The Candidates and Dynamics of Conspiracy Theories in the 2020 Election

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Abstract

With the election of Marjorie Taylor Greene and the increase in QAnon candidates running for office, many worry about the role of conspiracy theories in campaigns. Using 1,960 Senate and House candidates' personal and campaign Twitter accounts, I analyze which candidates supported specific conspiracy theories around QAnon, COVID-19, or the 2020 election. 300 candidates, or 7.6% of all Congressional candidates, expressed support for a conspiracy theory during the 2020 election cycle. Republican conspiratorial candidates ran in races with lower odds of success, while Democratic conspiratorial candidates were more likely to be incumbents. Analyzing tweet dates and Twitter trends further reveals that Republican candidates did not change tweeting habits after their Primary election and were followers, not leaders, of conspiracies. This indicates that conspiratorial candidates aren't using these theories strategically and are likely tweeting out of true support for the conspiracy.

Introduction

The 2020 election saw a wave of conspiracy theories like no past election. While Americans have long been suspicious of government and political elites, turning at times to conspiratorial narratives, the sheer number of conspiracy theories in 2020 was unlike any other (Oliver and T. J. Wood 2014; Stanton 2020). QAnon, a conspiratorial group started in 2017, gained popularity with its beliefs that a "deep state" was working against then-President Trump (Wong 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 became the perfect breeding ground for conspiracies, as the explanation of a virus coming from a Chinese wet market seemed too mundane an explanation for the yearlong international pandemic that followed (Lynas 2020). These theories were not simply fringe ideas: 17% of respondents to a 2020 NPR poll believed that a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media (a common QAnon belief) (Rose 2020), while a 2020 YouGov poll found that 28% of Americans, including 44% of Republicans, believed that Bill Gates wanted to use vaccines to implant microchips in people (Sanders 2020). Politicians have increasingly been drawn into these theories, whether out of personal belief or in an attempt to win voters. Trump himself promoted many of these conspiracy theories, sharing them over 1,700 times on Twitter (Shear et al. 2019).

While some conspiracy theories may be harmless, others, especially those around COVID-19, can become dangerous. Racially fueled attacks against Asian-Americans rose exponentially in 2020 (Cabral 2021). Many Americans refuse to be vaccinated: in May 2021, 41% of Republicans reported they did not plan on getting vaccinated, compared to 4% of Democrats (Santhaman 2021). Many QAnon members stormed the U.S. capitol on January 6, 2021 to protest the election's outcome (Roose 2021). The willingness of public officials or those running for office to repeat, spread, and legitimize conspiracy theories can result in deadly consequences.

While old conspiracy theories, such as the assassination of JFK, are linked more to

conspiratorial thinking, more recent theories, such as the birther movement, are primarily predicted by partisan and ideological identification (Enders and Smallpage 2019). These conspiracy theories are used as partisan calling cards and may serve to increase partisan support instead of serving as an electoral detriment (Smallpage, Enders, and Uscinski 2017). Candidates may then choose to express support for conspiracy theories not out of true belief, but as a show of partisanship and electoral strategy. While the literature has focused on why individuals believe in conspiracy theories, less is known about candidates who support these theories and their potential election outcomes.

I analyze the demographics of Congressional candidates who publicly supported conspiracy theories in the 2020 election. These conspiracy theories are narrowed to a few key Republican and Democratic conspiracy theories that spread during this election cycle: belief in or support for QAnon, specific theories around the 2020 Election being rigged, the COVID-19 pandemic was fake or orchestrated, masks are only used for public control, COVID-19 vaccines are nefarious and/or contain microchips, George Floyd's death was staged, and De-Joy sabotaged the post office to ensure Trump was reelected. Due to the different nature of conspiracy theories spread in both parties, I elected not to directly compare Democratic and Republican candidates to each other. Instead, I compared Republican (or Democratic) candidates who supported conspiracy theories to other Republican (or Democratic) candidates who did not support such theories.

I amassed a database of all Congressional candidates' tweets utilizing Ballotopedia's collection of official candidate campaign and personal accounts. I used key words and phrases from each conspiracy to find which candidates publicly supported these conspiracies, and then compared these candidates' demographics, election outcomes, and districts. By comparing averages and results from OLS regressions, I find that 300 candidates, or 7% of all House and Senate candidates, tweeted or voiced their support for one of the chosen conspiracy theories. Republican and Democratic conspiratorial candidates ran in different districts

and different races: conspiratorial Democrats ran in districts more likely to already have a Democrat in power, while conspiratorial Republicans ran in districts with higher filing cost and lower filing signature requirement. Conspiratorial candidates who won their primary and general elections also differed from their co-partisans: conspiratorial Republicans raised higher amounts from small donors, while conspiratorial Democrats were much more likely to be incumbents.

While it is difficult to determine whether candidates hold a sincere belief in certain theories, I test whether they used conspiracy theories intentionally by analyzing whether they used these theories differently, whether by supporting or ignoring them, during different periods of their candidacy. For example, candidates may espouse conspiracy theories during their primary campaign but stop addressing them once a win is secured, or vice versa. I employ a difference-in-difference while exploiting state variation in Primary Election dates to determine how elections impacted candidates' social media postings about conspiracy theories. I use a Granger causality to analyze if Twitter trends successfully forecast candidates' postings before and after their Primary Election. I find that there is no difference in conspiratorial tweets before and after their Primary election, and that candidates follow Twitter trends rather than setting them.

This paper advances our understanding of which candidates spread conspiracy theories in the 2020 election and contributes to the growing body of literature on the impact of small donors and how they can help conspiratorial candidates in their election. It further helps us better understand how elites may use conspiracy theories in their communications with the public, indicating that candidates rarely use extreme theories in a strategic play for votes, but rather out of true belief. While this finding may not hold for less extreme conspiracy theories, and as individuals such as Trump make certain conspiracy theories appear more mainstream, future studies may help us determine if this is a lasting effect, or just a side effect of the 2020 election.

Conspiracy Theories in America

Americans have long been suspicious of government and political elites (Barber 1983). This distrust in government has at times led to fears of secretive conspiracies (Oliver and T. J. Wood 2014). Anti-Masonic and anti-Catholic movements in the nineteenth century, as well as the "Red Scare" of the twentieth century, illustrate how Americans often share narratives about groups that collude in secret towards nefarious goals, what we would call "conspiracy theories" (Davis 1971; Bale 2007). Conspiracy theories in America have shifted over time from accusing outside groups of attempting to infiltrate the government towards blaming the federal government as a primary conspirator (Olmsted 2019). There has been a sharp increase in conspiracy theories shared publicly in the past few decades, as well as the popularity and legitimacy afforded them (Stanton 2020). Beliefs that Obama was not born in America, vaccines cause autism, and the government is colluding with big business frequently appear on news and social media sites (Tilley 2019).

Though the general public and academics often view such theories negatively, these beliefs are surprisingly common: at least half of the American public believes one or more conspiracy theory (Oliver and T. J. Wood 2014; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009. This popularity has led some to argue that conspiracy theories are no longer on the margins of society, but instead have come to "predominate American political culture" (Fenster 2008) and should be defined as a set of political beliefs rather than labeled as an extremist view (Fenster 1999).

