

PhD in Politics
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**Trump Priming:
The Anatomy of a Wedge Lie**

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Abstract

What happens to democracy when political leaders lie to their citizens? Using the case of the 2020 US Presidential election, my research conceptualises a type of lie (the Wedge Lie) that presents a material threat to democratic health through its potential to weaponise mass communications, further polarise the public through a manipulation of emotional responses to the lie which in turn can damage trust judgements, and galvanise action from both ingroup and outgroup audiences.

I situate my research in the wealth of literature that has robustly demonstrated the importance of trust, both political and social, to the functioning of a healthy democracy. Testing the theory of the Wedge Lie, my research design comprises three strands; analysis of secondary data from Twitter, an online survey experiment of 1000 US citizens, and semi-structured interviews with elected representatives in the state of Georgia.

The contribution of this thesis is both theoretical and empirical. In developing the theory of the Wedge Lie, I have introduced a new conceptual framework to give shape to our understanding of lying in modern political discourse, and the case study of Trump's "Big Lie" offers a paradigmatic example of that concept. I have also delivered new empirical evidence about the impact of the Wedge Lie on both citizens and the political elites who represent them. Data from the survey experiment demonstrates the ability of the Wedge Lie to trigger significant negative emotional responses, which in turn impact trust judgements. The quantitative analysis is complimented by the qualitative data from interviews with state lawmakers. These interviews are the first, to my knowledge, that seek to test the impact of political lies on the day-to-day business of governing. Together, these contributions offer a new perspective on the threat presented by this type of lie to the healthy functioning of democracy.

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Introduction

Lies in politics are nothing new. Examples abound, and have filled thousands of column inches, of falsehoods told to cover up personal scandal, malfeasance in public office or even to justify international aggression. But does the proliferation of publications, both academic and within the media, on the topic of “post-truth” politics indicate that something more systemic has taken hold? If so, does it actually matter, beyond our normative judgements on the morality of lying in public office?

During Donald Trump’s first term as US President, factcheckers at the Washington Post¹ identified well over 30,000 “false or misleading statements” publicly made by him in speeches, interviews and on social media. The language here is key, and indicative of a key challenge facing journalists, academics and the public; can we really label each of these utterances a “lie” if we cannot reliably determine the intent to deceive? As I argue in this thesis, the issue of intent must be deprioritised if, as is currently the case in the US, political elites seem comfortable with jettisoning the truth in favour of creating more favourable “bespoke realities” (DiResta, 2024). Navigating through the blizzard of lies disseminated by leaders, friendly media outlets and highly influential, high-profile supporters is disorienting and exhausting; at the heart of this research lies the contention that this is precisely the point. In particular, this thesis tests a theoretical framework that I have developed in the course of this research to give shape to the phenomenon of a lie designed to drive a wedge between ingroup and outgroup audiences, weakening both political and social trust, as well as driving increased affective polarisation.

I examine the impact of elite lies on both political and social trust, as key markers of democratic health. I do so through the prism of emotion; both as a mediating factor in the impact of the lie, and in the consequences of a public manipulated into negative emotional responses to the lie. I offer new contributions to the literature in two ways: by examining the specific impact of elite lies on democratic health (drawing a distinction, for example, with the recent wealth of research on fake news), and I newly conceptualise a type of lie that I argue is particularly damaging to both trust and wider democratic health. The Wedge Lie (targeted at both ingroup and outgroup audiences) is characterised by three features that have the potential to disrupt trust judgements, both in political elites, and in fellow citizens: to weaponise modern mass communications,

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/>

galvanise a subsequent emotional response, and to further polarise the two audiences. This phenomenon is explored from the perspectives of both the public, and political elites themselves through a multi-strand research design.

The research agenda focuses on the case study of the US 2020 Presidential Election, specifically on what has become known as former President Trump's "Big Lie". Discourse at the time, including communications from the Trump campaign and amongst his supporters referred predominantly to "Stop the Steal". Employed by US commentators, politicians and social media users, that phrase became a prominent motif in US political discourse that articulates the false assertion that Donald Trump was the true victor in the US Presidential Election in November 2020, and that Biden's victory was the result of electoral fraud on a national scale. As the US approaches the 2024 Presidential election, that narrative persists and has been transposed onto the coming election results as well. This case study offers a promising opportunity to study the Wedge Lie as it involves a highly visible, demonstrable falsehood perpetuated by political elites and it takes place within a clearly defined temporal and geographical context.

In order to examine both the character and the potential effects of a Wedge Lie, I pursued four interrelated questions. The first question concerns the characterisation and the operationalisation of a Wedge Lie.

1. How do Wedge Lies spread and how emotive are they?

To meet the criteria of a Wedge Lie, it should galvanise an emotional response from both the ingroup and outgroup audiences; to be successful, it needs to reach a critical mass of the public. I build on the substantial literature that focusses on the role of modern mass communications (particularly social media) in political discourse, as well as appeals to emotional responses in political messaging. It was important to ascertain the nature of the link between the "liar" and the receiving audiences, leading to my first hypothesis: *Hypothesis 1: Public discussion and dissemination of the Wedge Lie will correlate (in volume and temporally) to dissemination or repetition of the lie by the liar.*

I present data from almost 900,000 tweets collected from Twitter during the 2020 election period to analyse the spread of the Lie from Trump and his high-profile supporters, through layers of peer-to-peer communication that facilitates the dissemination of the lie at an

exponential rate. Using a timeline of Trump's own utterances of the lie (and its related narrative), I explore the nature of the lie's spread, finding close correlation between Trump's mentions of the lie, and trends in the volume of public tweets reinforcing it.

As a reflection of the growing body of research that highlights the monetisation of anger and hate in social media algorithms, I also focussed on the emotional content of the Wedge Lie, and the tenor of the public discourse surrounding it: *Hypothesis 2: Discourse focussed on the Wedge Lie will display predominantly negative sentiment*. In doing so, I demonstrate how Wedge Lies are inherently emotional in character, walking a fine line between deeply negative sentiment towards the outgroup, and maintaining enthusiastic support from the ingroup. Sentiment analysis conducted on the content of Trump's tweets that contain the Lie is compared to the same analysis of the content of public tweets containing the lie and finds that while there is a plurality of tweets that are negative in sentiment, much of the emotional content is actually positive or neutral. In depth analysis shows that this is achieved by conveying deeply negative messages about the outgroup whilst making the ingroup *feel* good (through triumphalism, jingoism or aggrandisement).

Lastly, looking toward the end of the information journey on social media, it was important to identify the target of any negative emotion to understand if that negativity was directed solely towards political targets, or (as I hypothesised) anger and vitriol was directed between ingroup and outgroup members. *Hypothesis 3: Negative emotional language in the public tweets is directed both vertically towards political elites and horizontally towards members of the opposing group*. This duality continues to the second research question which identifies trust as a fundamental feature of a healthy democracy:

2. To what extent do Wedge Lies impact social trust and political trust?

Once able to determine the nature of the lie and its dissemination on social media (Twitter), I moved on to an inquiry about the impact the lie has had on both political and social trust (situating this research in a rich history of scholarship that places high value on trust as a marker of a healthy, functioning democracy). I extend the significant body of work on political trust by gathering data from US citizens, not simply to provide a current snapshot of the relative levels of political trust (or lack thereof), but to understand how the interplay between their trust in each other, as well as trust in their political elites and democratic institutions may have been impacted by Wedge Lies.

Both political and social trust have long been established as overwhelming goods in a functioning democratic society. However, this thesis addresses a pertinent gap in the literature, investigating how the two interact, how that relationship may be vulnerable to distortion by elite lies. I present the results of an online survey experiment with 1000 US citizens to understand how their trust in each other, as well as trust in their political elites and democratic institutions may have been impacted by the Wedge Lie.

After random allocation to a control or treatment group, those primed with memories of the events of the 2020 election were asked to consider their attitudes and emotions towards political ingroup/outgroup citizens. Further questions asked participants to consider their trust in a range of vertical political targets including elected representatives, democratic institutions and elections. In doing so, I investigate if, and how, encountering the Wedge Lie impacts on US Citizens' trust, both in each other, and in their political elites and institutions of democracy. Two hypotheses address each of the political and social trust aspects. *Hypothesis 4: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will have a negative effect on political trust judgements* and *Hypothesis 5: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will damage social trust judgements between ingroup and outgroup members, increasing affective polarisation*. Hypothesis 5 was designed to incorporate the potential link between emotional responses to the lie and social trust, which is further expanded upon in the next research question.

The empirical data from the survey is complimented by findings from semi-structured interviews with US political elites (see also RQ4, below). Each participant was asked a set of questions asking them to report on their constituents' political and social trust, as well as their own trust in the institutions of democracy and their colleagues from both sides of the partisan divide in the wake of the Wedge Lie. While the survey found marginal movement in trust levels as a result of the experiment, the interview participants unanimously reported declining levels of trust in the actors and institutions of democracy as a result of the Wedge Lie. Furthermore, the interviews revealed concerns about additional downstream impacts as a result of declining trust in democratic process, including a potential downturn in political participation. A majority of participants also reported a breakdown in social trust, reflected in damaged social relationships caused by the Wedge Lie.

Reflecting the scholarship on the distinct presence of, and the relationship between, outgroup hate and ingroup love, I hypothesised that as well as an increase in affective polarisation, the Wedge Lie would cause an increase in ingroup trust. *Hypothesis 6: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will result in a positive effect on trust judgements of ingroup members.* An investigation into the role of emotion, both as a target for manipulation by the liar, and their function as a mediating force in trust judgements is spotlighted in the third research question:

3. What role do emotions play in the impact of the Wedge Lie?

If trust, so important to the healthy functioning of democracy, is built and maintained through judgements by the trustor of the target trustee, I present analysis of how emotions shape and mediate those trust judgements in the context of a Wedge Lie, building on research that elevates the role of emotion-led decision-making as a dominant force over cognitive reasoning. The theory of the Wedge Lie demands that the Lie will both be emotionally laden itself, and galvanise emotional responses from both ingroup and outgroup audiences- in particular, I expected to see an increase in negative emotions following recollection of the lie: *Hypothesis 7: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will increase reported negative emotions.*

An additional hypothesis looked at the expected impact of those negative emotional responses on trust judgements. *Hypothesis 8: A reported change in negative emotion moderates the reduction in political and social trust.* Expanding on the sentiment analysis of the Twitter data (see RQ1), in which I set out the emotional tenor of the Lie, I demonstrate the mediating role of emotions on the trust judgements of both the ingroup and outgroup.

