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An Incoherent Truth

Truth Social and democracy in our populist age

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Abstract

In January of 2021, the former President of the United States was banned from nearly every social media platform as a result of his actions during the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol. After a year of development, Trump's company, Trump Media and Technology Group, released Truth Social, a Trump-centric social media platform, in February 2022. Although Trump's bans from social media have mostly expired, Truth Social now serves as Trump's platform of choice in the lead up to the 2024 election. Now, in early 2024, Trump consistently posts multiple times per day on his platform, while rarely engaging with mainstream social media platforms at all. Naturally, as Truth Social is heavily linked to the former president, its users overwhelmingly support Trump and his politics. As Truth Social brands itself as a platform that prioritizes free speech above all else, it has gained a reputation for harboring some of Trump's most radical supporters.

This digital ethnographic case study will examine Truth Social's emergence amidst a global wave of populist sentiment. As distrust and disillusionment reach historic levels in liberal democracies, populism has slowly pervaded and infected democracies across the globe. With a firm position in populist history, Trump's ascendance to political power was significantly aided by social media platforms. Although the platforms used in Trump's 2016 and 2020 campaigns have been the subject of great scholarly interest and study, Truth Social is emerging as an important and under-researched factor in the 2024 election. Just as Twitter and Facebook were effectively used to build Trump's base in past elections, Trump is attempting to use Truth Social's echo chamber to further radicalize this base. This research aims to observe the discourse happening on Truth Social, and analyze the potential implications on democracy, more generally.

Social media has destructive potential in facilitating populism's growth. Social media allows populists to take advantage of oversimplified solutions to policy problems in the form of divisive politics. This division is definitional to populism and advocates for "the people" as defenders against opposing specific groups of evil doers. Such characterizations leave little room for nuanced policy discussion, as every deliberation is boiled down to "us vs. them." Naturally, this is antithetical to liberal democracy, which upholds civil and minority rights as foundational. This

case study will examine Truth Social as an echo chamber through theories on democracy and populism. The research reaches the conclusion that Truth Social represents a threat to democracy, as part of a populist tradition attacking against democratic norms. A new political dimension is proposed, which defines epistocracy, a re-emerging idea in democratic literature, as oppositional to populism.

Keywords: Democracy, Populism, Truth Social, Echo Chambers, Epistocracy, Alt-Tech

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	4
Table of Contents	5
Introduction	7
Literature Review	12
Literature on Truth Social.....	12
Alt tech.....	14
QAnon.....	17
Echo Chambers.....	18
Counter democracy.....	20
“Against Democracy”.....	22
Populism.....	24
Populists and the media.....	26
Civic Engagement.....	27
The Ambivalent Internet.....	29
Methods and Methodology	31
Analysis: Truth Social and democracy in our age of populism	37
Truth Social as Populism.....	37
Populism exemplified.....	37
Populism as ideology.....	41
How Truth Social works.....	43
Draining the Swamp: Anti-corruption rhetoric on Truth Social.....	43
Why Trump?.....	44
Truth social as negative politics.....	45
Truth Social as an echo chamber.....	47
Truth Social’s rigid hierarchy.....	49
Truth Social as a model of propaganda.....	53
Truth Social and Democracy.....	54
Implications for civic engagement and civic culture.....	54
Democratic implications: Counter democracy and epistocracy.....	55
Civic engagement.....	58
Conclusion	60
The path towards populism.....	61
A theoretical path to epistocracy.....	62
A third path?.....	63

References.....	66
Appendices.....	74
Appendix I: Codebook.....	74
Appendix II: Research Sample.....	75
Appendix III: Diary samples.....	76

Introduction

At the time of this research's conclusion, the 2024 general election will be roughly six months away. These months are set to be some of the most turbulent in American history as the Republican nominee will be spending the campaign in and out of courtrooms, facing 88 felony charges across four criminal trials (Sparkman and Wiatrak, 2024). Within these 88 charges, former President Donald Trump is alleged to have attempted to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, which resulted in the violent attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Within the context of American history, this is unusual, to say the least. Within the context of populist history, however, Trump's conduct is best understood as proto-typical (Müller, 2022).

The events of January 6, 2021 mark an inflection point in American political history. For almost as long as there has been a United States of America, peaceful transitions of power have been the norm. This precedent dates back to the contentious election of 1800, when the new country witnessed a peaceful partisan transition from a Federalist administration to a Democratic-Republican one (Georgini, 2020). For over 200 years, through civil wars and economic depressions, this precedent would hold. Amidst a changing political environment and backsliding democracy (Williamson, 2020), American democratic institutions would face their biggest hurdle in history in 2021. On January 6, as Congress was certifying the election results in the U.S. Capitol Building, Trump gave a speech at the Ellipse, a nearby park at the opposite end of the U.S. National Mall. In this speech, Trump made numerous false claims about the election being stolen, insisting that he and his supporters would “stop the steal,” and “fight like hell.” While Trump urged his supporters to “peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard,” perhaps to maintain some plausible deniability (Cabral, 2021), he also explicitly directed protestors eastward to the U.S. Capitol Building. A violent riot would result in the following hours at the U.S. Capitol Building with elected Representatives fearing for their lives.

As a result of the Capitol riot, the media empire that Trump built across social platforms vanished overnight. Trump was banned or suspended from virtually every mainstream social media platform. Included in this were bans from Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat (Tannenbaum, 2021), which Trump used to campaign and build a base of support. Because Trump used social

media preceding and during the Capitol attack to direct and incite violent actors, his social presence was essentially wiped from the internet in a number of hours. It was clear to Trump and the world that without his social media pulpit, his public influence was significantly limited. In the year following the insurrection, Trump's team was hard at work, working to bridge this gap.

With Trump's social presence obliterated following the January 6th attack on the Capitol, Trump needed a way to connect with supporters in preparation for his 2024 run for the presidency, which was announced in November 2022. In 2021, Trump formed a new company, Trump Media and Technology Group, tasked with developing a new social media platform that would focus on promoting Trump and his political brand (Spangler, 2022). In February 2022, TMTG released this platform, titled Truth Social. The mission of this new platform is, as written on the TMTG website, "to end Big Tech's assault on free speech by opening up the Internet and giving the American people their voices back (Konish, 2024)." In reality, however, the platform is part of a growing base of alt tech social media platforms that largely aim to serve as safe harbors for extremist speech, "such as anti-vaccination, climate change denial, white supremacy, and Holocaust denial (Koblentz-Stenzler, et al., 2023)." Truth Social does not release specific figures on active users, however, it is estimated that the platform had roughly 5 million visits in February 2024 (AP News, 2024). This is a far cry from the billions of visits that mainstream platforms like TikTok and Facebook receive, but this level of engagement also positions Truth Social among the most influential alt-tech sites, beating both Gettr and Parler by significant margins.

In the years since the attack on the Capitol, many of Trump's bans and suspensions have either expired or been lifted. Despite this, Trump's use of traditional social media has been dwarfed by his usage of Truth Social. Trump has only made one post on Twitter since Elon Musk lifted his ban from the platform, calling the move a "grave mistake (Singh, 2022)." In contrast, during Biden's 2024 State of the Union address, Trump live-posted so much on Truth Social that it broke the platform, causing network errors for users (Dwinell, 2024). It is certainly possible that Trump prefers the platforms for the same primary reason as many of its less prominent users. According to Pew, 65% of alt tech social media users "have found a community of people that

share their views (Pew Research, 2022).” Trump and his supporters receive much less resistance to their worldview on Truth Social, compared to less homogenous platforms like Twitter.

This thesis will aim to contribute to a limited base of emergent literature that exists on alt-tech, and an even more limited base of literature on Truth Social, specifically. The focus of this research is not necessarily on Trump or his personal engagement with the platform. Rather, this research and analysis will focus on the overall discourse of Truth Social, as well as its position within the emerging populist ideology that is defining politics, globally, in the 21st century (Rosanvallon, 2021). In the upcoming sections, observations made on Truth Social will be connected to the emergent threat that populism presents to democracy. Discourse on Truth Social is positioned within the politics of distrust, as discussed by Rosanvallon (2009), which are partially defined by an intense skepticism of governing and political institutions. The following analysis will focus on how these politics of distrust manifest in the form of ideological populism, as defined by Rosanvallon (2021). Populism will be discussed at length in relation to democracy, with specific focus placed on the parasitic relationship between the two.

In short, this research is important because it exemplifies the role played by emergent alt tech social media platforms in overall democratic health. To that end, this research takes Truth Social seriously. Although often played for laughs by late night hosts (Colbert, 2024) and liberal pundits (Pod Save America, 2024), Truth Social, and platforms like it, represent a real danger to democracy. Although echo chamber radicalization is well documented in existing literature, a case study on Truth Social in these terms has yet to be conducted. It is wholly likely that this moment in history represents peak Truth Social. As Trump is entering a campaign season of rallies and criminal trials, a large portion of this discourse will take place on Truth Social. Because of this, it is important that researchers take this opportunity to explore this platform. Although Truth Social exists on the fringes of both politics and technology, there may be an inclination to dismiss, ignore, or ridicule it. Fighting this inclination will serve democracy, however. Although Truth Social’s footprint is relatively microscopic compared to behemoths like Facebook or Twitter, it has outsized influence. Although Truth Social serves as an insular community, and perhaps the purest example of a social media echo chamber that exists, it is the mouthpiece of the former, and potentially future, leader of the most powerful country on the

planet. Flipping over this rock, so to speak, and examining what happens in this dark and damp corner of the internet is important in understanding the present and future of populism, in the United States and abroad. Truth Social serves as a critical rallying point for Trump's devotees. The connective power of the platform, and its implications on democracy, should not be understated.

The aim of this research is to flip over the rock and shine a light on what is happening on Trump's social media platform. As has been mentioned, understanding Truth Social is important to understanding the future of liberal democratic politics. If democracy is to be preserved, understanding how threats emerge, and through which mechanisms, will be important to maintaining this order. Throughout this research, I aim to convey the destructive potential that Truth Social, and hypothetical platforms like it, can play in undermining the norms and procedures that have kept the liberal democratic order afloat. As forms of civic engagement are being abandoned and perverted, in equal measure, echo chambers like Truth Social should be seen as existential threats that exacerbate the problems that are plaguing democracy. As populism's rise transitions to dominance over political systems, we should seek to understand the mechanisms by which populism has grown and proliferated globally. To be sure, Truth Social is just a drop in this bucket, and should not be understood as a root cause of populism. Rather, populism's root causes, namely distrust and disillusionment, can be exacerbated by dangerous platforms like Truth Social which aim to amplify and capitalize on these sentiments.

The following sections aim to serve this goal of shining a light on these issues surrounding democracy, populism, and emergent social media. In doing so, these sections also aim to answer four research questions:

1. How does Truth Social facilitate populism's growth as an ideology?
2. What are the democratic implications of alt-tech social platforms such as Truth Social?
3. What forms does civic engagement take on Truth Social?
4. What are the implications of this engagement?

This case study is structured to show the forms of civic engagement that exist on Truth Social, followed by commentary on the future implications of this engagement. The first section of this case study will consist of a literature review that examines existing literature on alt tech platforms, as well as theoretical concepts like populism, democracy, and echo chambers. This literature review will create the theoretical framework which will be applied to the succeeding chapters. The methodology and methods section of this study will explain the case study's methodology, as well as the digital ethnographic methods that underpin the research. These methods were chosen with intention and provide an ideal framework to explore Truth Social and its discourse. A lengthy analysis will follow this section. The analysis section aims to answer the four research questions listed above and includes examples of discourse on Truth Social with extensive discussion on the democratic implications of this discourse. Finally, the conclusion aims to make an argument in favor of democracy, in the face of current populist attacks, and hypothetical epistocratic attacks. This conclusion also defines a growing dimension in politics that has not been explored: an ideological division between populism and epistocracy.

Finally, a note on generalizability. The conclusions of this research on Truth Social are generalizable to alt tech platforms, generally, however caution should be exercised in applying these conclusions to mainstream social platforms. Still, the overall conclusions, which warn of an impending democratic crisis, warrant consideration in any discussion of democracy and populism. It should be noted, of course, that I am not the first to warn about this crisis. However, a primary finding of this research is a new definition of political conflict in its infancy. I define this conflict as one between populists and epistocrats. This definition will be defined in later sections, however, I theorize that, as democracy is increasingly overwhelmed by populist attacks, elitist epistocracy will emerge as a commonly cited alternative to poorly informed populism and overly lofty democracy. Of course, the emergence of this definition is perilous for democracy. Because both ideologies are antithetical to democracy, the emergence and increasing prevalence of these alternatives represent an existential threat. This research concludes that this emerging dimension warrants serious consideration from democracy and populism studies. In this way, the implications of this research are much greater than its limited scope.

Literature Review

Literature on Truth Social, specifically, is quite sparse. Because the platform is both niche and emergent, little has been written about it. In fact, the most relevant study on the platform was published during this research. This shows the under-researched nature of Truth Social as a digital platform. However, expanding this portion of the literature review to include “alt tech” platforms, more generally, yields more satisfying results, as platforms such as Gab and Parler have more substantial bases of literature. Additionally, discussions on democracy and its contemporary efficacy are relevant to this case study. While democracy is often held as the ultimate, ambiguous goal of a civil society, its viability is worthy of consideration in this age of social media polarization and “alternative facts.” Literature on democracy, populism, civic engagement, and the internet will be particularly relevant to this case.

Literature on Truth Social

As mentioned, literature on Truth Social is sparse and, most likely, in development as this is being written. One study from March 2024, however, examined Trump’s Truth Social activity in the 2022 midterm election and compared its earned media coverage with his tweets from the 2016 primary campaign. In short, a major conclusion of this research was that Trump received more media attention from his Twitter activity in 2016, compared with his Truth Social activity in 2022, as a percentage of all stories about Trump in the given time period (Zhang, et al., 2024). This is, partially, attributable to a much larger amount of media coverage in the 2022 period, compared with the 2016 period. Trump received more media attention, overall, about his Truth Social usage during the 2022 midterms than his Twitter usage during the 2016 campaign. Worth noting, however, is that this is comparing the “Trump Truth Social” and “Trump Twitter” queries for 2022 and 2016, respectively. Using more stringent queries of “realdonaldtrump Truth Social” and “realdonaldtrump Twitter,” the total media attention surrounding Trump’s 2022 Truth Social posts was much lower than his 2016 tweets (0.43 stories per day in 2022, compared with 4.93 stories per day in 2016.)