There are many reasons conspiracy theories are so popular. These theories appeal to a desire to find meaning or explanations for large or significant events, a way for those feeling powerless to regain control, and to show support for one's social group (Douglas et al. 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Americans quickly turned to these theories to make sense of the situation and cope with feelings of fear, uncertainty, and lack of control, sharing theories such as COVID-19 is a hoax, Fauci created the virus, or the virus was created as a ploy to trick people into receiving a microchip in the form of a vaccine (Lynas

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2020; Dwoskin 2021). Perceptions of political power also play into citizens' willingness to believe such theories. As Uscinski and Parent (2014) wrote, "At bottom, conspiracy theories are a form of threat perception, and fears are fundamentally driven by shifts in relative power. Because defeat and exclusion are their biggest inducements, conspiracy theories are for losers" (Uscinski and Parent 2014 131). As expected, Democrats and Republicans show an increased willingness to hold political conspiracy beliefs when the opposing party is in power (Wright and Arbuthnot 1974; Uscinski and Parent 2014; Bavel and Pereira 2018).

While the literature lacks information on candidates who support conspiracy theories, many studies have analyzed the demographics of conspiratorial individuals. These people are more likely to be less educated, are male, unmarried, unemployed, and have weaker social networks (Douglas et al. 2019). They are also likely to have a "conspiracy mindset", in that they are more likely to believe multiple conspiracy theories, even mutually incompatible theories (Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012; Imhoff and Bruder 2014).

The effect of believing political conspiracy theories on political behavior is contested. Many argue that these beliefs can lead to feelings of alienation from politics (Goertzel 1994), increased feelings of political powerlessness and decreased willingness to vote in elections (Jolley and Douglas 2014), and decreased likelihood of political activities, such as donating money to candidates or putting up political signs (Uscinski and Parent 2014). Others contend that it increases willingness to engage in protests (Imhoff and Bruder 2014), encourages people to become more involved in politics, and changes policy stances (Kim 2020). As conspiracy theories proliferate false information and create a sense of paranoia and doubt, it can turn voters against certain government officials and institutions. Candidates might use this to encourage more people to vote for them instead of their opponents, which they may paint as part of the corrupt institution.

While there are some studies suggesting Republicans are more prone to conspiratorial thinking than Democrats (Enders and Smallpage 2019, others find conspiracism is not a

result of political conservatism (Oliver and T. Wood 2014). Still others argue that extremists on both sides are more likely to believe conspiracy theories than moderates, though right wingers are the most prone to such beliefs (Douglas et al. 2019). I leave that debate to others. Instead, I analyze each party's conspiracy theories separately instead of comparing them directly to each other, particularly as the conspiracy theories on either sides of the aisle vastly differ from each other in the 2020 election.

Data

Conspiracy Theories Used

While many conspiracy theories spread during the 2020 election cycle, I chose to focus on seven key theories - six Republican, one Democratic - that were among the most well known. The theories that Republican voters tended to support were belief in or support for QAnon, the COVID-19 pandemic was fake, masks are used only for social control, the COVID-19 vaccine contained a microchip or was dangerous, George Floyd's death was staged, and the 2020 election was intentionally rigged by specific actors.

QAnon: The QAnon movement began in October 2017 when an anonymous user Q, claiming to be a highly ranked government official, posted on an anonymous 4Chan message board claiming that a "deep state" was working against Donald Trump and leveling accusations against high-ranked Democrats (Wong 2018). Since then, QAnon has amassed a large following, many of whom are Trump supporters (Bank, Stack, and Victor 2018). One of their primary beliefs is that Satan-worshipping elites in government run a child sex ring (Roose 2021). When asked about QAnon, Trump said he didn't know much about the group other than "they like me very much" and "these are people who love our country" (ibid). Many QAnon members stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 to protest Trump's election loss (ibid). Candidates often tweeted support for QAnon through directly referencing the group or tweeting the group's primary hashtag, "Where We Go One We Go All" (often

shortened to WWG1WGA), referencing the incoming storm or great awakening, and calling each other digital soldiers. For example, Jo Rae Perkins (R-OR) tweeted: "Congratulations to @laurenboebert We need more #Patriots like Lauren Boebert in Washington DC. I look forward to meeting Lauren #WWG1WGA #DigitalSoldiers #PerkinsForUSSenate"

COVID: The belief that COVID-19 is fake or orchestrated was first popularized by Judy Mikovits, who claimed in a documentary film entitled "Plandemic" released in May 2020 that Fauci deliberately unleashed the virus to benefit from vaccine sales, and was later shared on Fox News (Michor 2020; Gerstein 2021). Candidates who tweeted support for this theory often tweeted that the "Scamdemic" or "Plandemic" was fake or orchestrated for power, money, or to steal the 2020 election, and that COVID-19 deaths were fake or inflated. Erin Cruz (R-CA) tweeted, "This push for Pandemic Precautions was authentic for first 2-3 weeks. When we saw numbers shift with testing, death rates plummet; the now fake plague became about money, power, and control. It's now an attempt to crash our system, infrastructure, & our economy. #openCA #liberty".

Masks: A related conspiracy was that masks were not only useless, but were instead a propaganda tool, an intentional ploy to harm Americans, or used as indoctrination for control. As Alison Hayden (R-CA) tweeted, "Masks have NOTHING to do with health safety but ALL about testing social control, how willingly people will obey edicts w little evidence."

Vaccines: In March 2020, articles misrepresented Bill Gates' statement that digital certificates would track who received a vaccine, instead reporting that Bill Gates planned on using microchip implants to fight COVID (Goodman and Carmichael 2020). By May 2020, 28% of Americans, including 44% of Republicans, reported believing that Bill Gates wanted to use vaccines to implant microchips in people to track them with a digital ID (Sanders 2020). This theory is supported by various popular figures, such as Roger Stone, former adviser to Trump (Goodman and Carmichael 2020). Some candidates tweeted that

the vaccine would sterilize people, that Gates created COVID to microchip people, or that the vaccine was the biblical mark of the beast. Omar Navarro (R-CA) tweeted, "You wanna wear a mask & suffocate yourselves? Ok You wanna take vaccines & inject yourselves with poison? Ok You wanna microchip yourselves & give up your freedom? Ok You wanna take the mark of the beast? Go right ahead Forgive me if I don't join you."

Floyd: The next conspiracy theory that spread during the 2020 election cycle was that George Floyd was not dead; instead, the FBI or George Soros faked his death to start a race war or influence the upcoming election (Alba 2020). Candidates tweeted about a "georgefloydhoax", theories about how Floyd's casket was too small, or the use of deepfake technology in the video. One of the founders of this conspiracy theory, Winnie Heartstrong (R-MO) tweeted that "George Floyd is alive, America! Prove me wrong! #Floyd_is_Alive".