The survey experiment with US citizens asked participants to rate the intensity of their emotional responses to the Wedge Lie, in comparison to those who were given a control prime. Significant increases in negative emotions were reported by both the ingroup and outgroup participants, leading to two key findings; firstly, that the data suggests that the Wedge Lie caused both ingroup and outgroup audiences to experience and increase in negative emotions, particularly anger and that this response was still occurring more than two years after the 2020 election period. The second is that the greater the change in anger levels, the greater the impact on trust in particular targets (in this case, Donald Trump).

These findings are borne out by an analysis of qualitative data provided by the elected representatives I interviewed for this study in which participants repeatedly referenced the

anger they see from constituents as a direct response to the Wedge Lie. Taken together, the data suggests that the Wedge Lie is a powerful tool for manipulating emotional responses, and that this may impact on both political and social trust. The findings within this thesis on the role of emotion in how people react to Wedge Lies offers a potentially fruitful avenue for further research into the challenges of disinformation by political elites, with recent examples such as the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change denial and Black Lives Matter/Defund the Police.

4. What impact do elite lies have on the democratic behaviours of elites?

Despite the methodological challenges of conducting research with political elites, I believe that a study of elite lies and their impact on democracy would be incomplete without considering the elites themselves and the Wedge Lie's impact on the day-to-day business of governing. Therefore, in addition to data collection from US citizens, I use qualitative data from interviews with US political elites to address a historic trend in the research into the politics occurring within government institutions, which steers clear of establishing individuals as the unit of analysis, instead focusing on aggregated outputs and impacts. In essence, the behaviours and attitudes of those individual elites have been far less scrutinised than the institutions and constituencies they serve.

Through semi-structured interviews with elected representatives from the state of Georgia, I investigate how Wedge Lies may interact with the day-to-day business of governing at a local level. This is achieved through testing two hypotheses; the first looks at the impact on trust between politicians across the partisan divide: *Hypothesis 9: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will have a negative impact on elites' trust in their legislative colleagues across the aisle.* The second sets out the expectation that the Wedge Lie will cause changes to those elites' democratic behaviours: *Hypothesis 10: Engaging with the Wedge Lie decreases efforts to seek bipartisanship and consensus.*

The interview questions, divided into three blocks, asked respondents to reflect firstly on their trust in the credibility and integrity of other political elites, including their colleagues. This was followed by questions evaluating their trust or distrust of democratic institutions and the processes of government, including their own place of work. Finally, interviewees were asked to discuss their constituents, particularly focusing on polarisation within the US public, to explore whether that polarisation led to behavioural changes in their role as an elected representative, i.e. thinking about polarisation in their state/district, how does that make them

feel about seeking compromise or bipartisanship in their institution? The findings highlight how polarised and distrustful constituents influence lawmakers' behaviour, and in turn what consequences that has for democratic health.

Taken together, this ambitious research agenda aims to fulfil three objectives: to demonstrate how the relationship between social and political trust is vulnerable to manipulation by elite lies; to centre the role of emotion in political trust formation and decision-making; and to assess the potential of Wedge Lies to present a threat to democratic health. In doing so I encourage scholars in the fields of political psychology, political communications and democratic theory to consider the role of this new paradigm in political lies in their own future research. I hope that the findings presented in this thesis may usefully inform further studies in diverse fields grappling with modern challenges to democracy. These challenges have a common thread running through them; the strength they gain from slipping the binds of truth. Studies of culture wars, digital extremism, populism and the advent of AI/deepfakes may all benefit from an understanding of the power of the Wedge Lie to manipulate, agitate and polarise. Lastly, I set out to complete this investigation with the aim of providing robust evidence of an emergent material threat in some democratic settings with the intention to enable those working in academia and beyond to move towards solutions to counter it.

Chapter 1: Lying, Lies and Politics

“Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities...”

Voltaire

1.1 Introduction and Context

For an indication of the societal value placed upon the virtue of honesty, and the converse shame associated with dishonesty, look to fairytales, fables and religious scripts, which take a uniformly dim view. The 8th commandment on Moses’ stone tablet instructed followers that they “shall not bear false witness” [Exodus 20:12]. The Quran commands “And do not argue on behalf of those who deceive themselves. Indeed, Allah loves not one who is a habitually sinful deceiver” [4:107]. And in Judaism, the Talmud, the Rabbinical interpretation of the Torah states that "The Holy One, blessed be He, hates a person which says one thing with his mouth and another in his heart" [Pesahim 113b].

Centuries of religious and familial teaching are mirrored in scholarship and philosophy dating back nearly as far. The vast majority of this literature is concerned with the morality of lying, with some, most notably Immanuel Kant in his *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), espousing an absolutist stance:

“the greatest violation of man's duty to himself regarded merely as a moral being (the humanity in his own person) is the contrary of truthfulness, lying (aliud lingua promptum, alid pectore inclusum genere) (To have one thing in one's heart and another ready on one's tongue). . . . [T]he dishonour (being an object of moral contempt) that accompanies the lie also accompanies the liar like a shadow.” (Metaphysics of Morals 6:429)

Others, Plato among them, saw nuance. He outlined the possibility of the “noble lie”; that which ostensibly seeks to promote social harmony or advance a political agenda. Quite how noble those lies are remains a topic of considerable debate, and one that this chapter will indirectly address. Despite the ubiquity of moral judgements about deception and dishonesty in academic literature, I stop short of any pronouncement about the morality of lies and lying. Whatever their morality, lies and lying are profoundly social, and political, phenomena. This chapter and broader thesis are concerned with the impact that lies and lying have on democratic

health through their distortion of social and political trust as well as any epistemic damage they cause.

Through an exploration of the literature from political science, philosophy, and the behavioural sciences, this chapter makes the case that lies, and subsequent misinformation, present a uniquely insidious threat to the health of established democracies. Further, it will argue that research on lies in political campaigning and communications has hitherto not adequately addressed both the epistemic and the societal damage done by the perpetuating of falsehoods in political discourse. I argue our impulses toward lightening our cognitive load, and defending our own identity, leave us especially vulnerable to lies. Lastly, this chapter will conceptualise a new type of lie that I hypothesise is most costly to both societal and political trust, and consequently democratic health: that which can manipulate emotion-led responses on both sides of the partisan divide, further polarising an already agitated public.

Lies, frequently associated with scandal, have long been a feature of public life: the Profumo Affair, Bill Clinton's perjury over Monica Lewinsky, and Watergate are all notable examples of lies significantly shaping contemporary political events. What each of these examples have in common is the level of public outrage that followed and the consequences for the liar in each case. Profumo resigned in disgrace, Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives, and Tony Blair's legacy has been irrevocably tied to his conduct in the build up to war.

We are, in all walks of life, familiar with encountering lies. Why, then, the urgency in this thesis? Lies in very recent political discourse, whether nobly or ignobly advancing a political agenda, have become undeniably salient. 2016 saw an intersection of two pivotal political contests in which the victors perpetuated serious and sustained falsehoods to further their own campaigns; with no apparent consequence for the act of misleading the public. If the election of Donald Trump as US President, and the decision for Britain to leave the European Union were democratic processes, what implications are there for democracy if such consequential events can be so impacted by the deception of democratic participants? If, as I argue in the following chapter, trust is the frame upon which much of human social fabric hangs, I will demonstrate that specific lies and deception may represent the clearest stressor to that structural integrity.

The primary contribution of this thesis to the rich landscape of literature that explores lying, trust and emotion is to bind those three complex phenomena together in a theoretical framework to newly conceptualise a type of lie that I posit presents a material threat to democratic health, the Wedge Lie. A full outline and model of this concept is found in this chapter on p.36.

In order to test this theoretical framework, I developed four interrelated research questions:

RQ1. How do Wedge Lies spread and how emotive are they?

RQ2. To what extent do Wedge Lies impact social trust and political trust?

RQ3. What role do emotions play in the impact of the Wedge Lie?

RQ4. What impact do Wedge Lies have on the democratic behaviours of elites?

The remainder of this chapter and the two that follow set out the theoretical foundation for this concept as the basis for investigating these questions, and introduce a series of hypotheses outlining my expectations for the findings.

1.2 Clarifying terms

The truth often appears a relatively simple concept. The great philosophical questions have revolved around the nature of what is and what isn't, what is known and what can be known; and science is nothing if not a quest for the truth. This is not to say that proclamations of truth aren't hotly contested; and furthermore, modern philosophers see hubris in claiming truth in a complex world (Engel, 2002).

The diametric opposite of the truth is frustratingly difficult to pin down. Lies, misinformation, disinformation, deceit and dishonesty are all mirror images of truth, fact and knowledge. Lies themselves manifest in so many forms that the seminal ethicist Sissela Bok dissects them across fifteen chapters in her 1978 work *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. Such expansive, complex ideas inspire scholarship far beyond the scope of this research. For the purposes of clarity and continuity throughout this thesis, this section will further break down the key concepts in developing an understanding of the truth and lies specific to the political context.

Truth

A cursory glance at an anthology of philosophy would show just how nuanced the debate on the nature of truth has been for centuries, going far beyond the reach of this thesis to contend with. This research most closely aligns to the neo-classical correspondence theory of truth: that what we believe or say is true if it corresponds to the way things actually are- to facts. The correspondence theory of truth sees its origins in the early 20th Century work of Bertrand Russell, who sought to define the nature of truth by arguing that a belief only becomes true when there is a corresponding fact; a falsehood occurs where there is no corresponding fact (Russell, 1912 (reissue 2001)). Building on this theory, philosophers such as David Armstrong look to the role of facts as *truthmakers*, “something in the world which makes it the case, that serves as an ontological ground, for this truth” (Armstrong, 1997, p.115). Clearly, this neat definition throws up the inevitable question of what is, and is not, a fact. To avoid an ever-expanding series of ontological and philosophical queries, I follow a standard dictionary definition of a fact (particularly in the political context) as “an objective consensus on a fundamental reality that has been agreed upon by a substantial number of experts”². It is worth a wry note that this research becomes necessary due to the increasing perceived malleability of both truth and fact, but to avoid doubt, these definitions are my anchor point.