Looking further into the data, however, reveals interesting trends in the media sources that are promoting Trump's social media activity. In 2016, media coverage of Trump's twitter activity was driven by center-leaning outlets, as opposed to partisan outlets. In 2022, coverage of Trump's posts on Truth Social had flipped, being driven primarily by partisan outlets on the right and left, which both covered him with equal frequency, double that of center, right-leaning, or left-leaning outlets. The study asked whether news media paid more attention to Trump's social media activity during the 2016 primaries, or the 2022 midterms. There is a clear answer that, yes, news media, as a general group, did pay more attention in 2022. Despite this, centrist media was much more reserved in amplifying and embedding Trump's 2022 Truth Social posts compared with his 2016 tweets. The authors speculate that a difference in journalistic practices may be the cause of this difference. They warn that "while journalists have to attend to alt-tech platforms because of their watchdog obligation, this reporting can amplify alt-tech platforms and their users (Zhang, et al., 2024)." As centrist media outlets have perhaps become aware of this, learning lessons from facilitating Trump's ascendance in 2016, they may have been more reluctant in amplifying Trump and alt tech platforms in 2022. This trade off reflects the ambivalent nature of digital communication, which will be discussed at greater length later in this literature review.

Another study from March 2023 collected over 823,000 Truth Social posts from 454,000 unique users. The study also conducted a limited content analysis on these posts. This analysis examined the top-linked websites in Truth Social posts, the temporal artifacts within text content, and the follower network on Truth Social (Gerard, et al., 2023). Through its analysis of external website links, the paper concluded that the links reflected the politically charged and controversial nature of the platform and its user base. The study collected the top-ten linked domains in "Truths," or posts, as well as the top-ten linked domains in "ReTruths," or reposts. While ubiquitous and benign sources like YouTube and GameSpot were included in the popular domain list for Truths, the top-ten domains in ReTruths were nearly unanimously right-wing or alt-right news sources. The only exceptions were Rumble, which serves as a video hosting service popular among the alt-right, and the Babylon Bee, which is a political satire site that serves a conservative readership. The specific brand of conservative ideology most prevalent on

Truth Social can be observed through the media sources most commonly linked through its Truths and ReTruths.

In the study's text analysis, it found that posting frequency on Truth Social was highest in the weeks immediately following its official launch, but stabilized at roughly half that frequency through the following spring and summer months. The text analysis also utilized keywords to identify posts related to the January 6 Capitol attack. It found that posts relating to the attack spiked dramatically as the January 6 Committee Public Hearings began. Likewise, the study illustrated a similar spike in Mar-a-Lago related posts during the FBI raid of Trump's resort and official residence. In comparing this posting frequency with the Google Trends search frequency for January 6 and Mar-a-Lago, the researchers found that conversation on Truth Social was generally representative of conversation on the internet, as a whole, at least as it relates to conservative political discourse. The researchers argue that external events are influential in forming discourse on Truth Social. Additionally, they theorize that the "near-immediate rise in posts following certain events may point to both the interests of users and the cohesiveness of the Truth Social network (Gerard, et al., 2024, p. 6)."

While this study is helpful for understanding Truth Social's position within the wider internet, its methods are not ethnographic. In this ethnography of Truth Social, more focus will be placed on the specific content of interactions on the platform. While this ethnography cannot hope to have the same scale as the previous study (Gerard, et. al., 2024), it will focus on user experiences with the platform and with conspiracy theories on the platform. Additionally, the study used a web scraper to programmatically collect information about Truth Social users and their posts. In this ethnography, all data collection will be manual, with a focus on obtaining "thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973)" of Truth Social, as an online community.

Alt tech

Fringe and violent political groups have an extensive history with the internet, as online hate groups have been active since at least 1984 (Donovan, 2019). The open and decentralized nature of the internet has given rise to many online communities focused on fringe political discourse. As deplatforming efforts have been undertaken by traditional social media sites, hate

speech on mainstream platforms is more moderated than ever (Wakefield, 2022). This has encouraged so-called “alt-tech” platforms to flourish, promoting purportedly free-speech policies that allow for hate speech, fringe conspiracy theories, and calls to violence. Despite the deplatforming efforts of mainstream social media companies, hate groups have been able to utilize alt-tech platforms for recruitment and organization (Bär, et al., 2023). Rather than operating on mainstream social platforms, far right hate groups now operate in relative obscurity, but with continued influence.

One study examines the platform shift of white supremacist organizers from mainstream social media to Gab Social as a result of the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville. Organizers utilized many platforms to spread information about the rally, including both alt tech and white supremacist media sources, like 8chan and the Daily Stormer, as well as on mainstream social media like Discord and Youtube (Donovan, 2019). By using many platforms and communication tools, organizers were able to ensure that the event could carry on in the case of deplatforming from mainstream social media. After the event, however, white supremacists were shut out of traditional social media and were looking for an alternative platform. Gab Social was keen to fill the void and encouraged lax moderation policies. In turn, these policies enabled a sizable white supremacist community to communicate and organize on Gab. The article concludes that “technology is not politically neutral (Donovan, 2019, p. 61).” Gab’s founder was active in far right spaces and used the deplatforming to build his social network. It is clear through its marketing and branding that Gab is foundationally alt right and exists to facilitate communication between various groups on the far right. Like Gab, Truth Social is the result of widespread deplatforming. While Gab exists to platform white supremacists and hate groups as a result of deplatforming following the Unite the Right rally, Truth Social exists to platform Donald Trump after the January 6 attack.

In another case study on Gab Social, a social network that caters to far right users and conspiracy theorists, alt-tech social media is understood as “relatively stable and viable alternatives for ideologically non-mainstream users across the political spectrum” that “sustain a relatively small, yet strong and loud user base (Dehghan and Nagappa, 2022).” Truth Social certainly meets the criteria as an “alt-tech” social platform, considering it serves as a haven for

Trump supporters and far-right rhetoric (Gerard, et al., 2023). This study differentiates contemporary alt tech spaces from more general alternative media platforms. In this case, “alt tech” refers to those platforms that frame themselves as “free speech” advocates in contrast to the content restrictions on mainstream social media. These platforms, such as Parler, Gab, Gettr, and Bitchute “have often been considered synonymous to alt-right, far-right, hate speech, and extremist spaces.” Still, despite their free speech promises, alt tech platforms create “technological and discursive spaces that ensure the minimization of the presence of opposing discourses (Dehghan and Nagappa, 2022).” On Gab and other alt tech platforms, dissenting voices may not be outright banned, rather drowned out and ridiculed by the dominant voices and ideology on the platform.

Additionally, alt tech platforms serve as a counter to mainstream bans and deplatforming. Such bans and deplatformings are a form of “social capital” in alt tech spaces that is “used strategically as a victimization discursive strategy to prove that such users are speaking the ‘truth’ and are ‘onto something.(Dehghan and Nagappa, 2022)”” A Twitter or Facebook ban is not a demerit in such spaces, rather, it serves as a badge of honor and point of pride. To users on alt tech platforms, they may not have been engaged in targeted hate speech, for example, but were rather the victims of elitist big tech companies and their draconian free speech policies. Considering Truth Social was borne of Donald Trump’s numerous bans and suspensions from mainstream media following his involvement in and incitement of the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol, a similar resentment towards mainstream social media also exists on Truth Social.

This study on Gab Social focused on vaccination-related posts before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It conducted mixed-method analysis on over 68,000 Gab Social posts and found that, while vaccination discussion on Gab Social was always antagonistic and conspiratorial “such conversations became gradually politicized, and expanded far beyond the medical discourse and entered the domain of organizational politics (Dehghan and Nagappa, 2022).” The evolution of discourse in these alternative spaces is a focus of this case study on Truth Social. The Gab Social case shows that issues get amplified and politicized in these right-wing alt-tech spaces.

QAnon

Although it is not a defining characteristic of populism, generally, the Trump brand of populism deals heavily in conspiracy theory. Whether directly advanced by Trump, or indirectly through his supporters, anti-elite conspiracy theories have proliferated across right wing media. Notably, the Q Anon conspiracy theory has taken root among Trump's supporters and was at least partially the ethos of the January 6 U.S. Capitol attack. While this ethnography is not directly concerned with the Q Anon conspiracy, nor with its believers, there is a large amount of overlap between diehard Trump supporters and Q Anon conspiracy theorists.

Q Anon refers to a conspiracy theory founded on 4chan, an online imageboard popular with the far-right and others with fringe political ideologies (Papasavva et al., 2022). The theory surrounds "Q," an anonymous poster on the image board who claims to be an insider with "Q level" security clearance in the U.S. government. Since 2017, "Q" has posted many "drops," or image posts, claiming to have proof that satan worshipping pedofiles are secretly controlling the government. Among QAnon believers, Trump is seen as a savior, who is fighting the corruption and abuse that is rampant in the "deep state." Although beginning on fringe imageboards 4chan and 8chan, the conspiracy theory has since seen increasing engagement on mainstream social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Zhiri, et al., 2022). An analysis of 4,961 Q drops suggests that there is "no single canonical Q," meaning the posts were likely not written by the same person (Papasavva, et al., 2022). The study also suggests that the writing style of the Q drops straddles the line between incoherent and cryptic, which has necessitated decoding efforts by adherents. Although the content within the drops is certainly controversial, the language itself is not particularly violent or toxic. The study reports that the toxic reputation of the QAnon movement lies in the interpretation of actors that weaponize the posts and commit acts of violence. As with many far right conspiracy theories, QAnon supporters often traffic in antisemitism and antisemitic tropes. Anti-semitic attitudes are a strong indicator of support for QAnon and Trump (Levin, et al., 2022).

Although the QAnon conspiracy theory is controversial, its beliefs have transitioned from the online fringes of conservative politics to mainstream politics. While not supported by a majority of Republicans, a 2022 survey of 19,399 Americans found that one in four Republicans

believe in the QAnon conspiracy theory (PRRI, 2022). It also found that Americans who trust far-right news sources are nearly five times more likely to believe the conspiracy theory, compared with those who trust mainstream news sources. The survey did not mention QAnon by name. Rather, it asked respondents if they believed each of three different statements which define the conspiracy theory:

- 1) “The government, media, and financial sector are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex-trafficking operation.”
- 2) “There is a storm coming soon that will sweep away the elites in power and restore the rightful leaders.”
- 3) “Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country.”

Respondents were labeled QAnon believers if they generally agreed with these three statements. QAnon support has been generally hard to poll accurately, largely because what it means to be a QAnon supporter is debated. Still, it is clear that even beyond the “Big Lie” that Trump won the 2020 Presidential Election, many supporters traffic in extreme conspiracy theories. While Trump voters remain a relatively diverse cohort and may endorse his politics for any number of reasons, a sizable percentage support him because they believe in the QAnon conspiracy theory.

Echo Chambers

This ethnography of Truth Social invokes the work of Cass Sunstein, who coined the phrase “echo chamber” to describe these spaces that cater to specific ideologies. Sunstein’s “#republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media” discusses both “people’s growing power to filter what they see, and also providers’ growing power to filter for each of us, based on what they know about us (Sunstein, 2018, p. 15).” In this way, individuals are able to seek out information that reinforces their beliefs and confirms their biases. So too, however, platforms have power in catering content using personalized data to people of specific ideologies. Even on traditional social media, like Facebook and Twitter, the personalization algorithms will serve users content based on what content they have interacted with before. Naturally, this serves the platforms by keeping users engaged, but the side-effect of such engagement is an individual’s unawareness to differing or opposing ideas. Individuals may make a conscious decision to filter their media consumption through sources that promote their ideology, but the algorithmic

decisions made on behalf of users may be even more damaging. The conscious decision to filter information requires awareness that such a filter exists, and that certain content is not permitted to pass through. On the contrary, the power of social media platforms to filter content on users' behalf requires no input from the user and, thus, no conscious awareness that a filter is in place. Because of these limitations, a user may not be aware that they are in an echo chamber. Sometimes we choose the bubble, sometimes the bubble chooses us.

To be certain, by choosing to use Truth Social, users are likely very aware that they are only being exposed to a very limited view of the ideological spectrum. In this way, it could be argued that, while Truth Social and traditional social media both serve to place users into echo chambers, Truth Social users make a more conscious, informed decision to place themselves within such a chamber, compared to the algorithmically guided echo chambers of Twitter or Facebook. This is likely due to the size of such platforms in relation to Truth Social and due to the much more focused target audience that Truth Social is reaching for. Of course, Truth Social could, and likely does, employ some algorithm to filter content to personalize the app experience. But because the platform's user base and content base lack ideological diversity, the range of user experiences will also be less diverse than that of mainstream social media. Put another way, because of Truth Social's niche appeal, it may operate more as one echo chamber that one consciously enters, while mainstream social media incorporates many different, but connected echo chambers that one has only limited control over. The internet, and specifically alt tech social platforms, affords users this conscious choice to filter information. Before the internet and the subsequent explosion of social media, the choice of media was between a handful of newspapers. Later, this would expand to a few television networks. The personalizable and customizable nature of social media allows media consumers to consciously shut off large ideological blocks of discussion. The echo chamber, as we know it, could not exist without the internet.

Sunstein is wary of the effect of echo chambers on individuals, society, and conceptualizations of democracy. He calls for an "architecture of serendipity (Sunstein, 2018, p. 14)" by which authentic cross-ideological interactions are not simply possible, but routine. "To the extent that social media allow us to create our very own feeds, and essentially live in them,

they create serious problems. And to the extent that providers are able to create something like personalized experiences or gated communities for each of us, or our favorite topics and preferred groups, we should be wary.” Sunstein argues that as social media becomes more ingrained in society and within our collective and individual psychologies, the effects of echo chambers must be heavily scrutinized.

Sunstein also warns of the violent ramifications of this form of communication. His early 2017 prognosis was realized in the late 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. Far right, white supremacist rioters were radicalized and mobilized by social media echo chambers to incite violence (Bigea, 2018). A related white supremacist terror attack against counter-protestors in Charlottesville killed one person. Again in 2021, the January 6th attack on the US Capitol stemmed from the belief that the election was stolen from then President Trump. This idea, no doubt, gained traction just as the vaccination theories from the Gab Social study gained traction. Through extremist social media echo chambers, a conspiracy theory is able to become mainstream political speech. Again, as Sunstein predicted, this led to extremist mobilization and subsequent political violence. As a result of the attack, a number of rioters and Capitol Police lost their lives and countless others were injured.

Counter democracy

Discourse on Truth Social relates heavily to Pierre Rosanvallon’s ideas on democracy, or more specifically, on counter democracy (2008). Rosanvallon discusses democracy as an elusive ideal with constantly evolving goalposts. Because of the nature of democracy, as a system of perfect representation, it is impossible to fully achieve. Rosanvallon argues that actual democracy has never been fully realized. Rather, every system of democracy remains, necessarily, incomplete. Because of this, democracy is often associated with disappointment and frustration. Another necessary element of democracy is distrust in powerful figures and institutions. This distrust forms the foundation of Rosanvallon’s theory of “counter-democracy.” Rather than referring to democracy as a simple system of electing leaders, Rosanvallon’s counter democracy includes forms of distrust that manifest in three forms: powers of oversight, forms of prevention, and testing of judgements. Rosanvallon insists that counter-democracy is not anti-democratic in nature, rather it is “a form of democracy that reinforces the usual electoral

democracy as a kind of buttress, a democracy of indirect powers disseminated throughout society – in other words, a durable democracy of distrust, which complements the episodic democracy of the usual electoral-representative system (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 8.)” Extensive examples of counter democracy will be detailed throughout this ethnography of Truth Social.

