & Douglas (2020), and Viala-Gaudefroy (2024) emphasized the social and psychological factors that contribute to the formation and persistence of conspiracy beliefs, particularly within the political realm, in their studies. Insights from their research showed that political conspiracies arise from distrust (Räikkä, 2009) but also reinforce political and societal division, especially in times of uncertainty (Sutton & Douglas, 2020). This cycle is fueled by social media, as online platforms play an important role in the spread of conspiracy theories, and thus, have also been investigated in relation to the 2020 US election conspiracy theories. Scholars found that social networks drive opinion formation (Xiong & Liu, 2014), where disinformation spreads and deepens

political polarization (Sharma et al., 2022). The engagement of users on multiple platforms amplifies conspiracy theories (Murdock et al., 2023).

While the effects and consequences, as well as the driving factors of conspiracy theories and their amplification through social media platforms, have been studied extensively, there remains a need for a comprehensive overview of the origins, the development, and the media reporting about the 2020 US election fraud claims. Providing a chronological construct of claims and counterarguments, legal decisions, and influential events will contribute to a deeper understanding of the conspiracy theories. The role of media in creating a public perception about the topic will be highlighted in a comparison of reporting and framing techniques.

2.7 Conclusion

This theoretical framework explores the interconnectedness between election fraud, misinformation, and disinformation, especially within the context of conspiracy theories, populism, political polarization, and media framing. All concepts together create an influential system in which each component impacts or is impacted by others, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1*System of Influencing Concepts*

Disinformation, as well as misinformation, significantly contribute to allegations of election fraud. Hence, they can also serve as catalysts for further false narratives, reinforcing the belief of fraudulent elections despite a lack of evidence. Claims of deceit often evolve into conspiracy theories – narratives suggesting manipulation by hidden, malevolent forces. These theories are amplified in populist movements, in which the same belief in the divergence of good and bad is shared. Both conspiracy theories and populist movements sustain themselves on skepticism toward established institutions and consider governmental authorities, mainstream media, or political opponents as not trustworthy. Political polarization is both a cause and an effect of these two phenomena. It creates an environment in which conspiracy theories evolve and get fueled like a reinforcing cycle. This relationship makes it difficult for democratic societies to form consensus on fundamental issues, such as election integrity and the legitimacy of democratic processes. Media plays a crucial role in this environment.

Through framing effects and agenda-setting, public perception and opinion on these issues are

shaped. By selecting or highlighting certain aspects of a story, media outlets affect how the public understands and responds to, for example, political events or societal developments. Their reaction can either challenge or amplify conspiracy theories but also contribute to political polarization.

In their interaction, this network influences social dynamics, as demonstrated in the case of the 2020 US election. Due to its prepossessions, the system poses a threat to democracy, undermining trust in institutions, impeding critical thinking and informed decision-making, and cultivating societal fragmentation. Insights from this theoretical framework provide the basis for understanding the origins, evolution, and media reporting about the 2020 US election conspiracy theories.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study seeks to provide an overview and better understanding of the origins, evolution, and media reporting about the 2020 US election conspiracy theories. Therefore, a qualitative research design is employed to perform a content analysis of news media articles. Qualitative research is chosen to explore the complexities of media reporting and uncover “what is hidden deep within the text” (Kleinheksel et al., 2020, p. 129). Textual analysis allows for the examination and interpretation of underlying themes, intentions, language, and framing within news articles. Hence, the approach is suitable for the first research question, *How did conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election arise and develop over time?* To answer this question, the textual analysis of media coverage will focus on sub-questions about the content of the conspiracy theories, shifts in their narratives in response to counterarguments, legal decisions, and societal events, as well as their originators. A timeline of the claims and changes thereof will also be constructed. Based on the findings derived from different news media outlets, an analysis and comparison of their reporting will answer the second research question, *How are the conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election presented in the news media by CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC?*

3.2 Corpus of News Messages

The content analysis is performed on secondary data in the form of news articles published by the three major US news media outlets. CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC were selected because they are considered the leading cable news channels (Statista, 2025) and are among the largest news media in the United States. Therefore, they have a large audience, and their news is accessible to a wide range of people. They were also chosen for their political diversity, and therefore, reflect a representative sample of the US media landscape. The news articles of Fox News and MSNBC have been derived from their online archive, while CNN

articles have been found via Google search with site filters. The considered timeframe for this study ranges from the election day, November 4, 2020, to September 15, 2024. To delimit the data published in this timeframe to articles that are relevant to the study, a keyword search was employed. Only news articles containing keywords and phrases such as “2020 election”, “election fraud,” and “Trump win 2020 election”, or dealing with content related to the 2020 election and the aftermath were considered for further analysis. A closer examination of the articles’ content reduced the number of relevant documents from 298 to 207. They provided the corpus for the analysis of conspiracy theories surrounding the 2020 US election.

3.3 Data Analysis

To investigate the selected articles, the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti was used to organize and examine the content of 207 news articles considered for this research. The software facilitated an in-depth examination of the articles, applying a coding scheme to identify patterns within the data. For a thematic and narrative analysis, a comprehensive coding scheme provided in Appendix A was applied. Codes for claims and allegations, arguments and counterarguments, legal information, and quotes, were developed to categorize various and recurring themes in the articles (Silverman, 2024).

Keywords for the code “claim/allegation” covered their content to identify the claims being made. Examples included “Trump claims victory”, “election fraud”, “rigged voting machines”, “problematic mail voting”, “third parties interfered”, or “blaming Democrats”, covering central claims voiced during the discourse. The keyword “actor” identified individuals or organizations expressing claims. Ranging from the prominent central figure Donald Trump, his legal team, and supporters to media actors, institutions, and external researchers, the distinction helps to understand the source and intention behind their claims, as well as potential biases. The keyword “place” tracked the geographic scope of the allegations. As certain claims only applied to so-called swing states, it allowed to allocate the claim to an

addressed state, certain states, or the whole US. It provides insights into the most discussed and questioned environments for election fraud allegations. To track the timespan and temporal context of the claims, ranging from Election Day, November 4, 2020, until September 15, 2024, the keyword “date” was used. Especially regarding changing narratives and rhetoric, shifting foci of media reporting, and the development of legal proceedings, tracking the date of publication of the investigated articles helps to arrange them in a timely order. Examples of time stamps are right after Election Day in November 2020, in December 2020, around January 6, 2021, during the rest of 2021, or in the following years, 2022, 2023, or until September 15, 2024. The last keyword associated with the claims and allegations is their “source”. Labeling the articles according to the news media outlets CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC allows to compare the reporting and framing of the outlets and identify their stances in this case. Further codes capture the “arguments/justifications” and “counterarguments” of conspiracy claims surrounding the 2020 US election. They describe references to studies, surveys, or other news articles presented to justify the arguments. Analyzing these references helps to assess the kinds of evidence used to back up and debunk them. Noting from whom these arguments and counterarguments originated helps to determine biases, but also the strength and credibility of the claims. The code “legal information” covers court cases and legal decisions. They include references to lawsuits or legal actions related to the election and its fraud claims. Information labeled as “quotes” ranges from appeals capturing memorable slogans such as “Stop the Steal” and phrases to promote particular political ideologies to famous citations that have been widely used in the discourse around the 2020 US election.

The coding procedure followed a bottom-up approach, as it employed an inductive analysis. An initial coding scheme was applied and adjusted throughout the analysis. Hence, the initial coding was concerned with getting the essence of the text and assigning codes to relevant parts of the text, and line-by-line coding was used to review these passages and gain more details, perhaps also assigning new codes and adapting the coding scheme. Methods

used in the coding process range from in-vivo coding, using exact quotes, to descriptive and structural coding for summarizing text in one word and answering questions about what, where, who, and how, to value coding, to gain insights into attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews. With this coding procedure, insights from the selected articles could be gathered to create a structured overview of the evolution of conspiracy claims, their origins, and ideological background.

For the comparison of news media articles, a key word analysis was applied. This approach allowed the counting of frequencies of narratives and key words (Silverman, 2024), identifying key aspects of differences in the articles. This analysis enabled conclusions to be drawn about the attitudes of news media outlets and to understand their framing of narratives about the 2020 US election conspiracy theories.