A lie

Perhaps emblematically, defining a lie in theory is often easier than identifying one in practice. As I shall unpick shortly, the concept of a lie quickly spreads, fed by other phenomena including misinformation, “white lies”, and obfuscation. For clarity and brevity, I return to Sissela Bok for her definition of a lie, which she begins by outlining the slightly broader concept of deception:

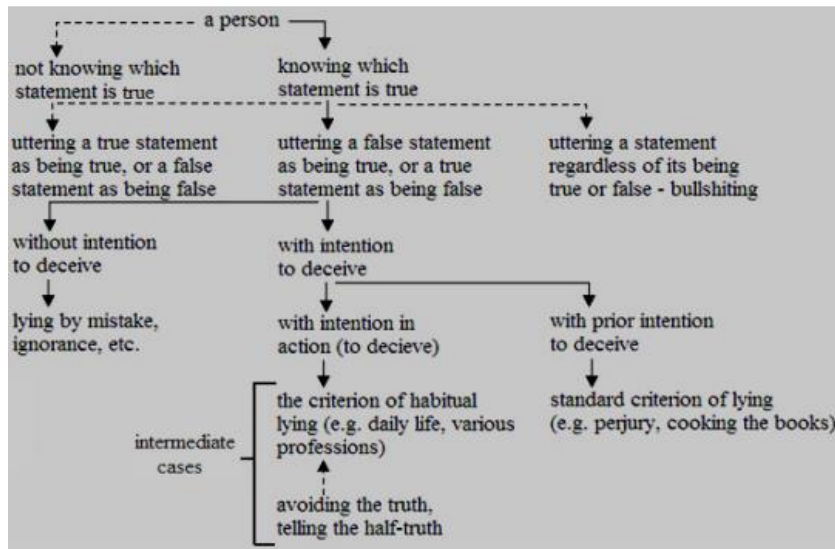
“When we undertake to deceive others intentionally, we communicate messages meant to mislead them, meant to make them believe what we ourselves do not believe. We can do so through gesture, through disguise, by means of action or inaction, even through silence.” (Bok, 1978, p.13)

Bok qualifies this by adding that “any intentionally deceptive message which is stated” is a lie (Bok, 1978, p.5). To depart briefly from Bok’s template, I would also note that if a statement does not meet these criteria of a lie, it certainly does not render it the truth by default. Crucial

² <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/fact>

to both statements is the notion of intent, which in turn has direct bearing on the perceived severity of the transgression against the norm of honesty. Buzar et al. (2010 p.37) formulated an instructive illustration of the role of intent (Figure 1.1):

Figure 1.1 Buzar and Colleagues' Model of the Role of Intent



This reasoning endorses the position that intention to deceive leads to the most egregious forms of lies, and while this research also supports that view, I would note that Buzar et al. are careful to continue to refer to unintentional deception as lies, albeit by mistake. For the purposes of this research, I argue that it is important to include this type of deception in the scope of study, under the term *misinformation* (see below).

The implication of a hierarchy of lies in the political context is useful, not simply in terms of the scale of deception, but also in gauging their potential damage to citizens or democratic health. A politician lying about having an extramarital affair may justifiably be deemed untrustworthy, or potentially hypocritical, but the lie itself is unlikely to cause the public, or the health of democracy material harm. The potential damage is markedly greater if a politician lies about a public health crisis: see, for example, independent fact-checkers Politifact declare 2020's lie of the Year as the "infodemic" of lies that served to undermine, downplay or outright lie about the severity of the Covid-19 pandemic. This included President Trump's statement to reporters on February 26th 2020³ that the US public should treat the new virus like the flu, despite mounting evidence that it presented a far greater risk. I acknowledge the damage to

³ The press briefing referenced is one of a series of incidents in which Trump minimised the severity of Covid-19. These are laid out in detail, here: <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/09/trumps-deceptive-comparison-of-the-coronavirus-to-the-flu/>

trust inflicted by lies of all seriousness, but for the purposes of this research primarily focus on those that have the potential to do material harm to citizens and/or democratic health.

Misinformation

A wealth of scholarship in the last twenty years has sought to disaggregate the study of lies and lying into its more specific denominations. A consensus within the literature has formed endorsing the view that while these all signify deception, they each have defining characteristics that mark them out as separate phenomena. Particularly relevant to this research is the concept of misinformation. Kuklinski et al. (2000, p.792) defines this as occurring when “people hold inaccurate factual beliefs, and do so confidently”. They further reasonably argue that scholarship to date had conflated the concepts of a public being *uninformed* with being *misinformed*. The distinction lies both in the state of being, and in the potential consequence. An uninformed public has no information upon which to base a decision. A misinformed public firmly holds inaccurate information, which they then may use to form preferences, prejudices or political beliefs. This leads to the potential for a collective or systematic bias (Kuklinski et al. 2000) and “the active misinformed” (Hochschild and Einstein, 2015).

As I argue throughout this thesis, a liar can state his falsehood once to an audience that then transmits it within their own peer group, before it travels through exponentially growing networks. None of those subsequent people has to *know* it originated as a lie for the proposition to become just as damaging in the form of misinformation.

Bullshit

Harry Frankfurt’s essay *On Bullshit* (2005) delivers the conceptual anchor for what is otherwise a very loose term. Nevertheless, it is a concept that becomes salient to this research in understanding that a disregard for the truth can be as harmful as an out-and-out subversion of it. According to Frankfurt (2005, p.43), bullshit is encapsulated in his lament that a literary character:

“offers a description of a certain state of affairs without genuinely submitting to the constraints which the endeavour to provide an accurate representation of reality imposes. Her fault is not that she fails to get things right, but that she is not even trying.”

Thus, bullshit is deception in the form of a shrug at the truth. The bullshitter, so Frankfurt argues, is less concerned with the audience's view of the content of his statements than he is about their view of him, and thus he panders, embellishes or brags with no concern for the veracity of his claims. This is an apt description of Donald Trump, and a wealth of media commentary pieces catalogue his many speeches and social media posts that amply demonstrate that particular trait⁴. Trump's mendacity goes beyond bullshit, but his tendency to issue a tsunami of more trivial lies may have helped to lessen the shock value of his more dangerous lies, which sit at the heart of this thesis.

A Liar

If a lie is a statement made with the intention of deceiving a target, a liar, by definition, is a person who commits that act of asserting a falsity as the truth with the intention of persuading the target to believe the false statement as true. Some scholars (e.g. Hahl et al. 2018) include a habitual component to their definition; i.e. that a liar is someone who has gained a reputation for telling lies repeatedly. I am less generous, and in this research, a liar is simply one who transmits false information with the intention to deceive a target, be it once or habitually.

Authenticity and Integrity

Along with integrity, authenticity speaks to a faithfulness to, and a consistency of, a set of values. It implies a sincerity, that a person's public and private persona are aligned (Eriksson, 2011). However, as Jones (2015) argues, the concept of authenticity goes beyond this simple equity between the inner and outer of any individual, and this additional complexity is key to understanding the ability of a liar to remain popular and trusted. Central to the definition of authenticity is an individual's identity. Whether as an understanding reached by a journey of self-discovery (Taylor, 1989), or a self-created concept (Sartre, 2020), an individual's identity, and a faithfulness to that, denotes authenticity. It is important to note, as Jones does, that authenticity departs from integrity in its ambiguity about the morality of an individual's values. Rather, as long as the individual is truthful to those values, it does not damage authenticity if those values are reprehensible. Indeed, if the liar is known to be a liar, he can continue to lie and remain authentic to his supporters; "he might be a liar, but he's *our* liar". As I demonstrate in Chapter 2, this authenticity (another term often associated with Trump) may allow leaders

⁴ A particularly good example of this was compiled by the Washington Post's fact checking team: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>

like Trump to be fundamentally untrustworthy and yet remain appealing to their supporters as authentic, and this in itself may be appealing.

For completeness, it is worth a note on integrity, if only in its contrast with authenticity as the two are frequently conflated. As above, a populist leader may well display authenticity, but be distinctly lacking in integrity. Whilst authenticity requires a truthfulness to one's own values (regardless of their morality), integrity implies a steadfast hewing to the *right* values (Calhoun, 1995; Carter, 1996; Putnam, 1996). Grant (1994) argues that integrity, rather than authenticity, best meets the Rousseauian ideal expressed by his own terminology about behaviour in public life: *probité*, *intégrité*, *vertu* and *droiture*. In Grant's assertion, only integrity meets the necessary connotation of moral fortitude. It follows that a leader with integrity is not one that will knowingly deceive the public for personal gain.

1.3 Identifying and Processing Lies

As I will set out in detail in the following chapter, social and political trust are essential components of a well-functioning democracy. However our cognitive mechanisms for trust formation and maintenance are susceptible to distortion by lies and unscrupulous liars (see Chapter 2). Key to this is our inclination to homophily, grouping with like-minded peers (Fu et al., 2012; Kim and Altmann, 2017). The social form of strength-in-numbers, these groups deliver a form of protection for social identities and perceived threats from outgroup individuals or other groups. As this section will demonstrate, the need to maintain those social identities, combined with our relatively poor performance in being able to identify lies when we encounter them, provides a framework in which lies are able to damage social trust. Furthermore, as I discuss in detail in Chapter 3, the nature of social media infrastructure ensures that these social peer groupings now have a place to coalesce on a huge scale, at no cost and little regulation of the content they share. It is a dangerous combination.

A rational starting point for an evaluation of the impact of lies and liars is to understand how we evaluate what is true, and what is false. Amongst the extensive research on lies and deception is a still developing understanding of our ability to detect lies (DePaulo, 1994). The results are not entirely promising. Repeated experiments asking participants to judge the veracity of statements revealed a propensity for taking things at face value. That is, most people were routinely unable to detect lies from the truth (Bond & DePaulo, 2006; Vrij, 2008; Hauch

et al., 2016). Importantly, in the context of the following chapter on trust, priming participants with the expectation that some of the statements may be false (i.e. reducing their trust in the pool of speakers) did little to improve accuracy in detection. Furthermore, increased confidence in the ability to detect lies did not translate into any increased ability to actually do so (Vrij and Mann, 2001).

Thus, if we aren't actually able to reliably or consistently detect lies amongst truths, what mechanisms are we relying upon to do this job, albeit poorly? Heuristics may offer an explanation as decision-making shortcuts. Not only do they offer the opportunity to lighten the burden of cognitive-led decision-making when making trust judgements, research has shown that they also come into effect when individuals evaluate what is true and what is false (e.g. Stiff et al., 1992; Buller et al., 1994; Vrij and Mann, 2001).

The truth heuristic has been well documented as affecting decision-making processes relating to establishing truth and falsity (e.g. McCornack and Parks, 1986; Street and Masip, 2015). This cognitive shortcut sees people tending to believe information that feels familiar or aligns with prior knowledge, even without verifying its accuracy. It makes us more likely to accept repeated statements or those from trusted sources as true, regardless of their factual correctness. The bias associated with the heuristic is activated, in part, by relational familiarity; that is, we tend to trust messages from those we know and are familiar with. However, the short cut also affects decision-making when the messages come from strangers, if those strangers also fall into the category of a trusted source.

