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When the Fear Sinks In: The Politics of Paranoia in the Wake of COVID-19

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**When the Fear Sinks In: The Politics of Paranoia
in the Wake of COVID-19**

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International Studies: Global Track

December 2023

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ABSTRACT

I pray that on the other side of this terrible darkness, love and light will surround us.

– New York Times commenter, March 6, 2021

This project begins in January 2021 – a period henceforth known as ‘post-pandemic’ – following the release of the first COVID-19 vaccines in Europe (AstraZeneca) and the United States (Pfizer). While the pandemic is still ongoing as of December 2023, the release of vaccines heralded a new era more reminiscent of a time before March 2020: less (or no) mask mandates, a reduced emphasis on social distancing, and a positive shift in social opinion towards prophylactic vaccination. During my time as an American studying international politics, I have observed a positive correlation between time passed since January 2021 and the rise of ultraconservative far-right politics across the globe. Through the use of case studies, literature review, and further synthesis, I hope to illustrate the evolving dynamic of these two variables, and the subsequent dangers waiting in the shadows of the future as a result.

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INTRODUCTION

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic embroiled the world in tragedy, resulting in nearly 7 million dead as of December 2023. During and after the pandemic's initial onset, there has been a marked rise in ultraconservatism (also known as 'far-right politics' or 'right-wing politics') across many democratic countries. This paper explores the United States and the United Kingdom as their political structures, reforms, and efforts trend more and more conservative over the 'post-pandemic' period. Using books for historical context and recent news articles for topical information, it was overwhelmingly evident that as the pandemic progressed, so did elite opinions in favor of conservative policy. Moreover, there is a significant disconnect between electeds and the voter base in both countries, resulting in widespread discontent amongst their respective populations. The world is effectively in a downward spiral of far-right politics for a mixture of reasons: the psychology of tragedy to bring out the worst in people, the desperation and pressure onset by large-scale paranoia, and the proliferation of propaganda resulting in brief, blind support.

METHODOLOGY

Although there have been dozens of countries who seem to have taken a leap towards far-right politics, this project focuses on two: the United States and the United Kingdom. With shared history and similar cultural norms, the U.S. and the UK serve as excellent benchmarks of how the West has responded to the pandemic. Both countries have elected a leader considered ‘extreme’ by most definitions, and their political systems have changed in the wake of the pandemic.

Case Studies

The United States elected Donald Trump, a Republican businessman remembered for his firm anti-immigration policies, which many regarded as xenophobic. His behavior during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic is thought by some to have exacerbated its devastation, in part because of his reluctance to inform the public of its dangers and his adamance in denouncing Dr. Anthony Fauci, who was then the chief medical advisor to the President. His lax approach to prophylactic measures and eagerness to restore order led to an array of misinformation from the country’s highest office and millions of Americans were caught in the crossfire of his inaction.

The United Kingdom elected Boris Johnson in 2019, a prominent politician and writer who helped spearhead the Vote Leave campaign in 2016. After the successful Brexit referendum, Johnson was elected in a snap general election, running his campaign on a commitment to finalizing the UK’s exit from the EU. Once Prime Minister, he was able to secure Brexit in January 2020. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the UK, and Johnson was credited with a swift response and a nationwide vaccine rollout which was one of the fastest in the world at its inception. However, controversies such as ‘Partygate’ – numerous unauthorized parties at

10 Downing Street during the peak of the pandemic – led to a vote of no confidence and his eventual removal. As the conservatives remain in power, Johnson’s successors have espoused more and more extreme rhetoric in an attempt to maintain the party’s favor.

Trump and Johnson have been compared in the media for being “larger-than-life populists” and garnering cults of personality around their public speaking and approach to public service.¹ Both criticized and praised for their extreme candor, disregard for political precedents, and colorful personal lives, they have managed to cement themselves in history, despite the significant controversy that surrounded their respective eras of leadership. For these reasons, Trump and Johnson are some of the most important public figures of the COVID-19 pandemic, and their decisions have had a tremendous impact on the future of global society.

Moreover, in the 21st century, propaganda is most often associated with fascist or totalitarian regimes. Rarely does the everyday person think they are being manipulated with propaganda. However, this is with the erroneous assumption that all propaganda is overt, obvious, or otherwise easy to catch. When historians reflect on the efforts of dictators, they do so with the gift of retrospect – something today will never have.

Methods

This project is sourced almost exclusively through secondary sources. Any firsthand information is from my own personal experience during the pandemic as an American woman. Most of the analysis and discussion in this paper regards ‘the now,’ i.e. the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the possible future. For this, I sought insight from a diverse set of news sources who reported on the ground of their respective countries and whose reporting best channeled the

¹ Frank Langfitt, “The Similarities Between Boris Johnson And Donald Trump,” *NPR*, July 23, 2019.

voice of their local people. When providing historical context or drawing comparisons as I do with the Spanish flu, I utilized a variety of books published by political scientists and historians.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background on Political Psychology

Political psychology is the cross-section at which politics and the psychology of man intersect; political psychology is inspired by ‘political behavior,’ a phenomenon which involves “any type of activity designed to meet some political end.”² This project is not about political psychology exclusively, but rather how political behavior creates a snowball effect leading to the metastasization of dangerous rhetoric. It is about how people are subconsciously influenced by countless forms of media, and these mediums inspire their personal values and actions. Many times, this is positive: we see commercials of dogs suffering in cages and donate to the cause, or maybe even volunteer our time at our local shelter. Other times, it is overwhelmingly negative: we see a TikTok video about how Jewish people or reptiles or QAnon or Democrats control our government, and this triggers our very human capacity to fear and defend ourselves, so we take matters into our own hands. It may seem like a uniquely American problem, but the pervasiveness of misinformation is a worldwide issue.

In considering political psychology, political behavior, and its influence on our global political systems, there are a number of big questions to consider. How did dictators such as Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, or Joseph Stalin come to power? Is it a credit to their skillful manipulation and diplomatic suave? Or did they simply exploit a weakness within their respective societies, which allowed them to advantageously rise to the top? Ultimately: how do we avoid repeating the past?

² David Patrick Houghton, *Political Psychology: Situations, Individuals, and Cases* (Routledge, 2014), 6.