2020 Election: Finally, the most popular conspiracy theory during the 2020 election was that the election was stolen from Donald Trump. While many candidates tweeted to "stop the steal" or "count every vote", I elected to focus on those who tweeted specific provably false theories about how the election was stolen. This ensured my data was not eclipsed by the many Republicans tweeting their support for President Trump and was more in line with the other more extreme Republican theories. These specific theories included that Dominion Voting Systems intentionally rigged the election, Dominion servers were seized by US military, and suitcases or boxes of ballots were destroyed or flown into cities. Elisa Martinez (R-NM) tweeted, "FACT-CHECKED: SOS Benson stated election night errors flipping votes to Biden was human error. The audit shows that is NOT TRUE. AUDIT: Dominion Voting System is intentionally & purposefully designed w inherent errors to create systemic fraud & influence election results".

DeJoy: While Democrats did not have as many conspiracy theories as Republicans in 2020, I chose one theory that candidates were most likely to repeat: that Louis DeJoy, the postmaster general appointed in May 2020, intentionally sabotaged the post office to ensure

Trump won reelection. DeJoy made several changes to the post office organization, including several cost-cutting measures, which led to slower mail delivery in certain areas. This led several Democrats to accuse DeJoy of deliberating sabotaging an election that relied on mail-in ballots, despite the Postal Service promising its "ample capacity" to manage mail-in ballots (Wolf 2020). Candidates tweeted that these changes were a politically motivated attack, that DeJoy was helping Trump steal the election, and that Trump installed DeJoy as an accomplice to sabotage the election. As Pam Keith (D-FL) tweeted, "Donald Trump, through his agent Louis DeJoy, ordered the industrial sabotage of the United States Postal Service for the express purpose of subverting the ability of citizens to vote in an election. Trump's actions caused serious damage to both the USPS & interstate commerce."

Collecting the Data

I collected the official campaign and personal Twitter handles of candidates running for Congress in 2020 utilizing Ballotpedia's collection of candidates' social media sites. After downloading 2,450,534 tweets from 1,634 candidates' Twitter accounts posted from January 1, 2020 to January 19, 2021, I used key words and phrases to search for posts that dealt specifically with the chosen conspiracy theories. These accounts represented 41.7% of all Congressional candidates. I then cleaned these posts by hand to ensure they were in support of the conspiracy theory instead of disparaging those who believed in it. The list of all key words, candidates, and their social media postings are included in the Appendix.

I collected further data on the elections, campaign finances, and districts of each candidate. I used FEC data to compile a list of 3,922 Congressional candidates in the 2020 election, as nearly all federal candidates registered with the FEC. Candidate vote share during the primary and general elections was collected via CQ Press Voting and Elections Collection. Candidate donor information was collected using the FEC data. District vote share for Trump in the 2016 and 2020 elections was collected via Nir 2020. District demographics came from the American Community Survey, relying on 2019 estimates. When

merging candidate vote share to the FEC data of all candidates, 1,350 candidates had no data on vote share due to name discrepancies, they received few to no votes, or they dropped out before the election.

I found 2,151 conspiratorial tweets from 300 candidates - 1,357 tweets from 178 Republican candidates, 483 tweets from 106 Democratic candidates, and 311 tweets from 16 3rd party candidates. I supplemented the tweets I directly pulled with deleted tweets from Politwoops and reports of QAnon supporters from Media Matters, who used social media posts and candidate websites to determine which candidates supported QAnon (ProPublica; Kaplan 2020). Table 1 reports the total number and percentage of candidates who supported each of these theories compared to all candidates. Table 2 shows the average number of mentions of each of these conspiracy theories by candidates.

Table 1: Total Number of Candidates by Topic

	QAnon	Election	COVID	Masks	Vaccines	Floyd	DeJoy	Total
Republican	108	84	34	15	8	6	0	178
	6.46%	5.03%	2.03%	0.9%	0.48%	0.36%	0%	10.66%
Democratic	5	6	2	2	0	1	97	106
	0.34%	0.4%	0.13%	0.13%	0%	0.07%	6.51%	7.12%
3rd Party	9	4	7	5	1	1	2	16
	1.18%	0.52%	0.92%	0.65%	0.13%	0.13%	0.26%	2.10%
Total	122	94	43	22	9	8	99	300
	3.11%	2.39%	1.10%	0.56%	0.23%	0.20%	2.52%	7.65%

Note: Numbers may not add to total, as some candidates tweeted support for multiple theories

Table 2: Average and Total Tweets per Conspiratorial Candidate

	Republican Topics						Democratic Topics
	QAnon	Election	COVID	Masks	Vaccines	Floyd	DeJoy
Average Tweets	8.16	6.27	3.30	2.27	4.89	10.63	2.52
Total Tweets	995	586	142	50	44	85	249

Overall, most conspiratorial candidates tweeted about QAnon, DeJoy, or the 2020 Election. These candidates made up a small percentage of all candidates in their respective

parties and compared to all candidates. Most conspiratorial Republican candidates tweeted about QAnon, followed by the 2020 Election and COVID. Very few candidates tweeted about masks, vaccines, or Floyd, while none tweeted support for the DeJoy theory. Overall, 10.7% of all Republican Congressional candidates tweeted support for at least one conspiracy theory during the 2020 election cycle. 97 candidates or about 6.5% of conspiratorial Democratic candidates tweeted about DeJoy intentionally working to overthrow the election, making it the most popular conspiracy theory for candidates to share. There were a surprising non-zero number of Democrats who tweeted support for QAnon, 2020 election theories, COVID, masks, and Floyd. On closer examination, these candidates held more conservative or Trump centered views but ran as Democrats. Some of these same candidates are running in the 2022 election and most are now running as Independent or Republican. 3rd party candidates appear to support more Republican theories, although two did support the theory about DeJoy.

As table 2 shows, most conspiratorial tweets focused on QAnon. Several candidates tweeted about QAnon multiple times each week: 5 candidates tweeted about QAnon over 50 times during 2020, and two of them, Alison Hayden and Jo Rae Perkins, won their Primary election while losing the General election. There were also a large number of tweets about the 2020 election. Even though there were more supporters of the DeJoy theory, there were double the number of tweets about the election, implying that Republicans were pressing the election theories much more strongly than the Democrats were pushing their theory about DeJoy.

There were several Republican candidates who supported multiple conspiracy theories. To test how often candidates supported multiple theories, I created a heat map (Figure 1) which shows the percent of candidates who supported two conspiracy theories. Most percentages are quite low, with the exception of QAnon and Election tweets, as about 22% of candidates who tweeted support for QAnon or election denial claims had tweeted support