4. Results

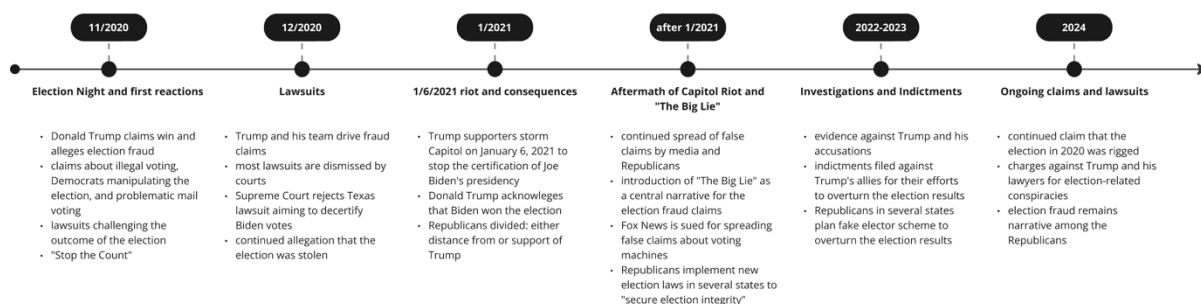
To answer the first research question, *How did conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election arise and develop over time?*, the first four sections will provide a timeline of expressed accusations, and an overview of their main arguments. The development of the narratives in response to counterarguments, legal decisions, and societal events will be outlined. Key proponents and disseminators of the conspiracy theories will be identified. The second research question, *How are the conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election presented in the news media by CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC?*, will be answered by comparing different reporting foci and contribution to the spread of election-related conspiracy theories of the news media outlets.

4.1 Timeline of the Claims and Events Surrounding the 2020 US Election

The timeline presented in Figure 2 provides an overview of the main claims and events surrounding the 2020 US election conspiracy theories. Beginning with the claims voiced by Donald Trump on Election Night in November 2020, through public responses and the legal consequences, this timeline serves as a foundation when the following sections discuss detailed information on the actors, their arguments, reactions, and events related to the 2020 US election conspiracy theories.

Figure 2

Simplified Timeline of 2020 US Election Aftermath



On Election Night, November 3, 2020, Donald Trump claimed his win in the presidential election and alleged election fraud, as the results did not reflect his claim. In the weeks after the election, claims about illegal votes, Democrats manipulating the election process, and problematic mail voting surfaced. Following this, lawsuits were already filed in November, challenging the results of the election. Toward the end of the month, Donald Trump called to “Stop the count”, demanding a halt on the counting process of the ballots, to be determined the 46th president of the United States. In December 2020, things revolved around the legal steps taken to question and challenge the election outcome. Even though most lawsuits were dismissed by courts, Trump and his team continued to spread their claims and false narratives among the public. A key legal decision was taken by the Texas Supreme Court when a lawsuit seeking to decertify Biden’s votes was rejected. However, the accusation that the election was stolen from Trump remained public.

Allegations and reactions to them culminated in a Capitol riot on January 6, 2021. Trump supporters stormed the building, aiming to stop the certification of Joe Biden’s win in the presidential election. On that day, Donald Trump acknowledged the win of his opponent for the first time. By that time, Republicans are divided between distancing from Trump or supporting him and his narratives. In the aftermath of the Capitol riot, the media continuously reported on conspiracy theories and fraud claims voiced by Trump and his allies. “The Big Lie” became a narrative for the allegedly rigged election in 2020. This label referred to the unfounded claim that the election, and thus, the presidency, was stolen from Donald Trump through widespread voter fraud (Canon & Sherman, 2021). Almost one year after the election, Fox News was sued for spreading false claims about voting machines’ interference in the counting process. Further, several states introduced new election laws to secure election integrity in the future.

Throughout 2022 and 2023, investigations and indictments were charged. A committee founded to investigate the incidents on January 6, 2021, gathered evidence against Trump and

his accusations. Hence, indictments were filed against him and his supporters for their efforts to overturn the election results. It was also found that Republicans in multiple states planned and executed an alternate elector scheme to flip the outcome of the election in favor of Trump. Election fraud claims and complaints against them lasted until 2024. Trump and his supporters continued to reaffirm that the election was rigged. Meanwhile, charges for election-related conspiracies were filed against them. Until today, election fraud remained a common narrative among Republicans, also in regard to future election campaigns.

4.2 Key Narratives and Arguments About the 2020 US Election

Many different claims and even more arguments about the 2020 US election and its outcome have been voiced. These claims emerged one day after the election on November 3, 2020, and developed until today. Donald Trump claimed to have won the presidential election and argued that the results showed otherwise because of voter fraud (MSNBC 3). With that, he initiated the idea of a fraudulent and unfair election. Trump said that the election had been stolen “by a group of very sad people” (MSNBC 1) and that people disenfranchised his supporters. In his argumentation, he explained that votes cast after Election Day caused false results and should thus not be counted (CNN 1, MSNBC 5). Another argument that he presented is that there had been problems with the mail ballots (MSNBC 2). Votes sent in via mail allegedly disappeared, and the counting of mail ballots was slow (MSNBC 7). His allegations led to multiple considerations as to why this could have happened. Various actors, including Donald Trump, tried to find an explanation or provide arguments. Trump called to “Stop the count” (MSNBC 8) because it was found that the Republican candidate was winning in key locations until overnight, votes allegedly disappeared (FOX 5), or Trump’s lead, for example in Georgia and Pennsylvania, changed to Biden (CNN 2). Supposedly, illegal votes have been cast in Nevada because there had been no election observer (MSNBC 9). Similarly, citizens from Nevada and Pennsylvania reported that no observation had been

allowed in the voting offices and demanded that votes counted without observation should be deducted (FOX 2). This led to Trump calling Pennsylvania a “corrupt Democrat machine.” (FOX 5). Matching the claims of problematic mail voting and counting, citizens reported that they received multiple ballots for one application for dead relatives, and ballots had been stolen or never got delivered (FOX 3). In Arizona, people complained that they got given Sharpies despite the advice from Democrats not to use them because they might not be able to get recognized by the voting machines (FOX 3). This claim was connected to the allegation against voting machines. Another claim made by Donald Trump accused the media of only promoting Trump-negative polls and reporting fewer points (FOX 4). One can notice that the allegations were diverse, all looking for a possible explanation but accusing others and reinforcing Donald Trump’s claims.

Trump reaffirmed that he had won the election, at least in some states, and got supported by Republicans. They claim that if the votes were cast legally, Trump would have won, and thus, a count of only legally cast ballots would have proven his win. Hence, they also called to not let corruption win, and Donald Trump reassured that the only way he could have lost was via betrayal (CNN 3, FOX 6, MSNBC 13). According to Trump, voting past Election Day was illegal and should have been stopped. He also accused key battleground states, such as Nevada, Georgia, and Pennsylvania, of voter fraud as they continued to count votes after election day (CNN 2, FOX 10, MSNBC 12). Next to protests to “Stop the count”, other people then called to “Count all votes” (FOX 8), and Donald Trump demanded states to cease counting votes once the total began to turn against him (MSNBC 12). He also claimed on that day that mail ballots were rife with fraud, rigging the mail voting (MSNBC 13). Backing this allegation, Trump’s lawyers criticized that in the case of such an election, it was reasonable to take allegations of fraud seriously. They also noted that mail-in ballots are the most vulnerable to fraud and that some margins in voting results in Pennsylvania might have been due to human error or fraud. Further, lawyers claimed that dead people voted in

Pennsylvania, where no observers had been allowed to watch the voting procedure, causing 600,000 ballots into question (FOX 10). Trump's lawyers also blamed the media for not being honest because they framed the allegations as "baseless claims" and "conspiracy theories" (FOX 10). Another accusation voiced by the legal team is that software was used to flip votes in election ballots (FOX 10).

Once the media joined the discussions, these claims were amplified. MSNBC reported that Republicans were under the impression that the losing candidate was the winning candidate, and thus, the presidency had been stolen. Their argumentation described a scheme to deny power to the rightful winner (MSNBC 15). This led to the claims that Democrats committed fraud in the election to make their candidate, Joe Biden, the next president (MSNBC 15). It was also claimed that the media outlets were gaslighting in their reporting that there had been no evidence of irregularities when such irregularities would have proven the win of Donald Trump (FOX 11). An accusation against the media also involves the claim that they reported outcomes before they had been verified when numbers were in favor of Joe Biden (MSNBC 20). This claim led to more arguments about how and why Democrats committed fraud to manipulate the election. Tucker Carlson alleges that the Democratic party changed the way people voted in 2020, as they advised people to vote via mail to minimize the risk of a COVID-19 infection (FOX 12). Republicans claimed that this made the system more vulnerable to manipulation, referring to the risk of manipulation through postal voting, which had been claimed before. According to his lawyers, Trump's opponents were perpetuating fraud in changing votes to disenfranchise voters. Relating to the problematic mail voting, the media reported that tabulation centers in Georgia were shut down overnight to count votes in secret (FOX 11). Reports from Michigan and Pennsylvania talked about electronic poll books that were plagued by freezing software and user error, complicating ballot counting (FOX 13). Trump also repeated that the election procedure in Pennsylvania had been corrupt, but he did not explain why (FOX 15).