Propaganda

To understand political psychology in the context of today's contentious climate, we must assert the motivations behind self-protectionism. We must also understand the nature of propaganda and its power over marketing and advertising, especially in political circles. The Soviets, who pioneered much of what the world understands about propaganda today, believed propaganda was part of education and thus its existence was intrinsic to the Soviet identity.³ It was deployed in radio, print, television, film, and art, with the goal of inspiring a collective consciousness in favor of a New Soviet world. It was a universal censorship that gave way to the Russian *samizdat*, an activity in which dissidents reproduced Soviet publications without governmental censorship, in an attempt to subvert their government's authoritarian influence.⁴

Propaganda remains difficult to define and discern. Nobody wants to be a victim to propaganda, and everybody thinks they are above such manipulation. Peter Kenez, who wrote extensively on the Soviet methods of mass mobilization, stated that "social scientists [...] have often defined propaganda in such a way as to make their definition an ideological weapon."⁵ Additionally, there is a contemporary ideological consensus that the best weapon against propaganda is intelligence. This is a logical fallacy in and of itself. If that were the case, then the Soviets would not have concerted resources to launch a mass pro-literacy campaign in an effort to improve disastrous literacy rates in its rural areas.⁶ One's susceptibility to propaganda has little to do with their intelligence; if anything, a more intelligent citizen makes for a more useful

³ Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 16.

⁴ Peter Reddaway, *Uncensored Russia: Protest and Dissent in the Soviet Union* (American Heritage Press, 1972), 350.

⁵ Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State*, 1.

⁶ *Ibid*, 70.

propaganda soldier. “Sometimes propaganda is aimed at our emotions,” said Kenez. “Sometimes at our minds.”⁷

Propaganda is about appeal. The rise of neo-fascists can happen for a mixture of reasons (this is one of the many questions this project investigates) but it is ultimately because of their appeal. Whether that is personal appeal, such as political suave and individuality, or simply because a candidate seems more appealing than the liberal incumbent or competitor is difficult to qualify. In the 21st century, propaganda remains a figment of the public sphere, it has invaded social media in ways more difficult to identify, making it harder for the average person to avoid manipulation.

Comparisons to the Spanish Flu

The 1918-1920 flu pandemic, better known by its misnomer the Spanish flu, was a global influenza pandemic caused by the H1N1 influenza A virus and killed approximately 50 million people.⁸ For this reason, the Spanish flu was deadlier than World War I, and yet has not received nearly as much historical coverage.⁹

In 1918, Madrid-based newspaper *ABC* published an article warning citizens of the “spread of a strange illness that had begun infecting the people of Spain.”¹⁰ Within a week, King Alfonso XIII was experiencing symptoms, as were hundreds of Spaniards across the country. However, the Spanish flu did not start in Spain; epidemiologists are unsure where the disease started, though it was likely in Western Europe or American military camps sometime between 1916 and 1917. However, the Spanish flu made landfall during a period of wartime censorship,

⁷ Ibid, 2.

⁸ Johanna Mayer, “The Origin Of The Name ‘Spanish Flu,’” *Science Friday*, January 29, 2019.

⁹ “The Influenza Epidemic of 1918,” *National Archives and Records Administration*, n.d.

¹⁰ Mayer, loc. cit.

and the U.S. and European press did not “did not acknowledge or transmit timely and accurate news about the high number of casualties among their military and civilian population.”¹¹ Spain, a neutral country during World War I, was not bound by any political constraints.

The Spanish flu is one of the deadliest pandemics in human history, second only to the Black Death. And yet it remains an anomaly in our global history, often overlooked in favor of the other, more ostentatious events of the 20th century. Laura Spinney, a British science journalist, wrote the non-fiction book *Pale Rider*, which depicts the events of the 1918 pandemic. Published in 2017, *Pale Rider* is a gripping and harrowing account that – unbeknownst to readers at the time – acted as a harbinger of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The Spanish flu is remembered personally, not collectively,” said Spinney. “Not as a historical disaster, but as millions of discrete, private tragedies.”¹² Pandemics and other forms of tragedy are treated differently, not only in the United States but across the world. The September 11 attacks, which resulted in the deaths of nearly 3,000 Americans, have statues and monuments commemorating the loss across the country.¹³ The Holocaust, which involved the genocide of six million Jews and five million prisoners of war, is treated with the same reverence.¹⁴ However, there is no monument honoring those who died of the Spanish flu, nor the millions who died of COVID-19. Among the many questions this project asks, one of them is: why? Pandemics and wars are both collective traumas, and yet the world would rather forget the former the minute they end.

Spinney described pandemics as a “social phenomenon, as much as it is a biological one” which “cannot be separated from [their] historical, geographical, and cultural context.”¹⁵ For

¹¹ Antoni Trilla, Guillem Trilla, and Carolyn Daer, “The 1918 “Spanish Flu” in Spain,” *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 47, no. 5 (fall 2008), 668-673.

¹² Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World* (Public Affairs, 2017), 4.

¹³ “22nd Anniversary of the September 11, 2001 Attacks,” *U.S. Department of State*, September 11, 2023.

¹⁴ “The Holocaust,” *The National WWII Museum*, n.d.

¹⁵ Spinney, *Pale Rider*, 5.

example, although the first recorded case of the Spanish flu was Albert Gitchell, a mess cook at Camp Funston in Kansas, it is understood that there were many – likely dozens – of cases before his across the world.¹⁶ Nearly every country blamed its immediate neighbor, a symptom of the intense proto-isolation of World War I, which is reminiscent of 21st century politics.

The world was supposed to have learned from the Spanish flu. Basic tenets like maintaining social distancing, not discounting the risk towards healthy individuals, and being cautious in the face of so-called cures were completely disregarded during the Spanish flu's most active period – and COVID-19's.¹⁷ According to CNN – and corroborated by Spinney – the Spanish flu's deadlier second wave was fuelled by “one large gathering near the end of the first wave in 1918.”¹⁸ Similarly, in July 2021, when restrictions were beginning to lift, air travel was becoming socially acceptable again, and vaccines were readily available, the new Delta variant of COVID-19 ravaged much of the West, causing an inordinate spike in cases and subsequent deaths.¹⁹

The average age of those who died from the Spanish flu was 28.²⁰ Millions much younger suffered and passed, even though there seems to be a colloquial belief that young people are protected from most diseases by virtue of their ‘strong’ immune systems. Such was the thought in 1918 and the same has happened since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a 2023 study from Oxford University stated that COVID-19 is the leading cause of death of children and young people.²¹ While those 50 and older account for the most number of COVID-19-related

¹⁶ Ibid, 36.