for both theories. This indicates that several QAnon supporters became election deniers after the 2020 election. A closer look at the data found that 32% of election conspiratorial candidates had at one point voiced support for QAnon. The otherwise low percentages for other conspiracy theories indicates that there wasn't a strong group of conspiratorial candidates who simply supported every conspiracy that came along; rather, most individuals focused on one or two conspiracies.
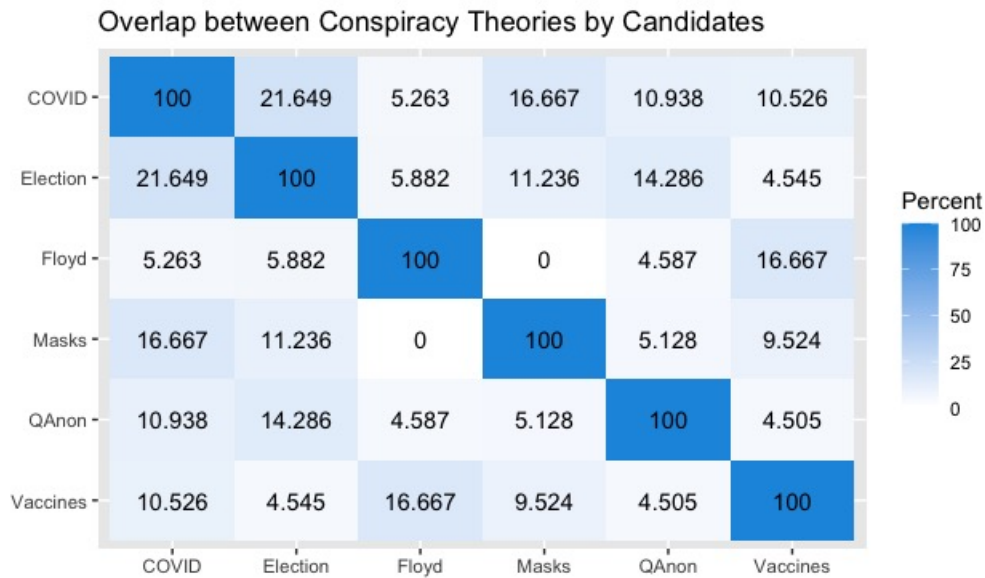

Figure 1: Overlapping Conspiracy Theories

In total, 7.6% or 300 candidates supported conspiracy theories during the 2020 election cycle.

Methods

To better understand if and how candidates who publicly supported conspiracy theories differed from typical partisans, I compare conspiratorial candidates to their non-conspiratorial co-partisans using t-tests to check for statistical difference in means. I used an OLS regression to further determine which of these variables best explained why conspiratorial candidates acted the way they did controlling for candidate, race, and district demographics.

Next, I analyzed when candidates tweeted, focusing on Republican conspiratorial candidates. Candidates could choose to post strategically, designed to increase donations or voter support, or non-strategically. If candidates are posting strategically, we might expect them to change their tweeting behavior before and after their primary election. Candidates may act more extreme before the primary election, but act more moderate after winning their primary election to better appeal to moderate voters and the general public in the general election. On the other hand, candidates may also feel free to post more about conspiracy theories after they've lost an election, revealing their choice to hide their beliefs during their campaign. I used a generalized difference-in-difference method to determine if candidate mentions of conspiracy theories changed around election time, using individual and time fixed effects. As the date of primary elections differ by state, I was able to exploit this state variation to determine how, if at all, candidates' postings differed.

Finally, I used a Granger causality test to determine how, if at all, candidates' conspiratorial tweets connected to social media trends about the same topic. Granger causality tests analyze whether one time series forecasts another. I use it to analyze if candidates' tweets aligned with Twitter trends and, if so, if candidates were the leaders or followers of when other individuals were tweeting or googling each conspiracy theory. I used Trendsmap and Google trends data to produce a weekly time series of how often people tweeted or googled different conspiratorial topics or hashtags. I further analyze this separately for candidates who won and lost their primary election to determine if there is any difference between the two.

Analysis

I start with a descriptive analyses of the conspiratorial candidates by comparing their demographics and the races and districts they ran in to see if they differ in any meaningful way from their co-partisans. I use t-tests to determine significance.

When comparing conspiratorial Republican candidates to their non-conspiratorial co-partisans, more conspiratorial candidates were non-incumbents and lost the general election. While they received a lower vote share in the general election, they won their primary election in roughly equal amounts with a higher vote share. They also ran more in races with a winning Democratic incumbent, including more noncompetitive elections (in which the general election winner gained 70% or more of the vote) and less open seat elections. Overall, conspiratorial Republican candidates ran in general elections with lower odds of success than their co-partisans.

The willingness of conspiratorial Republican candidates to run in these elections indicates that candidates were less strategic than their fellow candidates or were otherwise incentivized to run. One potential incentive is a lower entrance cost. States have vastly different requirements for partisan candidates to be on the primary election ballot, as some states require candidates to pay varying entrance fees and/or provide a set number of signatures from voters in their district. However, this doesn't appear to deter conspiratorial candidates: the signatures requirement of the states they ran in was roughly the same compared to their co-partisans, and they paid a higher rate when it came to filing fees.

Candidate funding similarly provides no insight for why Republican conspiratorial candidates run in more challenging elections. These candidates raised similar amounts from individual contributions, unitemized or small donor donations, party contributions, and candidate contributions as their non-conspiratorial co-partisans. However, their total contributions were 30% smaller than their co-partisans. Accordingly, a higher percentage of their total contributions came from small donors.

However, the districts these candidates ran in differed significantly. These districts had fewer white and more Black, Asian, and Hispanic populations, in addition to a higher percentage of foreign born population. These districts were also less well off, with higher numbers of unemployment, poverty, and individuals without a high school degree. They

were less likely to vote for Republican candidates, as they received fewer votes for Trump in both the 2016 and 2020 election.

Overall, this paints a picture of candidates running out of pure conviction instead of strategic planning. Their districts and specific races are less likely to elect a Republican, let alone a conspiratorial one, with lower rates of Trump votes, Democratic incumbents, more noncompetitive elections, and a higher percentage of minority groups which tend to vote Democratic. Candidates may have potentially been inspired to run because they felt upset or excluded by their current legislators or state culture. This in turn illustrates why they were less likely to run in Republican controlled areas, as they felt their views are already represented. However, as the Republican party falls shorter from where extremists' ideal point, we may see an increase of conspiratorial candidates running in these historically Republican races.

When narrowing our focus towards conspiratorial Republican candidates who won their general election, we find that most are incumbents. Only 3 were nonincumbents who won their general election (Greene, Boebert, and Moore), and 2 of these 3 ran in open seat elections.

Conspiratorial Democrats, on the other hand, ran in sympathetic districts which elected them at higher rates than their fellow Democrats. Conspiratorial Democrats were more likely to be incumbents, winning more of their primary and general elections which were non-competitive non-open seat elections compared to their non-conspiratorial co-partisans. As expected of incumbents, they raised more total funds than their co-partisans. The districts they ran in had a higher percentage of foreign born individuals, a better economy with a higher median household income, fewer below the poverty line, with more Asian populations and more college educated individuals. Their districts received fewer votes for Trump in the 2016 and 2020 elections.

There are several likely reasons for this. First, the conspiracy theory about DeJoy wasn't

popular until after the primaries concluded, thus those repeating it were more likely to still be in the running for their general election. However, comparing all Democratic primary winners to Democratic conspiratorial candidates still reveals that conspiratorial candidates were more often incumbents who won the general election. This reveals that sharing this theory was not part of a last ditch attempt to gain voters or donations, as these candidates were already in a safe position. Only candidates who had their general election well in hand would be willing to tweet support for this theory, as those in a tight race were less likely to expose themselves to the potential pushback for supporting such a conspiracy. This indicates that candidates knew this theory could potentially backfire and reacted accordingly.

Most 3rd party candidates supported typically Republican conspiracy theories in the 2020 election. However, as there aren't many (numerically or by percentage) who believed in these theories, I've elected to not discuss them in further detail here or throughout this paper.