More specifically, Rosanvallon’s idea of “negative politics” will be particularly useful in this ethnography of Truth Social. While this often manifests in general negativity such as ad-hominem political attack advertisements, Rosenvallon uses “negative politics” to refer to political tactics that highlight the bad aspects of another candidate or party, rather than promoting the good aspects of one's own candidacy or party. John Kerry’s “anybody but Bush” slogan from 2004 exemplifies this shift in politics (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 178). In the contemporary political environment, Trump’s various negative nicknames and chants also represent this form of negative politics. When Trump uses nicknames like “Sleepy Joe” Biden (Johnson, 2021) and Nikki “Birdbrain” Haley (Robertson, 2024) to refer to his political opponents, he is taking advantage of the wave of negative politics in the United States. During the 2016 campaign, his “lock her up” chants were used to paint Hillary Clinton as a criminal, rather than promote his own political brand (Locke, 2022).

As Rosanvallon argues, much of contemporary politics is a negative reaction to what is current. While Rosanvallon claims this negative politics strengthens the incumbency advantage, it is possible that the substantially different media environment in 2024, compared to 2008, has flipped this on its head. His primary reasoning behind the claim is that “easier to sow doubt about a challenger, who is less well known than the incumbent and who has no track record in office (Rosanvallon, 2008, p.178).” More modern examples in American politics, however, illustrate that this logic may be outdated.

Trump successfully ran an insurgent political campaign using negative politics to attack anyone who confronted him. While Clinton, his opponent in 2016, was not an incumbent, Trump was able to skewer her institutional Democratic politics that occupied the White House the previous eight years. While Trump represents a particularly anathematic brand of negative politics, he is vulnerable to this wave, as well. Joe Biden’s 2020 general election campaign was

focused on attacking Trump for his political failures (Nehamas, 2024). Through negative politics, Biden was able to nullify Trump's incumbency advantage. Perhaps, even Biden was able to flip the incumbency advantage into an incumbency disadvantage (Drutman, 2023). In the contemporary political media environment, it is possible that negative politics could be used to counter the incumbency advantage. Contrary to Rosanvallon's argument, it seems Trump and Biden were able to use name recognition against their opponents. While in the past, this name recognition may have worked as a shield for incumbents as Rosanvallon argues, it seems increasingly exploitable.

It feels inevitable that this discussion will become more and more relevant as a potential 2024 rematch between Trump and Biden grows less and less hypothetical. Negative politics are sure to play a large role in the 2024 election, fueled by discussions on social media that were simply not on Rosanvallon's radar in 2008. Despite the change in the media environment, however, Rosanvallon's theories of counter-democracy and negative politics remain relevant.

“Against Democracy”

As an electorate is informed and misinformed through negative politics, a cynical view of democracy can develop. This is the view of Jason Brennan, who holds a controversially cynical view of democracy in his aptly named book “Against Democracy.” Brennan argues that the common person should not need to concern themselves with politics. He also puts labels on three types of democratic citizens. The first, the “hobbits” generally do not concern themselves with politics. This is the typical nonvoter. The “hooligan” is a strong partisan or ideologue. They vote regularly, passionately, and consistently. The average Truth Social user is likely a hooligan, by Brennan's definition. Finally, the “vulcans” are those that “think scientifically and rationally about politics (Brennan, 2016, p. 5).” They are interested in politics, but also dispassionate in partisan politics.

Brennan prescribes epistocracy as the most effective system of power-distribution, primarily because a fully democratic electorate cannot be trusted to act rationally. Brennan argues that there is no intrinsic value in democracy, only instrumental value. In saying this, he argues for the system that produces the best outcomes, above anything else. Because of this,

epistocracy, meaning rule by the “knowers” in society, is the preferred alternative. Essentially, the power to select leaders should lie with the “vulcans” in society. Brennan is unclear in describing what are “good” or “just” outcomes of a democracy or epistocracy. Because what is “good” and “just” is incredibly subjective, and because Brennan offers no standard method of evaluating political outcomes, it is impossible to objectively judge a system’s “instrumental” value. Such a value judgment would, itself, become the source of political debate.

While the criticisms made against democracy in “Against Democracy” are valid and perhaps exemplified by extremist social media discourse, Brennan’s case for epistocracy is ultimately unconvincing. Low civic knowledge is a problem, to be sure, but it is unclear that abandoning democracy in favor of epistocracy is a viable alternative. Additionally, Brennan’s premise rests on a shaky foundation. Do rabid partisans truly have nothing to offer the political process? Is there really nothing valuable in the political mind of the “hooligan?” All perspectives should be valued in the political process. To make a division between the valuable and the un-valuable members of civic society is hasty and subjective.

Moreover, what specifically makes the perspectives of the “vulcan” so virtuous? Should a knowledge of and adherence to classical philosophy be necessary to be active in the political process? Must one follow rationalist philosophy to be involved? And to what end is it true that politics ought to be logical, unfeeling, and unemotive? Is there not room for a certain amount of irrationality? In asking these, admittedly leading, questions of Brennan, the aim is to resist the notion that one can make a claim of another’s validity to participate in the political process, and to push back on the goal of an absolutely rationalist political sphere.

Relevant to this case, Brennan never argues that extremists, specifically, should be barred from participating in the political process. A far right white supremacist or a far left marxist-leninist could be vulcans, while a moderate liberal is a hooligan. Rather than reflect any ideological preference, Brennan’s preference is on supposed critical thinkers who do not follow specific partisan or ideological dogma. Still, it seems unlikely that Brennan would consider any earnest Truth Social user to be a member of the epistocracy. To Brennan, the political outcomes are simply preferable if Truth Social users are not permitted to engage with the political process.

The problems with epistocracy are both hypothetical and real. A recently published criticism of epistocracy believes that epistocracy's supposed rule by the knowers is impossible, as the elite society created by the system would not have access to vital information (Mendez, 2021). Specifically, elite rulers would not have access to the preferences of lay citizens. Another article, titled "Against Epistocracy" is explicitly critical of Brennan's book. The article is skeptical of epistocracy, considering it implausible, unviable, and unnecessary in this contemporary context (Gunn, 2019), particularly because political knowledge is correlated with increased ideological dogmatism (Converse, 1964). This means that as people become more knowledgeable on political topics, they are more more constrained by their ideologies. Contrary to Brennan's assertions, there is nothing inherently irrational or ill-informed about voting with ideology— in fact, the most politically knowledgeable citizens are the most ideologically dogmatic. Brennan's "Against Democracy" frequently puts dogmatism and knowledgeability at two opposite ends of a spectrum, however real-world observations of civic engagement appear to undermine this assertion.

Populism

Returning to the work of Pierre Rosanvallon, discussions of populism will feature heavily in this ethnography, as it is heavily reflected in support for President Trump. "Populism exalts a people as one body, a people bound together by its rejection of elites and oligarchies (Rosanvallon, 2021, p. 7)." Although Trump, himself, can be easily considered an "elite," his vocal rejection of powerful political figures has positioned him as the face of American right populism. Worth noting is that "populism" is not exclusive to the far right. Throughout the history of populist movements, political ideology is often deemphasized in favor of a sense of collective action. A uniting distrust of powerful individuals and institutions is the basis for both left and right populism. Still, Rosanvallon argues that left populism and right populism are phenomena with distinction from one another. The primary division between a right populist and a left populist can be found in their positions on immigration. To a right populist, immigration poses a threat to the people and to social order. Meanwhile, left populism asserts a humanist perspective that is welcoming of immigrants. As Rosanvallon outlines, there is no requirement for a right populist movement to strictly adhere to conventionally conservative policy positions.

Marine Le Pen, the leading figure in French right populism, and her Front National party positioned themselves as fiscally left in the 2009 European elections. The party distributed pamphlets, stating that “Jaurès would have voted with the Front National,” in reference to socialist leader Jean Jaurès. In her 2012 book, Le Pen cited Karl Marx as well as contemporary French leftist academics. In this way, Le Pen and the National Front have positioned themselves as outside of the conventional left-right political spectrum. However, the National Front’s nationalist immigration platform makes it definitionally right populist, in Rosanvallon’s terms.

Rosanvallon considers Trump to be a threat to the democratic order. He invokes Sinclair Lewis’s “It Can’t Happen Here” to illustrate the threat that a second mandate could pose. “If America were to topple one day, it would be the result not of a coup, but rather of the country’s acquiescence to repeated attacks against democratic norms (Rosanvallon, 2021, p. 151).” Trump has successfully freed himself from the conventions of political behavior, remaining within the confines of the law, perhaps, but exploiting democratic institutions for his own benefit. Trump divides Americans into the good and the reprehensible, in line with the characterizations of past populists. Trump “behaves instinctively as though the country were divided between humans and subhumans, friends and enemies, supporters and opponents cast as constituting antithetical worlds, and he hammers away endlessly at this message (p. 151).” Trump’s divisive “them and us” rhetoric is contextualized within a long history of populists that seek to gain support by dividing and stoking resentment. To Trump and other populists, new and old, the “very notions of tolerance, political community, and democratic civility are rejected and swept away (p. 151).”

Rosanvallon’s conception of populism will accompany this collection and analysis of content on Truth Social. While it is not necessarily the intention to confirm Rosanvallon’s ideas on populism, it is clear that his prognosis of the Trump media strategy is accurate. A global wave of populism has been a defining feature of the last decade. While acknowledging the unpredictability of future politics, Rosanvallon argues that overwhelming populist sentiment will be the defining political shift that occurs during this century. While it may not be an unstoppable force across the globe and political spectrum, the rise of competitive and agile populist political figures is unlikely to cease in the near future. This ethnography, naturally, positions itself in the present, amidst an emergent wave of discontent and a palpable shift in civic and political attitude.

It is not the intention to give any prediction for the political future of the world or of the U.S., in the near or short term. Rather, this ethnography will seek to better understand twenty-first century populism as an emergent political sentiment. The political merits or demerits of populism are to be debated elsewhere, but the rise of populism is beginning to transform public policy and individual worldviews.

Although this research will be heavily grounded in Rosanvallon's understanding of contemporary populism, there is a vast field of populist studies which can be useful in any discussion of populism. In the aptly named "What is Populism" Jan-Werner Müller reflects on the ambivalent nature of populism. Müller (2016) defines seven theses on populism, much of which has been covered here in the work of Rosanvallon (2021). Müller emphasizes that populism is not defined only by anti-elitism, rather anti-elitism in combination with anti-pluralism. Populists focus on delegitimizing political opponents, claiming that they, alone, are the voice of the people. It is possible to criticize elites without being a populist. Müller also argues that populism will persist as the "permanent shadow of representative politics." Populists are not opposed to representation, rather, they believe that they are the only legitimate representative. Importantly to this research and its conclusions, Müller insists that populism does not increase democratization by bringing politics "closer to the people" as is often claimed. While populists do pose a real threat to democracy, Müller theorizes that their emergence signals a possible representation gap. While this does not legitimize populists nor their claims, the popularity of populist rhetoric can reflect a broader failure with representation.

Populists and the media

Among the general attitude of distrust that pervades populist movements (Rosanvallon, 2021), there is an intense distrust of media institutions. Mainstream media sources are perceived as spreaders of "fake news," often portrayed by populist leaders as the "enemy of the people (Fawzi, 2018)." Despite the overwhelmingly negative perception of mainstream media among right wing populists, there is an ambivalent relationship when it comes to how this media is used (Peucker and Fisher, 2022). In an analysis of 40 Australian Gab accounts, researchers found a pluralism in media sources being shared on the platform. While the accounts made extensive use of fringe, right-wing media, in accordance with past research (Lima, et al., 2018), users also

posted mainstream media content, although to a lesser extent than fringe content. This shows that despite widespread distrust among populists in mainstream media institutions, content from these sources can still be used to promote the ideology. I will discuss this media ambivalence later at greater length, in the section titled “The Ambivalent Internet,” in reference to Milner and Phillips’s book of the same name.

Additionally, understanding the relationship between social media and populism will be important to this ethnography, which makes frequent reference to both. One study found that increased social media engagement facilitated a maintenance of populist attitudes over the course of three months (Schumann, et al., 2020). Despite the maintenance of populist belief, the researchers concluded that “there is no evidence to suggest social media news use predicted more extreme populist attitudes.” Notably, this study did not discriminate based on the type or quality of social media news, making it of limited relevance to Truth Social. Despite this, the study shows that, in broad terms, social media news consumption should not be blamed for the contemporary rise in populist sentiment. Moreover, it could possibly be used as a tool to positively inform citizens. These conclusions, however, are mostly speculative and more research is needed on the topic. Another study found that exposure to populist social media only facilitated an increase in populist attitude if the “message is congruent with their prior feelings of relative deprivation (Hameleers et al., 2018, p. 51).” The study defines “relative deprivation” as “the perception that the out-group opposed to the people’s in-group unfairly receives economic and cultural resources at the cost of the in-group of ordinary citizens (p. 54).” More simply, this study suggests that populist messages do not have universal appeal and that only certain people are predisposed to be vulnerable to its messages. The research also suggests that there does not necessarily seem to be a positive relationship between social media use and populist sentiment. The relationship is likely dependent on many factors, which may facilitate a growth, a maintenance, or a decrease in populist sentiment. More research is certainly needed, as there is not substantial information pertaining to Truth Social, or even alt tech, social media use and an increase in populist sentiments.

Civic Engagement

As this research aims to answer broad questions about the present and future state of democracy, discussion on civic engagement is vital. High levels of civic engagement are seen as necessary for the health and wellbeing of a democracy. Peter Dahlgren has discussed the internet and its relationship to democracy, both positive, as a means of pluralization, and negative, as a contributor to democratic instability (Dahlgren, 2005). While today's internet is fundamentally different from the one Dahlgren wrote on in 2005, similar conclusions can be reached today, nonetheless. Modern methods of communication are affecting all aspects of life, as Dahlgren writes, but the effect on democracy remains ambiguous. Some of these effects are clearly positive, at least on their face, including new modes of political engagement and a new diversity of political voices (p. 151). This a double edged sword, however, as these effects can cause destabilization that has negative consequences on political effectiveness and governance. In future years, Dahlgren (2015) would relate the internet to Habermas's idea of the public sphere (1989). Dahlgren refers to the public sphere as the "communicative space of politics (2015, p. 21)." Naturally, the internet is a large player in this communicative space. Dahlgren writes that "different platforms can offer different forms of civic participation (p. 30)," giving the example of an activist group using Facebook, Twitter, and mobile networks for various, specialized purposes. Enabling these forms of civic participation, however, requires a civic identity, moulded from a civic culture. Social media activists must be driven by a sense of efficacy— an idea that their actions can actually make a difference.