As I will set out in the following chapter, this is reinforced by the nature of peer groupings on social media, which have been shown to coalesce around worldview (Shareef et al., 2020). To give an indication of the scale of the problem on social media, an analysis of news stories with the highest levels of engagement in the run up to the 2016 US Presidential election revealed that real news stories generated less engagement than fake news or misinformation using the metrics of likes, shares, and comments (Silverman et al., 2016). Falsehoods are 70% more likely to be retweeted on Twitter than the truth, and reach their first 1,500 people six times faster (Vosoughi et al. 2018). Such is the scale of the problem that in 2013 (notably before the Trump era that has become synonymous with “fake news”) the World Economic Forum declared that the spread of misinformation and fake news was tantamount to ‘digital wildfires’ and labelled it a “significant threat to society at large”. This is salient to this research because

audiences that are less likely to prioritise veracity, or even consider factchecking the information they consume are therefore susceptible to manipulation by narratives unbound from the truth.

Other aspects of social media exacerbate the challenge to identify the truth in a sea of rumour, conspiracy theory and fabrication. Research has shown that repeated exposure to a concept or story will increase the likelihood of an individual considering that information to be truthful (e.g. Begg et al. 1992; Dechene et al. 2010). In the case of fake news stories, prior exposure to a story increased accuracy judgements among participants, leading Pennycook et al. (2018) to conclude that “when the truth is hard to come by, fluency is an attractive stand-in” (p.35). Additionally, it is worth noting that our ability to determine the truth from falsehoods is severely tested by social media platforms’ own content algorithms. Twitter’s structure changed in 2015 from a simple chronological timeline to a newsfeed dictated by an algorithm utilising “deep learning” to amplify content that had already gained traction through prior engagement. Furthermore, Twitter’s algorithm has also been demonstrated to amplify emotionally charged and divisive content (Milli et al., 2023), the implications of which I set out in Chapter 3. Taken in the context of the research on prior exposure and accuracy judgements, this presents a material challenge to our ability to discern the truth.

In summary, it is clear that even without any malicious intent present, the ubiquity of false information on social media and elsewhere is disruptive to our ability to evaluate what is truthful, and what is false. Returning to the original enquiry of this section: how do we tell the truth from a falsehood? The answer is, according to the literature, unreliably.

1.4 Lies and the Politics of Identities

A common critique of modern political discourse and campaigning is the retreat to identity politics; that is, a reliance on the framing of political arguments and persuasion in terms of selected identities (Bernstein, 2005). The identity in question may be racial, gender, nationality, class, sexual orientation or partisan alignment, or something else entirely. The recurring feature is the desire to erect boundaries and delineate sections of society for the purposes of political gain. Kauffman’s (1990) definition of identity politics in cultural terms is salient for this enquiry into the threat posed by lies. For an explanation, we return to the nature of peer

groupings founded on common worldviews that are particularly prevalent on social media platforms.

Using the social identity theory framework established by Tajfel (e.g. 1978), namely that individuals define their identities in relation to social groupings, and that those group identities serve to reinforce and protect individual identities, we begin to see how membership of thematic online groups is an investment in one's own identity. Furthermore, such reinforcement of one's own identity through the mechanism of social groupings is aligned with increased perceived conflict or discord with other groups, or simply those outside of the group's boundaries (Tajfel et al., 1971). To preface the detailed discussion in Chapter 3, individuals with shared group identities feel empowered to trust content delivered by group members without the need to verify the veracity of the information (Habibi et al., 2014). Social Identity Theory suggests that the opposite would be true for information shared outside the group's boundary; i.e. information that might otherwise correct falsehoods shared within the group is more likely to be dismissed without verification if it is shared by an individual external to the group.

In a hyper-polarised environment, empirical information can lead to rancour and a defensive rejection of facts if those facts represent a threat to favoured candidates or leaders. In instances of public health, this can be dangerous (e.g. the MMR vaccine scandal in the UK, the downplaying of the risks of Covid-19, and the denial of man-made climate change). Studies have found that when views of favoured candidates are challenged by non-congruent information; the supporter may indulge in "motivated forgetting" (Anderson and Hanslmayr, 2014) and even strengthen their support for the candidate (Redlawsk, 2002). Social exchange theory, as set out by social psychologists Thibaut and Kelley (1959), conceptualises social interactions as an ever-updating series of cost-benefit analyses. Thibaut and Kelley's work focuses on dyadic relationships, but there is little to suggest that the same theory could not be successfully applied to intergroup relations, and the political elite-citizen relationship. Their research demonstrates that individuals will assess any social interaction on the basis of the potential gain for themselves, offset by any potential cost. Through this lens, it is arguable that an individual's inclination to fulfil a need (such as defending their social identity) may motivate them to engage with actors, rhetoric and information that satisfies that need, and this may take priority over a need for the truth.

1.5 The Wedge Lie

Thus far, I have set out evidence to argue that humans' mechanisms for forming and maintaining trust in each of the interpersonal/social/political contexts build a framework to which lies present a unique threat. I acknowledge that not all lies are equally damaging: there is a large body of literature on "white lies", where the lie benefits the target (e.g. Erat and Gneezy, 2012; Bizziou-van-Pol et al. 2015; Levine and Schweitzer, 2014). Unless hewing to the Kantian deontological view that all lies are immoral due to their violation of the inalienable right to the truth, I assert that there can, and should be a hierarchy of lies in terms of their potential for harm.

The central theme of this research is the unique threat of lies in political discourse. To address a hitherto unfilled gap in the literature on elite lies, I posit that there is a type of lie which presents the most egregious threat to democratic health through its distortion of trust relationships and its potential for epistemic damage: the Wedge Lie. This differs in subtle, but important ways from the "blue lies" explored by researchers including Fu et al. (2016). The blue lie occurs when a speaker transmits a falsehood for the benefit of a group of which they are a member (Fu et al. 2016 p.355). The Wedge Lie shares this feature, but it also affects those external to the group. It does so, not with the need to deceive (it is almost certainly not going to) but to draw or entrench lines of division between groups.

How, then, might these lies be so effective? Triggering motivated reasoning through an appeal to affective responses and pre-empting any attempt at a cognitive-led, deliberative response, these lies may be able to do epistemic damage as well as undermine societal and political trust. I argue that they have three main characteristics; the weaponisation of modern mass communications, the galvanising of emotional responses, and the polarisation of the ingroup and the outgroup audiences. I shall unpick each of these in turn.

Weaponise

Once a commitment to the truth has been jettisoned, our inclination to emotion-led responses, combined with falsehoods, can be weaponised to further agitate and divide. It is an opportunity that seemed to appeal to a multitude of political actors during the Trump era, including cable news pundits, elected representatives, political candidates and the President himself. Trump, and his vociferous surrogates, found (as many populists do) that inciting negative emotional responses, such as fear, resentment or anger, are key to establishing exclusionary solidarities

amongst shared identity groupings (Ost, 2006; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). However, although this redoubling of nagging social divisions is dangerous, it is far from the only negative outcome of the weaponising of the interplay between lies, identity and trust.

The first of these potentially harmful effects is the epistemic damage inflicted on those who consume falsehoods; either directly as lies told by a liar, or as misinformation as the lie spreads by those who do not know that it is untrue. However, historically, the primary focus of the concern has been on leaders and elites, those with the power and reach to materially influence the opinions of the masses. This focus on demagoguery is understandable, and continuing research in this area still yields valuable scholarship (e.g. Stanley, 2015), but it has let the public's role (albeit in some measure an unwitting one) in this epistemic damage slip below the radar. Some recent research has tried to address this gap in the literature. Brown (2018) offers nuance to Stanley's argument that liberal democracies are at material risk from demagoguery and propaganda by highlighting the critical role of misinformation coursing through peer-to-peer communications. A lie cannot spread without an audience sharing to their own networks. Social media has rendered those networks vast.

A clear example of this epistemic damage amongst the public is the discourse on climate change. A significant body of research argues that the volume of misinformation and disinformation shared online has hampered progress on climate change mitigation. (Ding et al., 2011; Cook et al., 2018; Brulle, 2018). I suggest that climate change falsehoods may qualify as further examples of Wedge Lies; the issue divide on climate change is not confined to those who are proponents of the fossil fuel industry vs environmentalists. Rather, political actors (including the Trump administration), have sought to transpose the issue along socio-economic and racial fissures. A recent analysis⁵ of paid-for climate change denial advertising on Facebook found that the adverts were viewed over 8 million times in the USA in the first half of 2020. Critically, they “cost just \$42,000 to run and appear to be highly targeted, with men over the age of 55 in rural US states most likely to see them.”⁶ Plugging the issue into intergroup suspicions (i.e. rural, white working-class vs metropolitan “elite”), these Wedge Lies served to make what is a universal challenge a question of hyper-partisan politics. In addition to Trump's historic declarations on climate change, where he famously described it as a hoax by the Chinese, these statements lent presidential authority to an already teeming

⁵ <https://influencemap.org/report/Climate-Change-and-Digital-Advertising-86222daed29c6f49ab2da76b0df15f76#1>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/oct/08/climate-denial-ads-on-facebook-seen-by-millions-report-finds>

ecosystem of organised online climate denial (Dunlap and McCright, 2011). The result is badly, and deliberately, misinformed sections of the public (Antonio and Brulle, 2011).

The Wedge Lie has another line of attack by sowing doubt, or even outright distrust, in traditional media institutions, science or other sources of expertise along those familiar intergroup lines. The Committee to Protect Journalists found that his consistent undermining of the press had substantially weakened its credibility in the US⁷. Trump understood the power of this tactic; in 2018, the veteran journalist Leslie Stahl reported that Trump had explained his attacks on the press, “You know why I do it? I do it to discredit you all and demean you all so that when you write negative stories about me no one will believe you”⁸. In 2018, 42% of Americans suspected major news outlets of reporting fake news with the purpose of promoting a biased political agenda (Monmouth University, 2018).

Declining trust in the media is not a new phenomenon. Polling organisation Gallup reports a steady downward trend in the past two decades, but it is a nuanced picture. In the years since 2016 when Donald Trump was elected president, the partisan divide in Americans’ trust in mass media has dramatically increased. In 2020, whilst only a mere 10% of Republicans reported a great deal or a fair amount of trust in mass media, for Democrats, that figure stood at 73%⁹. Indeed, research has found evidence of political bias in the interpretation and perception of fake news; although both liberals and conservatives saw justification for labelling traditionally left or right wing news outlet content as fake news, conservatives were more likely to associate the term with all mainstream news media (van der Linden et al., 2020).