¹⁷ Holly Yan, “The 1918 flu pandemic killed 50 million people. These lessons could help avoid a repeat with Covid-19,” *CNN*, April 16, 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Coronavirus Second Wave, Third Wave and Beyond: What Causes a COVID Surge,” *Hopkins Medicine*, n.d.

²⁰ Yan, loc. cit.

²¹ “COVID-19 is a leading cause of death in children and young people in the US,” *University of Oxford*, n.d.

deaths by a large margin, the risk to young people cannot be discounted.²² Children and teenagers are less likely to know they may have underlying medical conditions that can contraindicate with the disease. Additionally, men and women younger than 50 are more likely to have a mental illness;²³ those with mental illnesses such as depression and schizophrenia have shown a higher likelihood of severe COVID-19 symptoms and death.²⁴

In 1918, people turned to all types of remedies, primarily in the forms of herbs or tonics in an attempt to relieve symptoms of the Spanish flu. As medicine at this time had “no clear explanatory theory of action,” these treatments were largely symptomatic, suggested as comforting rather than curative measures.²⁵ In 2020, then-President Trump touted a drug called hydroxychloroquine, which is used to treat arthritis, lupus, and malaria. Although Trump claimed to the American public that the drug showed “tremendous promise,” medical researchers came out within two weeks of his statement to negate this belief; rather, the misuse of hydroxychloroquine has been associated with the development of abnormal heart rhythms and has shown zero effectiveness against COVID-19, according to a French study published in 2020.²⁶

The Spanish flu was considered ‘over’ by the mid-1920s, after an intense but milder bout of influenza struck the world earlier in the year. Britain had begun preparing a vaccine in October 1919, and countries were becoming increasingly savvy in implementing social

²² John Elflein, “Number of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) deaths in the U.S. as of June 14, 2023, by age,” *Statista*, June 21, 2023.

²³ Preeti Vankar, “Percentage of U.S. men with any or serious mental illness in the past year as of 2021, by age,” *Statista*, November 29, 2023.

²⁴ “COVID-19: Who’s at higher risk of serious symptoms?” *Mayo Clinic*, n.d.

²⁵ “The Medical and Scientific Conceptions of Influenza,” *Stanford University*, n.d.

²⁶ Minali Nigam and Elizabeth Cohen, “French study finds hydroxychloroquine doesn’t help patients with coronavirus,” *CNN*, April 15, 2020.

distancing and mask-wearing measures.²⁷ Though some parts of the world reported higher levels of infection, these infections were less fatal than previous waves.²⁸

The parallels between the Spanish flu and the COVID-19 pandemic are endless, which begs the question: what did the world truly learn from the great influenza pandemic? Was it anything at all?

²⁷ “British Prepare for Influenza,” *The New York Times*, October 30, 1919.

²⁸ “Chicago Influenza Epidemic Spreads,” *The New York Times*, January 18, 1920.

THE UNITED STATES:

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Understanding the Healthcare System

The American healthcare system is a mixed system primarily monopolized by private insurance companies. A small percentage of Americans rely on insurance plans provided by the federal government, such as Medicaid and Medicare. Approximately 9% of Americans – or 2.5 million – were uninsured as of 2019.²⁹

50% of Americans receive private insurance via their employer. Employers provide health insurance to their employees as a part of their compensation package upon hiring. Guarantors – or the primary recipient of the insurance – are provided with a number of providers that are ‘in-network’ for their insurance plan. In-network providers vary by insurance company; being in-network means that the provider provides a service with no out-of-pocket charge. However, patients may be expected to pay a copay – a fee for an office visit – or a deductible, which is a certain amount of money a guarantor must pay out-of-pocket before their insurance begins to cover their charges. A deductible may be a couple hundred or couple thousand dollars.

Treatments, tests, and medications can cost anywhere from a few dollars to a few thousand. The U.S.’ emergency medicine departments are notorious for having sky-high fees, including ambulances rides, which cost the uninsured thousands of dollars out-of-pocket. 52% of Americans rate the quality of the healthcare system as ‘subpar’ or ‘poor,’ according to a Gallup poll. This is a stark decrease from the high of 62% in favor in the mid-2010s.³⁰

²⁹ “US Healthcare System Overview-Background,” *ISPOR*, n.d.

³⁰ Lydia Saad, “Americans Sour on U.S. Healthcare Quality,” *Gallup*, January 19, 2023.

The Scope of the Pandemic

The United States is credited with having largely failed the country during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in its early stages, with a lack of prophylactic measures taken to prevent subsequent waves. In November 2020, the U.S. was leading the world in COVID-19-related deaths. A study published in March 2021 stated that a number of factors contributed to the U.S. government's failure to act quickly and effectively, such as "the voluntary nature of the [lockdown] guidelines" resulting in a lack of "unified, enforced response across the country."³¹ States with more lenient or no restrictions generally suffered more deaths per capita, such as Texas, Arizona, and Oklahoma.³²

The U.S., like the UK, also struggled with testing procedures and contact tracing. "Testing kit and supply shortages further limited widespread availability of testing," according to the March study, and "the lack of a federal testing strategy has largely left states to handle purchases and distribution."³³ For states that did not prioritize pandemic recovery, this meant their citizens were unable to access testing facilities or equipment and were more susceptible to infection and/or death.

Healthcare workers were under a significant amount of stress during the first wave of the pandemic, having reported instances of "burnout, exhaustion, and trauma" in a field where they were predisposed to these problems.³⁴ Many hospitals suffered from critical staffing shortages and some states failed to adequately prepare their hospitals for the burgeoning pandemic. This led to increased rates of sickness amongst employees, leaving them unable to care for patients.³⁵

³¹ Mathew Alexander, Lynn Unruh, Andriy Koval, and William Belanger, "United States response to the COVID-19 pandemic, January–November 2020," *Health Economics, Policy and Law* 17, no. 1 (2022): 62-75.

³² "COVID-19 Mortality by State," *CDC*, n.d.

³³ Alexander, loc. cit.