I split my analysis into two parts: which types of districts conspiratorial candidates ran in, and what type of conspiratorial candidates won their primary and general election. Table 3 shows the results of the former. I ran a binary logit regression with robust standard errors clustered at the state level which compared districts or states, depending on House or Senate election, which had a Republican or Democratic conspiratorial candidate to the areas without such a candidate. I start by including obvious variables that prospective candidates would see before they filed for candidacy: whether a Democrat had previously held the office, if the seat was open, filing costs and required signatures, and district vote for Trump in the 2016 and 2020 election. While they wouldn't have the information on their district's Trump vote in 2020, they likely had access to polls that helped them see how favorable Trump was looking in their district before they ran. I ran another logit regression including district demographics which may be less obvious to candidates, including the percent of whites, blacks, and foreign-born individuals in the district, the percent of the populace that had a

less than high school education or had a college degree, the unemployment rate, medium household income, and percent below the poverty level.

Table 3

	Race where Conspiratorial Candidate Ran:			
	District (House)	State (Senate)	District (House)	State (Senate)
	Republican	Republican	Democratic	Democratic
Dem. Previously in Power	0.651	3.198**	0.080	1.786*
	(0.398)	(1.422)	(0.399)	(1.082)
Open Seat	0.393	2.561	0.270	2.403
	(0.389)	(3.239)	(0.442)	(2.117)
Filing Cost	0.070	0.920**	−0.048	0.262*
	(0.055)	(0.414)	(0.047)	(0.143)
Filing Signatures	−0.014	−0.046	0.085	−0.048
	(0.105)	(0.044)	(0.116)	(0.030)
Trump Vote, 2016	0.147**	2.344**	0.024	0.942
	(0.067)	(0.950)	(0.065)	(0.803)
Trump Vote, 2020	−0.167***	−2.477**	−0.051	−1.124
	(0.063)	(1.060)	(0.072)	(0.807)
District Demographics	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	26.980*	−132.760	−8.107	252.523*
	(13.962)	(122.885)	(16.812)	(141.063)
Observations	436	42	436	42
Log Likelihood	−234.742	−13.159	−197.098	−12.592
Akaike Inf. Crit.	499.483	56.318	424.196	55.183

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 3 shows that the types of districts conspiratorial candidates ran in were largely similar to districts without conspiratorial candidates, with most differences occurring at Senate races. States with Democrats previously in power saw more conspiratorial Democrats running for office, likely as more Democratic conspiratorial candidates were incumbents. Senate races were more likely to see a Republican conspiratorial candidate in the running when the seat was previously held by a Democrat, the filing cost was higher, and the share of votes for Trump were higher in 2016 and lower in 2020. These factors indicate that these candidates are not deterred by certain challenging factors, such as running against an

incumbent Democrat, paying a higher filing cost, and facing lower Trump support in the upcoming election (even if the 2016 results make them more hopeful about their chances).

I then move to analyze the types of conspiratorial candidates who won their primary and general elections. I run a binary logit regression with robust standard errors clustered at the state level comparing conspiratorial candidates who won to all other candidates in Table 4. Table 4 shows that Republican candidates who won their primary election had higher numbers of small donor donations, while those who won their general election were less likely to run in a seat a Democrat had previously held, same thing with small donor donations, and in a district that received higher Trump votes in 2016. Democrats, on the other hand, were more likely to win if they were incumbents and had lower levels of candidate contributions, likely because they were more established and had to rely less on their own funds.

However, this is only half of our analysis: painting a picture of what these candidates look like and perhaps understanding their motivations for why they run for office or share these conspiracies. But what impacts when these conspiratorial candidates use their voices - or more accurately, their fingers - to share their beliefs? We next turn to scrutinize when conspiratorial candidates tweet, and what that can tell us about their beliefs.

Table 4

| | Conspiratorial Candidate Won: | | | |
| | Republican Candidate | | Democratic Candidate | |
	Primary	General	Primary	General
Democrat Previously in Power	0.598	−16.099***	−1.677**	15.530***
	(0.627)	(1.574)	(0.744)	(1.031)
Incumbent	1.177	1.226	3.153***	3.709***
	(0.751)	(1.648)	(0.847)	(1.386)
Office	−0.775	−1.429	−0.384	0.414
	(0.810)	(1.399)	(0.551)	(0.583)
Open Seat	−0.712	−0.090	0.449	2.763***
	(0.677)	(1.380)	(0.616)	(0.904)
Individual Contributions (logged)	−0.276	−0.584	0.630	0.981**
	(0.190)	(0.464)	(0.462)	(0.491)
Small Donor Donations (logged)	0.449**	1.080***	0.016	−0.054
	(0.221)	(0.318)	(0.121)	(0.102)
Candidate Contributions (logged)	0.056	0.038	−0.135***	−0.176***
	(0.035)	(0.092)	(0.046)	(0.058)
Total Contributions (logged)	0.009	−0.055	−0.449	−0.364
	(0.122)	(0.536)	(0.437)	(0.568)
Party Contributions (logged)	0.036	−0.049	−0.015	−0.029
	(0.046)	(0.117)	(0.037)	(0.048)
District Trump Vote, 2016	−0.003	0.569**	−0.032	0.090
	(0.067)	(0.284)	(0.065)	(0.096)
District Trump Vote, 2020	−0.052	−0.444	0.009	−0.215**
	(0.066)	(0.290)	(0.071)	(0.100)
District Demographics	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	12.888	73.816	−9.268	−8.745
	(11.938)	(54.777)	(13.740)	(17.835)
Observations	1,668	1,668	1,485	1,485

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Tweets and Election Dates

Are candidates strategic about when they post support for conspiracies in regards to their primary and general elections? I start by looking broadly at when candidates tweet about a conspiracy theory. Figure 2 shows when candidates tweeted about one of the seven conspiracy theories in 2020, while Figure 3 shows the percentage of when each conspiracy was tweeted during this same time period. Both include a red line indicating when the general election occurred. Primary elections took place between February 3 and September 15, with most primaries occurring in June and August.
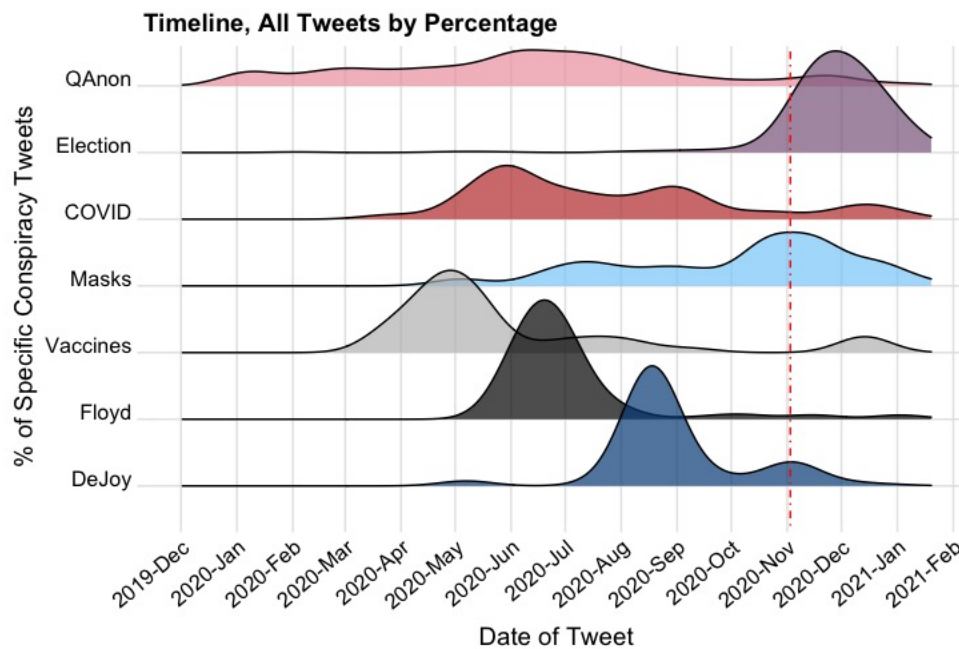
Figure 2: Timeline of Conspiratorial Tweets, by Percent

