



NATIONAL JOURNAL

The GOP's common cause with conspiracists

From Birchers to birthers to QAnon, conspiracists have often found a home in the conservative movement. But now, conspiracy sympathizers are a key segment of the Republican base.



Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, with President Trump at a campaign rally in support of Senate candidates Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue in Dalton, Ga., on Jan. 4

Mini Racker

🕒 Jan. 31, 2021, 8 p.m.

The second of two parts. To read Part One, on how past conspiracy theorists in Congress have met their political fate, [click here](http://njour.nl/s/712290?unlock=W38oPOoCH3TJ3R1S) (<http://njour.nl/s/712290?unlock=W38oPOoCH3TJ3R1S>).

Marjorie Taylor Greene has already done the hard part. While several fringe conspiracy theorists have gotten themselves elected to Congress before they became vocal about their beliefs, voters sent Greene to Washington knowing she was a full-throated QAnon supporter. Even as some Republicans attempt to ostracize her, they should be concerned she will flourish—or at least stick around.

After all, in a [heavily Republican district like hers](/almanac/district/506/) (/almanac/district/506/), it's much easier to stay in Congress than to get there in the first place. Moreover, throughout the postwar era, the GOP has often served as a home for fringe characters like Greene.

Greene owes some credit to former President Trump, a unique figure in political history. Whereas most heads of government attempt to downplay paranoid theories lest they end up on the wrong side of them, Trump [espoused and encouraged such ideas](/s/707793/for-trump-a-boom-time-for-conspiracy-theories) (/s/707793/for-trump-a-boom-time-for-conspiracy-theories) even as the leader of the free world.

“In the modern Republican Party, the discourse of victimhood is central to their message,” said Kathryn Olmsted, a professor of history at UC Davis. “Political scientists like to say that conspiracy theories are for losers, so people who lose an election are more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories about the government. That just makes sense. But that didn't happen with Trump.”

Now, rather than causing that faction of the party to wither and die, Trump's election loss may deepen its roots. False claims of fraud in the 2020 election might metastasize into ideas that undermine the government for years to come, from allegations that Joe Biden's presidency is illegitimate to suspicions about future election rigging, building on the conspiracy theories that have swirled at the fringes of the party for decades.

Perhaps the most well-known theories centered on accusations that government officials and other powerful citizens had communist ties. In the mid-20th century, dozens of members who served on the House Committee on Un-American Activities implied just that. But even they couldn't hold a candle to Sen. Joseph McCarthy, whose name to this day is still synonymous with anti-communist paranoia.

While mainstream Republicans were able to rein in or purge the most vociferous anti-communists—22 GOP senators voted with the majority to censure McCarthy in 1954, effectively ending his political career—the movement took hold outside of government in the form of the John Birch Society.

HUAC's first chairman, Rep. Martin Dies, went on to become a John Birch Society member after losing a race for Senate and leaving Congress. He contributed to its journal for years.