³⁴ "Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Hospital and Outpatient Clinician Workforce," *ASPE*, May 3, 2022.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Rates of infection and death abated following the release of the COVID-19 vaccines, but vaccination was unpopular in a number of states. A 2023 Pew Research study showed that a majority of Americans supported getting vaccinated against COVID-19 and felt doing so was their responsibility as a citizen.³⁶ Another study stated that the difference in vaccination rate between Biden and Trump states was marginal as of May 2022: 65% of citizens from Biden states were vaccinated and 52% of citizens from Trump states were vaccinated.³⁷

Non-white and low-income communities were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. They were less likely to have access to adequate testing supplies and PPE and more likely to become infected and die from the virus. A late 2020 study determined that African-Americans were becoming infected at alarming rates, particularly in the Deep South where restrictions were lax or non-existent and African-Americans were more likely to be living in impoverished or dense, urban conditions.³⁸

Additionally, those held in prison during the pandemic were “5.5 times higher” to contract COVID-19 than the general public because of the nature of prison life and a lack of appropriate medical supplies.³⁹

COVID-19 has left its mark in a number of indelible ways, but has especially damaged the American public’s opinion towards Asian-Americans. As the virus began in Wuhan, China, some time in November 2019,⁴⁰ Asian-Americans of all descent suddenly became associated with the virus’ outbreak. There was a 339% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in 2021, a number

³⁶ Cary Funk, Alec Tyson, Brian Kennedy, and Giancarlo Pasquini, “What Americans think about COVID-19 vaccines,” *Pew Research Center*, May 16, 2023.

³⁷ Jennifer Kates, Jennifer Tolbert, and Anna Rouw, “The Red/Blue Divide in COVID-19 Vaccination Rates Continues: An Update,” *KFF*, January 19, 2022.

³⁸ Akilah Johnson and Talia Buford, “Early Data Shows African Americans Have Contracted and Died of Coronavirus at an Alarming Rate,” *ProPublica*, April 3, 2020.

³⁹ Katherine LeMasters, Shabbar Ranapurwala, Kathryn M. Nowotny, Meghan Peterson, and Lauren Brinkley-Rubinstein, “COVID-19 community spread and consequences for prison case rates,” *PLoS One*, 17, no. 4 (2022).

⁴⁰ “COVID-19 Timeline,” *CDC*, n.d.

that increased in 2022.⁴¹ In 2020, a Texas man admitted to targeting a Burmese family because he “thought they were Chinese” and thus responsible for “spreading [COVID] around.” He brutally slashed the father and 6-year-old child of the family and stabbed a Sam’s Club worker who attempted to intervene.⁴²

It is not only the documented stories that deserve attention, as hate crimes in general go underreported due to a perceived carelessness from law enforcement, or reported crimes are not labeled as ‘hate crimes’ due to the burden of proof with bias-motivated incidents.⁴³ As a university student in New York City, many of my East Asian friends have anecdotal experience with being harassed or attacked on the street; a friend of mine, who is Korean, was punched by a homeless man on the street and berated with slurs on more than one occasion. While events like these are difficult to ‘prove’ as being related to COVID-19 rather than general xenophobia or racism, it does put faces and names to statistics that can be difficult to swallow.

Political Consequences: The 2020 Election

The 2020 election was the 59th presidential election in the United States between Democratic candidate Joseph “Joe” R. Biden and Republican candidate and incumbent Donald J. Trump.

Joe Biden is a career politician who first joined the U.S. Senate at the age of 30 in 1972 and was regularly re-elected for multiple subsequent terms. Having endured several personal tragedies in the public eye, Biden became admired as a politician because of his commitment to public service and persona as a ‘family man.’ This, mixed with his humble upbringing and

⁴¹ Kimmy Yam, “Anti-Asian hate crimes increased 339 percent nationwide last year, report says,” *NBC News*, February 14, 2022.

⁴² Andy Rose, “A man who attacked and blamed an Asian family for Covid-19 pleaded guilty to hate crimes charges,” *CNN*, February 23, 2022.

⁴³ Tanner Stening, “Why hate crimes are underreported—and what police departments have to do with it,” *Northeastern Global News*, August 23, 2021.

picturesque Delawarian lifestyle, made him a very popular choice for the 2020 election. Biden also served as Vice President to Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, during which he was well-received.

Biden's son, Hunter, has been under investigation since 2018 for tax-related charges, illegally owning a firearm due to a history of drug abuse, and purported corruption.⁴⁴ These allegations have decorated much of his father's presidential term.

Donald Trump, the incumbent of the 2020 election, did not have any political office experience before winning in 2016. He was a Reform party candidate in California and Michigan in 2000 but withdrew from the race.⁴⁵ Trump was a prominent businessman and real estate investor before foraying into the political space.

All of his children except for Barron, a high school student, have publicly supported Trump and his presidential endeavors, having followed him on the campaign trail in 2016 and 2020. In 2017, Trump appointed his daughter, Ivanka, and her husband Jared Kushner as senior White House advisors, which was seen as an act of nepotism.⁴⁶

Throughout his first term, Trump was a source of tremendous controversy. While he initially received criticism from Fox News, America's chief conservative news network, opinions warmed once he was elected and much of Fox's current programming currently exists to his benefit.⁴⁷ Charlie Sykes, a conservative radio host, said that more than anything, "pro-Trump viewers want a safe space," and "a reliable outlet that will defend the president and attack his

⁴⁴ Lindsay Whitehurst, "Hunter Biden is indicted on 9 tax charges, adding to gun charges in a special counsel investigation," *AP News*, December 8, 2023.

⁴⁵ Adam Nagourney, "Reform Bid Said to Be a No-Go for Trump," *The New York Times*, February 14, 2000.

⁴⁶ "Donald Trump exploited loopholes to build a White House rife with nepotism. Lawmakers must close them," *The Boston Globe*, n.d. (Note: Trump was not the first president to do this; JFK gave high-profile positions to his brother and brother-in-law)

⁴⁷ Jason Schwartz, "Fox, facing new competitors, clings tighter to Trump," *Politico*, November 9, 2017.

critics.” The Murdoch family and Fox “have apparently decided that [they’re] going to give [the audience] that.”⁴⁸

Nearly all Washington Post pundits predicted Biden to win the presidency, though with varying margins of success.⁴⁹ This was echoed by Fox News, much to the chagrin of many of their newscasters.⁵⁰ The Republican party supported Trump’s accusations of voter fraud during the general election. During the latter days of the campaign, when support for Trump appeared to be dwindling, the incumbent relied on false rhetoric to improve his chances.⁵¹ He questioned the veracity of election results in a phenomenon that would become known to Democrats and ‘Never Trumpers’ as ‘the big lie.’