One outcome of this declining trust in traditional news media outlets (particularly amongst the political right), is the diversion of those citizens to social media as a regular source of news. In 2021, in the aftermath of the 2020 Presidential election, 53% of US adults reported using social media platforms as a source of news at least some of the time. Proportionally, those adults using Twitter were most likely to be using it for news consumption¹⁰. Social media, therefore, becomes a crucible for disinformation (including a Wedge Lie) to spread. As I will detail in

⁷ The Committee to Protect Journalists <https://cpj.org/reports/2020/04/trump-media-attacks-credibility-leaks/>

⁸ Leslie Stahl shared this anecdote in multiple interviews. Coverage can be found here: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/05/22/trump-admitted-he-attacks-press-to-shield-himself-from-negative-coverage-60-minutes-reporter-says/>

⁹ From Gallup <https://news.gallup.com/poll/403166/americans-trust-media-remains-near-record-low.aspx>

¹⁰ Research conducted by Pew Research Center, with an overview available here:

https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/01/12/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-in-2020/?utm_source=AdaptiveMailer&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=21-01-12%20Social%20Media%20Update%20General%20Distro&org=982&lv=100&ite=7690&lea=1696518&ctr=0&par=1&trk=

Chapter 3, the coalescence of social media users into worldview aligned peer groupings also suggests that this information will go largely unchallenged in these echo chambers; or that any challenge can be rebuffed by strength in numbers. A leader wishing to manipulate emotional responses through a Wedge Lie can therefore turn to social media as a preferred platform to disseminate the lie, where the ingroup will take cues from him. This leads on to the first Hypothesis of this thesis.

Hypothesis 1: Public discussion and dissemination of the Wedge Lie will correlate (in volume and temporally) to dissemination or repetition of the lie by the liar.

As I discuss further in Chapter 3, the arrival of social media platforms saw a paradigmatic shift in political communications. The elimination of financial barriers to entry, the comparatively low regulatory oversight of the dissemination of “news”, the many-to-many communication model and (perhaps most significantly) the monetisation and incentivisation to provocative content has created a perfect environment for the Wedge Lie to thrive. But the favourable conditions still require active engagement with the lie in order for it to spread effectively. As other studies have established, that engagement is driven by appeals to identity-based grievances (Diaz Ruiz and Nilsson, 2023), but in order to establish the journey of the lie from dissemination to impact, I first needed to understand how the lie travelled through a mass communication platform.

On Twitter, the platform I selected to study (see Chapter 4), the Wedge Lie was spread, not just by Trump but by his high-profile advocates, as well as the public (both ingroup and outgroup audiences). A poll conducted by *Morning Consult*¹¹ found that amongst Republican respondents, the most identified source of the election fraud narrative was Donald Trump. Given his very large following on Twitter at the time (approximately 85 million followers in 2020), I would expect to see the public’s discussion and dissemination of the lie to strongly correlate with his own, demonstrating that the lie galvanises a mass response from the public.

This correlation will play out in two ways. Firstly, I would anticipate a correlation in terms of timing, i.e., the public’s discussion of the lie will follow the timings of Trump’s own postings about the lie demonstrating that the public are taking their cues from Trump. Furthermore, the

¹¹ Full results of the *Morning Consult* poll are here: <https://morningconsult.com/form/tracking-voter-trust-in-elections/>

more frequently Trump tweets about the election fraud narrative, so I would expect a corresponding increase in the volume of public tweets also doing so.

Galvanise

As Martel et al. (2020) note, previous scholarship on the fake news phenomenon has centred on our ability to use reasoning and deduction to evaluate the veracity of information online. Martel and colleagues suggest that a recipient's over-reliance on emotional responses causes an increased belief in fake news stories. I go further to argue that it is the Wedge Lie, a prominent feature of fake news content, which exploits our use of emotion-led heuristics in trust-making judgements, alongside our inclination to defend our social identity in peer groups.

Once political actors have made a choice to slip the binds of truth, they are at liberty to activate emotional responses from their target audiences about any issue, from a perspective that suits their particular needs. Research on priming theory recognises the ability of priming to be used as a technique to activate mental representations through external stimuli such as images or rhetorical cues (Bargh and Chartrand, 2000; Le Boeuf et al., 2010). Researchers also broadly agree that the activation of priming effects is largely beyond individual conscious control (Celse and Chang, 2017). Wedge Lies about provocative subjects can provide just such stimuli. A wealth of existing literature demonstrates why this may be a highly successful strategy (e.g. Lerner and Keltner, 2001; Schwarz, 2011; and Bodenhausen et al. 1994). This pool of research explores the role of different emotions on cognition and decision-making processes. Bodenhausen and colleagues (1994) in particular, demonstrate the ability of anger to lead to an increased dependence on decision-making heuristic cues (Martel et al. 2020). Others explain the power of emotion to influence decision-making processes through the mood-congruency effect (Schwarz and Clore, 1983), namely when decisions bear the influence of the prevailing mood of the individual making them, leading to a perception that the object of the decision was at least partially the stimulus for the current valence. This is salient as it serves as a reinforcement of the connection between subject matter and emotion, which can be manipulated by the Wedge Lie.

The effect of this emotional manipulation can be seen in the immigration debate in American political discourse. A Gallup poll taken in 2019 evidenced an overall positive trend in public opinion towards immigration and the societal value of immigrants in the previous twenty years. Despite recording a high watermark of the percentage of respondents citing immigration as the

most important problem facing the country (at 23%), positive views towards immigration rose in both the Democrat and Republican respondents (albeit a dramatically higher increase amongst those identifying as Democrats). Given that a plurality of Americans broadly support and value immigration, how did Donald Trump persuade a crucial group of voters to cross party lines to vote for a virulently anti-immigration candidate?

I contend that the Wedge Lie played a role in voters choosing to forego traditional Democrat policy priorities in favour of that nativist approach to immigration. In 2015, as he announced his candidacy for President of the US, Donald Trump infamously declared about Mexico, *“They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”*¹² This, in comparison to the multitude of other lies that he, and his campaign, would go on to tell during his candidacy, was widely reported and discussed within the media. The statement has been, and was in real time, readily debunked; the well-trodden tropes linking immigrants to crime and disorder have regularly clashed with a reality that tells a different story. It was a demonstrable lie.

It meets the criteria of a Wedge Lie because it prompted affective responses on both sides of the issue divide, and aggravated existing divisions. For both those already in Trump’s natural base, and more centrist voters, the appeal to the emotions of fear, resentment and anger had a marked effect. During the first three years of the Trump presidency, the Southern Poverty Law Centre (SPLC) that identifies and tracks hate groups in the USA, reported a 55% rise in the number of white supremacist groups. The SPLC further noted, *“Trump’s campaign energized white nationalists who saw in him an avatar of their grievances and their anxiety over the country’s demographic changes”*¹³.

This casting of immigrants as the enemy is not a new strategy. Enemy framing *“activates a range of behaviours- distrust, polarization, negative stereotyping, black-and-white thinking, aggression, deindividualization, and demonization- while fostering ethnic intolerance, racism, and political or religious fundamentalism”* (Zelizer, 2018 p.9). Recalling the role of social identity within peer groups, and the heightened wariness or even animus towards those in

¹² Coverage of Trump’s Presidential announcement speech in 2015 was heavily focused on those particular remarks:

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/16/donald-trump-announces-run-president>

¹³ The SPLC’s Report 2019: *Year in Hate* reflected on the rise in extremist activity in the first three years of Trump’s presidency

<https://www.splcenter.org/news/2020/03/18/executive-summary-2019-year-hate>

external groups, ‘others’, or ‘enemies’, the lie further entrenched lines of division between these social groupings, arguably reducing intergroup trust.

It is clear that those negative emotions were not simply stirred amongst his base; anger and resentment were roiled across the partisan divide, in part, as a response to Trump’s deployment of emotionally provocative Wedge Lies. A survey of young Latinx Americans reported salient themes in their responses to open-ended questions about Trump’s immigration rhetoric including “feeling afraid and/or anxious; expressing anger, contempt, and/or disgust; recognizing and experiencing racism” (Wray-Lake et al., 2018, p.192). Taken together, the findings of Wray-Lake and colleagues, as well as the SPLC’s reporting of a dramatic rise in white supremacist hate groups, demonstrate the effect of the Wedge Lie on both sides of the issue divide, galvanising emotional responses to the rhetoric and, in doing so, deepening social divides. Pew Research’s 2019 survey of US adults¹⁴ on the issue of trust reported that not only did Americans feel trust in the federal government had been shrinking (an instinct long borne out by comprehensive studies of levels of political trust), but that 64% of adults also believed that trust *in each other* was also shrinking. 70% of adults felt that low trust in each other was an obstacle to solving problems. Those classed as “low trusters” were more likely to be non-white, low income and with lower educational attainment. Amongst this group, only 25% had confidence in their fellow Americans to respect the rights of people like them. Distrust between social groupings, fuelled by aggravating divisions along social identity lines, is a demonstrably significant problem. The Wedge Lie offers an unscrupulous leader the opportunity to exacerbate those divisions on demand. In order to trigger those emotional responses, I hypothesise that the narrative of the lie must itself be highly emotive, and that overwhelmingly the sentiment will be negative.

Hypothesis 2: Discourse focussed on the Wedge Lie will display predominantly negative sentiment.

In Chapter 3, I discuss in depth the importance of emotion as it interacts with the Wedge Lie, as well as the specific emotions targeted as the most conducive for the desired outcomes of that lie. I argue that conveying and provoking anger presents the greatest opportunity for an elite deploying a Wedge Lie to galvanise a desired response from both their ingroup and outgroup audiences. Findings of studies (and building on the idea of approach/avoidance emotions) have

¹⁴ Pew Research’s 2019 survey on trust in the US surveyed political and social trust attitudes. The results can be found here: <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/>

shown that anger is activated by the same neurological system that triggers enthusiasm, “especially when familiar disliked or threatening stimuli present themselves” (Brader and Marcus, 2013, p. 179; MacKuen et al., 2010). Within that conceptual framework, the Wedge Lie has a relatively straightforward task; to convey anger itself, and to provoke feelings of anger from its ingroup *and* outgroup audiences with the aim of galvanising further action upon its receipt.

That task is made easier through the infrastructure of modern social media networks; studies have repeatedly demonstrated that emotions can be contagious through social media, even without the more traditional methods of transmission through facial or vocal cues (Kramer et al., 2014; Coviello et al., 2014). In addition, the social media platform business model that drives and rewards engagement makes it more likely that emotional contagion becomes mediated; that is to say that the contagion is curated and cultivated as part of the goal of social media companies to “increase the frequency and intensity of user emotions” (Goldenberg and Gross, 2020, p.316).