Figure 2 illustrates that most conspiracy theories have specific lifetimes: they come into popularity at one moment and only last for a few months before vanishing into obscurity again. However, the QAnon, COVID, and masks conspiracy theories differed from this pattern. These theories are spread out more over the space of 8-9 months, while QAnon is the most consistent conspiracy theory throughout the year.

Figure 3 shows a bump in conspiracy theories around the end of the primary election
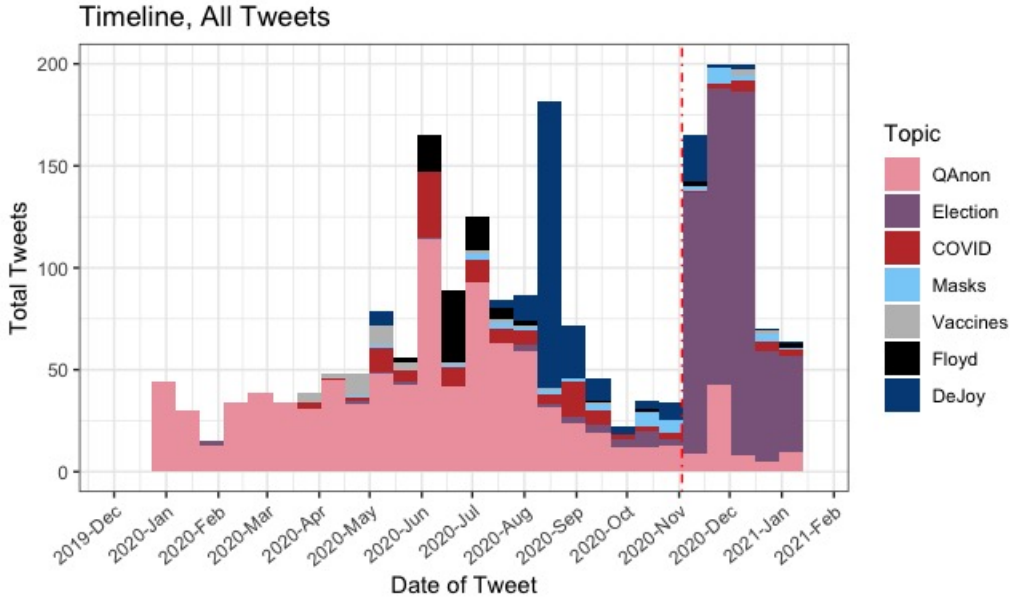
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Figure 3: Timeline of Conspiratorial Tweets, by Number

season, which then drops before the general election. Instead of ramping up before the general election, conspiracy tweets fall after the primaries, and only increase after the general election and the introduction of 2020 election conspiracies. This may be due to other conspiracies become popular around this time or that candidates running for office stop tweeting conspiracies to avoid the appearance of extremity.

One way to determine if the latter is true is to compare how often candidates tweet about conspiracies in relation to their primary election date. Candidates may be incentivized to tweet extreme theories before their primary election if they believe primary voters are more extreme, but stop tweeting about such extreme issues before the general election in an attempt to win over moderate voters. If this were true, we would expect to see a bump in tweets before the primary election, then a decrease afterwards. However, when we look at figure 4 below, which graphs the percentage of conspiracy tweets tweeted before or after each candidates' primary election date, we see that that only applies to two conspiracy theories: QAnon and vaccines. The clear bump for QAnon tweets in Figure 4 compared to the very slow rise and fall of QAnon tweets in Figure 2 clearly illustrates a bump in

QAnon tweets before candidates' primaries. The other theories have multiple bumps. Using this information with Figure 4, which includes a unitary bump for many of these theories, indicates that candidates weren't tweeting about these theories in reference to their primary election date.
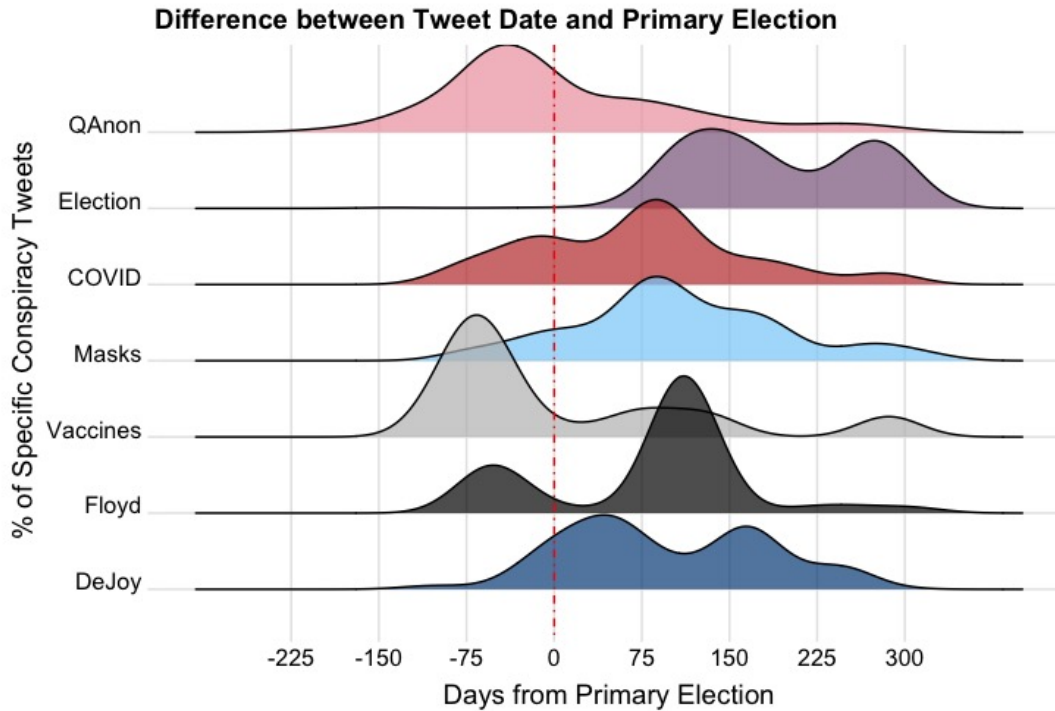