Much of the contemporary focus on civic engagement among democracy scholars takes heavy influence from the work of John Dewey in the early 20th century. Dewey called for increased education as a means to foster democratic ideals among the electorate. This formal education would instill citizens with a democratic spirit, leading to increased civic participation (Dewey, 1968). In "The Public and its Problems" (1927), Dewey observed the contemporary problems facing democracy in the early 20th century. Although written nearly 100 years ago, Dewey's characterization of 1920s democracy as "under a cloud (p. 144)" resonates today. Despite the depressing state of democracy at the time, Dewey felt it necessary to defend democracy, not necessarily as a political system, but as a way of life. A participatory culture among a civically engaged citizenry was Dewey's prescription for the ills facing early 20th

century democracy. Dewey asked “What has happened to the Public in the century and a half since the theory of political democracy was urged with such assurance and hope? (p. 157)” We can ask a similar question today: what has happened to the public in the century since “The People and Its Problems.” In answering this question, we will naturally be led to the advanced communicative technology that mediates a great amount of civic engagement in the 21st century.

The Ambivalent Internet

Milner and Phillips’s idea of the internet as a neither inherently positive nor inherently negative phenomenon is reflected heavily in the ideas of scholars like Dahlgren. Just as Dahlgren argues that the internet can have both positive and negative effects on democracy and civic engagement, “The Ambivalent Internet” portrays an internet that is steeped in contradiction (Milner and Phillips, 2017). This characterization is helpful in considering any digital space, not least one as offbeat as Truth Social. As a matter of fact, Milner and Phillips directly discuss Trump in a chapter on unity and division. Interestingly, unity and conflict are not presented as diametrically opposed, rather, they are better seen as siblings. Divisive politics serve as a tool for unification. This is central to populism, particularly as it is described by Rosanvallon (2021). Trump, as a populist, uses divisive, us and them rhetoric to build support. While this section only sparingly references the internet, it is clear that these attacks reflect the ambivalent nature of communication, online and off. Milner and Phillips write of a world of grey. Every form and expression of digital communication has drawbacks and benefits, pros and cons, and inherent contradictions.

Milner and Phillips also make reference to the ambivalent nature to content moderation in digital spaces. They discuss how platforms should handle antagonistic speech. They write that content moderation “decisions are tethered more to bad press than to legal (or even broadly ethical) concerns (p. 182).” This echoes Gillespie (2018), which argues that content moderation policies are often driven by profit-concerns, rather than concerns over the state of democracy. In another case of ambivalence, censorship of content is neither completely positive nor negative, nor can any action be taken that satisfies all users. From a certain view, any content moderation is anti-democratic. Milner and Phillips reference Evelyn Beatrice Hall to exhibit this position: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” This absolutist

view of free speech can be seen in the very formation of Truth Social and other alt tech platforms. As Milner and Phillips write, these are the ideals of many alt-right users who are banned from mainstream platforms due to their inflammatory or incendiary speech. While freedom of speech is foundational to the United States, the U.S. Constitution, and the constitution of liberal democracy, more generally, it is clear that certain speech can be damaging to democracy. Milner and Phillips assert that this view of speech is fundamentally flawed in its idealism, failing to account for difference in power. They write that, while free speech works for those in a privileged position to speak and be heard, “others could spend their lives screaming and never be heard (p. 184).”

Millner and Phillips go on to cite Chantal Mouffe’s “On the Political,” which outlines conflict as necessary and fundamental to democracy. Despite this, these conflicts must never attack the “conflictual consensus” that upholds values of liberty and equality (Mouffe, 2005, p. 121). Speech that crosses this line can, and should, be deemed illegitimate, and should be restricted. In contrast to free speech absolutists that maintain lofty and overly idealistic goals of free speech, Mouffe positions herself as something of a free speech realist. Mouffe’s ideas of legitimate and illegitimate speech will resonate throughout this ethnography. In dealing with extremist speech, “a democratic society cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries (p. 120.)”

Methods and Methodology

This research is ethnographic in nature. This means that its methods seek to gain “thick descriptions,” as described by Geertz (1973) of the Truth Social as a digital culture. Geertz describes culture as something that can be intelligibly described (p. 14). This ethnography aims to obtain thick, intelligible descriptions of Truth Social. As an approach, ethnography seeks to gain a deeper understanding of culture through experience. Rather than simply recording data from the periphery, ethnography seeks to integrate the researcher within a culture. In this way, ethnography seeks to expose a culture’s “normalness without reducing their particularity (Geertz, 1973, p. 14).” Because Truth Social is a unique platform with a unique digital culture, this aim is particularly important. A primary focus of this research will be to understand the mundanity of communication on Truth Social, while maintaining an awareness of its unique, subversive, and often violent content. Much of the general public’s understanding of Truth Social is informed by voices who have never even created an account on the platform. In discussions about Truth Social there is an automatic inclination to dismiss and ridicule the platform as unserious. Ethnographic methods are chosen in this case specifically to avoid this inclination. It is the goal of this research to understand Truth Social from the ground level. By gaining the perspective of an everyday Truth Social user, ethnography is the most useful toolset to understand Truth Social as a digital culture.

While this research is ethnographic, it more accurately follows emergent digital ethnographic approaches, which seek to update and expand ethnographic principles to online communities. In the aptly named “Ethnography for the Internet,” Christine Hine details how Geertz’s quest for thick descriptions in real-world cultures can be extended to online communities. Hine praises ethnography as a “method for getting to the heart of meaning and enabling us to understand, in the round and in depth, how people make sense of their lives (2015, p. 1).” These principles can be extended to digital spaces, which can help answer persistent questions about the internet and other digital technologies. Hine emphasizes that digital ethnography can be used to gain a more holistic understanding of online communities, when compared to more traditional research techniques, being particularly useful in “helping us to avoid glib simplification (p. 2).” Hine draws a contrast between digital ethnography, which

“celebrates the involvement of the researcher in the whole process of engaging with the field, gathering data and interpreting results,” and other methods, which use “depersonalized and standardized” systems of collecting information (p. 19). The flexibility afforded to researchers by digital ethnographic methods is particularly useful. In seeking a more holistic view of a digital community, it can greatly benefit researchers to be agile in their methods. In this digital ethnography on Truth Social as a digital community, my methods maintain this flexibility.

Throughout this project, its methods follow digital ethnographic ideals. Chiefly, an emphasis on natural observation and discovery was key to this research. Using the platform as a normal user gave a unique perspective which would have been otherwise impossible to gain through standardized means of data collection. Collecting data by using the platform, rather than studying it from a detached perspective, can paint a more vivid picture of Truth Social, its users, and its discourse. Central to digital ethnography is defining connections between the online and the offline (Hine, 2015). This element of digital ethnography is particularly important to this case, which seeks to understand not just Truth Social, itself, but also its broader implications on democracy. Because Truth Social serves as a digital community for Trump supporters, forms of online civic engagement will be clearly linked with forms of offline civic engagement, including voting and protesting.

It is important that the methods chosen for this case study reflect the dynamic, moment-to-moment nature of discourse on Truth Social. Digital ethnography’s focus on researcher participation “allows the ethnographer to observe in minute detail exactly how activities happen, rather than relying only on selective retrospective accounts from participants (Hine, 2015, p. 55).” For this case study, which examines an emergent, politically oriented social media platform, digital ethnography has clear advantages.

This ethnography uses a mixed-method approach to gain thick descriptions of Truth Social as an online community. Through this process, observations and diary entries (Appendix III) will be used as empirical material that will later be used to answer the four research questions mentioned in the introduction. In this case, this portion of the research was particularly helpful, as it helped me get my bearings in the Truth Social community. Although it is

straightforward to download the app or visit the website and create an account, gaining a full understanding of the platform can only happen with first hand experience. Unlike more mainstream, heterogeneous platforms, Truth Social is niche by nature. Because of its insularity, understanding the quirks in slang and discourse takes time and experience.

Although the spirit of ethnography lies in observation and participation, qualitative text analysis will supplement the participatory aspects of this research. The sampling method for this text analysis was carefully chosen to answer my research questions. The data collection process took place over three weeks, from February 19, 2024 to March 10, 2024, with the first three days being used as a pilot to test these methods and solidify a codebook. Following a successful pilot, two posts were analyzed per day. One of these daily posts would be Trump’s most engaged with post on the given day, as measured by number of replies. In addition to the original post, the top two replies were analyzed, as well as the top five replies to those replies. This is perhaps better explained by figure 1 below:

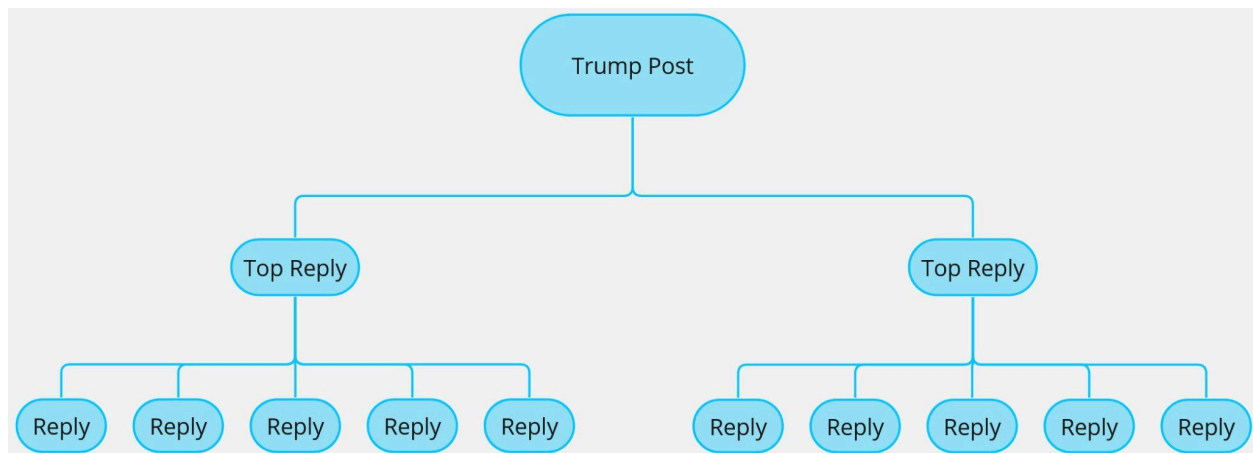


Figure 1: The sampling method used for a portion of the qualitative text analysis. For the portion focused on Trump’s tweets sampled thirteen posts each day, using this method, originating from a single post by Trump.

The second post selected for analysis each day would belong to the top listed account in the “Suggested Profiles” section. The post garnering the most engagement in the prior 30 days would be chosen. If the profile made no posts in that time period, or if there were fewer than 5 replies, the next profile listed in the “Suggested Profiles” section would be used instead. Once a post was selected, the top five replies would be analyzed. Using this sampling scheme, 19 posts

per day, over the course of 21 days, were analyzed. Naturally, this means that 399 posts were analyzed using qualitative text analysis.

In structuring this qualitative text analysis, the guidance of Hansen and Machin's "Media and Communication Research Methods (2019)," as well as Kuckartz's "Qualitative Text Analysis (2013)" were particularly helpful. The pilot process was used to establish a codebook (Appendix I) that was applied to the data collected in the following days, as outlined by Hansin and Machin. This codebook divided posts into seven codes: general conservative comments, general liberal/moderate comments, conspiracy theories, hate speech, calls to violence, general comments, and unknown/spam. With the exception of the "general comment" and "unknown" categories, each of these codes contained sub-codes that were helpful in specifically defining the type of engagement examples of these subcodes include "Trump praise" under the conservative code, "Trump insult" under the liberal/moderate code, "QAnon" under the conspiracy theory code, and "civil war" under the call to violence code. This process follows the methods outlined by Kuckartz (2013), who would classify this type of qualitative text analysis as thematic (p. 69).

Qualitative methods, generally, are rooted in grounded theory, first outlined by Strauss and Glaser (1967). Grounded theory has become a dominant research methodology in social science, which aims to generate observations and theories grounded in data. This is contrasted with methods used in the physical sciences, which test pre-determined hypotheses. Because this research uses digital ethnographic methods, its methodology is rooted in grounded theory. Using methods rooted in grounded theory allowed me to create research questions after I had made observations about Truth Social. This inductive approach allowed me to use my research to guide its conclusions. This approach relates heavily to Flyvbjerg's theory of phronetic social science. Flyvbjerg borrows the phrase "phronesis" from Aristotle, which is taken to mean practical knowledge. He argues that "attempts to emulate natural science and produce explanatory and predictive... theory (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 3)" within social science is misguided. Instead, social science must remain aware of the context and complexities of any subject. Simply put, social science does not have the luxury of repeatable testing. Because of the inherent complexities and contradictions that surround people and their societies, it will remain futile to follow the same research methods as natural scientists. As the "natural sciences are relatively cumulative and

predictive, while the social sciences are not and never have been,” social scientists must not conduct research with the expectation that their conclusions will be necessarily predictive of future study. Flyvbjerg states that the primary objective of phronetic social science is to “carry out analyses and interpretations of the status of values and interests in society aimed at social commentary and social action (p. 60).” In this pursuit, he recommends social scientists ask themselves four questions as they begin designing their research methods. These questions are:

1. Where are we going?
2. Is this desirable?
3. What should be done?
4. Who gains and who loses; by which mechanisms of power? (p. 60)

This ethnography aims to provide partial answers to these questions. In answering the first question, through this research, it is clear that we are heading towards populism, and that social media is, in part, facilitating this trend. Regarding the second question, considering populism’s contradictory relationship with democracy, it is clear that this is not desirable. This is assuming one believes in preserving liberal democracy. Answering questions three and four will require a longer discussion, which can be found in the analysis and conclusion sections.

As with any choice of methods in any case study, there are limitations worth consideration. Firstly, it should be noted that for all of the flexibility afforded by ethnographic methods, there are limits to its effectiveness. Because ethnography is heavily reliant on the researcher’s experiences. To this end, ethnography is necessarily subjective, as is all social scientific research. This research is taken from my perspective, and my experience with the platform. While eliminating bias entirely is impossible in any kind of research study, this effort is particularly trivial in digital ethnography, as personal experiences inform the research. In saying this, remain aware that this research was conducted from a human perspective, situated within a specific cultural and political context. Thus, the observations made and conclusions reached in the following sections originate from this personal context. In conducting this ethnography, my personal background as an American voter, student of political science, and follower of American political media will inform and influence this ethnographic research.