As such, I expect to see a trend in the spread of the Wedge Lie; the content of the communication of the lie will convey predominantly negative emotions, particularly anger, designed to provoke that same emotion in both ingroup and outgroup audiences, increasing affective polarisation (see also Hypothesis 5).

Polarise

This chapter has established that there are multiple harms in the political context that can occur when political actors feel unbound by the truth and can simply say what they want to elicit positive responses from their supporters or evade accountability by a critical public. The third impact of the Wedge Lie arguably has the potential for the greatest harm.

Research on the impact of lies on trust relationships, whether interpersonal, social or political has traditionally identified two parties to each incidence of a lie. There is the liar, and there is the target of the deceit (e.g. DePaulo et al., 1996; Kashy and DePaulo, 1996; Gawn and Innes, 2018; Tyler et al., 2006). I argue that in the case of Wedge Lies, there are *three* material parties to the occurrence. There is still the liar, but there are two distinct groups of recipients; whilst both groups are lied *to*, one group (whose worldview aligns with the liar) is also lied *for*. That is to say that the lie benefits them through the strengthening of their social identity and

reinforcement of their worldview, which in turn rewards the liar with a redoubling of support. The other group (whose worldview counters the liar) is also the target of deceit, but the lie is designed to further distance them from the in-partisan group. In essence, the Wedge Lie polarises through aggravating existing partisan or ideological divisions between social groups. The same lie, from the same liar, has profoundly different impacts on the two recipient groups. This is, to the best of my knowledge, a new concept in the literature and adds to work exploring on the seemingly counter-intuitive phenomenon of voters continuing to support proven liars.

Swire-Thompson and colleagues (2020) have conducted experiments to successfully demonstrate that even after a correction to misinformation has been presented and accepted (and, by extension, an acknowledgement that a falsehood has occurred), feelings towards the source of the falsehood may remain unchanged. Despite any reduced belief in the misinformation, the overall level of support for the liar remains steady. Other studies have shown that not only does correcting the misinformation not change feelings about the source of the falsehood, but that it does not materially change perceptions of the outgroup targeted by the misinformation (e.g. Nyhan and Zeitzoff, 2017). The lie exacerbates divisions that pervade and persist.

What makes the Wedge Lie potentially more dangerous than others (e.g. a politician's lies about a financial scandal or extra-marital affair), are the twin goals of pleasing the ingroup, whilst simultaneously alienating the outgroup. I argue that in the current tenor of political discourse in America, polarisation cannot simply be seen in merely partisan terms. In extreme examples, that became alarmingly frequent during the Trump presidency, the Wedge Lies deployed the rhetoric of dehumanisation. On immigration, Trump frequently linked the issue to crime. In a 2018 roundtable with California sheriffs, in reference to MS-13, an organised criminal gang with Central American roots, Trump stated,

“We have people coming into the country, or trying to come in - and we’re stopping a lot of them - but we’re taking people out of the country. You wouldn’t believe how bad these people are. These aren’t people. These are animals.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Coverage of the remarks can be found here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/us/politics/trump-undocumented-immigrants-animals.html>

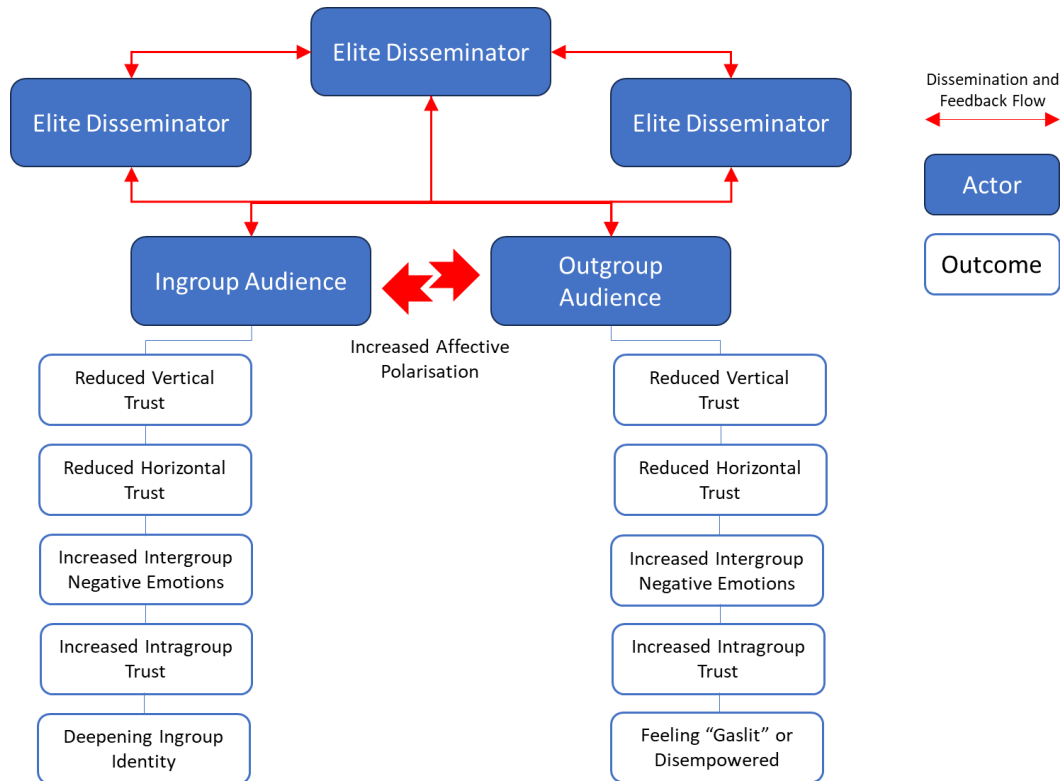
Trump made no effort to clarify that he was talking specifically about MS-13 members (the question he was asked was not explicitly in reference to criminals), and not immigrants in general, and it was not the first time he had used the term “animals” to describe people recently deported. In fact, dehumanisation became a recurring feature of the Trump presidency from multiple political actors, on both sides of the partisan divide. Pundits, politicians and surrogates indulged in dehumanising rhetoric: Jeanine Pirro (Fox News) labelled Democrats “Demon Rats”, Bill Maher (late night talkshow host) referred to Republicans as “treasonous rats”, Trump referred to entire (traditionally Democrat and with large populations of African Americans and Hispanic Americans) cities as a “rodent-infested mess...no human being would want to live there”.

Political elites have long deployed dehumanising language, but as Martherus and colleagues (2021) assert, a more troubling development in the US context has been the trickle down of this language. Research has demonstrated that rank-and-file political party members and surrogates respond to cues about political group behaviour from their leaders (e.g. Lenz, 2012), but Martherus et al’s work supports concerns that this behaviour has become more frequent in the public at large. This increasing prevalence and the resulting polarisation has implications for social trust relationships, and consequentially for democratic governance. Chipping away at the human characteristics of a group has been shown to lead to increased stereotyping of, and discrimination against, them (Kteily et al., 2015). Martherus et al (2021) also suggest that dehumanisation in the political discourse could be expected to lead to problems achieving legislative compromise, resulting in increased gridlock (Hetherington and Weiler, 2018). Martherus and colleagues’ study provides evidence that affective polarisation is significantly predictive of the willingness to dehumanise, and that the phenomenon is “far more common among the most affectively polarised partisans” (Martherus et al., 2021, p.519). Furthermore, their research supports the suggestion that dehumanisation is linked to a more authoritarian worldview, especially in Republican survey participants.

Further polarisation occurs due to the Wedge Lie’s differing impacts on the two target groups (see Figure 1.2). In this model, the lie spreads via communications from the elite actors, who may or may not be the originators of the falsehood in question but have recognised its potential for political gain. The ingroup and outgroup audiences experience the lie differently, most notably, the ingroup feel empowered and their social identity reaffirmed. The outgroup

conversely feels disempowered or “gaslit”. Both of these differing reactions nonetheless result in the same increase in affective polarisation.

Figure 1.2 The Wedge Lie



As I argued above, the Wedge Lie operates along existing fissures to further entrench or widen those divisions. For the group that the lie is *for*, motivated reasoning linked to the preservation of social identities will lead members of this group to double-down on their support for their chosen candidate or leader if the lie is challenged. This leads to a cyclical dynamic in which entrenchment leads to increased partisan-motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge, 2006), leading to greater distance between social groupings, leading to increasingly protective responses to outgroup challenges (Kinder and Kalmoe, 2016), further entrenching divisions, and so on it goes. Thus, I argue that Wedge Lies, especially those employing the most extreme rhetoric of division, present a material threat to social trust, and by extension to democratic health. The negativity of the lie, outlined in Hypothesis 2, therefore needs to be directed towards members of the opposing group as well as upwards towards political elites and the institutions of government.

Hypothesis 3: Negative emotional language in the public tweets is directed both vertically towards political elites and horizontally towards members of the opposing group.

One important aspect of understanding the emotional impact of the Wedge Lie is investigating whether it triggers emotional responses in those who engage with it, and which emotions are stirred. However, understanding the source of that emotional response is only part of the picture. The second part of the analysis involves determining who or what these emotions are directed toward. The theory of the Wedge Lie suggests that its effects are not confined to a single target. Instead, it has a twofold capacity to erode trust, both vertically and horizontally. This aligns with established research on political trust, which emphasizes that trust is not only an individual's confidence in political actors but also a societal bond that helps maintain cohesion between diverse social groups (Newton and Zmerli, 2011). The Wedge Lie, by introducing divisive and emotionally charged narratives, disrupts these bonds in multiple directions, fracturing trust on both institutional and interpersonal levels (Hetherington, 2005).

Anger, as shown in the political psychology literature, is a particularly effective emotion for mobilizing action because it signals a sense of injustice and demands corrective behaviour (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe, 2015). When directed upward, this anger undermines political trust by fostering feelings of betrayal or incompetence toward political leaders and institutions. This phenomenon has been observed in situations where political actors are perceived as dishonest or manipulative, as individuals begin to question the legitimacy of the entire political system (Levi and Stoker, 2000).

At the same time, the Wedge Lie directs emotional hostility horizontally, deepening animosities between ingroup and outgroup members. This horizontal erosion of trust is particularly dangerous because it attacks the social fabric that binds different political factions together, fostering social fragmentation. Studies have shown that anger and other negative emotions heighten partisan biases and decrease the likelihood of cooperation or dialogue between groups with opposing political views (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, 2012). As partisan polarisation intensifies, individuals increasingly view members of the opposing group not just as political adversaries, but as threats to their identity and values, further reducing social trust (Mason, 2018).