Figure 4: Difference between Tweet Date and Primary Election

However, figure 4 does not capture an important aspect of this theory: whether or not candidates won their primary election. Primary losers may not have the same incentive to stop tweeting conspiracy theories after their primary election, as they are not trying to win the general public's vote. On the other hand, if candidates are strategically using these theories to gain voters, primary losers may stop tweeting these conspiracies while primary winners ramp up their tweets. To understand how winning or losing the primary election impacts how often candidates tweet conspiratorial candidates, I run a difference-in-difference comparing the number of conspiratorial tweets posted before and after candidates' primary election dates and whether candidates won or lost their primary election, which is included in the Appendix. Figure 5 shows the event study plot of how often candidates who won their

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primary election tweeted conspiracy theories. As the Democratic conspiracy theory did not take off until after most primaries had concluded, I limited this to Republicans.
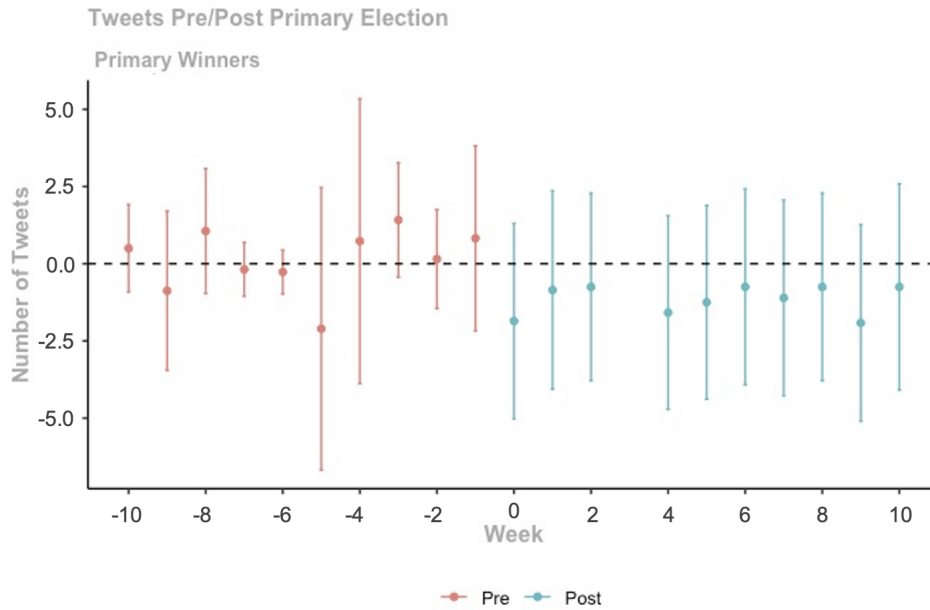

Figure 5: Event Study Plot: Tweets Pre/Post Primary Election

Figure 5 illustrates that, though there is a slight decrease in tweets following a candidate's primary election, there is no statistically significant relationship exists between winning the primary and number of tweets published before or after the primary. This implies that conspiratorial candidates who won their Primary Election were not being overly strategic about when to post conspiracy theories, but were more influenced by their beliefs or Twitter trends. This is further illustrated in Figure 5, which plots the number of conspiratorial tweets by week by candidates who won and lost their primary election.

The similarity in trend lines among all conspiratorial candidates indicates that these candidates do not dramatically change their conspiratorial tweeting habits regardless if they win or lose their primary election, illustrating that they likely are not using these conspiracies strategically.
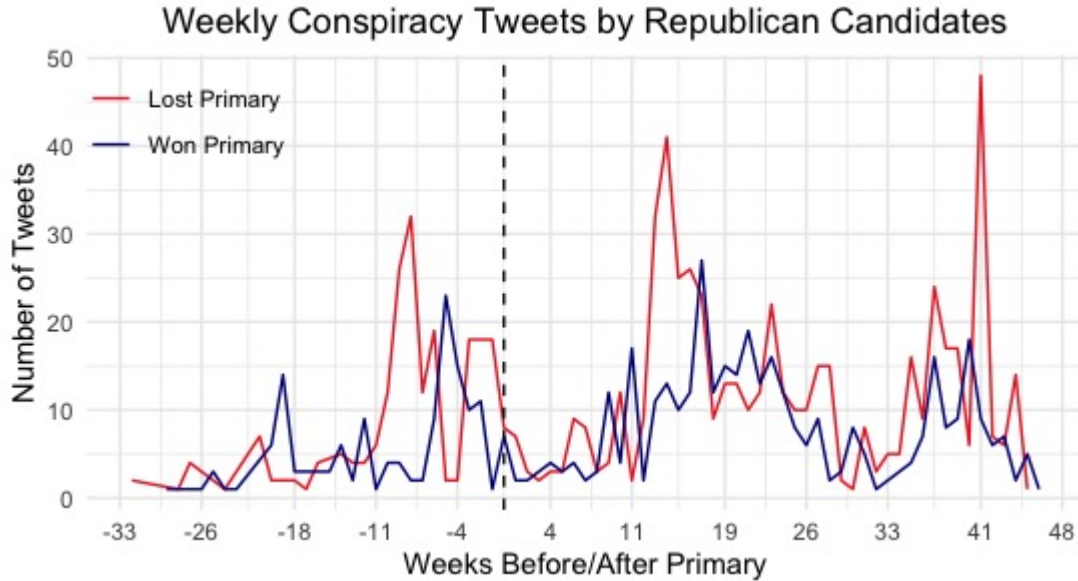
Figure 6: Weekly Conspiracy Tweets by Republican Candidates

Granger Test

While conspiratorial candidates may not be using these theories strategically, are they leaders or followers of their conspiracies? By comparing when candidates tweeted support for conspiracies to Twitter and Google trends using a Granger causality test, which determines whether one time series forecasts another, I can analyze whether the candidates were simply following the trend or vice versa. I used data from Trendsmap to determine Twitter trends for hashtags specific to certain conspiracy theories. For other theories which had no hashtags or no results on Trendsmap, I used Google trends as a proxy to determine how popular the theory was during each period. I aggregated candidate tweets by week to make the two time series comparable. The first column in Table 5 shows the results of different Granger causality tests analyzing whether the Twitter and Google trends accurately forecast Republican candidate tweets with an optimal VAR lag structure of 1 for most topics.