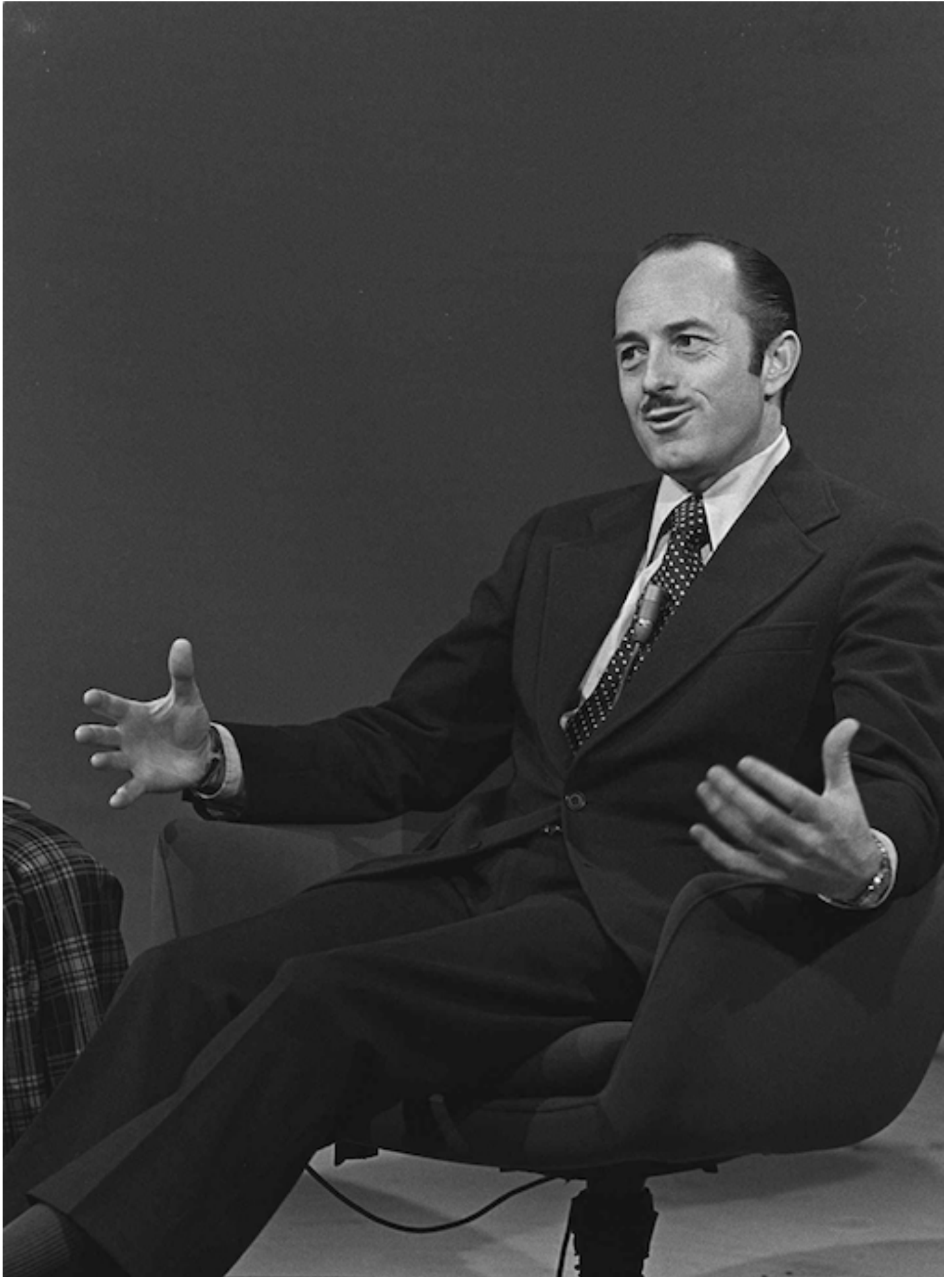
Robert Welch, the founder of the society, accused President Eisenhower himself of serving as a communist agent and espoused conspiracy theories similar to those of the Anti-Masons more than a century before; [he once wrote](#)

(<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/07/16/the-john-birch-society-is-alive-and-well-in-the-lone-star-state-215377>). that the "Illuminati" planned to refashion the world order and make themselves the new ruling elite.

John Schmitz, a Republican congressman from California and Birch Society member, wrote the introduction to a 1971 anti-communist book entitled *None Dare Call It Conspiracy*. The next year, after a primary loss, Schmitz [alleged](https://ia801808.us.archive.org/32/items/john-schmitz-is-no-george-wallace...-by-stephen-lesher-the-new-york-times-novemb/John%20Schmitz%20is%20no%20George%20Wallace%E2%80%A6%2C%20by%20Stephen%20Lesh%20%28The%20New%20York%20Times%2C%20November%205%2C%201972%29%20Section%20SM%2C%20p.%206%2C%2016%2C%2018%2C%2022%2C%2029.pdf) (<https://ia801808.us.archive.org/32/items/john-schmitz-is-no-george-wallace...-by-stephen-lesher-the-new-york-times-novemb/John%20Schmitz%20is%20no%20George%20Wallace%E2%80%A6%2C%20by%20Stephen%20Lesh%20%28The%20New%20York%20Times%2C%20November%205%2C%201972%29%20Section%20SM%2C%20p.%206%2C%2016%2C%2018%2C%2022%2C%2029.pdf>) that President Nixon, who hailed from his district, orchestrated his defeat behind the scenes. Schmitz eventually became [too conservative even for the Birchers](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2001/01/12/conservative-gop-congressman-john-g-schmitz-70-dies/d1dc7a2d-458c-4ef4-8fod-398dfb8d54b4/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2001/01/12/conservative-gop-congressman-john-g-schmitz-70-dies/d1dc7a2d-458c-4ef4-8fod-398dfb8d54b4/>), who kicked him off their governing council in 1982.

But in the following decades, conspiracy theories targeting Democrats took hold in the Republican Party. Another congressman, Rep. William Dannemeyer—who had also espoused a conspiracy theory about AIDS—helped set that trend in motion. “He was the first person, the first prominent person to publicize the 'Clinton Body Count' idea, which is the conspiracy theory that the Clintons have murdered dozens or hundreds of people who've all gotten in their way,” said conspiracy-theory researcher Mike Rothschild, whose book on QAnon, *The Storm Is Upon Us*, will be released this fall.