In this sense, highly emotive discourse triggered by the Wedge Lie will both mirror and magnify distrust vertically and horizontally. The work of scholars such as Hetherington and

Rudolph (2015) highlights the dangers of this dual erosion of trust, showing how the breakdown of political and social trust can lead to reduced civic participation and growing political apathy, thereby weakening democratic governance itself. When the Wedge Lie spreads, I expect that negative emotions—most commonly anger—will manifest in communication towards both political and social targets.

1.6 Summary

The damage inflicted by lies in political discourse reaches far beyond the perceived moral transgressions of politicians trying to cover their tracks after a scandal. As this chapter has set out, there is the potential for material harm done to social trust and the rupturing of fissures along existing lines of division when lies are deployed systematically and repeatedly to agitate the public en masse. I have introduced the concept of the Wedge Lie, a new approach to our understanding of particularly pernicious lies that aggravate divisions through the targeting of motivated reasoning and emotion-led responses. Why does an angry, agitated public matter? It is quite reasonable to counter that when facing complex challenges, emotions can run high. It is further arguable that an engaged public, even an emotionally engaged one, is better than a passive, submissive citizenry, uninterested in holding their leaders to account. To counter this, I argue that while emotionally fraught and vociferous debate may look like democratic participation, it is at best a distraction from meaningful, consequential democratic engagement.

David Runciman's *How Democracy Ends* (2018) suggests that our assumptions about what the death of democracy looks like may be considerably off the mark. The failure of democracy in states across the world has traditionally been accompanied by pictures of tanks in city streets, news and radio stations being taken off air, and the military where once politicians stood. However, in an advanced democracy such as the US, we risk democracy being felled by a slow hollowing out (Runciman, 2018, p.9). I argue that Wedge Lies present a material threat in this scenario.

Key to the threat to democratic health is the interplay between lies and trust. The prevailing consensus in the literature is that lies erode trust (e.g. Bok, 1978; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Schweitzer et al., 2006) or that there are scenarios in which trust levels remain steady despite learning of a lie (Swire et al., 2017). This chapter adds a further dimension to the extant literature by arguing that Wedge Lies are particularly successful at *increasing* trust in the liar

amongst those that are worldview congruent (and indeed strengthening intra-group trust), whilst simultaneously damaging generalised social trust. To understand the threat that this degrading of social trust poses to democratic health, I return to Bok's seminal work (1978) and to her assertion that a fundamental trust in the veracity of human communication is a foundation of social interaction and cohesion. Destabilising those foundations with lies, and the experience of being lied to, can lead not just to epistemic damage but to the collapse of social institutions.

While this appears to be a projection of the most extreme scenario, there are several intervening impacts of lies that taken together have the potential to, if not destroy democratic institutions, then render them paralysed and functionally impotent; Runciman's (2018) hollowed, and vulnerable, democracy.

Chapter 2: The Role of Trust in Democratic Health

“Trust but verify...”

Ronald Reagan

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter set out the ways in which lies have the potential to disrupt politics when disseminated by political elites. It did so whilst distinguishing lies from disinformation, misinformation and fake news, establishing lies (and the act of lying) as a discrete and insidious threat to democratic health. I introduced the concept of the Wedge Lie as a particularly consequential example of an elite lie, arguing that when an ingroup member encounters a Wedge Lie, I expect to see social trust towards outgroup members decrease, whilst political trust in the elite liar increases. This is in contrast to the expectation that when an outgroup member encounters a Wedge Lie, both social trust in members of the “opposing” group, and political trust in the elite liar decreases. This impact is driven by the defining objectives of the Wedge Lie, which for ease of reference I summarise here:

1. To weaponise mass media communication infrastructure to exploit peer-to-peer dissemination.
2. To galvanise emotional responses upon its reception by both ingroup and outgroup audiences.
3. To further polarise the ingroup and outgroup audiences.

In this chapter, I move on to argue that the lies become so effective in their disruption through targeting the mechanisms and drivers that shape who we trust and why.

Trust, as has long been established, is a decidedly positive feature of established and emerging democracies, conferring legitimacy on political institutions, maintaining participation in democratic activity, and promoting social cohesion. Political trust has a positive relationship with the stability and credibility of democratic governments (Zmerli, 2014), and to their willingness to pursue solutions to complex societal problems (Weymouth et al, 2020). While high levels of social trust have been demonstrated to be an indicator of healthier economic performance (Dincer and Uslander, 2010; Algan and Cahuc, 2013), as well as a more tolerant society (Putnam, 2000).

The rich literature on trust in its various forms, and its importance to democracy, does not extend in the same depth to an exploration of the consequences of trust becoming a target of manipulation or denigration by elites for political gain. In this chapter I set out the dominant theoretical concepts in trust research through the lens of elite lies (and in particular the Wedge Lie), arguing that while scholarship to date has brought forth a wealth of knowledge in the field, stubborn gaps have persisted that leave questions as to the vulnerability of political and social trust and the implications for democratic health largely unanswered. Furthermore, this chapter lays the contextual foundations for the following chapter in which I argue that in understanding how emotion drives the formation and maintenance of trust, elite lies and liars in modern political communications infrastructure emerge as a unique threat to democratic health.

2.2 Clarifying Terms

The definition and understanding of trust, both within and without of the political context, falls into the category of what Walter Bryce Gallie (1956) referred to as an “essentially contested concept”, something ephemeral, something often malleable, and certainly something that invites subtly different definitions and approaches. It is helpful, therefore, to lay out which of these definitions and approaches I will be using to frame my own research, and in doing so, provide some critique of historic approaches that I argue have not sufficiently answered how trust is developed and maintained, or undermined, in the face of elite lies.

Recent scholarship widely accepts Mayer et al.’s (1995, p.712) definition of trust as “*the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party*”. Whilst this is undoubtedly a clear and important definition, from which to benchmark any measurement of trust, further research establishes that trust requires a more nuanced understanding, which would place this definition in a more textured context. Devine et al. (2020) provide a compelling argument for expanding our analysis of trust from a singular concept to a family of trust concepts. This delineation of trust, mistrust and distrust as separate concepts (Bertsou, 2019) that must be studied as such, adds welcome nuance to studies into political trust (Lenard, 2008; Krishnamurthy, 2015; D’Cruz, 2018). Bertsou (2019) goes further to suggest that the historic narrow focus on the concept of trust has hampered our understanding of distrust as a discrete phenomenon. The more nuanced

family of trust concepts allows not only for the study of the three discrete phenomena, but also the relationships between them; how a citizen may move from one to another. It is helpful, then, to briefly set out the individual characteristics of the family of trust concepts as a framework for understanding the drivers behind them, and their relative desirability in the political context.

Trust

Trust, Devine et al. (2020) argued, is bestowed (or refused) through an empirical assessment of information. Moreover, it is a necessary component in the sustenance of democracies (Almond and Verba, 1963; Easton 1965) particularly in times of low satisfaction or crisis. Trust is the glue that “keeps the system together, the oil that lubricates the policy machine” (Zmerli and van der Meer 2017; p.1). But there is increasing concern that the traditional aggregators of data on political trust, such as the American National Election Study, are over-reliant on related (and often conflated) constructs like trustworthiness, satisfaction and confidence (Hamm, Smidt and Mayer, 2019).

More fundamentally, there is disagreement about what trust actually is. Different schools of thought have identified trust varyingly as “a general outlook on human nature, an affective attitude, a decision, and an action” (see Nannestad, 2008 for a comprehensive review of the theories and conceptualisations of trust). Such disagreement is not inherently a sign of weakness in the scholarship, but rather is viewed here as an opportunity to delimit the concept of trust when investigating it as part of a nuanced picture of social and political behaviours.

Further disagreements exist as to the genesis of our trust formation. Two theories dominate here; one determines argues that trust is *rational*; the other that trust is *moral*. The moral conceptualisation of trust is most vigorously put forth by Uslaner (2008). For him, it is a product of socialisation, imbued with our experiences throughout life, and even with the cultural or familial norms in which we develop. This conceptualisation speaks to the type of person that the trustor is, as much as the character of the trustee. Uslaner (2008, p.4) describes this vision of trust somewhat piously as a “moral commandment to treat people as if they were trustworthy”. As I set out later in this chapter, there is a shortcoming in this accounting of trust when approaching the concept through the lens of attitudes towards ingroup and outgroup peers. How does the morality of trust stand up in the face of distrust in outgroup members, simply by virtue of their worldview?

On the other hand, Hardin's (2004) comprehensive case for trust to be seen as a rational decision-making process demands that trust is particularised, that is to say that it relates to a specific trustor, trustee *and* what the trustee is being trusted to do. It is, as such, a strategic process. If this is indeed the case, this does not fully account for trust decisions that seem to run counter to a process meant to best protect the interests of the trustor. For example, there was an 8% swing in Latino votes towards President Trump in the 2020 Presidential election, and he hit a high watermark for Latino support in 2024, despite years of highly visible antagonistic rhetoric and policies towards Latinos, not least the Mexican border wall. While the Latino vote cannot be taken as a monolithic whole, those voters who cast a ballot for Trump for the same reasons as their white counterparts (as economic and socially conservative messages cut through) did so *despite* his clear racial animus towards their cohort. Furthermore, as is central to this thesis, if trust is a rational processing of information before arriving at a strategic decision, what distortion can be done to that process by manipulating or even falsifying the information upon which that trust is based?

Despite the differences, there is a common thread that runs through all of the contested conceptualisations and theories of trust; that in deciding to trust an individual, group or institution, we demonstrate a willingness to place ourselves in a position of risk, at the mercy of the actions of that other party (Mayer et al., 1995). That is to say, that to trust is to accept that the trustee has the potential to affect our own interests (Hardin, 2004). This becomes materially important when we consider circumstances in which trust in another party continues despite a demonstrable lack of warrant, or trust in the veracity of information is maintained without verification of that credibility. The central argument of this thesis is that elite lies, and in particular Wedge Lies, disrupt the trust process to the extent that trustors are willing to place themselves in a position of risk without sufficient warrant.

As I detail in this chapter and the following chapter, the interaction of emotion and trust is fundamental to the theory of the Wedge Lie and as such I align with Uslaner (2008) and others such as Fehr (2009) and Misztal (2013) who argue that trust is emotionally-driven behaviour.