The “big lie” is a propaganda technique originally used by Adolf Hitler and mentioned in his autobiography *Mein Kampf*. The big lie asserts that if a certain falsehood is repeated consistently and broadcasted on enough different channels, then the public will believe it because it is within our human nature to believe extreme assertions, especially when those espousing them appear to be respected or educated figures.

After the 2020 election, when former president Trump asserted that the election was ‘stolen’ from him – a claim corroborated by then-Fox News host Tucker Carlson and multiple reputable Republican politicians – Democrats began referring to his claim as ‘the big lie,’ wherein the accusations of election and voter fraud were a disingenuous attempt at maintaining public attention.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “Here’s who the power rankers think are going to win — everything,” *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2020.

⁵⁰ David Folkenflik, “How a civil war erupted at Fox News after the 2020 election,” *NPR*, March 8, 2023.

⁵¹ Sam Levine and Spenser Mestel, “Just like propaganda: the three men enabling Trump’s voter fraud lies,” *The Guardian*, October 26, 2020.

Trump was later indicted on various counts of criminality, including business fraud, obstruction of justice, and election interference. He denies the allegations.⁵² However, claims of election fraud by the Republican party have had dire consequences for the American political process. The Cambridge University Press published a study in 2021 which found that “unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud undermine the public’s confidence in elections” and “these effects cannot easily be ameliorated by fact-checks or counter-messaging.”⁵³

Moreover, voter fraud – which in large quantities would lead to election fraud – is extremely rare, despite sensationalized claims after the 2020 election. In Wisconsin, five people were arrested and charged with voter fraud out of the 3.3 million ballots placed in the state.⁵⁴ While the 2020 election reported record-high levels of mail-in ballot voting, something that conservatives have used as ammunition to support their election fraud claims, there is no evidence that mail-in ballots increase the probability of election fraud.⁵⁵ However, because this allegation is frequently repeated and painted across headlines by conservative news channels, the American public is led to believe that election fraud is an epidemic in and of itself, which is simply untrue.

⁵² Melissa Quinn and Graham Kates, “Trump's 4 indictments in detail: A quick-look guide to charges, trial dates and key players for each case,” CBS News, September 5, 2023.

⁵³ Nicolas Berlinski, Margaret Doyle, Andrew M. Guess, Gabrielle Levy, Benjamin Lyons, Jacob M. Montgomery, Brendan Nyhan, and Jason Reifler, “The Effects of Unsubstantiated Claims of Voter Fraud on Confidence in Elections.” *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 10, no. 1 (2023): 34-49.

⁵⁴ Christina A. Cassidy, “AP review finds far too little vote fraud to tip 2020 election to Trump,” PBS, December 14, 2021.

⁵⁵ Darrell M. West, “How does vote-by-mail work and does it increase election fraud?” *Brookings*, June 22, 2020.

THE UNITED KINGDOM:

Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Understanding the Healthcare System

In 2008, the British government devolved the National Health Service (NHS), the country's public healthcare system, in an effort to better serve the unique populations of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This new system, known as the Barnett system, led to a "wide difference" for patients based on their local government.⁵⁶ Countries were allocated a certain price per person of population. As of 2018-2019, these numbers were £2,269 in England, £2,396 in Scotland, £2,402 in Wales, and the highest in Northern Ireland at £2,436.⁵⁷

England's system is driven by service improvements, such as reducing wait times and improving clinician responsiveness.⁵⁸ Scotland has a "collectivist model" revolving around free personal care and Northern Ireland underwent "very big structural change[s]" which brought "more integration between health and social care."⁵⁹ Wales introduced free prescriptions shortly after the announcement of devolution.⁶⁰

The devolved healthcare systems of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland were largely responsible for their own healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, £800 million was dedicated to supporting "people and businesses" of the respective countries.⁶¹ Healthcare expenditure in the UK grew by 15.7% between 2019 and 2020 due to (at least in part)

⁵⁶ "Huge contrasts' in devolved NHS," *BBC*, August 28, 2008

⁵⁷ Kelly Shuttleworth and Elspeth Nicholson, "Devolution and the NHS," *Institute for Government*, August 18, 2020.

⁵⁸ *BBC*, loc. cit.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ "Extra £800 million to support Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland through Covid-19 this year," *gov.uk*, December 24, 2020.

COVID-19 investments.⁶² A majority of Britons state that the NHS is a source of national pride for them, and the NHS is representative of the best of Britain's welfare state.⁶³

The Scope of the Pandemic

The United Kingdom, like many countries across the world, is thought to have been insufficiently prepared for the pandemic. After the pandemic's onset in the country in January 2020, there was "a significant delay before population-wide distancing strategies were introduced" and contact tracing was "abandoned in mid-March [of 2020]" which resulted in a lack of communication between providers, citizens, and the government. By May 2020, 70% of doctors polled in England indicated a lack of confidence in the government's response to the pandemic.⁶⁴ Overall, many British citizens were dismayed by Johnson's handling of the pandemic, which contributed to a vote of no confidence by the Conservative party. Though Johnson prevailed, he resigned a month later due to mounting concerns over his leadership and the conduct of his cabinet.⁶⁵

In June 2022, the British government launched an inquiry into the conduct of 10 Downing Street during the nationwide stay-at-home order in March 2020.⁶⁶ At this time, there were multiple reports of Johnson and his inner cabinet members hosting large gatherings, facilitating the spread of COVID-19 and disregarding their own regulations. These instances, subsequently known as "Partygate," were confirmed in November of 2021 and sparked outrage

⁶² Thomas Prendergast, "Healthcare expenditure, UK Health Accounts: 2020," *gov.uk*, May 9, 2022.

⁶³ "NHS remains our biggest source of national pride, but public are worried about its future," *The Health Foundation*, July 2, 2023.

⁶⁴ "The public health response by UK governments to COVID-19," *BMA*, October 2, 2023.

⁶⁵ Owen Amos, "Boris Johnson resigns: Five things that led to the PM's downfall," *BBC*, July 7, 2022.