Another accusation was that the election had been rigged because the Dominion voting machines had falsified votes, and the election observers were not allowed to observe the procedures, nor had they been properly instructed (MSNBC 24). Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, claimed that poll workers were instructed to assign ballots without names to people, change dates on absentee ballots, and not request photo identification of voters. As a consequence, Giuliani alleged that 100,000 absentee ballots in Wisconsin should have been deemed invalid because of such occurrences (CNN 7). In every state that kept counting, Trump won, while he lost in states that halted the counting. Hence, due to false vote counting, Trump may not have won more states, Giuliani claimed (MSNBC 36). Allegations about dead people voting were repeated (CNN 5), as well as that the Democrats committed fraud in encouraging mail voting, which is known to be problematic in terms of integrity and transparency, but they knew they would benefit from it (FOX 21). Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, claimed that mail ballots were the primary device for committing fraud. He further alleged that there must have been a centralized plan to commit voter fraud as a logical conclusion of all the incidents (CNN 7, FOX 25). He also announced that, at this point, most Americans already believed that the election was rigged. Also, 58% of conservatives, 70% of Republicans, and 77% of Trump voters said that Biden won the election only due to voter fraud (MSNBC 29). Almost one month after the election that predestined Joe Biden to be the 46th president of the United States, his opponent, Donald Trump, again announced, "I did win by a tremendous amount, but it has not been reported yet." (MSNBC 37). Another claim was that Republican board members refused to certify election results because they did not like them and got a call from Trump (MSNBC 30).

Voices were raised about the possible interference of third parties outside the political environment. Attorney Bill Barr claimed that foreign actors could have interfered with the vote-by-mail systems through fraudulent ballots (MSNBC 42). Concerning that, Donald Trump accused the Department of Justice and the FBI of being involved in the rigging of the

election because they failed to investigate his claims (MSNBC 41). According to Giuliani, there has been evidence of illegal voting activities in at least six states, and many witnesses saw crimes being committed in connection with voter fraud (FOX 33). Hence, Team Trump had evidence of fraud, while fraud is also undetectable, which is why no one could see it (MSNBC 50). Another accused third party is the US Postal Service. They claimed that thousands of ballots were backdated in multi-stage illegal efforts to influence the election in at least six swing states (FOX 32). They also reported that absentee ballots were transported across states and that Dominion voting machines were tampered with (FOX 30, FOX 32). The accused FBI themselves claimed that China, Russia, and Iran potentially manipulated the US election. While China's efforts had only been minimal and aimed at shaping the US' policy, Iran's interference was designed to incite social unrest against Trump via social media. Russia, according to the FBI, tried to denigrate Joe Biden (FOX 40). Based on all claims voiced until this point, 68% of Americans believed that the presidency was stolen from Trump (FOX 38). Hence, Donald Trump had been worried about the US having an illegitimate president due to election fraud (FOX 39). He claimed that it was statistically impossible to have lost the election because the amount of election fraud was sufficient to swing the outcome (FOX 41). Following that, Trump's legal team blamed the Supreme Court for letting them down (CNN 9). The Republican Brad Raffensperger also alleged that Democratic victories do not count because Democratic voters were not truly American (MSNBC 54). At the end of December, Dana Milbank raised the concern that the Republicans might have planned the fraud and the overturn of a win for Biden. He claimed that the Republicans were not investigating why Donald Trump had lost but tried to create a problem because a group of people felt disenfranchised and like the election had been rigged (MSNBC 56). The key narrative voiced and spread was that the presidency was stolen from Trump because of a rigged election and widespread voter fraud. However, no credible evidence of fraud has been found.

One major narrative was that the Republicans were trying to overturn the election (MSNBC 56), which developed into them taking action. After claiming victory again at the beginning of January 2021 (FOX 43), Donald Trump urged the then-state secretary of Georgia, Brad Raffensperger, to “find enough votes” (FOX 43) to turn the result because he claimed to have won the election in Georgia (FOX 43). Along with this, Trump also alleged that then-Vice President Mike Pence had the power and should block the certification of the results of this corrupt and illegal election (FOX 44). The narrative that the Democrats used the pandemic to defraud people and, therefore, stole the election was amplified by Donald Trump. Resulting in a violent riot, Trump proclaimed, “Stop the steal” (FOX 47), and blamed that “we don’t want our election to be stolen by radical left democrats, [...] by the fake news media” (FOX 47). In the days after the storm of the Capitol, Donald Trump continued to reaffirm that the facts proved him right and that he disagreed with the voting results (MSNBC 60). He also admitted telling Brad Raffensperger that he wanted someone to find enough votes to flip the state outcomes (MSNBC 65). Mike Pence publicly announced that he shared Trump’s concerns about voter fraud and voting irregularities (MSNBC 63).

This belief was also supported by 76% of Republicans (CNN 10) at this time. Trump supporters repeatedly claimed that Smartmatic technology in voting machines was used to rig the election against Trump (CNN 10). Donald Trump himself alleged that “people hiding in the dark are controlling Biden” (MSNBC 68), while his team asked Senators to believe that Antifa members attacked the Capitol on January 6, 2021 (MSNBC 69). The discussion around election fraud conspiracy theories heated up and started with Donald Trump announcing that people would find thousands of votes in Arizona and New Hampshire that counted for him (MSNBC 81). Backing his superior, Mike Pence reassured that the 2020 election was marked by significant voting irregularities and numerous instances of officials setting aside state election law. He accused the Democrats of an “unconstitutional power grab” (MSNBC 73). With this, the claim that the election was rigged because of Democrats who stole the

presidency from Trump continued. Further allegations were made by Donald Trump, who claimed that Wisconsin state officials violated the law by using “unauthorized, illegal absentee voting drop boxes” (FOX 53) and allowing poll workers to correct absentee ballots. Trump also claimed that in Wisconsin, ballots were found thrown out in a river because they were voted for him (MSNBC 74). However, Donald Trump also alleged that voting changes took place before the election and accused Courts that have been afraid to rule despite the US intelligence community’s warning that narratives of fraud could lead to people engaging in violence (MSNBC 75). In Pennsylvania, Postal workers claimed that supervisors tampered with mail-in ballots, and a mail carrier reported hearing people talk about an election fraud scheme (MSNBC 74). Sidney Powell also repeatedly alleged Dominion voting machines were involved in the steal of the election in 2020. Connecting to the claims about the interference of third parties, National Intelligence accused Donald Trump of embracing Russia’s disinformation campaign against his opponent, Joe Biden, while Iran’s efforts were intended to undercut Trump’s reelection prospects and undermine public confidence in the election process and US institutions (CNN 11).

Allegations about dead people voting in Pennsylvania reemerged (MSNBC 83), and Trump introduced the narrative of the stolen, fraudulent election as “The Big Lie” (MSNBC 82). Claiming his victory, Donald Trump delivered an “official presidential speech” (MSNBC 90), in which he also talked about corruption, problematic mail voting, and Democrats committing fraud (MSNBC 90). He argued that mail-in voting is inherently fraudulent and that the 2020 US election will be known as “the greatest rigged election in history” (MSNBC 92). It was also reported that Donald Trump instructed officials in the Department of Justice to call the election “corrupt” in support of overturning its results (FOX 54). According to CNN, right-wing media outlets continued to push the narrative that the election was rigged (CNN 13), and Tucker Carlson presented the idea that the attack on the Capitol on January 6 may have secretly been a scheme hatched by the FBI (MSNBC 91). Allegedly, large-scale

voter fraud continued to be reported in Georgia, where 43,000 absentee ballots that violated the chain of custody rules made them invalid (MSNBC 95). In Arizona, Trump claimed, there were enough fraudulent, mysterious, and fake votes to change the outcome in the state four or five times over (MSNBC 98). Another Republican claimed that a secret source from a CIA fraud department told him about hundreds of fraudulent ballots in Arizona, and disgruntled Trump supporters spread a fake report from the competition that they say shows interference from the deep state (MSNBC 100). Additionally, Donald Trump claimed a connection between Dominion voting machine software issues and China through smart thermostats with an internet connection (CNN 15). Donald Trump continued to allege that “that was the insurrection: when they rigged the election. The big insurrection, the real insurrection” (MSNBC 101). Allegedly, the rigging was, among other things, due to 35,000 fictitious votes in Arizona, which is also why Donald Trump urged the Georgia state secretary to “start the process of decertifying the 2020 election” (MSNBC 104). In December 2021, Trump asked officials of the Department of Justice to call the election corrupt because it was stolen (MSNBC 107).

Arguments voiced since 2022 mainly center around the idea that Republicans planned the overturn of the 2020 election to make Donald Trump the US president. He claimed that a group of lawmakers working to reform the Electoral College proved his claim that Vice President Mike Pence had the power to overturn the 2020 election results. Trump also repeated, “I’ve been in two elections, I won ‘em both, and the second one, I won much bigger than the first” (MSNBC 109). Team Trump claimed that the National Archives had obtained forged voter verification certificates declaring Trump and Pence as the winners of Michigan and Arizona (MSNBC 111). Matching this claim of manipulated documents, Republicans in Wisconsin, Michigan, Arizona, Nevada, and Georgia created and submitted fraudulent election materials (MSNBC 113), pretending to be “duly elected and qualified electors” (MSNBC 119). Fourteen of them falsely claimed Donald Trump had won the election

(MSNBC 119). Directors of Election Day operations in November 2020 reportedly participated in efforts to promote allegations of fraud and encourage state legislators to appoint false slates of electors (MSNBC 127). Following this, Trump's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, pressured state lawmakers to disregard election results in Michigan and said that the results have been a "criminal act" (MSNBC 127). According to Donald Trump, "the ballot harvesting scam will go down as the biggest political scandal in history" (CNN 19). However, allegations also resurfaced in February 2022 that Team Trump had circulated material outlining a way to overturn the election result by falsifying documents and forging electoral votes. A new accusation also appeared when Donald Trump claimed that Hillary Clinton broke into his apartment and spied on the Oval Office to undermine and discredit the 2020 election, along with massive ballot harvesting and phantom voters (MSNBC 128).