Table 5 shows a clear pattern that candidates continually follow Twitter and Google trends. This shows that conspiratorial candidates are not conspiracy generators but instead are simply responding to their conspiracies and are not posting randomly. This is further

Table 5: Granger Causality Test, Twitter or Google Trends

Topic	Trends Forecast Candidates	Candidates Forecast Trends	Primary Winners	Primary Losers
QAnon: #WWG1WGA (Tweets)	0.002**	0.487	0.000***	0.041*
COVID: #Plandemic (Tweets)	0.048*	0.604	0.261	0.097
Vaccine Chip (Google)	0.011**	0.993	0.679	0.011*
Floyd Hoax (Google)	0.000***	0.979	0.000***	0.000***
Mask Tyranny (Google)	0.218	0.845	0.898	0.005**
DeJoy: #USPSSabotage (Tweets)	0.000***	0.942	-	-

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

highlighted in Figure 6 below, showing that candidates roughly followed Twitter trends when tweeting about QAnon.
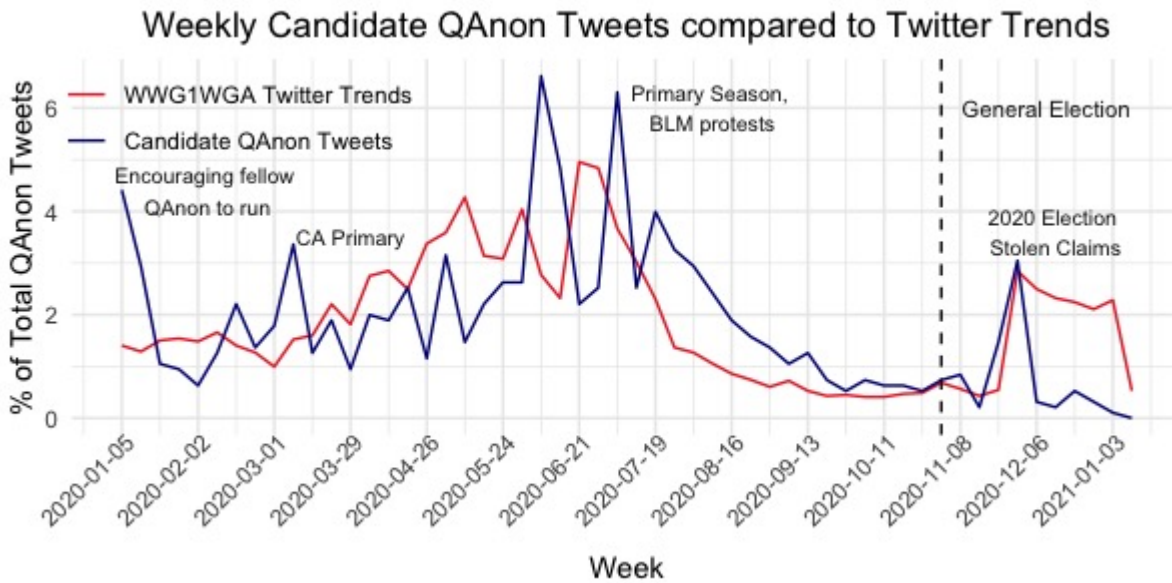

Figure 7: Weekly Candidate QAnon Tweets compared to Twitter Trends

To see if there was any difference between primary winners and losers, I ran Granger causality tests on these two groups. As seen in Table 6, for QAnon, COVID, and Floyd tweets, these two groups were similar in following or not following trends. These groups differed when it came to the vaccine and mask tweets, possibly because primary winners didn't tweet about these conspiracies. Figure 8 below shows that primary losers tweeted about QAnon more often than winners and twitter trends. Despite this, both winners and

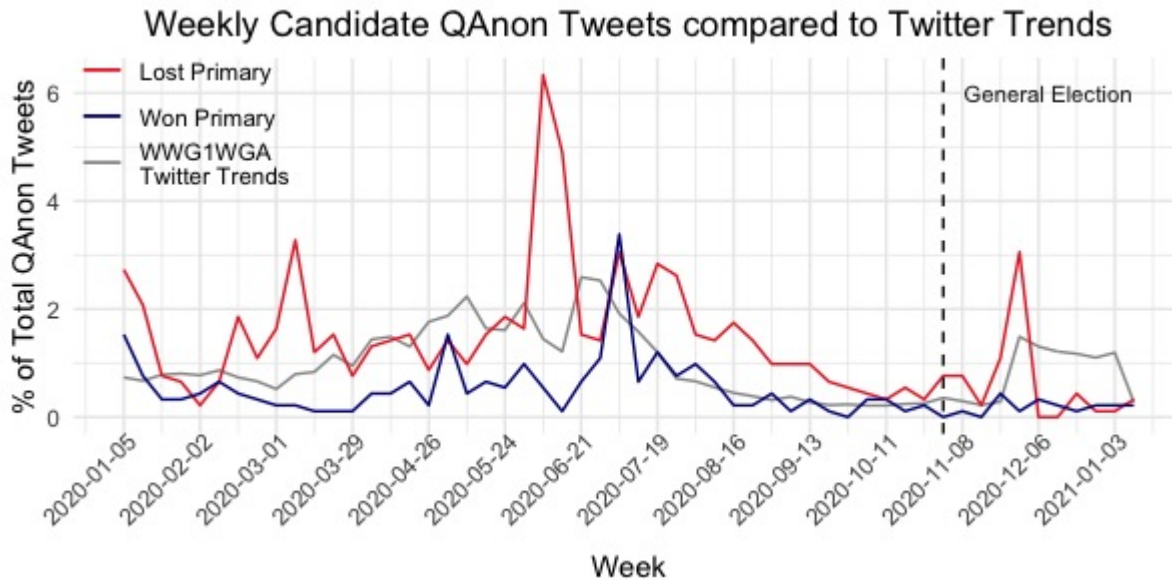losers followed Twitter trends, as reversing the Granger causality was nonsignificant.

Figure 8: Weekly Candidate QAnon Tweets compared to Twitter Trends

Discussion

With the Big Lie (the 2020 election being stolen) becoming the highlight of many Republican candidacies in the 2022 and future elections, it becomes increasingly important to study the role of conspiracy theories in elections. While many studies have focused on how individuals or the public interacts with these theories, few have focused on how candidates may use these theories to garner votes or support.

My finding that 300 Congressional candidates supported conspiracy theories during the 2020 election is cause for relief in some (only 7.6% of all Congressional candidates is a lot lower than many newspaper articles would have us believe) and worry in others (300 candidates is a lot of people to be supporting these types of conspiracies at the federal level). We also find that Democratic and Republican conspiratorial candidates vastly differ by personal and district demographics, likely because the Democratic conspiracy theory is more a partisan theory that gained traction after the primaries. Democratic conspiratorial candidates were

more likely to be incumbents who won their primary and general elections in districts that supported Trump less compared to their co-partisans. Conspiratorial Republicans, on the other hand, had higher numbers of newcomers to the field who were less likely to win their general election, though they did raise more from small donors. A regression of winning conspiratorial candidates further showed that winning Republican conspiratorial candidates raised statistically more from small donors compared to other candidates. This highlights how small donors may contribute to candidates with extreme beliefs running in and winning elections.

My analysis of the timing of these conspiratorial tweets revealed that Republican conspiratorial candidates did not change their tweeting behave after their primary election, regardless of the results, and that these candidates were the followers, not leaders, of conspiracies. These lends credence to the idea that candidates who support these extreme theories are not using them to manipulate support, but rather share them out of belief. While there are likely more candidates who truly believe in these conspiracy theories, they may feel that tweeting their support for them may only hurt them at the ballot box. However, this may not continue if large subsections within each party support a specific theory, such as the theory about the 2020 election, thereby reducing the penalty and increasing the potential support candidates may gain when tweeting support for such theories.

Further research should be done to analyze how elites use conspiracy theories, not only during elections but to rally support for their base or partisan policies. Qualitative research could help us understand why these candidates run for office, where they gain their supporters, and the role small donors play in their campaign. While many may wish this topic was only applicable for the 2020 election, it appears that the use of conspiracy theories in American politics is not going away anytime soon.

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