⁶⁶ Jamie Grierson, "20 May 2020: what was UK doing while No 10 aide organised a party?" *The Guardian*, January 10, 2022.

amongst the British public.⁶⁷ Johnson's competence was called into question and the Conservatives began to look at alternative Prime Ministers.⁶⁸

Dominic Cummings, the former chief advisor to Boris Johnson, has become one of Johnson's biggest dissidents as a result of the former prime minister's conduct during the early months of the pandemic. Johnson was resistant to reinstating pandemic restrictions in December 2020, when cases had spiked in the UK, and allegedly stated that COVID-19 was "nature's way of dealing with old people."⁶⁹ A separate, conclusive report stated that Johnson "deliberately misled the Parliament" and was aware he was breaking COVID-19 restrictions during his time in office.⁷⁰ Cummings himself was also accused of unnecessary travel during the COVID-19 lockdown.⁷¹

Political Consequences: The Downfall of Boris Johnson

Shortly after Boris Johnson's election to the premiership, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United Kingdom, and Johnson's government was criticized for its lack of urgency. Johnson himself did not attend COVID-19 advisory meetings and the country was one of the last in Europe to enforce lockdown measures. Additionally, the UK's test and trace program was poorly implemented and there were high levels of miscommunication between government and the

⁶⁷ Piper Crerar, "Boris Johnson 'broke Covid lockdown rules' with Downing Street parties at Xmas," *Mirror*, December 1, 2021.

⁶⁸ Jon Stone, "Furious Tory MPs put Boris Johnson on notice over No 10 lockdown party revelations," *Independent*, January 15, 2022.

⁶⁹ Matthew Weaver, "Eight shocking revelations from Cummings and Cain at the Covid inquiry," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2023.

⁷⁰ Sylvia Hui, "5 key takeaways from 'partygate' report that found Boris Johnson deliberately misled UK Parliament," *AP News*, June 15, 2023.

⁷¹ Joshua Keating, "Why Is the U.K. in an Uproar Over a Boris Johnson Adviser's COVID Road Trip?" *Slate*, May 26, 2020.

general public.⁷² Some have theorized that the UK's death toll from COVID-19 would be much lower if lockdown measures were implemented sooner.⁷³

The COVID-19 pandemic consumed much of Johnson's premiership and his response garnered a significant amount of controversy from global news outlets due to perceived incompetence of leadership. He faced accusations of cronyism in his cabinet and a widespread neglect of COVID-19 restrictions. Other than Partygate – which pushed Johnson's administration into the global spotlight and provoked outrage amongst the British public – the Conservative party was struck with allegations of sexual misconduct.

The Deputy Chief Whip, Chris Pincher, resigned in June 2022 after it was revealed he allegedly “drunkenly groped two men” while at the Carlton Club, a private members' club in London.⁷⁴ This is years after he resigned in 2017 over similar accusations, having apparently made an “unwanted pass” at a British Olympic rower.⁷⁵ Pincher's most recent resignation came after a long string of similar events in Johnson's government: an unnamed MP was arrested on suspicion of rape a month prior; a former MP was revealed to have molested a 15-year-old boy; and that April, Conservative MP Neil Parish admitted to watching pornography in the House of Commons chamber.⁷⁶ These stories resulted in a severe infighting amongst Conservative politics and a rapid loss of trust in Johnson from the British public.

By early July, Johnson's cabinet members were resigning en masse; on July 7th, 2022, Johnson resigned.

⁷² Andrew Macaskill, Stephen Grey, Ryan McNeill, Steve Stecklow, Tommy Wilkes, and Andrew R. C. Marshall, “50,000 COVID-19 deaths and rising. How Britain failed to stop the second wave,” *Reuters*, November 24, 2020.

⁷³ Charlie Cooper, “Scientists turn on Boris Johnson over UK's coronavirus response,” *Politico*, June 10, 2020.

⁷⁴ Jessica Elgot, Rowena Mason, and Aubrey Allegretti, “Tory deputy chief whip resigns after ‘drunkenly groping two men,’” *The Guardian*, June 30, 2022.

⁷⁵ Peter Walker and Harrison Jones, “Tory whip steps down as more MPs are caught up in harassment scandal,” *The Guardian*, November 5, 2017.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Boris Johnson was succeeded by Liz Truss, who resigned after only 50 days in office due to a rapid loss in confidence in her leadership within the Conservative party.⁷⁷ After her came Rishi Sunak, the United Kingdom's first Indian prime minister. Sunak, considered a moderate conservative, has prioritized economic stability and public confidence in government. However, as of December 2023, Sunak is polling worse than his predecessors Truss and Johnson, particularly in the area of COVID-19 restructuring.⁷⁸ Considered too liberal by Conservatives and too conservative by the Labour party, Sunak is struggling to honor his campaign goals and combat the rising Reform party, led by former UKIP leader Nigel Farage.⁷⁹

The UK Independence Party (UKIP) is Britain's far-right nationalist political party, characterized by their focus on national identity, anti-immigration stance, and Euroscepticism (or distrust of the European Union). In recent years, the party has taken on a more extreme façade, with former leader Gerard Batten branding Islam a “death cult” that was “founded on violence and oppression and intimidation.”⁸⁰ Such statements have pushed UKIP into the far-right category of political parties in the UK.

Political scientists Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin describe UKIP as having fostered a very specific voter base. In their 2014 book depicting Britain's evolving political sphere, Ford and Goodwin stated that UKIP “voters are not single-issue Europhobes or political protesters,” rather they “[mix] deep Euroscepticism with clear ideas about immigration, national identity and the way British society is changing.”⁸¹ There is a remarkable disconnect between UKIP and the other three main parties of the Britain, as “those who lead [the other parties] are all from the

⁷⁷ “Liz Truss Announces Resignation as U.K. Prime Minister,” *WSJ*, October 20, 2022.

⁷⁸ Gaby Hinsliff, “Far from cleaning up Boris Johnson’s Covid mess, Rishi Sunak is drowning in it,” *The Guardian*, December 7, 2023.

⁷⁹ Alex Wickham, “Sunak Now Polling Worse Than Truss With Key UK Voters,” *Bloomberg*, November 4, 2023.

⁸⁰ Harvey Gavin, “New Ukip leader defends Islam ‘death cult’ comments - ‘I am right,’” *Express*, February 19, 2018.

⁸¹ Robert Ford and Matthew J. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain* (Routledge: 2014).

highly educated, socially liberal middle classes, who are comfortable in an ethnically and culturally diverse,” while the staff and voter base of UKIP “are older, less educated, disadvantaged and economically insecure Britons, who are profoundly uncomfortable in the ‘new’ society, which they regard as alien and threatening.”⁸² The Reform party, UKIP’s successor, has similar values and has garnered a similar voter base.