More allegations of Trump's legal team pressuring Mike Pence to outline a coup to not let states send out Democratic electors (MSNBC 129) underline the Republicans' attempt to overturn the election results of the 2020 US election. Republicans repeated claims about forged election materials and fake electors (MSNBC 139), while Donald Trump announced the involvement of the military for re-election (MSNBC 140). Republican Liz Cheney revealed that Trump had a plan to overturn the election and that he intended to stay in office. She also claimed that the rioters on January 6, 2021, were motivated by Trump's false claims and that he "summoned and assembled a mob and lit the flame of this attack" (CNN 20). Around the same time, Donald Trump started to tell people that the election was illegitimate and that they should donate money to a fund to defend the election (CNN 21). He also sought inside help from the Department of Justice to execute his campaign to reverse the outcome: "Just say that the election was corrupt and leave the rest to me" (MSNBC 151). Following Trump's claims, the Republican Party of Texas passed a resolution at the state convention rejecting President Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 US election (CNN 21). Afterward, Donald Trump again declared his victory in the election in November 2020. Alleging that

“other states are looking at and studying the amazing Wisconsin Supreme Court decision” (MSNBC 152), which decertified the election results, he demanded Arizona and Georgia also decertify the election results (MSNBC 152). In support, Arizona Gouverneur Kari Lake demanded a hand count for all elections in the state and called voters not to trust the results from the presidential election in 2020 (MSNBC 154).

Since 2023, there has only been sporadic reporting on the events surrounding the 2020 US election. Reports then deal with re-heated debates and new arguments that are contributed to them. Texas Senator Ted Cruz wrote a book in which he published that Republicans were planning to set up some sort of commission that would slow down the certification process and that they hoped to overturn the election results (MSNBC 161). A Gouverneur from Arizona revealed that Donald Trump pressured him to find fraud in the Arizona election that would contribute to the overturn of the result. He also claimed that Trump wanted Pence and Raffensperger to find votes to flip the election (MSNBC 163). This matched the claim made by Trump’s attorney, who claimed that the Republican candidate urged Mike Pence to delay certification results (CNN 24). Trump also claimed to have won the election in Georgia, but fraudulent votes were still allowed to be counted (CNN 26). All claims still reaffirmed that Trump considered himself the winner of the presidential election on November 3, 2020. He still believed in voter fraud and a rigged election against him. Hence, he demanded to be shielded from prosecution due to his presidential immunity when he claimed that his efforts and accusations were “at the heart of his official responsibilities as President” (MSNBC 183). Republicans still supported Trump’s claims, for example, the mail voting issues, the involvement of the Democrats in the rigging process (CNN 28), or the media’s amplification of the narratives (FOX 61). Allegations about the Republicans planning to overturn the election lasted until September 15, 2024. According to the media, Republicans in several states developed a “fake elector scheme” and “voter fraud units” (MSNBC 186) that helped to prepare official mailings of false certificates (MSNBC 187). Lara Trump again accused

Democrats of committing voter fraud, as they allegedly did not request photo identification, allowed unsecured ballot boxes, and let dead people vote, which helped Biden to win the election (CNN 32). Despite only repeating arguments that had been voiced years ago and were initially invaded by Trump, he and Republican allies still insisted on having won the election at least in some states, and announced that they would only accept the results of the 2024 election if it would be an “honest election” (MSNBC 194).

The allegations surrounding the presidential election can be summarized in eight claims. Table 1 presents these main claims, as well as the most repeated and prominent supporting arguments of these allegations.

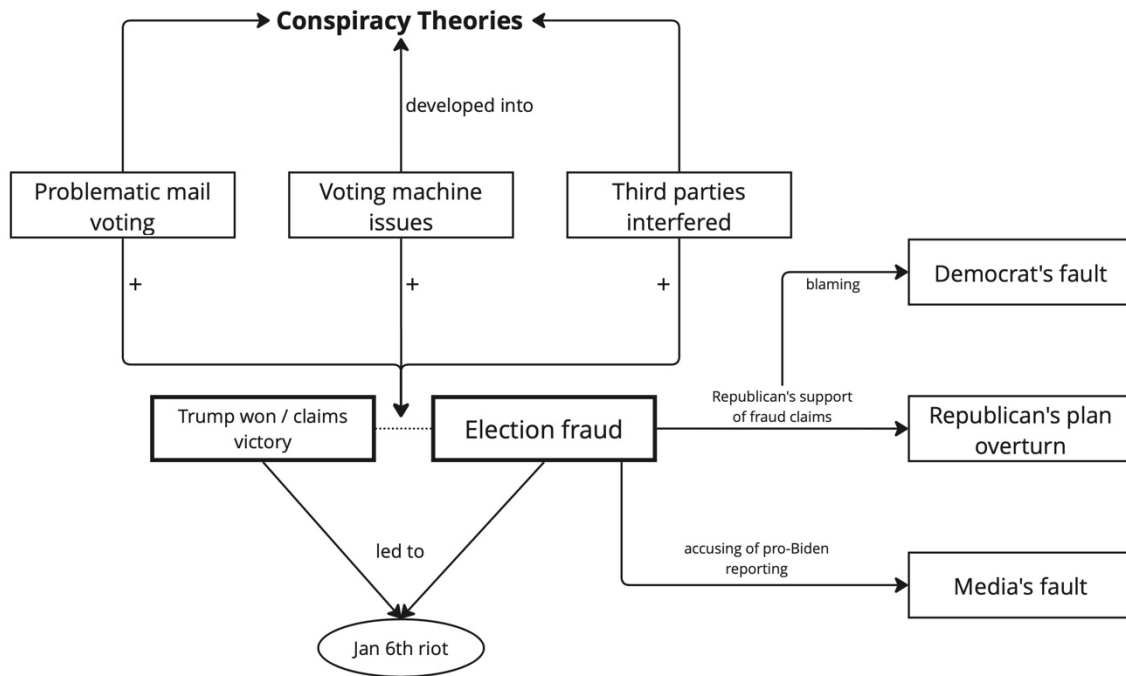
Table 1

Main Claims and Supporting Arguments

Main claims	Supporting Arguments
Trump won the election	Trump declared victory despite losing, his lawyers argued that a count of legal votes would prove his win.
Election fraud	Claims of widespread voter fraud e.g. via illegal votes, dead people voting, disappeared ballots
Problematic mail voting	Mail ballots are allegedly vulnerable to fraud, ballots were stolen, counted incorrectly, or received after Election Day
Voting machine issues	Dominion Voting Machines are accused of flipping votes from Trump to Biden,

	Sharpies were allegedly purposefully provided to invalidate votes
Democrats' manipulation	Claims that Democrats emphasized fraud-prone mail voting and counted ballots in secret
Medias' misinformation	Claims that outlets suppressed Trump-positive narratives, prematurely declared Biden the winner, and dismissed fraud claims as conspiracy theories
Interference of third parties	China, Iran, and Russia allegedly interfered in the election campaign, Department of Justice and FBI were criticized for failing to act on fraud claims
Republicans plan to overturn the election results	Trump and his allies pressured state officials to overturn results by creating a fake elector scheme and find non-existent votes

The most prominent ones were that Trump won the election and that there has been massive fraud in the process of electing the 46th president of the United States. The assertions that mail voting in this election has been problematic and that voting machines caused issues to align with the previous claims. Others argue that it was either the media's fault, the Democrats' manipulation of the election process, or the interference of third parties, even from outside the United States, that caused the election outcome. Aside from seeking explanations and blame, there were also claims that Republicans planned to rig and flip the election. Figure 3 presents a visualization of the main claims and how they relate to each other.

Figure 3*Visualization of Claim Network*

All arguments aim to explain and justify Trump’s claim that he won the election. Due to the contrary election result, this allegation is connected to an allegation of election fraud, as visualized as the two main claims in Figure 3. Supporting arguments that also provided the basis for the most prominent conspiracy theories include problematic mail voting, voting machine issues, and the interference of third parties. Backed by these narratives, the “Save America March” resulted in the violent riot on January 6, 2021. As the main claims were voiced by Trump, his team, and supporters, the Republican’s support of them led to the party’s plan to overturn the election results and blaming the Democrats for the illegitimate election result. Additionally, media got blamed for pro-Biden reporting from supporters of the stolen election idea and election fraud claims.