Although temporal limitations exist in any study such as this, the chosen time period of research represents an opportunity for unique research. This research has an extremely limited scope, with a granular focus on engagement on Truth Social during the early months of 2024. While this timeframe captures certain narratives in the 2024 election, including the rise and fall of primary campaigns run by Trump's rivals, the history of the campaign season is still being written, and less than half finished. Rather than being a weakness of this study, however, this specific, limited, moment in time is critically necessary to study. One of the primary strengths of this ethnography is its currency and relevance. Observing this moment in time, as with any moment in time, is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. This moment is unique and worthy of extensive study, particularly as American democracy appears to be at an inflection point. Similarly, as with any study, there will be limitations in sampling. It is simply impossible to analyse every word posted to Truth Social in perpetuity. Despite this reality, the chosen timeframe captured a unique moment in the 2024 election. The remainder of the campaign season will be raucous on Truth Social and represents a prime opportunity for future scholarly inquiry.

Although, through my casual use of the platform, I was able to gain experience with much of the content on Truth Social, the scope of my research represents only a fraction of the engagement on Truth Social over this period. Particularly, the qualitative text analysis portion of this research had a specific focus. One could argue that this sample has issues with representation. Although Truth Social has hundreds of thousands of active users, this portion of the research focused heavily on one specific user: Donald Trump. While the sample strategy included others found in the "Suggested Profiles" section, the bulk of this text analysed focuses on Donald Trump's posts and their replies. While this was for good reason, as Trump is a nearly god-like presence on the platform, future study could use this research as a point of departure and examine other aspects of Truth Social in more detail.

Analysis: Truth Social and democracy in our age of populism

In analyzing this case, several concepts covered in the literature review will be applied. Central to this case is discussion on populism and its effects on civic engagement and implications for democracy. This analysis will seek to answer four research questions focused on social media's relationship to populism and democracy. These questions are:

RQ1: How does Truth Social facilitate populism's growth as an ideology?

RQ2: What are the democratic implications of alt-tech social platforms such as Truth Social?

RQ3: What forms does civic engagement take on Truth Social?

RQ4: What are the implications of this engagement?

Truth Social as Populism

Populism exemplified

A wide variety of discourse can be observed on Truth Social. Because of the ideologically flexible nature of populist movements (Rosanvallon, 2021), there is a wide variety of opinion and sentiment on the platform. For this reason, Truth Social's user base should be understood as a broad populist coalition. Disregarding the limited, but strong, liberal and moderate opposition on the platform, for a moment, the diversity within the coalition is rooted in populist history. Truth Social's core user base is not united by partisanship, or public policy positions, perhaps with the exception of a hardline stance on immigration and migrants. Rather, Truth Social is emblematic of a truism within populist communities, in the past and present—online and offline. Truth Social's users rally around a sentiment of anti-eliteism and

anti-globalism that is synonymous with contemporary populist movements, more generally. This can be exemplified by figure 2 below, posted with the following caption:

“Should be a no brainer, but then again, we’re talking about Libtards. #Hypocrats.
#AbsoluteTruth #Globalism #Agenda2030 #NWOBS #FJB #Trump2024”



Figure 2: Meme calling elite icons Bill Gates, George Soros, and Klaus Schwab anti-American, genocidal, infanticidal child molesters

This meme exemplifies the overwhelming anti-elitist, anti-globalist sentiment that is present on the platform. Another, more cryptic, post on the platform, in reply to a fake news article about Hunter and Joe Biden, portrays globalist institutions like the WEF with inherent skepticism, suggesting a global conspiracy to undermine western society. The post reads:

Injecting serial killers, rapists, and terrorists into adversaries' nations is a form of slow-warfare, and has taken place for centuries.

They chose to free Barabas over Jesus, afterall.

With the capability and excellence of Western intel services, we can't pass gas at home and an analyst not hear it - this has to be deliberate.

The WEF is efforting forcing the entire western hemisphere's cultures to kneel to China, at an accelerated pace, triggered by the pandemic out of, China.

The audacity to think they have the authority to force a hemisphere that evolved over millenia to do a 180° by 2030. How did politicians get rich? They signed on to subvert the West.

While, naturally, Truth Social users trend conservative, as they tend to follow the same strand of right populism, these users show a diverse range of opinion on various topics. One user may be in favor of increased welfare spending, while another is a fiscally conservative deficit hawk. One user may consider themselves an LGBTQ+ ally, and another user may be engaged in homophobic or transphobic rhetoric. Populist movements are often able to gain such momentum because they effectively transcend ideology. Rather than advocating for a single coherent policy platform, populists tend to emphasize division between “us” and “them (Rosanvallon, 2009).” This division can be drawn between any in-group and out-group, so long as it places a large group of “the people” within the in-group. As long as there is a division between any two social groups, it will be exploited by the populists on Truth Social. Divisions could include: globalists vs nationalists, Satanists vs Christians, communists vs conservatives, migrants vs natives, blacks vs whites, Democrats vs Republicans, and Republicans vs Trump supporters. One reply comment simply refers to undocumented immigrants as “parasites” and “thieves.” Another reply claims House Speaker and famously-Christian Republican Mike Johnson is a “satanist.” Many other comments make the same claim about Presidents Obama and Biden. These divisions, contradictorily, serve as the uniting force behind a populist movement. Populist movements gain momentum through this division, as a sense of community is created using distrust and division. Using Rosanvallon’s theory of populism as an ideology, this community through division is definitional to the ideology of populism (2021).

Populism is experiencing a near universal resurgence in democracies around the world. While democracy and populism both relate to a decentralized distribution of power among a collective, populism represents a much more skeptical spirit, referred to by Rosanvallon as counter-democracy (Rosanvallon, 2009). Although populism is theoretically possible outside of a democratic system, its present rise is most felt in countries that have historically strong democratic regimes. A defining characteristic of many successful contemporary populists is an ability to exploit and weaponize Rosanvallon’s politics of distrust in democratic institutions. This distrust is evident in counter-democratic tactics used by populists. In “Why Populists Don’t Concede,” political science scholar Jan-Werner Müller writes that Trump’s election denial is not particularly unique to Donald Trump’s brand of populism. Müller draws parallels between Trump and Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro. In both cases, populist candidates are claiming elites have

undermined the democratic process. Populist leaders claim to be the voice of the people, or the silent majority. Because of this claim to be “the only authentic representatives of the people, an election loss must mean that someone (‘liberal elites’) did something (‘rigged the vote’) to thwart the will of the supposed majority.” Because members of populist movements are deeply ingrained, the conspiracy theory is often believable. The conspiracy theory has earned the moniker “the big lie” among mainstream American media organizations. The claims have been widely debunked by scholars and media fact checkers, yet they persist in conservative circles. One example, of many, posted to Truth Social can be found below, in reply to a meme criticising the content of Biden’s State of the Union address:

God help us if they are able to steal another one, we are going to HAVE to overwhelm the ballot boxes to have a chance. God bless President Trump and the stall worthy patriots of this great nation.

Truth Social users, although not a monolith, tend to strongly believe Trump’s erroneous claims that the 2020 election was stolen. Although a simple fact check can debunk most election conspiracies that are spread on Truth Social, it is clear that users either do not bother to fact check claims, or do not trust the fact checkers. To be sure, if one does not trust fact checkers to be truthful, there is little reason to seek the truth from mainstream media. Trusted media on Truth Social consists of far-right and alt-right sources like Fox News and the Gateway Pundit, an alt-right news source that consistently engages in lies and mistruths (Politifact, n.d.). Headlines from these organizations tended to promote election conspiracy theories in the weeks and months following the 2020 election, and were likely contributing factors to the January 6th Capitol riot. On January 5, 2021, Fox News reported that “Democrats sought to win 2020 election by 'hook or by crook,’” (Creitz, 2021) citing Fox host Mark Levin. On the same day, the Gateway Pundit ran the headline “The Next 24 Hours May Be the Most Important in US History – Will The US Remain Free Or Fall to Corruption and Communism? (Hoft, 2021)” Considering the media diet of Truth Social users and the nature of populist movement, it is unsurprising that election conspiracy theories persist on Truth Social, as an expression of the kind of counter-democratic skepticism that Rosanvallon describes (2008).

Populism as ideology

Rosanvallon describes populism as an ideology. To this end, populists share a united view of global politics that can be characterized as “populist.” As an ideology, its adherents naturally vary in specific thought. Despite this variance, however, there are specific throughlines that underpin the populist ideology. Anti-elitism and “us and them” rhetoric are central to populism. Additionally, under populism, complex ideas are often simplified or “amalgamated (Rosanvallon, 2021, p. 18)” through the existence of an enemy. The enemy is meant to personify the evils that populism intends to overcome. The rallying power of populism comes from the existence of such an enemy. The specific nature of this enemy is not definitionally tied to populism, however. Although this discussion includes characterizations of specific antagonists to right populists, or Trump-aligned populists, there is no specific unanimous villain under populism. Despite this, enemies to populism tend to be elites, in some way. This may be a wealthy caste of oligarchs, or the systems tied to the globalist era (Rosanvallon, 2021). The defining factor is that a group of antagonists is created, which encourages division between “the people” and its enemies, whomever they may be.

Under the populist ideology, these enemies embody the ills that supposedly plague society. In this way, complex issues are simplified to a single solution—rooting out the bad actors. Populists rely on oversimplification of nuanced political problems to rally support. In this way, populists are able to create and maintain a movement with mass-appeal and a low barrier to entry. This oversimplification gains traction as global and domestic politics grow increasingly complicated. When faced with this increasingly nuanced political landscape, many turn to simple solutions that are focused on reducing political reality “to a single opposition between the powerful and the powerless (Rosanvallon, 2021, p. 46).” This creates a division between two distinct groups within the society: the people and the problems. Populist movements are attractive in their simplicity. Rather than engaging with nuanced arguments in favor of specific policy solutions, populist movements allow for a simple, accessible answer to all political problems. Populism begins and grows through this mechanism.

Distinction should be drawn between populist politics and “big tent” politics. Although the two terms may seem related, they are almost entirely diametrically opposed. A big tent

political party aims to unite a wide range of political parties in support of a single party platform. While both populist movements and big tent parties both aim to gain a large base of support, as they both must compete for vote share in a democratic system, they achieve this goal through differing means. Big tent parties aim to build an ideologically diverse coalition to support specific policy initiatives, while populism is itself an ideology. Within the context of American politics, the Democratic Party exemplifies the idea of a big tent party. Its voters come from a wide range of ideological backgrounds (Glenn, 2008). One voter may identify as a neoliberal, while another may consider themselves a revolutionary marxist. Although these two individuals are ideologically opposed, they are united under the Democratic Party. They see this “big tent” as the best chance to move society in their desired direction, and are willing to make policy platform concessions because of it. In contrast, populist movements are not built with a specific policy platform in mind. The policy solutions are both simple and vague. They mobilize a base of support against a group of antagonists, which is meant to embody the problems they see in society. This is the oversimplification that Rosanvallon writes about. Despite this oversimplification, however, populists do not tend to be specific in their solutions. Rather than uniting their base in support of certain policy initiatives, they unite their base against a perceived group that opposes the interests of “the people.” One post from @Catturd, a popular account on the platform, reads:

People who are better off than they were 4 years ago ...

1) Politicians.

2) Illegals

The end

This example shows how “illegals” and elites, in this case politicians, are demonized to rally support for the populist cause. In this way, negative politics are definitionally required to classify a political movement as “populist.” In contrast, big tent political parties may use negative politics in strategy, but their primary purpose is to advocate for a specific policy platform, an example of positive politics. In practice, it is clear that discourse on Truth Social shows a strong slant towards populism as an ideology. Users on the platform feed into the same division and the same oversimplification that define populism as an ideology.

How Truth Social works

Draining the Swamp: Anti-corruption rhetoric on Truth Social

Strong parallels are easily observable between the prototypical populist movement and discourse on Truth Social. The political culture on Truth Social is steeped in anti-elitism. Perhaps more than any other ideology, anti-elitism pervades the discourse on Truth Social. One of the starkest examples of anti-elitism rhetoric on Truth Social manifests in the “Drain the Swamp” message that has resonated with Trump supporters since 2016. The phrase is not unique to Trump, of course, and has been used in the past by politicians like Ronald Reagan, as well as by leftist socialist political figures (Widmer, 2017). In each of these cases, there is an anti-corruption appeal to populism. Left populists may use the phrase to decry the corrupting influence of populists in government, while right populists will seek the “drain the swamp” of corrupt politicians that threaten a traditional way of life. To be sure, Trump’s use of the phrase has tapered off since the 2016 election, but it maintains a lasting legacy through his supporters. Calls by users on Truth Social to “drain the swamp” are omni-present.

Once again, this anti-corruption messaging is distinctly counter-democratic in Rosanvallon’s terms (2008). The prevailing politics of distrust have resulted in a populist ideology of conspiracy theory that describes Washington D.C. as a corrupt swamp that must be drained. On Truth Social, this culture is the norm. Posts and replies relating to corruption in the federal government are widespread. One meme reply to a Trump post on Truth Social quotes Trump’s attorney Alina Habba, who stated “If we don’t stop corruption in courtrooms, it doesn’t matter what your politics are.” Analyzing this quote through the lens of Rosanvallon’s populism is straightforward. Regardless of your party affiliation, there are corrupt enemies in the courts that must be fought. This anti-corruption messaging is another example of how Trump’s populism aims to unite a diverse coalition against a specific evil enemy. In this case, the division is drawn between “the people” and corrupt actors in courtrooms: presumably judges and lawyers. Replies to this post follow a similar counter-democratic skepticism towards supposedly corrupt elites in politics. One reply reads:

“It’s true! Justice won’t be done to innocent people. The Corrupt Judicial System must be fixed.” Another states: “Corrupt governments are the Achilles heel of our country ! It’s looks legal to the casual observer ! It’s not , it’s TYRANNY FULL BLOWN !”

Much of the anti-corruption messaging on Truth Social is rooted in a counter-democratic culture that aims to hold officials accountable. At first glance this objective is both reasonable and noble. Even Rosanvallon (2008), acknowledges the need to hold officials accountable. Upon further inspection, however, this accountability is sought using conspiracy theories that support claims of corruption.

Why Trump?

The rise of populism is a worldwide phenomenon (Rosanvallon, 2021), but the rise of Donald Trump, as a political figure, must be analyzed within an American context. An insurgent far-right candidate threatening the democratic order feels almost predictably humdrum to western democracies in the 20th century, but understanding Trump’s specific personal appeal requires a contextual understanding of the American political psyche. Although it is beneficial to discuss this case as a part of a global populist reaction, it is also necessary to view the case in isolation. There are certainly factors that contributed to Trump’s rise that did not contribute to Jair Bolsonaro’s in Brazil or Viktor Orban’s in Hungary, and vice versa. There are personal attributes unique to Trump, and societal attributes unique to the United States, that have greatly affected the success of the Trump political brand. This analysis on Truth Social can shed light on Trump’s audience and why his message resonates so strongly.