It is no surprise that parties such as UKIP and Reform have gained popularity in the years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as trust and confidence in government has fallen and many British citizens feel as though they were forced to isolate.⁸³ In parallel growth with right-wing politics has been the popularity of QAnon in the UK. In an interview to the BBC, an English woman stated that she “underwent a ‘spiritual awakening’ during the Covid-19 lockdown” and later started a Facebook group espousing QAnon rhetoric, which gained “thousands of followers in just a few weeks.”⁸⁴

She is far from the only one. Popular British YouTuber Charlie Ward began “uploading QAnon-themed videos during [COVID-19] lockdown” and QAnon rallies have garnered thousands of attendees in the last year.⁸⁵

Lack of trust in government is a breeding ground for conspiracy theories. In the face of perceived incapability or overt incompetence, humans naturally want to find the answer as to ‘why.’ Groups like QAnon seem outlandish to those outside of them, but for people who desperately seek answers or a sense of stability, these far-right organizations foster a sense of community, familiarity, and confirm people’s worst, most unconscionable beliefs.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Robin McKie, “Britain got it wrong on Covid: long lockdown did more harm than good, says scientist,” *The Guardian*, January 2, 2022.

⁸⁴ Shayan Sardarizadeh, “What’s behind the rise of QAnon in the UK?” BBC, October 12, 2020.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

CONSEQUENTIAL CONTAGIONS

QAnon & Conspiracy Theories

QAnon is a far-right extremist group which rose to prominence in 2017. It is both a conspiracy theory and political movement which started in the United States, but now boasts followings in countries across the world.⁸⁶ QAnon started on the Internet forums 4chan and 8chan, where posters began to embrace a number of outlandish conspiracy theories. Their core belief is that “the world is controlled by a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles,” most of which are American political and social elites such as Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Ellen DeGeneres, and Pope Francis.⁸⁷

According to Q, the anonymous figure at the center of this movement, these individuals run a global sex trafficking ring which conspired against Donald Trump.⁸⁸ QAnon became a bridge for the ideas of conspiracy theorists and far-right extremists to intersperse, onslaught by the ‘Pizzagate’ conspiracy theory which claims that high-ranking members of Democratic party control an organized pedophilia ring. Though discredited by dozens of organizations, including the Washington D.C. police department, Pizzagate has inspired thousands of QAnon followers across the globe and even pushed a North Carolina man to attack a pizzeria in 2016.⁸⁹

QAnon conspiracies have been spread and purported by many conservative journalists, despite the fact that their claims have been discredited by legitimate organizations.⁹⁰ Even worse, QAnon membership has increased since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Polish researchers Elżbieta Kuźelewska and Mariusz Tomaszuk stated in their 2022 study that “[the]

⁸⁶ McKenna Moore, “What You Need to Know About Far-Right Conspiracy QAnon, Which Was Present at the Tampa Trump Rally,” *Fortune*, August 1, 2018.

⁸⁷ Lorna Bracewell, “Gender, Populism, and the QAnon Conspiracy Movement,” *Front. Social.* 5 (2020).

⁸⁸ Michael Kunzelman, “‘QAnon’ conspiracy theory creeps into mainstream politics,” *AP News*, February 9, 2020.

⁸⁹ Hannah Allam, “Conspiracy peddlers continue pushing debunked ‘pizzagate’ tale,” *Miami Herald*, December 6, 2016.

⁹⁰ “The saga of ‘Pizzagate’: The fake story that shows how conspiracy theories spread,” *BBC*, December 2, 2016.

pandemic became a fertile ground for the bloom of the conspiracy theories already existing, but struggling for the global attention,” and that “disinformation campaigns, coupled with the Internet and social media, has greatly enabled the unprecedented global effect of QAnon.”⁹¹ Such effects have been seen in both the United States and the United Kingdom.

QAnon has journeyed far from the deep forums of the Internet and now poses a real, tangible risk on our temperamental world. It is more than a Facebook post: QAnon has inspired violence, touted antisemitism and other forms of hate speech, and promoted white supremacist ideas such as the Great Replacement theory.⁹² Its danger runs deep: 1 in 3 American veterans believe in QAnon’s conspiracy theories.⁹³ In a way, that is no surprise; America has been long considered to have failed its veterans, with nearly half of post-9/11 claiming that the transition to civilian life was “somewhat or extremely difficult.”⁹⁴ These studies show an acute connection between confidence in government – which is lacking in most veterans – and their belief in conspiracy theories, which is high at similar rates.

QAnon hysteria has been compared to the daycare sex abuse hysteria of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, during a period wherein more American mothers were working outside of the home and placing their children in daycare. Psychologists have stated that many of the accusations – while they were not all false – were either entirely fabricated or sensationalized – in part due to the new fear of leaving children with strangers.⁹⁵ Allegations of satanic sexual abuse happening in daycares was causing “moral panic” well into the mid-1990s.⁹⁶ A number of previous

⁹¹ Elzbieta Kuzelewska and Mariusz Tomaszuk, “Rise of Conspiracy Theories in the Pandemic Times,” *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 35 (2022): 2373–2389.

⁹² JTA and Charles Dunst, “Is QAnon, the Latest pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory, anti-Semitic?” *Haaretz*, August 3, 2018.

⁹³ Steve Beynon, “Nearly 1 in 3 Veterans Agree with Racist Great Replacement Theory, Rand Study Finds,” *military.com*, May 23, 2023.

⁹⁴ Ruth Igielnik, “Key findings about America’s military veterans,” *Pew Research Center*, November 7, 2019.

⁹⁵ Mark Pendergrast, *Victims of Memory: Sex Abuse Accusations and Shattered Lives* (Upper Access Book Pub, 1996).

⁹⁶ Mary de Young, *The Day Care Ritual Abuse Moral Panic* (McFarland, 2004).

convictions were eventually overturned. Similar to the QAnon conspiracies of today, these accusations were born from a lack of trust in daycare workers, confirmation bias, and fear of the unknown, which led many parents to accuse innocent people of malicious child sex crimes.