4.3 Evolution of Claims About the 2020 US Election Over Time

The presented conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election evolved in response to counterarguments, court rulings, and key societal events. In changing their narratives or introducing new arguments, they maintained their credibility despite mounting evidence to the contrary. Hence, investigating how narratives were influenced by differing arguments, legal information, or happenings will contribute to the understanding of conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election.

One counterargument to the prominent claim that Donald Trump won the presidential election on November 3, 2020, was that the counting process was not yet completed (MSNBC 1). An ex-National Security officer called the claim “one of the most irresponsible comments the president of the United States ever made” (MSNBC 6). To avoid the consequences of a continued counting process and the final result, Trump demanded the Supreme Court to “Stop the count” (CNN 1, MSNBC 5), although stopping the count at this point would have led to Trump’s loss of the presidential election. Nonetheless, lawsuits were filed in multiple states, such as Michigan and Pennsylvania, to effect a halt on the counting process. While votes in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Arizona were still being counted (CNN 1), accusations of improper counting in Georgia and a call for a re-count in Wisconsin surfaced (CNN 2). Trump’s judicial team also filed lawsuits seeking access to monitor the vote counting (FOX 6). Three days after the election, illegally cast ballots allegedly contributed to the final result, and poll watchers were denied overseeing the counting process (FOX 8). This underlined Trump’s conflicting positions: demanding to stop the count while calling to count all votes. Despite his claims, no significant evidence of fraud was found, only minor human errors (FOX 11). In some reports, it was argued that Trump and his team were misleading their supporters by making contradictory statements (MSNBC 15).

Once counterarguments emerged in public, Trump, his team, and supporters adjusted their narratives. TV host Tucker Carlson claimed that dead people voted in the election who

were, in fact, alive (FOX 12). At the same time, Democrats in Nevada filed lawsuits seeking to eliminate signature verification (FOX 12), fueling the conspiracy theory that they interfered with and manipulated the election process. Trump's team also accused officials in Pennsylvania of preventing Republican poll watchers from observing the vote counting (FOX 15), leading to lawsuits challenging the election results in Nevada, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Georgia (FOX 16). By late November 2020, Trump admitted for the first time that Biden won but continued to say that the election was rigged against him (FOX 23). When a cybersecurity official stated that the 2020 election had been the most secure in US history (FOX 20), Trump fired him, along with an ally who agreed that there had been no fraud in the process (MSNBC 26). This reinforced the impression that Trump and his team were attempting to suppress counterarguments and explanations that contradicted their narratives. Furthermore, Trump announced plans to challenge the results at the Supreme Court (MSNBC 28). Rudy Giuliani claimed there had been a plan to commit voter fraud, asserting that 100,000 absentee ballots in Wisconsin should have been deemed invalid (CNN 7). However, attorney Bill Barr admitted that he had not seen any evidence of voter fraud that would have changed the outcome of the election (FOX 33). Trump then rephrased his argument, stating that the issue was not whether fraud had occurred but whether state officials violated the law by systematically manipulating measures for ballot integrity so that fraud became undetectable (MSNBC 50). The Supreme Court rejected a bid to block millions of pro-Biden ballots in key battleground states, further diminishing Trump's legal prospects (CNN 9).

As the perception that Republicans planned to overturn the election result gained attention, the US Court of Appeals upheld a decision dismissing a lawsuit filed by Texas Republicans that sought to grant Vice President Mike Pence the power to overturn Biden's victory (FOX 42). Nevertheless, Trump continued to claim that Pence was authorized to stop the certification of the votes despite his role only being ceremonial (CNN 18) and legal rulings also stating the contrary. The Capital riot on January 6, 2021, was widely interpreted

as the physical embodiment of Trump's refusal to accept the election results (FOX 46). On that day, Trump acknowledged Biden's win but justified this admission as a means to calm the rioters (FOX 45). Trump supporters, including attorneys in Georgia, distanced themselves from him or were even dismissed after rejecting Trump's election fraud claims (MSNBC 64). Meanwhile, Donald Trump Jr. stated that the election was "fortified, but not rigged" (FOX 51). Some journalists argued in their reports that the Republicans benefitted financially and politically from the "Stop the Steal" movement. Thus, they would not reduce their efforts to spread their narratives despite a lack of evidence (MSNBC 71).

Because election fraud claims persisted, they had lasting effects. In response to widespread misinformation, 33 states introduced, pre-filed, or carried over 165 bills that aim to restrict access to voting. Smartmatic sued Trump, Fox News, Rudy Giuliani, and Sidney Powell, accusing them of coordinated efforts in a disinformation campaign (CNN 10). Internal discrepancies in Trump's legal team appeared when Rudy Giuliani called Sidney Powell's claims irrational (MSNBC 76). The Supreme Court rejected Trump's defiance of the Wisconsin Elections Commission, but he argued that such cases were necessary to prevent similar issues in future elections (FOX 53). Handwritten memos revealed that Trump had instructed law enforcement to take steps to nullify the election (FOX 54). Some 60 lawsuits alleging voter fraud had been filed, then dropped or dismissed - some by judges appointed by Trump himself (CNN 14). In one case, a Republican falsely claimed that a secret CIA fraud division had confirmed voter fraud when no such division existed (MSNBC 99).

By 2023, media coverage focused on lawsuits and accusations related to the 2020 election. Trump and 18 allies were accused of their efforts to overturn the Georgia election results (FOX 60). Despite several investigations confirming that there had been no fraud, Sidney Powell filed a lawsuit in Georgia alleging an anti-Trump conspiracy involving rigged voting machines (CNN 26). Donald Trump faced charges of impediment, conspiracy to defraud the US, election interference, and leading a criminal enterprise to shift the election

(CNN 27). However, Trump continued to deny the allegations despite being aware of the false narratives because his officials informed him (FOX 60). In 2024, it was confirmed that Trump employees, rather than fake electors, submitted false documents to government agencies as part of a fake elector scheme (MSNBC 187). Eleven Arizona Republicans were charged with conspiracy, fraud, and forgery for falsely claiming that Trump won the election in the state (FOX 63). Another lawsuit at that time dealt with Newsmax, whose CEO, Chris Rudy, alleged that Smartmatic had been involved in election rigging. Smartmatic sued Newsmax, arguing that the network intentionally promoted false claims (CNN 34, CNN 35). Internal documents showed that Newsmax employees were aware of the fact that they had no proof backing their reported claims but continued to spread the narrative.

Hence, as the lawsuits were dismissed and investigations debunked the fraud allegations, the narrative shifted from allegations of stolen votes to allegations of systematic manipulation and cover-up. Despite overwhelming evidence of contradictory claims of voter fraud, these narratives have had lasting political and legal consequences, impacting election laws, public trust, and ongoing cases against Donald Trump and his supporters.

4.4 Proponents and Disseminators of the 2020 US Election Conspiracy Theories

The first person who publicly questioned the voting results one day after Election Day on November 4, 2020, was Donald Trump (MSNBC 1, MSNBC 3, MSNBC 5). Hence, one can assume that he and the people supporting or working for him sparked the idea of election fraud and, therefore, initiated future conspiracy theories. Following the initial claims about election fraud in the 2020 US election, Trump's legal team joined the conversation (FOX 10), and the media commented on claims about the past election. News reporters and journalists published their opinions and comments in reports. Tucker Carlson, a TV host and political commentator, shared his opinion on the topic in MSNBC news reports and during his TV show "Tucker Carlson Tonight" (FOX 12). One member of Donald Trump's legal team, his

lawyer Rudy Giuliani, who also became more prominent in this case, publicly commented on the claims (FOX 25), as well as attorney Bill Barr (MSNBC 42). Until then, the only actors involved in false narratives about the 2020 US election were Donald Trump, who was present almost every day in the news, Trump's legal team, especially his lawyers, and media reporters. Most allegations that were discussed in news media came from Trump's lawyers, who tried to defend Trump's narrative and him as a presidential candidate. Eventually, external actors interfered in the discussion. The US Postal Service reacts to accusations of them being involved in the rigging of the election in November by raising different concerns (FOX 32). The politician and supporter of Trump, Brad Raffensperger, comes into play (MSNBC 54), as well as Dana Milbank (MSNBC 56), a TV reporter but detractor of Trump. As an accused third party in this construct, the FBI also shares its view on things (FOX 40).