Unsurprisingly, there is no single, ubiquitous view of Trump on Truth Social, and different users discuss the man in different terms. Despite some variance in this discourse, Trump is still discussed as a nearly unstoppable force of nature in most posts. On Truth Social, he is elevated to superhuman status. Reading these comments may give the impression that Trump is a pop star or a teen heartthrob. Disregarding the few posts from liberal accounts, Trump receives universal admiration on the platform. While not every post on the platform references Trump, the posts that do exhibit overwhelmingly positive affection. In comment replies, this affection is most often generalized, and is only tangentially related to the content in the parent post. One

post, in reply to a meme criticizing the Democratic Party's purported support for Ukraine and undocumented immigrants, reads:

“I am a patriotic Maga American !! I will not give up on President Trump , My loyalty is steadfast and true!! I stand with fellow American Patriots!! I will never surrender!! For Love of God and Country!!”

A reply to a video of Trump posted by Fox News anchor Sean Hannity reads:

“How can you not LOVE Trump...??? That man is putting his neck on the line to SAVE America... Trump 2024 MAGA and drain the swamp.”

Frequently throughout Truth Social, there is a collective narrative that Trump is sacrificing himself in the fight for everyday Americans. Posts frequently allude to supposed witch hunts like Trump's banning from social media, his civil and criminal trials, and his impeachments as president. Even more often, these posts are vague regarding what specific sacrifices Trump has made. One Trump supporter posted:

“Love him or hate him... I will say this. It takes a very strong man to withstand 8 years of constant financial, personal, psychologically vindictive attacks. Very few men could. This would have brought lesser men to their knees.”

Trump supporters on Truth Social describe the man as a resilient and stoic figure of resistance. Trump's perception on the platform is almost mythical. Often, Trump is described in terms more fitting of rock stars, religious figures, or freedom fighters.

Truth social as negative politics

Rosanvallon argues that these politics of distrust and division manifest in overtly negative politics (2008). Negative politics seek to attack the unfavorable aspects of an opponent rather than the favorable aspects of one's own candidate or party. To be sure, negative politics is not exclusive to populism. A growing wave of negative politics is observable in mainstream party politics, as well. Discourse on Truth Social, similarly, is not dramatically more negative than political discourse on other platforms.

While there is frequent disagreement among Truth Social users, this is not commonly open vitriol directed at users. While this discourse is rarely productive in changing anyone's opinion, the tone often trends neutral, positive, or humorous, rather than negative. Some of this

discourse could even be considered positive engagement in that it involves praise for the ideas and actions of representatives within the MAGA movement. On posts discussing other political figures, however, particularly President Trump's political rivals like Joe Biden and Nikki Haley, negative politics are guaranteed. Moreover, when liberal and moderate accounts are active in defending these figures, the tone quickly turns divisive, offensive, and even violent. Throughout Truth Social, posts advocating for potential civil war and domestic armed conflict are nearly unavoidable. One post bluntly states "November is coming it's either president trump or civil war." Additionally, calls for violence against Trump's political rivals are common. One post, referring to President Biden, reads "our military should remove the dictator and communist in our government and the executions [should] begin." Another post reads "He needs to be dragged out by US Military and have a swift military trubunal." These posts, while not representative of the entire Truth Social user base, reflect the nature of a portion of discourse on the platform. Not only are open calls for a violent coup present on the platform, there appears to be no intention of limiting such speech. In contrast, mainstream social media platforms have gone to great lengths to prevent such calls to violence.

Another example of negative politics that can be generally observed on Truth Social is the widespread use of discriminatory language and hate speech. While such discriminatory language is virtually synonymous with the internet, generally, Truth Social's focus on divisive, negative politics is likely a driving factor. Notably, it is not only conservative posters that engage in hatespeech. Among the few liberal accounts that exist to counter the overwhelmingly conservative majority, hate speech seems at least as common. When disagreements happen on Truth Social, ad hominem attacks are almost mandatory. In many of these attacks, hateful language is present, particularly ableist language that denigrates those with cognitive disabilities.

Still, these are a minority of the incidences of hate speech on Truth Social. More commonly, discourse is between like-minded conservatives. Thus, hate speech and discriminatory language is often targeted at the subject of conversations. A public figure is likely to be ridiculed for their identity. Such a figure is much more likely to be ridiculed for their identity if they belong to a minority group. Users on Truth Social often use a subject's gender or racial identity to discredit their ideas. Hate speech towards progressive women in politics, as well

as Muslim and hispanic individuals seems particularly normalized. Using the search function on the platform, one could search the names of prominent women or muslims in politics and quickly find instances of hateful speech. Searching “Ilhan Omar,” a progressive, muslim woman in Congress, will yield results of islamophobic, sexist and racist speech including slurs. Other women in the news are described in sexist terms. One meme labels Vice President Kamala Harris a “whore,” while another describes New York Attorney General Letitia James as a “corrupt, communist, bitch.” Of course, hate speech is not unique to Truth Social. This hate speech represents the division inherent to populist politics, as observed by Rosanvallon (2021).

Despite the rampant hate speech on the platform, there does appear to be some censorship of specific slurs. Specifically, the n-word will not be found on Truth Social. Seemingly, one will never come across the word in discourse on the site and searching for it will yield no results. Similarly, the homophobic f-slur cannot be found. Truth Social, although likely far less moderated than mainstream platforms, clearly censors some speech using a profanity filter for very specific words. While searching Twitter for such slurs will yield results, Truth Social appears to be deleting any reference to some of the most offensive slurs. Of course, other, more niche slurs exist on the platform and are easy to find in comments.

Truth Social as an echo chamber

These pervasive examples of negative politics can be seen as an obvious effect of the echo chamber phenomenon (Sunstein, 2017), Truth Social’s users have been radicalized to the point that certain opinions and sentiments have become dogma. It seems, to platform users, no sane person would hold a conflicting view. Because of this, the conversations are approached by conservative posters with a tone of superiority and an intention to ridicule. Of course, liberal and moderate users of the platform exercise the same tone and intention, and are likely fully aware of the response that they will receive on the platform. Much of what is posted by liberals and moderates on Truth Social falls distinctly in the realm of trolling– also negative politics. One example comes from a liberal account, in response to Trump’s son Eric complaining about a judge in one of his father’s trials. This post, from a liberal troll account, reads:

Poor boy. You got caught with your hand in the cookie jar. Now you are crying like a baby. Suck it up buttercup and take your punishment like a man. And your dad is not the frontrunner to win the election.

Many of the posts from liberal accounts echo this general antagonistic sentiment. Despite the differing viewpoints from Truth Social's core user base, liberals on the platform exhibit the same antagonism as the MAGA conservatives that make the platform famous.

Sunstein's theory of echo chambers remains popular, yet imperfect to describe this phenomenon. Truly, perfect echo chambers do not exist. It is impossible for one to fully isolate from dissenting viewpoints. Additionally, the prevalence and effects of echo chambers remains uncertain. One literature review found that "echo chambers are much less widespread than is commonly assumed" and that there is "a very mixed picture on polarisation and the role of news and media use in contributing to polarisation (Ross, et al., 2022)." It is clear that the effect and existence of echo chambers needs broader study, however, there is certainly doubt that Sunstein's echo chambers are as pervasive as many assume. Despite this, there is a large research gap surrounding niche, ideology focused platforms such as Truth Social. The aforementioned literature review states that social platforms are "virtually never used in isolation," however this may not be consistent across social media platforms. To be sure, it is certainly possible that Truth Social's user base rarely or never ventures to other social media apps. Another consideration is that many users could be banned from other platforms. Further research on niche, alt-tech digital spaces is needed, as these could be much better examples of echo chambers, when compared with mainstream social media platforms. Less niche platforms contain a much broader ideological base of users, posting a broad range of opinions. Truth Social, by contrast, does not have liberal content to display, as the discussion is nearly unanimously supportive of Trump. A conservative is much more likely to find resistance to their ideas on Twitter than Truth Social, regardless of any efforts to maintain an echo chamber environment.

One important study on the subject found that, contrary to the echo chamber theory, "exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization (Bail, et al., 2018)." The study offered compensation to Democrats and Republicans on Twitter who would follow bots that retweeted messages with opposing political views. The results found that the

Republican group expressed significantly more conservative views after following the bots, while the Democratic group, likewise, expressed more liberal ones, however the effect on Democrats was too muted to be considered statistically significant. Notably, the study cautions: “Readers should not interpret our findings as evidence that exposure to opposing political views will increase polarization in all settings.” As with the literature review above, this result seems only generalizable to Twitter, and perhaps other mainstream social media platforms. More study is needed to see the effect that a platform like Truth Social would have. Additionally, because the bot account only retweeted posts from politicians and popular political figures, the effects could be different if the posts came from less prominent individuals. More study is certainly needed on this, particularly in alt tech digital spaces.

Truth Social’s rigid hierarchy

Truth Social maintains a rigid hierarchy of accounts. Disregarding a few exceptions, such as the Biden campaign’s account, there are four distinct classes of Truth Social accounts, each with a different role to play in the ecosystem. These tiers can be found in figure 3 below:

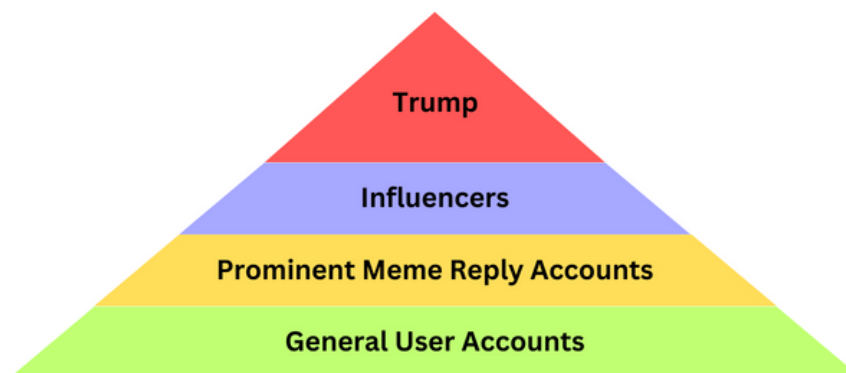


Figure 3: The hierarchy of user accounts on Truth Social

The broadest group sits at the bottom of the hierarchy and represents general user accounts. These users consume content from others and post general, individual opinions. These users represent the least powerful, but largest group of users on Truth Social. They are free to post any individual opinion they may have and are unlikely to face reputational damage from others in the community from posting non-conforming beliefs.

The next most powerful class of user on Truth Social is the prominent meme account. Memes can be defined as “remixed, iterated messages which are rapidly spread by members of

participatory digital culture for the purpose of continuing a conversation (Wiggins and Bowers, 2014, p. 1).” Image memes are everywhere on Truth Social. In virtually every popular post, they can be found in the most prominent replies, and they make up a strong portion of the overall content on the platform. These media messages contribute greatly to the overall content on Truth Social. Because Truth Social is a political platform, most of these memes are political in nature, aimed at either promoting Donald Trump or denigrating his rivals. Memes serve as centers for community discussion. The top replies to Trump’s posts on the platform are overwhelmingly memes. Most often, the content of reply memes are unrelated to the topic in the original post. For example, Trump may post about an upcoming campaign event, but the top reply could be a meme lampooning Joe Biden’s border policy. Such memes usually relate little, if at all, to the content in the main post.

Prominent meme accounts enjoy a large amount of visibility on the platform, but do little to actively engage with the community. This category of accounts contains a relatively small number of users, but they are among the most prominent accounts on the platform. The separation between this class and general user accounts is the least distinct, however, as general user accounts engage in similar behavior. A general user account may post a meme reply to a Trump truth, and may even gain significant traction. These occurrences, however, are one-off occurrences for a general user account. In contrast, a prominent meme account has recurrently popular meme replies to top posts on the platform.

One top example of a prominent meme account is @OksanaTrump. This account has over 100,000 followers on the platform, but is not popular because of its own opinions. The account exemplifies the prominent meme reply account, because it is most visible in the replies to popular posts on the platform. The owner of the account rarely posts their own opinions on political issues, but relies on using meme content, largely generated by others. While this analysis is not concerned with identifying potential bot accounts on Truth Social, these accounts display a lack of creativity and originality in their posts. Figure 4 shows examples of the memes posted by @OksanaTrump.



Figure 4: Memes posted by @OksanaTrump in reply to Donald Trump’s posts. Each meme was posted uncaptioned. Each meme serves to either praise Trump or denigrate his rivals.

Whether these are bot accounts, or not, they operate similarly to broadcast bots (Oentaryo, et al., 2016). Broadcast bots are used to disseminate information, in this case memes, and are not used to interact with others. Communication from these accounts appears to be largely one-way, indicating a lack of interaction with general user accounts. Of course, general users will reply to the memes posted, but return replies from the meme account are not expected. The result of the memes posted by prominent meme accounts is most often general messages indicating support or humor. Discussion between general user accounts can also result from these posts.

Next on the hierarchical pyramid is the influencer account. These are well established voices in conservative media, as well as some anonymous voices that are prominent in online conservative discourse. An example of the former could be @JackPosobiec, while an example of the latter is @catturd2. Both accounts have over a million followers and their posts garner a relatively large amount of attention on the platform. They may rarely engage with general user accounts, but are much more likely to reply to users in their class of influencers. These accounts likely feel a large amount of pressure to post opinions consistent with the Trump campaign’s messaging, and may even be members of Trump’s past or present campaign or government. These users exist to influence general users while reinforcing and confirming Trump’s brand of populist ideology.

Finally, at the top of the hierarchy is @realDonaldTrump. Trump's personal account is significantly more prominent than any other account on the platform. In many ways, the entire ecosystem exists to promote and preserve Trump's position at the top. Trump has tremendous power in controlling the conversation on Truth Social through his posts. These posts serve as centers for discourse on the platform among general users, and they consistently have a high amount of user engagement from general users, meme accounts, and even influencers. Trump's position at the top is potentially untouchable as the platform was created by Trump, for Trump. He not only has direct power over the platform through administrative control, his posts are also the most popular on the platform. In the Truth Social ecosystem, this elevates Trump to almost god-status, as he controls the overall narrative on Truth Social and the platform where this narrative is spread.

The reply section of Trump's truths is remarkably consistent. The first several, at least, replies are nearly unanimously in meme form. Most often, these are from the prominent meme accounts that appear consistently in Trump's top replies. It usually takes a significant amount of scrolling before reaching a reply that is not in the form of an image. Occasionally, an influencer account breaks through the memes and is able to secure a top reply to a Trump truth, however, this is an exception. Most engagement from influencers occurs in individual quote-reply posts, rather than directly in reply to Trump.

Trump has supreme control of the conversation on Truth Social. This allows for easy spread of information and propaganda. Naturally, this near omnipresent control has negative effects on the democratic spirit on the site. Specifically, dominant control of media is anti-democratic, as a free press is a central component of democracy (Repucci, 2019). While, of course, Trump does not have control of the national media, he has complete control over Truth Social. This control is extremely influential in the civic consciousness of many individuals who use Truth Social as a primary source for political information. This ubiquitous control enables the spread of propaganda with worrying efficiency.