The attacks on the Clintons persist to this day, as do conspiracy theories about President Obama that found a foothold soon after. Years before Trump rose to political prominence by questioning Obama's birthplace, numerous "birthers" [in Congress](https://www.salon.com/2009/07/28/birther_enablers/) (https://www.salon.com/2009/07/28/birther_enablers/) would not accept that Obama had been born in the United States.



 Rep. John Schmitz, in 1972 AP PHOTO

Lawmakers had wielded conspiracy theories against leaders of the opposing party before. In 1946, for instance, in response to rumors that Franklin Roosevelt had baited Japan into attacking Pearl Harbor because he wanted to enter World War II, [a Senate committee](https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/pearl-harbor.htm) (https://www.senate.gov/about/powers-procedures/investigations/pearl-harbor.htm) investigated and debunked the idea. But two Republican senators, Owen Brewster and Homer Ferguson, wrote a minority report arguing that more digging needed to be done.

Olmsted called it “a common move among conspiracy theorists—I’m just raising questions.”

It is the same tack taken in recent months by many Republicans who implied that widespread voter fraud had cost Trump his job. Instead of saying that the election was undoubtedly rigged, they simply asserted that the existence of such allegations required further investigation.

“What I would urge of this body is that ... we appoint an electoral commission to conduct a 10-day emergency audit, consider the evidence, and resolve the claims,” Sen. Ted Cruz said on Jan. 6, the day he voted against certifying the election results. “For those on the Democratic aisle who say, 'There is no evidence, they've been rejected,' then you should rest in comfort if that's the case.”

For Brewster and Ferguson, the subtlety with which they addressed the conspiracy theory about Roosevelt kept their claims from being viewed as particularly bizarre. Nor did their report seem to affect their political careers; both won reelection after the committee’s investigation.

The same was generally true for members of both parties who gave credence to conspiracy theories surrounding the assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King when the House Select Committee on Assassinations' [1979 report](https://www.archives.gov/research/jfk/select-committee-report) (https://www.archives.gov/research/jfk/select-committee-report) suggested that two gunmen had fired at the president and that both men had likely been killed “as a result of a conspiracy.”

Part of the acceptance of those congressional conspiracy theorists had to do with the fact that the theories they pushed were relatively mainstream. For instance, the belief that two shooters targeted Kennedy has been held by [a majority of Americans](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-one-thing-in-politics-most-americans-believe-in-jfk-conspiracies/) (https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-one-thing-in-politics-most-americans-believe-in-jfk-conspiracies/) since 1967. Should QAnon achieve the same widespread acceptance, Greene could keep her seat for many years.

It's not there yet, but it may be on its way. An [online poll](https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/npr-misinformation-123020) (https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/npr-misinformation-123020) conducted in December by Ipsos found that 17 percent of Americans believe a powerful, Satan-worshipping pedophile ring exists and 37 percent aren't sure whether it exists or not. The same poll found 39 percent believed the "deep state" was working against Trump. And belief may be even more widespread than polls show.

“A lot of people either don't want to identify as QAnon or don't really think of themselves that way,” Rothschild said. “A lot of people who came to QAnon, especially during the pandemic, really don't identify as Q believers. Some of them will say, ‘Oh, I'm not one of those crazy Q people. I just think that there's, you know, trafficking rings running under Central Park.’”

As public opinion shifts, it may well be that the QAnon adherents in Congress become assets to their party rather than pariahs. Already, they may hold a special appeal to some voters.

“Somebody like Marjorie Taylor Greene comes along and starts talking about George Soros and global bankers and pedophile rings, and the people who believe that stuff find a reason to vote for her,” Rothschild said. “It’s just as much of a part of the fabric of the Republican Party as, you know, fiscal conservatism at this point is. ... I think the GOP was really slow to condemn QAnon—not because they necessarily believed it but because they knew that a decent chunk of their voter base believed it.”

Whether QAnon lingers in Congress may depend on whether the divisions in American politics, which some see as personal and irreconcilable, can be smoothed over.

As historian Richard Hofstadter wrote in his famous essay “[The Paranoid Style in American Politics](https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/) (https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/)”: “[T]he fact that movements employing the paranoid style are not constant but come in successive episodic waves suggests that the paranoid disposition is mobilized into action chiefly by social conflicts that involve ultimate schemes of values and that bring fundamental fears and hatreds, rather than negotiable interests, into political action.”

Only widespread public rejection of such “fears and hatreds” would be likely to rid Congress of conspiracy theorists. It would require Americans to accept the premise that President Biden argued in his inauguration speech: “Every disagreement doesn’t have to be a cause for total war.” But given the long history of conspiracies in American politics, that might be a tough sell.