In 2021, news media reporting about the presidential election in November 2020 started with Donald Trump as the main character again (FOX 43, FOX 44). Following the events on January 6, 2021, affected citizens and capitol rioters shared their opinions on the election and claims surrounding it (FOX 45). As more and more people raise their voices and speak about the fraud allegations in public, the then-Vice President Mike Pence makes his first public statement in news media after the storm of the Capitol (MSNBC 63). Similar to the year before, election fraud allegations and possible reasons and evidence are brought up primarily by Donald Trump. He appeared as the main actor and was supported by his staff, including the legal team, the Vice President, and his supporters from the public. More external actors emerged when postal workers again raised their voices in countering allegations that claim their involvement in election rigging. National Intelligence also interfered in claims that centered around its involvement (CNN 11). As another more prominent participant from Trump's legal team, his attorney Sidney Powell became a figure in the discussions (MSNBC 76). Alongside Donald Trump, his party allies continue to repeat his claims or extend them with their arguments. One of the Republican supporters was Mark Meadows, who was also

the Chief of Staff of the White House under Donald Trump (MSNBC 89). He was also a re-appearing figure in this conspiracy case. Tucker Carlson also re-appeared with his claims (MSNBC 91). Most of the time, only Trump and citizens continued to spread their conspiracy concerns in the news media. Majorie Taylor-Greene was another Republican to make her opinion on Trump's claims public (MSNBC 102). Along with her, several Republican politicians or candidates from certain states, such as Arizona (MSNBC 100, MSNBC 104), Maryland, and California (MSNBC 93), supported Trump in his allegations of a rigged election. Thus, multiple actors joined the discussion and shared their concerns and claims surrounding the 2020 US election. However, Donald Trump remained the main disseminator of this discourse, as he and his statements were the most widely reported in the selected news media outlets.

From 2022, the debate around election fraud and stolen elections in November 2020 attenuated. Donald Trump, his team, and other supporters from the Republican party are still the main proponents of claims concerning wrongdoing in the presidential election. Among them is Liz Cheney, who belongs to the Republican party but was considered an internal critic of Donald Trump (CNN 20). According to allegations against crimes in particular states, certain state politicians got involved in election-related conspiracy theories. Officials from primarily accused states like Texas, Arizona, and Ohio publicly raised their opinions on the occurrences (CNN 24, CNN 28, FOX 61, MSNBC 161). Besides them, Donald Trump and his team remained active in their efforts to call the election unlawfully rigged and stolen. As a result of filed lawsuits, accused actors, for example, Mike Lindell, a businessman, political activist, and conspiracist, as well as the CEO of Smartmatic Voting Machines, shared their arguments for a fraudulent voting procedure during the presidential election (MSNBC 191). Lara Trump, a Trump family member and TV host, voiced her opinion, as she was also involved in Donald Trump's election campaign and can be considered a member of Trump's team trying to win back the presidency in 2024 (CNN 32).

Analysis shows that Donald Trump was the central figure in spreading false claims about election fraud in the 2020 US election. He initiated a narrative and remained devoted to his truth throughout. His main supporters were his legal team and Republican party allies. Especially key lawyers, such as Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell, played renowned roles in questioning the election's integrity and lawfulness. Hence, they also amplified conspiracy theories about election fraud, filed lawsuits based on these beliefs, and made public statements about their point of view. Multiple members of the Republican party also voiced their opinions in public, backing their presidential candidate, Donald Trump. Supporters like Mark Meadows and Majorie Taylor-Greene became reappearing figures as they not only repeated but also expanded on Trump's claims about a rigged election. Media also played a central role in amplifying conspiracy theories. Due to their underlying political orientation, media outlets legitimized election fraud claims in their content. Apart from Trump-supporting citizens, politicians outside of Trump's close circle, and businessmen affected by allegations, Donald Trump, his team, and party colleagues were the main proponents and disseminators of false information about the presidential election in 2020. As these narratives were spread via the media, they also played an important role in this development through their way of reporting.

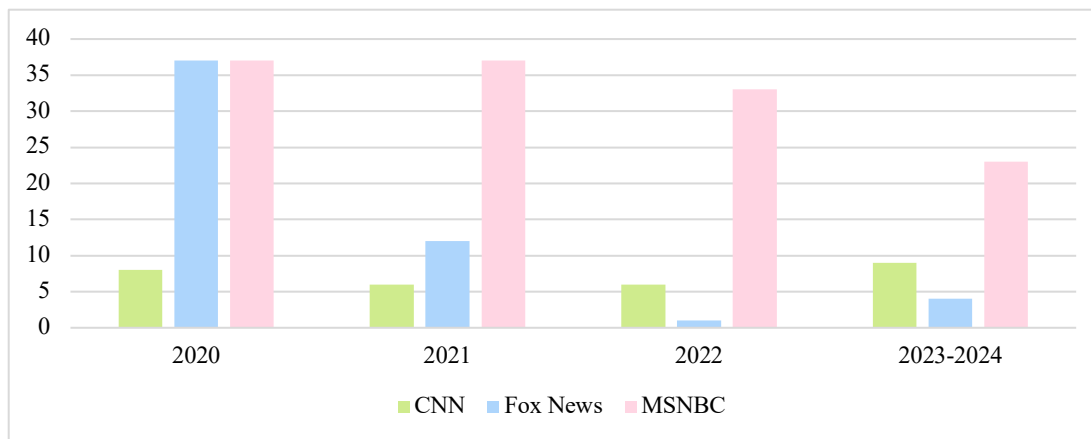
4.5 Media Reporting of the 2020 US Election Conspiracy Theories

News media reporting about the 2020 US election conspiracy theories and claims differed in their scope and framing strategies regarding their foci and perceptions. As presented in Figure 4, CNN did not report as much on election-related conspiracy theories compared to Fox News and MSNBC, but consistently throughout the considered time frame. Fox News, on the other hand, reported about the 2020 US election claims in 37 articles between November 4, 2020, and December 31, 2020, but significantly reduced their number of articles concerning that topic in the following years. Similar to CNN, MSNBC persistently

reported about the 2020 election claims from 2020 to 2024. However, it can be noted that the number of articles published by MSNBC is significantly higher than the number published by CNN or Fox News.

Figure 4

Distribution of Published Articles Concerning the 2020 US Election Conspiracy Theories



This distribution does not only demonstrate the different scope of reporting, but can also be linked to the media outlets' different framing and foci. CNN frequently framed Donald Trump's claims about a stolen election and election fraud as false and baseless and, instead, emphasized the fact-checking and lack of evidence for fraud claims. The news outlet reported about legal challenges but often highlighted rejections made by judges and the lack of credibility of allegations. Trump's attempts to undermine election results were covered, but at the same time, institutional integrity and compliance with legal procedures were also emphasized. CNN discussed the role and possible interference of foreign actors, especially Russia and Iran, but did not cover claims about domestic election fraud to the same extent (CNN 10, CNN 32, CNN 34). This distance from the accusations and politically neutral reporting of facts, without revealing an attitude, aligns with the smaller number of published articles.

Fox News varied between amplifying election fraud claims and later moderating them. In their reporting, the news outlet initially aligned with Trump's allegations and underlined his concerns about election integrity and poll-watching issues. Accusations of dead people voting, mail-in ballot fraud, and voting software malfunctioning were discussed, but reports also heavily focused on lawsuits that were concerned with allegations of a rigged election. However, some reports acknowledged the absence of conclusive evidence for these claims. Fox News also highlighted the significance of electoral malfunctioning for democracy and accused mainstream media of emphasizing and declaring Biden's victory (FOX 12, FOX 15, FOX 51). Considering the high number of published articles in 2020, and comparing it to the significantly reduced number from 2021 until 2024, one could interpret Fox News reporting as being interested in the election fraud claims as long as an overturn of the results was still imaginable. Hence, a Trump-positive framing can be noted in Fox News articles.

The news outlet MSNBC took a strong anti-Trump stance, frequently exposing claims of voter fraud and highlighting his misinformation tactics. Hence, Trump's legal efforts were presented as a threat to democracy and a maneuver to delegitimize the election in 2020. MSNBC also covered the complexity of election fraud claims voiced by the Republican party and argued that allies enabled Trump's false narratives. The impact of misinformation on voters was emphasized, referencing the misled Republican voters in the 2020 election. According to MSNBC news reports, narratives about election fraud are connected to broader societal incidents, such as the riot on January 6, 2021, or citizens' efforts to restrict voting rights after the election (MSNBC 16, MSNBC 20, MSNBC 196). MSNBC's reporting style reflects a strong criticism against Donald Trump, which is also reflected in their consistently high number of articles about his election fraud claims over four years. It can be interpreted as MSNBC seeking to cast blame for the election fraud claims and spreading skepticism about Trump's continuous allegations.