Truth Social as a model of propaganda

Intentionally or otherwise, Truth Social promotes prominent conservative voices on the platform. This is achieved through the “For You” feed, as well as through the “Suggested Profiles” section, which appears to almost exclusively promote high profile, verified conservative personalities. As Truth Social is a closed source platform, it is uncertain whether this content is algorithmically curated for the individual user and to what extent. Still, it is clear that Truth Social’s design and affordances create an elite class of content producers and a more general class of content consumers. Between these two classes, is also an intermediary class of meme accounts, which rarely directly engage in discussion.

Media messages are generally disseminated from the top to the bottom. This model shows how Truth Social can be used as a propaganda tool. Although user engagement on the platform seems genuine, the discourse is widely dictated by the content producing influencer class on the platform. Largely, this consists of prominent conservative voices in the MAGA movement. Put another way, media influence on Truth Social appears more centralized and homogenous on Truth Social than other platforms. This allows for a more controlled manufacturing of certain ideas to Truth Social’s users. While other platforms have an ideological range of voices that participate, the overtly partisan nature of Truth Social promotes a single view of right populist orthodoxy. While it is well beyond the scope of this research to speculate on any sort of collusion between and among top accounts, it is clear that media messages among the platform’s elite voices generally endorse and elevate those disseminated by Trump. Prominent accounts may reply to Trump’s posts directly, or they may echo messages that originated from Trump. There is little contradiction in the top accounts, leading to a single, Trump-approved view of the political landscape. Media messages often flow from Trump, through prominent surrogate voices, to regular users. Trump’s use of Truth Social frames the conversation at any given time.

Truth Social is unique in that prominent dissenting voices are virtually non-existent, giving Trump and his surrogates near uncontested control of the platform’s discourse. In contrast, mainstream social platforms are much less centralized, with a less rigid division between prominent accounts and regular users. While Trump has leveraged social media in the past to

gain support, Truth Social allows him near total control of discourse on the platform. Observing the discourse on Truth Social reveals that Trump's new posts are community events. They receive the most engagement and serve as centers for discussion.

Truth Social and Democracy

Implications for civic engagement and civic culture

Rosanvallon, as well as other scholars, see the destructive potential of populism. The divisive nature of populism, as well as its negative politics are a threat to the prevailing democratic order. As civic engagement is necessary in a healthy democracy (Dahlgren, 2021) (Habermas, 1989) (Coleman and Blumler, 2009), populism threatens democracies by poisoning public discourse. Democracy is predicated upon a free and open exchange of ideas. This concept extends at least as far back as the French and American Revolutions during the enlightenment. John Stuart Mill's marketplace of ideas forms part of the backbone of contemporary democracies (Gordon, 1997). The marketplace of ideas, however, relies on opposing, good faith actors openly and rationally engaging in nuanced debate. Because populism appeals to simple, emotion driven solutions, it can be seen as incompatible with such a marketplace.

To be sure, contemporary populist supporters are civically engaged. Even under more limited definitions of civic engagement, populists are engaged. This engagement can manifest in many ways, but there is no doubt that populists are motivated to vote for and electorally support their leaders. They participate in public discourse and are prepared to discuss and defend their positions. Many attend protests and rallies, and many supporters get involved in the organizational structure of their movements. Certainly, populism is compatible with existing definitions of civic engagement. This analysis of Truth Social can show this beyond any doubt. Its users are far from apathetic and may well be the most passionately engaged mass of voters that exists. Problems emerge, however, in the types of engagement that manifest from this passion.

While it is not the purpose of this analysis to police civic engagement or establish a litmus test for the "correct" civic engagement, it remains that some expressions of civic

engagement are more productive than others. Defining “negative” and “positive” engagement is a slippery slope, but it is difficult to argue that most of the discourse on Truth Social is positive. Some defining characteristics of the Truth Social worldview are intense, almost paranoid skepticism of institutions and that this movement, led by Donald Trump, is the only defense against the perceived ills that accompany modernity. When posts on Truth Social originate from this political perspective, it is difficult to see much of anything on the platform as positive engagement.

Even the posts supporting Trump or specific policy proposals are difficult to read as positive politics. Out of context, a reply indicating general Trump support could be read as positive engagement, but this endorsement usually signals support for distinctly negative beliefs. Explicit endorsement of demagoguery is negative engagement, even when such support is a positive statement of approval. While this support indicates generally positive support for Trump, the effect of this support is ultimately negative on the democratic process. Seen as a measure of how constructive engagement is, generic support for Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric should be classed as negative engagement. This general form of negative engagement is among the most common forms of engagement on Truth Social. To be sure, most posts and replies on the platform are not necessarily problematic in isolation, but placed within the broader political context, the engagement is clearly negative politics (Rosanvallon, 2009). These general messages of support not only indicate a support for negative and dangerous political sentiments, they reinforce and enable the more vulgar rhetoric that garners wider appreciation.

Democratic implications: Counter democracy and epistocracy

Underpinning this discussion of populism on Truth Social is an anxiety surrounding democracy. Central to populism is an institutional skepticism (Rosanvallon, 2021) that manifests in counter-democratic speech and tactics (Rosanvallon, 2000). Counter democracy is not exclusive to populism, and not all aspects of populism are inherently anti-democratic. Counter democratic mechanisms are found in many forms and are necessary to a healthy democratic society (Dahlgren, 2009). A healthy and free press is certainly vital to liberal democracy, as are protest demonstrations. These are healthy and necessary mechanisms to keep actors accountable in a free liberal democracy. However, these politics of distrust can be intoxicating. A healthy

democracy must keep counter-democracy in check, just as counter-democracy serves to keep political actors in check. When this balance is not preserved, politics of distrust can lead to dangerous outcomes. Dissatisfaction and political disillusionment are among the most dangerous. Negative politics result from this descent into distrust.

In Rosanvallon's terms, American democracy has already progressed quite far into this spiral. Negative politics is not new to American political discourse, as displayed by attack ads and "the age of deselection (Rosanvallon, 2008, p.173)." American voters are no longer choosing a candidate to vote for, rather they are choosing candidates not to vote for. The trend towards "poison politics (Rosanvallon, 2008, p.177)" has snowballed from occasional attack ads in the early 1980s to the unrelenting political vitriol that is now the standard. Accompanying this slow shift towards negative politics is increasing political hopelessness and disillusionment. To remedy this, voters have looked towards easy populist solutions. These solutions mask populist division behind a veneer of hope for a better future.

Populism can be seen as the ultimate result of counter democracy run amok. Of course, populism has always existed, but when negative politics reaches a tipping point, the dominant political sensibility shifts inevitably towards populism. The political shift towards populist ideology has led to more drastic proposals from some academics. Epistocracy could, in theory, limit some of the most dangerous effects of populism. While many write about the dangers of populism to liberal democracy, proponents of epistocracy believe in a progression away from democracy towards a new system that places priority on political knowledge (Brennan, 2016). There are many versions of epistocracy, ranging from restricting suffrage to implementing elite knowers that police the choices of the people. Although there is wide variance in practice, each of these epistocratic solutions aim to solve the same prognosis on contemporary democracy: the people cannot be trusted to control the direction of society.

One could argue that epistocracy and populism, as ideologies, originate from a similar spirit of disillusionment and distrust, however from different angles. While populism represents a distrust for an elite class among the people, epistocracy could represent a distrust for the people among an elite class. In this way, populists and epistocrats are two sides of the same coin,

advocating for simple solutions to complicated problems with democracy. For whatever reason, the electorate is not engaging with the complexities of modern politics. Populism and epistocracy both exist to solve this problem. Populism aims to reduce those complexities to a more digestible division between groups. In this way, populism's goal is increasing the accessibility of civic engagement. Epistocracy, conversely, aims to decrease the accessibility of civic engagement by placing a limit on who is involved in political decision making. In this way, epistocracy could represent an emerging outlet for elitism. As populists are not shy in expressing their hatred of elites, epistocratic elites are clear in their disdain for populists. Perhaps the largest difference is that epistocrats are aware that their solutions threaten democracy, because that is their goal. I define this as an emerging political dimension of conflict. Just as there is a divide between right and left, or Democrat and Republican, this dimension of populism vs. epistocracy will become increasingly present in political debate and discourse.

Truth Social's users are clearly defined in Brennan's *Against Democracy*. The platform is host to perhaps the most extreme example of "hooligans" that exist in American politics. These are "the rabid sports fans of politics (Brennan, 2016, p. 5)" that "are overconfident in themselves and what they know." This is the most dangerous type of voter to Brennan, as there is little rationality in their decisions. Limiting access to these individuals would certainly halt the progress of populism in democracy, but it would come at the cost of democracy itself. Brennan is not ignorant of this, of course, and calls upon millenia-old democratic skepticism to defend his point. Plato was an epistocrat who believed the people were too "dumb, irrational, and ignorant to govern well." It is a point well made, and one well taken, but the alternative solution equates to a democratic nuclear option. Few would argue that civic engagement on Truth Social is the healthiest form for liberal democracy, but to take this extreme example to make a case for political literacy tests would be dishonest.

A switch to epistocracy would not only require a monumental constitutional restructuring, but it would also require stripping the right to suffrage from hundreds of millions of Americans. Of course, Brennan does not see it this way. To him, the right to suffrage, as it exists, should not exist. According to epistocratic thought, governments should require voters to be licensed in the same way that bus drivers are. We would not trust an unlicensed bus driver to

steer a bus, so why would we trust an unlicensed voter to steer a country? Although epistocracy is an interesting ideological foil to populism, it is no better. Other solutions must be found that preserve the right to suffrage that has been so hard fought. There is no virtue in disenfranchising hundreds of millions to give a select few ultimate power. As both epistocracy and populism are undesirable and represent existential threats to democracy, an alternative must be proposed. As democracy, hopefully, weathers this wave of populist and potentially epistocratic threats, it is of vital, time-sensitive importance that further research is conducted on Truth Social and platforms like it.

Civic engagement

In academia, civic engagement is often seen as a silver bullet for democratic health. John Dewey wrote about the importance of education on democratic citizenship in 1916. In “Democracy and Education,” Dewey theorized that formal education was critical in preparing students to be good participants in a democratic future (Dewey, 1916). This education is vital in promoting civic habits that underpin democracy. In this way, Dewey was among the first to theorize on a positive relationship between civic engagement and democratic health (Dewey, 1927). Both civic engagement and civic education have changed since Dewey’s time. It is no longer viable to simply argue for citizens to be engaged and educated. Traditional schooling may still be valid as a means to promote civic engagement, but education comes through more varied avenues in the internet age. Social media is a consistent source of political education, regardless of the quality of that education. Truth Social users are, to an extent, educated on a specific set of issue-positions that they have been fed. Dewey’s solutions to promoting democratic health through education naturally rely on an outdated premise. The mediascape in the early 20th century had no analogy for Truth Social. While traditional education may still be a tool to promote democracy, it is not as strong as it once was. Democracy relies on much more than the schooling of its participants. To this end, modern scholars have updated Dewey’s philosophy. While the problems of 21st century democracy differ greatly from those of the 20th century, Dewey’s fundamental ideas remain sound, albeit in need of update. New strategies are necessary to defend democracy from the 21st century attacks levied against it.

Ideas of civic and political engagement have developed extensively since Dewey. Civic engagement remains on the minds of scholars and is consistently cited as the most vital aspect of a healthy democracy. Peter Dahlgren upholds civic engagement as a vital aspect of democratic health. In “Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy,” Dahlgren emphasizes that healthy civic engagement is passionate. In contrast to theorists like Brennan who uphold absolute rationality in civic engagement, Dalhgren writes “to be engaged in something signals not just cognitive attention and some normative stance, but also an affective investment (p. 83).” In a later section titled “Unreasonable Rationality,” Dahlgren emphasizes that asking citizens for complete, unfeeling rationality is unreasonable and unrealistic. Throughout his work, Dahlgren praises the positive effects of civic engagement on democracy. Despite this, emerging platforms like Truth Social show how damaging negative civic engagement can be. Users on Truth Social are clearly passionately engaged in the democratic process, however this engagement and participation is undermining democracy. In Dahlgren’s own words “democracy is continually at risk from antidemocratic forces, some of which even use the processes of democracy itself to further their cause (p. 2).” Populists use many democratic institutions, including mass media and social media, to undermine democratic culture.

Conclusion

Democracy is entering an age of profound uncertainty. As political distrust and discontentment reach a tipping point, anti-democratic spirit is beginning to pervade political systems around the world. Attacks against the prevailing democratic order are unlikely to slow as Rosanvallon's populist century ages (2021). It seems there may be two opposing, but equally distasteful paths forward for democracies. When confronted with complex, international political problems, there are two simple solutions. The system can either lower the barrier to entry and oversimplify complicated political problems; or it can limit who is allowed to participate altogether. Both of these ideas fly in the face of democratic ideals. To be sure, western democracy has always upheld widespread civic engagement as the gold standard. Noble as this pursuit may be, it feels rooted in an outdated and grossly optimistic understanding of the contemporary media landscape. Although the internet presents an opportunity to produce the most informed voters democracy has ever seen, misinformation and echo chambers undermine this opportunity. It is unclear that the potential of the internet as a tool to mass-educate the electorate can ever be realized. At the very least, it is not hasty to suggest that the digital media ecosystem is trending in the wrong direction, as far as democratic health is concerned.

It should be stated that there is no indication that digital communication is inherently damaging to democracy. To the contrary, a great deal of digital communication is beneficial to the democratic spirit and civic engagement. A problem exists however, as that positive communication is overshadowed and undermined by the toxic echo chambers that online engagement often results in. Specifically, there is a problem with the understudied echo chambers that result from partisan, ideological alt tech platforms. From this perspective, the internet is only as dangerous as we allow it to be. The current structure of digital communication, intentionally or otherwise, facilitates and exacerbates the anti-democratic populist ideology that is defining the modern age. While this phenomenon is nothing new, and has been observable on mainstream social media in the past, the shift towards alt tech platforms represents a new level of danger. As many users seek to confirm their biases, they flock to ideologically homogeneous platforms like Truth Social for their civic engagement. While Truth Social certainly gives these

users what they're looking for— political discussion unadulterated by conflicting or dissenting views— this is perilous for individual civic awareness and collective democratic health.

It is clear that there is a problem with misinformed voters. It would be inaccurate to call Truth Social users “uninformed” as this segment of the electorate consumes a massive amount of information. The problem lies in the quality of information. Similarly, there is not a problem with civic engagement among Truth Social’s users. These voters are extremely politically engaged. Again, there is a problem with the quality of this engagement. While civic engagement can be measured in many ways, and it may mean different things to different scholars, it is difficult to argue that the civic engagement on display on Truth Social is desirable. Truth Social exists, more than anything, as a propaganda tool focused on spreading massive amounts of information in support of a specific worldview. This propaganda, combined with the connective affordances of the platform, allow for mass civic engagement among its massively misinformed user base. To this end, Truth Social supports the populist ideology’s focus on mass mobilization, but it does not support democratic ideals of an engaged citizenry giving informed consent to its governors. The echo-chamber induced populism on Truth Social as well as its epistocratic foil are emerging as opponents in a new dimension of political conflict that warrant serious attention from researchers, scholars, and democratic advocates. The emergence of this dimension points to critical flaws in democracy that must be repaired.