Moreover, QAnon has been associated with the dissemination of a number of social engineering tactics, such as post-truth politics – a phenomenon wherein basic facts such as what is ‘true’ and ‘false’ cannot be agreed upon – and fake news, a culture which has led to the purportment of false information as truth by even the most reputable news organizations. According to communications theorist Jayson Harsin, post-truth “can be recognized in constant discursive obsession with [...] dishonesty, especially lying, and by the public anxiety and distrust it generates,” a perfect storm for QAnon, as a group that fed off of the elevated anxiety of individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹⁷

Submission to QAnon is a simple question of human psychology. In our most primitive days, it was natural to believe that outsiders or different groups could be evil forces conspiring to hurt ‘good people.’⁹⁸ Those who believe in conspiracy theories do so because it provides them with some semblance of control; for some, it is easier to say that Joe Biden won the 2020 election because it was rigged or because he is a secret reptile rather than accept that the tide had turned against Trump. A psychology study explained that “irrational beliefs are rooted in pattern perception [...] the automatic tendency to make sense of the world by identifying meaningful relationships,” meaning that individuals who believe illogical conspiracy theories do so out of a desire to make sense of events they believe to be unexplainable.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Jayson Harsin, “Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. December 20, 2018.

⁹⁸ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, “The psychology of Qanon: Why do seemingly sane people believe bizarre conspiracy theories?” *NBC News*, August 13, 2018.

⁹⁹ Jiaying Zhao, Ulrike Hahn, and Daniel Osherson, “Perception and identification of random events,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 40, no. 4 (2014): 1358-1371.

Fear increases belief in conspiracy theories, which is why QAnon gained popularity in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic. But this is not a new phenomenon; for example, there are conspiracy theories about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the September 11 attacks. Sharp and sudden change to a public sphere – such as the change brought on by these tragedies – indicate a spark in conspiracy theories as a method of coping.¹⁰⁰

Conspiracy theories are not exclusive to conservatives. American studies have shown that when a Democrat is president, Republicans are more likely to tout conspiracy theories, and the opposite is true when a Republican is president.¹⁰¹

While it seems that a majority of QAnon followers are Protestant white Americans,¹⁰² there is a rising number of minorities who subscribe to conspiracy theories because of their susceptibility to discrimination by a majority group.¹⁰³ A Dutch study, focusing on the Muslim population in the Netherlands, stated that Dutch Muslims were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories because of the discrimination they face from white Dutch people and sentiments of “not feeling regarded as a full-fledged member of society.”¹⁰⁴

Disconnects Between the Elite & the Electorate

Despite the ousting of Boris Johnson by the Conservative party, the rallying cry of the citizens after his resignation was “Bring Back Boris,” which led to the appointment of Boris-backed candidate Elizabeth “Liz” Truss. Truss implemented an economic strategy later known as ‘Trussonomics’ which involved unfunded tax cuts up to 45 billion pounds. Market

¹⁰⁰ van Prooijen, loc. cit.

¹⁰¹ Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁰² Mia Bloom, “We knew QAnon is anti-Semitic. Now we know it’s racist, too,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July 5, 2021.

¹⁰³ Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Jaap Staman, and André P. M. Krouwel, “Increased conspiracy beliefs among ethnic and Muslim minorities,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 32, no. 5 (2018): 661-667.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

response was tragic and the value of the sterling “plunged” and the Bank of England was forced to launch an “emergency government bond-buying programme in an attempt to stabilise markets.”¹⁰⁵ Truss spent her subsequent days in office reversing her decision and attempting to fix what she had broken.

Truss’ decision was backed by the Conservative party and represented more than one woman’s erroneous mistake; it represented an ideological delusion amongst Conservatives. The UK has had “persistently low growth” since its 2007-2009 financial crisis and many Conservatives have called for Thatcherite measures: free-market principles featuring low tax and supply-side reforms.¹⁰⁶ When Johnson resigned, inflation was at a “forty-year high” and interest rates were skyrocketing.¹⁰⁷ In response, Truss and her chancellor – Kwasi Kwarteng – implemented a ‘mini-budget’ which they alleged would boost the economy beyond what had been seen in years. It had the opposite effect: Conservatives turned against Truss and she was ousted after only 44 days in office.

Conservatives have strayed far from the ideals of the British electorate, particularly in regards to economic reform. Truss’ reforms worsened a fragile economy already facing a cost of living crisis and inflation. The determination of the British political elite to ‘go-for-growth’ and institute expensive tax cuts represents the cognitive disconnect between UK Conservatives and the citizens that originally voted them into office.

However, this is not an exclusively British phenomenon. An opinion report from The Hill in 2022 described a disconnect between U.S. citizens and their legislators, particularly on social issues such as climate change, which have been pushed to the backburner by the most liberal of

¹⁰⁵ Keith Fray, Carolina Vargas, Kevin Wilson, Charlotte Middlehurst, and Sam Joiner, “How the markets broke ‘Trussonomics,’” *Financial Times*, October 22, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

politicians.¹⁰⁸ The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace released a study stating that the United States is so polarized that “[we] are on the brink of civil war.”¹⁰⁹

Polarization extends past neighborhoods and communities and has infected the country’s elite, similar to the United Kingdom, resulting in high levels of infighting. Consider the very public discourse between former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and former President Donald Trump: the two major parties simply could not get along. And this issue – the inability for major parties to cooperate, see reason, or compromise – is indicative of a new era of politics, much more radical and dangerous than its predecessors.

When your politicians refuse to speak to one another, the electorate is growing more and more discontent, and the global economy seems to be tanking, what is the world to do? The pandemic pushed every country to its natural limit, pulling back the curtain to reveal the true colors of many politicians and citizens. Millions of people are dead with nothing to show for it. Liberals and conservatives worldwide are more radical than ever before, motivated by a mutual extremism and desperation to rule as they see fit in the face of horrible tragedy. To many politicians, the COVID-19 pandemic was a bump in the road of their agenda, but the reality is much darker. Millions lost parents, siblings, children, and friends.

Despite this, the world is eager to move forward and push COVID-19 deep into the bowels of history. What happens in five years when COVID-19 is no longer in the public consciousness? What happens when we forget everything we were supposed to learn? And what happens a hundred years from now – when it all happens again?

¹⁰⁸ Joseph Chamie, “Growing disconnects between citizens and legislators endanger US democracy,” *The Hill*, August 2, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Rachel Kleinfeld, “Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States: What the Research Says,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 5, 2023.

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