Their different foci are also reflected in the way the three news media outlets discussed the main arguments surrounding the 2020 US election fraud. Trump's claim that he won the election is seen as premature and false by CNN, initially amplified but later compressed by Fox News, and framed as delusional misinformation by MSNBC. Voter fraud allegations were debunked by CNN, referring to the lack of evidence. While Fox News highlighted both the claims and the lawsuits contesting them, MSNBC rejected voter fraud claims as disinformation initiated by Republicans. The controversially discussed mail-in voting is portrayed as a safe and normal procedure in elections by CNN, but it is allegedly prone to fraud and misused for cheating by the Democrats, according to Fox News. MSNBC called Trump's accusation against this voting procedure an act of voter suppression. They also framed Trump as using courts to delegitimize the 2020 election, while Fox News only reported about Trump's legal fights, and CNN focused on the court's dismissals. The violent attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, was presented by CNN as an attack on democracy, while MSNBC directly connected the riot to Trump's narratives about the election. Fox News downplayed the role of Republican claims in the event from January 2021. The role of the media is also perceived differently among the three news media outlets. CNN reported the election results as facts, but Fox News accused mainstream media of being biased. MSNBC argued that the right-wing media contributed to the spread of misinformation. To conclude, CNN prioritized fact-based reporting and focused on uncovering narratives about the 2020 US election. Fox News employed a mixed approach, initially emphasizing fraud allegations but later recognizing their lack of legal support. MSNBC, as the only news media outlet connecting Trump's claims directly to the violent incident on January 6, 2021, framed his narratives as a deliberate strategy to undermine democracy.

The different reporting and focus also entail differences in tone and phrasing. CNN reported in a neutral but firm way, relying on legal outcomes and expert analysis to refute fraud claims. Fox News launched its first articles repeating Trump's narratives, such as

“rigged election” and “illegal votes”. In later reports, a more cautious language was used, acknowledging court decisions made in the meantime. MSNBC used a more critical and direct phrasing in condemning Trump’s claims. This was reflected in phrases like “baseless conspiracies”, “dangerous lies” or, “authoritarian tactics”.

A network analysis demonstrates that the three media sources referenced each other in their reports covering 2020 US election conspiracy theories. CNN criticized Fox News for amplifying election fraud narratives, especially regarding Dominion Voting Systems and manipulation of votes. They also referred to Fox News hosts Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity dismissing voter fraud claims and the legal accusation of Fox News being involved in spreading disinformation about Dominion voting machines. MSNBC was less frequently mentioned by CNN, but if it were, it discussed the left-leaning media’s response to Trump’s claims. On the contrary, Fox News criticized CNN and MSNBC by portraying them as liberal media suppressing conservative perceptions. Thus, one criticism leveled at the two media outlets is that they rushed to declare Biden the winner before the election result was confirmed. Further, Fox News accused CNN of gaslighting the public by reassuring that the election was secure when reported irregularities were ignored. In some reports, Fox News referenced MSNBC’s clear position toward Trump and framed it as part of a broader media bias against conservatives. On the other hand, MSNBC frequently referenced Fox News as a key distributor of misinformation about election fraud in the 2020 election. They highlighted Fox’s role in spreading conspiracy theories, particularly regarding rigged voting machines and problematic mail-in ballots. The TV host, Tucker Carlson, was also criticized by MSNBC for allegedly misleading the audience about voter fraud. CNN and MSNBC aligned in their coverage and often used the same fact-checking approaches to critically evaluate fraud claims in their reports and, hence, frequently shared the same narratives. In sum, CNN and MSNBC often associated Fox News with right-wing misinformation, especially concerning Dominion Voting Systems and Trump’s fraud claims. Fox News considered the other two news outlets as

biased, accusing them of favoring the Democrat Joe Biden and prematurely calling the election in his favor before verification, as well as for dismissing fraud claims without investigation and questioning. MSNBC and CNN aligned in their reporting to a large extent, while Fox News took a defensive stance when responding to their critiques.

5. Discussion

5.1 Main Findings

The 2020 US election conspiracy theories timeline began on Election Night, November 3, 2020, when Donald Trump claimed to have won the presidential election prematurely. Along with this claim, he alleged widespread voter fraud, which led to various narratives and arguments about election fraud in the following weeks. According to Urbinati (2018), this rhetoric and belief in election fraud fit into populist frameworks, which also contributed to further political polarization. Accusations included illegal mail-in ballots, vote switching due to manipulated voting machines, and fraudulent election procedures in crucial swing states. Trump's legal team, fellow Republicans, and media actors reinforced his claims. Due to a lack of evidence, most lawsuits were dismissed. However, the narratives persisted, which aligns with findings from Pennycook & Rand (2021), who assumed a rapid spread of false claims despite their debunking by official sources. They argued further that once misinformation is spread, it is difficult to correct, especially if it was already picked up by influential figures (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). On January 6, 2021, Trump supporters, believing in the claims, stormed the US Capitol in an attempt to overturn election results. Despite Joe Biden's inauguration and Trump acknowledging the win of his opponent to calm the rioters, the narratives spread further and led to more investigations and legal proceedings, even election reforms. As a consequence of the 2020 US election fraud claims, several states implemented voting laws to ensure election integrity in the following years. Until 2024, election-related conspiracy theories remained a key issue in US political discourse, underlining their far-reaching influence, as outlined by Van Prooijen & Douglas (2018). This underlines the persistence of these conspiracy theories. Donald Trump as the central and most influential figure in this context set the foundation, backed by his followers, to question the election's legitimacy and integrity, even people's trust in official institutions.

The study identified eight main claims about the election, which evolved in response to arguments, counterarguments, court rulings, and events surrounding the 2020 US election. Donald Trump and his allies repeatedly claimed that he had won the election and that Biden's victory was fraudulent. Despite lacking evidence, Republicans argued that mail-in ballots were more prone to fraud; Democrats took advantage of this and manipulated the process. They were also accused of ballot harvesting, dead people voting, and election officials covering up fraud. The argument that "elites", in this case, Democrats, manipulated the election aligns with populist strategies as described by Bergmann & Butter (2020). They also explain that outsiders then claim to fight against the corrupt elite, which fits into the narrative of Republicans accusing Democrats of election interference and calling not to trust them. Another allegation was that Dominion voting machines were manipulated to flip votes from Trump to Biden. This claim led to a lawsuit against Fox News for spreading this narrative. Trump supporters further argued that the media was biased, suppressed evidence of fraud, and favored Biden in their reporting. As explained by Pérez-Escobar (2023), media and their framing further contribute to the amplification or rejection of these claims. Others suggested that third parties, such as China, Iran, or Russia, interfered in the election process. A claim that emerged in the process of finding an explanation for election manipulation accused Republicans of attempting to overturn the election results. Despite claiming that the election was stolen, narratives about Trump's allies creating a fake elector scheme and hindering the certification process surfaced. This aligns with insights from Hagen (2017) and Reid (2024), whose research on conspiracy beliefs suggests that people endorse and engage in such narratives when they feel that their political group is threatened.

Key shifts in these narratives appeared after courts dismissed fraud claims. Specific allegations of fraud transitioned into broader claims of systematic corruption. When lawsuits were filed, Trump and his allies argued that courts were biased and part of the conspiracy to cover up the truth. The refusal to accept contradicting court decisions aligns with research on

distrust in democratic institutions performed by Rekker (2021). However, many Republican voters continued to believe in the stolen election claim, demonstrating that misinformation remains even after being uncovered. Sutton & Douglas (2020) support this phenomenon, arguing that once people accept a conspiracy belief, they are unlikely to change their stance. This contributes to the spread and evolution of false narratives rather than their disappearance (Sutton & Douglas, 2020; Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018), underlining the resilience of these conspiracy theories.

The most prominent and frequent actor to voice conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election was Donald Trump. He acted as the central figure, continuously reinforcing claims of election fraud and presenting arguments to justify these claims. Trump's team of lawyers and attorneys, including Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell, provided legal support for his claims, defended counterarguments, and filed lawsuits alleging opponents of their accusations. While the majority of Republicans supported and repeated Trump's claims, others distanced themselves after the Capitol riot or due to contradicting evidence. Analysis revealed that Fox News initially also amplified conspiracy theories and fraud claims but later moderated them. However, the media outlet did not position against Trump and contributed to the spread of fraud narratives through their reporting. This behavior fits within the framework of agenda-setting as outlined by McCombs & Valenzuela (2007).

As narratives shifted, so did media coverage of the 2020 US election conspiracy theories. While Fox News amplified the fraud claims in the beginning, CNN and MSNBC mainly focused on uncovering fraud claims, presenting them as misinformation for their audiences. This also supports claims made by Entman (1993), who argued that media outlets frame claims in ways that align with their audience's ideological leanings. Later, Fox News also distanced itself from specific allegations and even faced legal consequences because of their narratives. However, these findings highlight the media's role in shifting, yet persisting conspiracy theories and fraud narratives about the 2020 US election conspiracy theories. They

underscore Pérez-Escobar's (2023) finding that false narratives evolve, rather than disappear once they have been voiced. The results also underline the dangers of political disinformation and its impact on democracy concerning informed political opinion-making.