The path towards populism

Without intervention, the only path forward for western democracies leads to populism. The dangers of this path are plainly visible even as many democracies are taking their first baby steps towards populism. Whereas liberal democracy has worked to protect and bridge demographic gaps, populism clearly represents a threat to these democratic ideals. With repeated attacks against democratic norms becoming more commonplace as the populist century reaches the first quarter mark, minority rights are increasingly under attack. The institutions that are tasked with defending the most vulnerable individuals within society have fallen victim to the prevailing politics of distrust, as Rosanvallon describes (2008). While metered skepticism is conducive to democratic health and public accountability, the dominant worldview in liberal democracies is becoming one of institutional distrust. Although this distrust may be grounded in

some version of reality, the effects of a political culture overwhelmed by institutional distrust can be disastrous.

This path towards populism is being aided to a great extent by the contemporary digital media ecosystem. Platforms like Truth Social enable dangerous media consumption habits that can result in radicalizing echo chambers. More mainstream platforms like Facebook or Twitter are certainly home to their own echo chambers, often reinforced intentionally by users who curate their feeds, and by algorithms which curate feeds automatically. In the case of fringe, alt-tech platforms like Truth Social, however, the echo chamber is the point. Truth Social is populated, with few exceptions by users of a specific political ideology. As ideas bounce around the echo chamber, they become amplified and simplified, making them ripe for exploitation by populist leaders. Users seek out ideologically homogeneous platforms like Truth Social in an attempt to confirm their preexisting assumptions about the world.

A theoretical path to epistocracy

The path that scholars like Jason Brennan suggest is openly anti-democratic on its face. Rather than allow platforms like Truth Social to continue to poison society, epistocracy would negate their power. Whether epistocracy is reasonably possible to implement as a counter-measure to the rising tide of populism is a matter of debate. But regardless of its feasibility in practice, there is a scholarly inclination towards epistocracy that has not abated since the teachings of classical philosophers like Plato. To put society in the hands of those regarded as the most knowledgeable is tempting, particularly as misinformation and political radicalization feel crushingly inevitable.

Epistocracy and populism exist on opposing ends of a spectrum. Both are theorized as solutions to bridge gaps in civic knowledge and civic engagement, however their solutions are entirely opposing. As populist urges begin to control governments, there is certainly an inclination to put restrictions on democracy that prevent the will of a misled and misinformed people. Perhaps the merits of epistocracy can only be debated in earnest after democracy reaches its logical, populist conclusion. While epistocracy feels both drastic and impractical in the first quarter of this populist century, it is certainly reasonable to predict that it will gain steam as

populism progresses and liberal democratic protections regress. To be sure, any transition to epistocracy is easier said than done. Most versions of epistocracy are simply incompatible with the mechanisms of government that exist in democracies. Constitutions would have to be rewritten and it is not unreasonable to expect violent conflicts and even civil wars to accompany any shift to epistocracy. Despite the tumultuous nature of a change of any prospective epistocratic shift, it may become an attractive alternative anyway. Truly, there is no prediction to be made about what a populist world order may look like, only that it is the course that democracy is taking. In future generations, epistocracy may gain serious consideration as the only counter to populism. It would be both premature and speculative to take any position on a future ideological conflict between populists and epistocrats. However, at the current moment in time, it is necessary to repair and protect democracy from the challenges that it will face in the future.

A third path?

A third path could exist that rejects the seemingly inevitable tide of populism while also refusing to succumb to anti-democratic, epistocratic theorists. In this discussion, pragmatism is a necessary consideration. Liberal democracy is on a collision course with populism. We can consider the first path, towards populism, the default. Without intervention, liberal democratic ideals will give way to relentless populist attacks. Epistocracy exists as a theoretical counter-point to the emerging populist paradigm. It is entirely possible that an epistocratic system would be more resilient in the populist century than democracy. Epistocracy is attractive to academics, but the practicality of its implementation in the modern day ranges from unconvincing to pipe dream. Regardless of one's opinions on epistocracy's theoretical merits, it must be noted that it faces tremendous, likely insurmountable hurdles in implementation. Even Brennan acknowledges that epistocracy is unlikely to ever be seriously considered, at least in the near-to-moderate future (2016). Simply from a pragmatic perspective, if we are interested in quelling the populist urges of the 21st century, we must consider other alternatives.

Without substantial change in the digital media environment, populism will win. Liberal democracy is beginning to bend under the pressure of populist movements, and, without intervention, it will break. In determining the manner and extent of intervention, one must ask

fundamental questions about democracy. With regards to this specific case, one must ask, simply, does a platform such as Truth Social belong in a liberal democracy? Freedom and democracy have been clearly linked in both enlightenment philosophy and world history, however, one must ask how mutually beneficial this relationship is. When free enterprise economics and the right to free speech are central to implementations of democracy, there is financial incentive to create platforms like Truth Social that profit from misinformation. Fundamental questions about the nature of democracy must be asked and answered if the crushing tide of populism is to be stopped. Liberal democracy as it is currently theorized simply lacks the resiliency to withstand populist attacks.

As it turns out, 20th century democracy ended with the 20th century. Updating democracy's priorities will be key to ensuring it survives a populist surge enabled by connective technology that simply did not exist in the time of John Dewey. History is certainly valuable in showing the dangers of giving governing power to populists, but guiding democracy through this century will require solutions borne from this century. Of course, we can learn lessons from political scientists and democratic history; however, this moment is unique. The contemporary media ecosystem breeds populists with efficiency that was impossible in the 20th century. While modern media is not completely to blame, this moment of intense distrust, division, and oversimplification within politics has been greatly exacerbated by emergent technologies that continue to facilitate disillusionment with increasing efficiency. While past discussions of democracy place emphasis on civic engagement, efforts to improve democratic health in this century must focus on the quality of that engagement. There is nothing desirable about a misinformed voter going to the polls. Epistocrats are right on this point. However, rather than rejecting this segment of the population from participating in the process, systemic solutions must be pursued that prioritize healthy civic engagement and directly confront the aspects of media consumption that drive the distrust, division, and oversimplification that breeds populist urges.

Saving democracy can not be as simple as banning a certain social media app, or even several. This effort must require shifting priorities to emphasize a healthy civic culture. Certainly, alt tech platforms are not solely responsible for the increasingly precarious situation

that democracy finds itself in. A systemic solution must target this civic culture that encourages platforms which emphasize profits over individual and collective wellbeing. Central to this mission must be efforts to curb misinformation and echo chambers, while promoting ideological heterogeneity within platforms. Additionally, while this discussion has focused on social media and digital content, corporate mass media objectives should also be questioned. Liberal democracy has always prided itself on freedom. It is the “liberal” in “liberal democracy.” This freedom, of course, extends to an adherence to free market economic principles. While freedom, of course, is a noble pursuit, problems emerge when media platforms are operated under the liberal, profit-first mentality. In this way, the phrase “liberal democracy” is effectively cannibalizing itself. Specific restrictions on the operation of social media platforms, illiberal as they may be, could be the only way to save liberal democracy from itself.

To be clear, this conclusion does not advance any specific solution to the problems facing democracy. Rather, the aim is to ring an alarm bell that liberal democracies across the globe are accelerating towards a point of no return. Without timely intervention, the attacks levied by populists will break democratic systems and fracture national, and international, governing institutions. Institutions are viewed through a lens of distrust. As this distrust has been given a voice, movement, and ideology in the form of populism, a critical mass will soon be reached. It is imperative that action is taken before this happens. Without action, we could be facing a future political landscape defined by two undesirable ideologies: populism or epistocracy. Simply put, liberal democracies are not currently equipped to weather this populist century.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Codebook

The following image shows the codebook that resulted from my pilot process. These codes were applied to the qualitative text analysis portion of my research

Code	Subcode	Subcode
Liberal / Moderate	Fact-check	
	Negative engagement	Insult poster
		Insult Trump
		Insult subject
	Positive engagement	Praise Biden/Dems
		Praise subject
Conservative	Negative engagement	Insult poster
		Concern for poster
		Insult Biden/Dems
		Insult subject
		Insult Republicans/moderates
	Positive engagement	Praise Trump
		Praise GOP
		Praise poster
		Religious
		Political/strategy opinion
Praise subject		
Conspiracy	QAnon	
	Revisionist history	
	Election Denial	
	Drain the swamp/general corruption	
	Other	
Possible hate speech	Racism	
	Misogyny/sexism	
	Anti-LGBTQ+	
	Other	
Call to violence	Civil war	
	Directed at a person	
General comment		
Unknown		

Appendix II: Research Sample

Below is a sample of the research, which contains a majority of the posts studied on February 2, 2024. The colors on the left represent whether the excerpt was a post (red), reply (yellow), or sub-reply (green).

2/20/2024	Source	Text:	Image?	url	Codes	Sub codes
Trump	realDonaldTrump	I have substantially UNDERSTATED my assets in the Financial Statements, not overstated them, as the Corrupt A.G. and "Judge" said. Also, 100% Disclaimer Clause, No Default, No Victims, No Complaints, No "Nothing" except for success from the banks and everyone else. The Judge FRAUDULENTLY stated that Mar-a-Lago was worth only \$18,000,000 in order to make his Fake Case. He, the A.G., and Crooked Joe Biden should be the ones under investigation, not me. Election Interference! MAGA2024	N/A	https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/111961511340956488	Conspiracy	Election Denial
Image 1	theExecutioner	Every conservative should steer clear of NY. Make them feel the heat. Remember, there was no victim in their fake charges. Election interference at its finest. #Trump #Truth #TrumpTruths #TrumpWon #Murch #Maga #DT47 #WeThePeople #RJ6P #WFFDUT #WTPAFU #FJ6NOW #Trump2024		https://truthsocial.com/users/TheExecutioner/statuses/111963474949025665	Conspiracy	Election Denial
Comment 1	Hargrave826	Thank you TRUCKERS the American people stand with y'all. And what a great place to start NY!! America First WWG1WGA	N/A	https://truthsocial.com/users/Hargrave826/statuses/111963836789444433	Conservative	Praise subject, Qanon
Comment 2	Patriot_Fires	I'd like to know how Trump is supposed to make out the check. There is no victim to pay any damages to. Were his lawyers given a W-9 from the judge? Who would receive all that money since the banks did not sue him, this rogue judge decided he didn't like Trump and took it upon himself to do that, which is completely illegal.	N/A	https://truthsocial.com/users/Patriot_Fires/statuses/111963744374644931	Conservative	Insult subject
Comment 3	SallySteel	Lord, we pray for protection over our country, including all seas and waterways. Keep us from terror attacks from without and within. We ask You to continue revealing the corruption in our land, especially in our government and the media. remove it. Send revival, we pray, in Jesus' name.	N/A	https://truthsocial.com/users/SallySteel/statuses/111964238402402052	Conservative	Religious
Comment 4	normgto	You can stop New York in its tracks so please start now!!!	N/A	https://truthsocial.com/users/normgto/statuses/111963962461658109	Conservative	Political/strategy opinion
Comment 5	Kingjo64	The legal precedence now exists, so unless it is overturned by a higher court, it can be used by NY courts to attack any business democrats want to destroy. The problem with legal precedence, it could eventually be used across the entire country and by either political party in the future.	N/A	https://truthsocial.com/users/Kingjo64/statuses/111965200791926633	Conservative	Political/strategy opinion
Image 2	MagaGlam	🔥 TRUTH 🔥		https://truthsocial.com/@MagaGlam/111962187123271640	Conservative	Praise subject
Comment 1	RaymondeWinkler	It's true! Justice won't be done to innocent people. The Corrupt Judicial System must be fixed.	N/A	https://truthsocial.com/users/RaymondeWinkler/statuses/111963328530848762	Conspiracy	DTS/General Corruption
Comment 2	BillyDTalley	Corrupt governments are the Achilles heel of our country ! It's looks legal to the casual observer ! It's not , it's TYRANNY FULL BLOWN !	N/A	https://truthsocial.com/users/BillyDTalley/statuses/111962277932830414	Conspiracy	DTS/General Corruption
Comment 3	therealjonah	Whole time they're concealing the laptop from hell	N/A	https://truthsocial.com/users/therealjonah/statuses/111962811978378067	Conspiracy	Other
Comment 4	Bubba725	Our military should remove the dictator and communist in our government and the executions begin	N/A	https://truthsocial.com/users/Bubba725/statuses/111963967980947946	Call to violence	Civil war
Comment 5	kkreed	She is a Boss!	N/A	https://truthsocial.com/users/kkreed/statuses/111962260629690886	Conservative	Praise subject

Appendix III: Diary samples

Below are two diary entries from late January, recorded just as the ethnographic process was beginning. These diary posts reflect some of my general experiences and feelings while navigating the platform.

23/1/2024

Heavy criticism of Nikki Haley before NH.

Some valid policy criticism (flip-flopping and supporting unpopular policy), but a lot of ad-hominem attacks. A lot of posts talking about her cheating on her husband. (A quick google seems to indicate that these are only rumors, although TS users seem completely convinced.) Would a man be getting the same attacks? Or is this fitting a sexist narrative of the “distrustful” woman. No pushback on any of the cheating claims, and no “community notes” feature to correct the record. Also interesting is that a lot of posts are screenshotted from Twitter/X and reposted by the same account owner to TS.

Trending topics:

#scotus

Nothing specific, really. General distrust in SCOTUS. Possibly manufactured ahead of 14th Amendment rulings

#DWAC - Digital World Acquisition Corp.

Trending because stock is rising, likely because of Iowa. DWAC is partnered with Trump

#Treason

Discussion about dems and moderate republicans. Some Q Anon propaganda

#Texas

Discussion about immigration and recent SC ruling in favor of CBP (feds), against the state of Texas.

26/1/24

#Texas is trending. People are talking about Gov. Greg Abbott intentionally disobeying the orders of the Supreme Court.

“Is this the beginning of the next Revolutionary War?” Scary stuff.

Person talking about shooting coyotes at the Texas border to scare off crossing migrants. Also suggesting that you may intentionally miss a coyote and hit a migrant. TS constantly references immigration from Mexico as an “invasion,” which makes militarizing the border more palatable, I suppose.

A meme about lining the border with militiamen snipers.

“This could be the start of the Rebellion. The start of the Civil War. Biden is trying to push us into a Civil War.”

I'm surprised at how much hate scotus is getting, considering it is an extremely conservative court and Trump appointed three of the justices. Maybe they see conservative judges, liberal judges, and MAGA judges.