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this research highlight the significant impacts that false narratives and claims, especially about election fraud and stolen elections, can have on public trust in democracy and, consequently, also on political stability. Characterized by efforts to alter or annul voting outcomes, stolen election claims can also cause societal and political unrest, even protest, as seen in the January 6th Capitol riot. Allegations of election fraud or stolen elections are often false claims lacking evidence. However, false claims weaken trust in governmental institutions and processes and foster skepticism about legitimacy and integrity. The case of the 2020 US election fraud allegations demonstrated that even after exposing claims as untrue, the narrative evolved into conspiracy theories about systematic manipulation, keeping the controversy alive. False beliefs spread more easily in a polarized environment, in which conspiracy theories also fuel political division and extremism. The storm of the Capitol on January 6th, 2021, exemplifies how conspiracy theories can cause real-life consequences and lead to violence. Media plays a powerful role in either amplifying or debunking disinformation. Findings from the comparison of media outlets and insights from agenda-setting and framing theories explain that media reporting influences public perception. This not only makes it harder to combat misinformation but also challenges society to detect false information. Hence, this research demonstrates the potential for advanced handling of election fraud claims by the media. Prioritizing fact-checked and evidence-based reporting, and highlighting legal rulings and investigative findings will help prevent misinformation from spreading further. To avoid amplification of false claims, the media should also provide context to allegations instead of merely reporting on them without verified background

information. Further, the media should take a close look at the motivations behind false claims and their potential to cause unrest among groups of society. As media content addresses an audience, media literacy should be promoted among the public. Educating citizens on identifying misinformation or framing patterns can reduce the influence of election fraud narratives.

The findings of this research underline the importance of transparent electoral processes, media accountability, and public awareness to protect democracy from false claims and political manipulation. By applying these principles, media can contribute to the protection of democratic legitimacy and the prevention of disinformation undermining trust in government and its institutions and processes.

5.3 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study also contribute to the theoretical understanding of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and media influence, especially in political contexts. Three core insights emerged from research that reinforce existing theories and concepts outlined in the theoretical framework while also offering new perspectives.

A key insight of this study is the resilience of conspiracy theories despite contradicting evidence. The continuity of claims about election fraud in the 2020 US election throughout 2024 underlines the research conducted by Sutton & Douglas (2020). They emphasize that once individuals accept a conspiracy belief, they are unlikely to change their stance, even though there are reasoned counterarguments. This study demonstrated how claims of election fraud persisted, even after courts dismissed legal charges. Specific allegations shifted into broader speculations about election fraud but remained the main narrative about the 2020 US election. This also aligns with findings from van Prooijen & Douglas (2018), who suggested that conspiracy theories serve as frameworks for interpreting political and societal

uncertainties. The persistence of the beliefs surrounding the 2020 US election underlines their impact on society, especially in politicized environments.

This study not only confirms but also expands on agenda-setting and framing theories proposed by McCombs & Valenzuela (2007) and Entman (1993, in Scheufele, 1999). Findings underline that media outlets did not merely report on election fraud allegations but actively portrayed the narratives in ways that aligned with their and their audience's ideological leanings. Fox News initially amplified election fraud claims, while CNN and MSNBC critically reported about them, aiming to uncover false narratives. Such selective framing contributed to the political polarization due to the 2020 US election conspiracy theories, intensifying the public's perception of an illegitimate election. It also supports existing literature suggesting that framing can reinforce ideological divides and challenge consensus among democratic societies.

Another finding highlights the power of political actors as elites in driving and sustaining conspiracy narratives. Donald Trump and his allies acted as the central figures in legitimizing claims of election fraud and using them to their advantage. This demonstrated how public figures can effectively mobilize misinformation to affect public opinion. In line with the communication theories of Schlipphak et al. (2022), the results suggest that the discourse of the elites significantly influences public perception. Furthermore, it illustrates how elite-driven (conspiracy) narratives can lead to real-world consequences, such as the January 6 Capitol riot. This impact underlines that conspiracy theories can be instrumentalized as tools in political campaigns, causing societal implications.

To summarize, this research contributed to the theoretical discourse about misinformation, political communication, and the role of media therein. By demonstrating the interplay between conspiracy theories, media framing, and public perception of elite discourse, the study deepens the understanding of the evolution of misinformation amplified by political actors and media.

5.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Due to its specific focus on the 2020 US election conspiracy theories, this study is subject to some limitations. One major limitation is reflected in the choice of data for this research. The discussed election fraud claims have been derived from news media articles. Hence, the presented arguments rely on media reporting, which means there may be nuances to the allegations. Journalists' biases may be reflected in their rhetoric, or stories might have been adapted to the interests of the media outlet's audiences. Further, not all claims and arguments about this topic may be covered in this analysis. Thus, this master's thesis does not claim to be exhaustive of all claims and events surrounding the 2020 US election conspiracy theories. This is also due to the choice of data sources. This analysis used news media articles published by traditional news media outlets. CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC have been selected as the three main traditional news media outlets, but others, for example, left-leaning, right-leaning, or centrist media outlets, have not been taken into account.

Due to the limited scope of this master's thesis, a second analysis of the amplification of conspiracy theories surrounding the 2020 US election on Twitter was omitted. Hence, this analysis also does not cover the emergence or the spread of these narratives on social media platforms. Another limitation of the study is the focus on understanding the conspiracy theories themselves but not assessing their impact on people or consequences for politics or society. It is also not analyzed why people believed in them, as this thesis does not include psychological aspects.

Insights were only gained from this case, aiming to understand exactly this case and not to analyze electoral fraud in general and take the case of the 2020 US elections as an example. Therefore, there is also limited applicability to other cases of election fraud. Apart from theoretical and practical implications and learnings from the gained insights, the incidents during the 2020 US election and its aftermath do not compare to other electoral systems in other countries. Reasons for that are, for example, different political systems and

cultural circumstances influencing government and societal mindsets. For reasons of scope and time, this study covers a time frame of just under four years. Hence, a long-term analysis investigating the development of the claims over time and their influence on future elections is not possible.

Building on the addressed limitations of this study, future research could focus on social media platforms and their role in spreading and amplifying conspiracy theories, as initially envisioned. Because the reporting styles, as well as the audiences of modern media platforms, differ from those of traditional media outlets, findings of such an analysis would draw a more comprehensive picture of conspiracy theories and their impact. Additionally, public perception and belief in conspiracy theories could be investigated, and potentially the role of influencers on social media platforms in that regard.

Concerning different media outlets, a comparison between, for example, traditional news media outlets, social media platforms, and alternative media outlets could be performed. A study expanding on the insights from CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, including platforms such as X, Instagram, or Truth Social would offer new perspectives on the 2020 US election fraud claims and conspiracy theories. Another comparative study could employ a cross-national comparison, analyzing how the 2020 US election conspiracy theories and fraud claims have been perceived in other countries by investigating foreign media reporting. A longitudinal study of whether conspiracy theories about the 2020 US election faded, transformed, or got replaced by new ones could give insights into the long-term persistence of false narratives in a political environment.

Especially regarding their effects on the 2024 election, the impact and consequences of conspiracy theories could be examined. Addressing the need for media responsibility and literacy, research could also focus on the effectiveness of media fact-checking in detecting and countering conspiracy theories and misinformation. Further, the role of government in mitigating or enabling the spread of misinformation could be examined concerning public

trust in governmental institutions and electoral processes. Qualitative research about the 2020 US election conspiracy theories could assess the frequency of false narratives in media reporting, giving insights into media framing and concentration of topics.

5.5 Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the origins and evolution of 2020 US election conspiracy theories. It also emphasizes the role of media reporting in their spread and amplification among society. False narratives about election fraud were fueled by misinformation and disinformation, causing widespread doubt about the government's legitimacy and integrity. Results show that political leaders, actors, and media actively evoked and promoted conspiracy theories. Donald Trump's accusations of election fraud and his claims to have won the election were repeated and strengthened by his supporters. This led to the conviction that the election was stolen and blamed the Democrats for manipulating the election process. As legal charges against election fraud were dismissed, narratives shifted from specific accusations to broad claims of election fraud. Further, narratives about Republicans planning to overturn election results appeared. Despite the lack of proof, a large part of Republican allies supported Trump's perception of election fraud, culminating in the violent attack on January 6, 2021, when his supporters stormed the Capitol in an attempt to block the certification of the election results. The analysis of CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC articles shows how media outlets apply framing techniques to either support or refute fraud narratives. It is also highlighted that conspiracy theories are resilient to lacking evidence or legal rulings. The attack on the Capitol in January 2021 exemplified the impact and real-world consequences of persistent false information in political contexts. This study confirms and underlines how populism, political polarization, and conspiracy theories condition each other. Results show that media reporting plays an influential role, as it can both challenge and perpetuate disinformation. The demonstrated legitimacy and dissemination of these beliefs by

the political elites underlines how susceptible democratic institutions are to misinformation. Findings also highlight the need for responsible journalism and enhanced media literacy in terms of transparency. This especially applies to political contexts, where society relies on fact-checked information to form an opinion. To summarize, the persistent influence of disinformation on democratic governance is evidenced by the persistence of conspiracy theories surrounding the 2020 election. Addressing this problem requires a multi-layered strategy that includes legal protection, public education, and media accountability. Societies can better protect democratic integrity in the next election by understanding the mechanisms underlying the spread of false electoral narratives.

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