Mistrust

Arguably, mistrust is the hardest to of the three concepts to split off from either its positive or negative counterparts, largely because it is more fluid in its character. Mistrust is signified by its cautious scepticism; those who are mistrustful will approach a situation or other party with

a “careful and questioning mindset” (Lenard, 2008, p.313). Moreover, as Devine, Gaskell, Jennings and Stoker (2020) argue, mistrust judgements are the most frequently subject to revision and reconfirmation, and are led by a focus on the empirical. Trust may be given, but it is balanced by a vigilance about its continued justification and verification in the light of any new information. It is therefore the most labour intensive of the trust concepts. It is also, the trust judgement most likely to promote engaged, critical citizens (Norris 2011). Those who are mistrustful are likely to regard their political actors, parties and institutions with a healthy measure of scepticism, and take actions to hold those actors to account; in effect, they are quality controllers in the political system (Rosanvallen, 2008).

Distrust

If accepted as not being the absence of trust but rather a discrete phenomenon, distrust is the most consequential of the trust family, as I will argue in subsequent sections. It has been historically identified by a pervasive cynicism towards individual actors, political parties, institutions of government, or political systems. Devine et al (2020) draw out the different processes that inform distrust judgements as opposed to trust judgements. Distrust, they argue, requires a component of normative assessment from the distruster. Drawing out that requirement would suggest that there is a moral element to distrust judgements, i.e. to come to a conclusion of distrust suggests an assessment of a trustee not simply as untrustworthy, but as bad, immoral or morally inadequate (D’Cruz, 2018). Unlike the fluidity of mistrust, distrust appears to be a settled belief that a trustee is untrustworthy (Citrin and Stoker, 2018).

In established Western democracies at least, citizens are increasingly discontented with and distrustful of their political leaders, institutions and even their entire system of governance (Bertsou, 2019). Signalled by rising popular anger, falling voter turnout and diminishing party loyalty, though tempered by a continuing commitment to democratic principles (Dalton, 2004), a growing current of distrust flows upwards from citizens to political elites. Where the research falls short is in seeking to understand how political distrust bleeds into social distrust *and vice versa*, as I shall discuss in more detail in this chapter.

Trustworthiness

The concept of trustworthiness speaks directly to the character of the trustee, and the trust-judgement process of the trustor. Early research (Hovland, Janis and Kelley, 1953) gauged the impact on the credibility of the trustee of varying expertise and trustworthiness. Their definition

of trustworthiness centred on a trustee's motivation to lie; if the trustee could be perceived as benefitting from the lie, he would be considered less trustworthy. It is notable for this research that the role of lies and lying is central to the decision to trust another party. Mayer et al (1995) expand the conceptual understanding of trustworthiness into a multi-dimensional assessment of ability, benevolence and integrity, all of which draw on the predictability element, which refers to the idea that people seek and rely on regularity and consistency in their environment to make sense of events, especially in uncertain or complex situations (Bandura, 1977; Good, 1988). Further studies have highlighted the perception of fairness in government processes, alongside individual integrity, as a significant predictor of the perception of trustworthiness (Whiteley et al., 2016). There is now, at least, a baseline assumption that trustworthiness is just one component in a multidimensional process through which we come to determine who to trust, and why (see Fisher et al., 2010; Newton, 1999; Tucker 2004 for examples).

Existing theories of trustworthiness (and indeed political trust) alone cannot adequately explain that persistent support, limited as they are by practical observations of successful yet objectively untrustworthy politicians. There is an *a priori* case that other mediating factors have material consequence for our trust judgement formation process, with significant consequences for democratic health. Emotion and heuristics in decision making, and the relationship between social and political trust are key components that deserve further empirical and conceptual investigation as I return to throughout this thesis.

System Support

Political trust is a complex construct and one that is often defined by measures that are in themselves hampered by a lack of clarity over their meaning (Hamm et al., 2019). The measurement, and particularly the reporting of political trust often sees other phenomena conflated in the analysis. System support is a good example of this, despite its differences with political trust.

Prominent scholars (e.g. Norris 1998; 2011) have long framed trust as a key barometer of democratic health; one which trends upwards or downwards much like a commodity's market value. But Norris (2011) herself has also contributed to this blurring of the lines between system support and trust through what she describes as the five pillars of system support, which draw on the seminal work by Easton (1965). Taken together, these indicators are designed to give an overall reading of political trust. It is certainly reasonable to link political trust and system

support as synergic concepts, but I suggest it is useful to look at them individually in the context of the Wedge Lie. As a citizen, for example, I may deeply distrust the current government administration but retain a fundamental support for the structures and principles of democracy. Democratic systems are, at heart, a mechanism for managing the inevitable conflicts amongst citizens and would-be leaders about how best to conduct our societies for the greatest overall good. Further, they are designed to do this by motivating citizens to engage in politics in the form of debate and electoral participation (Warren, 2018). They require, as Easton (1965) set out not just the specific support for individual leaders or administrations, but a diffuse, stable support for the system and institutions of democratic government itself. This support acts as a buffer against democratic backsliding (Norris, 2011) and confers legitimacy on democratic government (Easton, 1975) with implications for policymaking and reform (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

However, the question of system support is growing in salience for this research because of the trend that has been building in the last two decades for populist success in established democracies. Anti-system narratives can undermine public confidence in the broad democratic system (Sheets et al., 2016; Hameleers et al., 2018; Mauk, 2020a). These messages can be vague, wide-ranging attacks on a fuzzy target and remain effective. During his first Presidential campaign, Trump and his allies rallied support around his pledge to “Drain the Swamp”¹⁶, a reference to implied corruption on a grand scale in the amorphous blob of Washington DC. As has long been established, care, competence and an accountability to citizens are core to our perceptions of the trustworthiness of governments (van der Meer, 2010). Populists are adept at targeting public confidence in those aspects, positioning themselves as a corrective force (Mauk, 2020a) ready to “fix” democracy itself (not simply replace the offending current administration). The remainder of this chapter builds on this to elucidate why trust is so important to democratic health, and identifies a gap in the literature posed by the question: what happens to trust (and therefore democratic health) when confronted with elite lies and liars?

2.3 Measuring Trust

It is worth noting here some of the ways in which trust has historically been measured in both academic research, and some of the long running surveys of populations. These measures, as

¹⁶ Trump first used this phrase when launching his plan for government ethics reform on 18th October 2016: <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/788402585816276992>

discussed further below, can be a relatively blunt instrument, measuring the presence (or lack thereof) of trust, without adequately probing the drivers of those trust judgements, let alone the complexities around why trust persists even if the warrant has seemingly retreated. Nonetheless, they have provided the backbone of the research on political trust, and as such are an important component of this initial review. Although it is not within the scope of this research to mount a granular methodological critique of survey techniques and question wording, a brief overview is presented to highlight the relatively unchanged predominant measures for trust in its different forms.

The General Social Survey has proved to be something of a North Star for navigating measurements of trust. Since its first inclusion in 1972, the standard question on generalised trust has featured in the virtually all the surveys conducted. The question has been replicated in studies across the world, from multinational comparative studies such as the World Values Survey, to polling commissioned by newspapers. The wording asks respondents “generally speaking, do you believe that most people can be trusted, or you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” Despite remaining a consistent presence, the question is contentious. Some (e.g. Miller and Mitamura, 2003) assert that the question does not accurately reflect two poles on a balanced scale, and should actually be presented as two separate questions. This wariness was borne out by a study demonstrating that when asked the two halves as separate questions, respondents indicated a high level of agreement to *both* (Wuthnow, 1998). Nonetheless, Ulsaner (2011) among others mounted a defence of the standard question as readily understandable by respondents. However, there is wide acceptance that more nuanced data is required to meaningfully measure trust, leading the World Values Survey to field a battery of 32 trust, or confidence-related questions to interrogate levels of trust in multiple interpersonal or institutional targets. For the purposes of this research, I use an adaptation of the General Social Survey’s standard question (details on the justification of this choice and the amendments made to the question are found in Chapter 4).

Whether reflecting upon the political, social or interpersonal forms of trust, academic research has relied upon a series of measurements designed to capture a core set of assessments from citizens towards a range of targets. These assessments routinely conceptualise trust as an expectation (Morrone, 2009) in the target to demonstrate the key features of trustworthiness . If relational, the question may ask for an evaluation of a particular target with regard to a specific situational factor; e.g. “to what extent do you agree with the following statement: I

trust the government to act in my best interests”. If generalised, the question may ask for an assessment of a particular target, often conflating trust with confidence; e.g. “how much confidence do you have in the police”. A clear problem with this question is the very real possibility that I may trust the police to demonstrate the principles of trustworthiness, but have little confidence in their ability to do their job well. That conflation is not the only issue with standardised questions of trust.

For the purposes of this investigation looking into the impact of elite lies upon trust, the dominant measurements, and related schools of thought on the concept of trust itself are a solid starting point. Each of these examples of standardised survey questions used widely to measure different types of trust share the same problem for this investigation: they give little insight to the externalities affecting trust, nor to the resulting consequences for the social and political attitudes or behaviours associated with trust. With particular regard to impact of elite lies on democratic health, it becomes necessary to understand the interaction of trust with those externalities, as I shall set out more fully in Chapter 3.

2.4 Does Trust Matter to Democratic Health?

Trust, as established at the outset of this chapter, is a complex phenomenon. A consensus has built in recent decades that both political and social trust are required for the healthy functioning of a democracy (Newton et al., 2018; Newton, 1999; Zmerli and Newton, 2017). Furthermore, political and social trust are deeply connected. What follows is an overview of the importance of these forms of trust, why they are consequential for democratic societies, and their vulnerability to Wedge Lies.

During the protracted nuclear disarmament negotiations in the final decade of the Cold War, then US President, Ronald Reagan, used the phrase; “Trust, but verify”. Or as Patti Lenard wryly noted, “trust your compatriots, but count your change” (Lenard, 2008 p.312). After the acute turbulence of the 1960s, the deep malaise that plagued Western democratic governments in the 1970s (King, 1975) brought with it increasing concern at and crises of confidence (Citrin and Luks, 2001) in Western democratic governance. and a narrative of declining political trust (van der Meer, 2017) that has dominated academic research since that time. Underpinning this research is an acceptance of trust as a key measure of democratic health (Christensen and

Lægreid, 2005; Jamal and Nooruddin, 2010; Norris, 2011). Some scholars go further to identify it as being the keystone to a functioning society (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000).

Political trust performs a number of key functions in stabilising and nurturing democratic governance. Primarily, it is fundamental to the credibility of political regimes (Levi and Stoker, 2000), ensuring that citizens recognise their leaders or current administrations as being legitimate. When citizens trust their leaders and institutions, they are more likely to accept decisions, even those they might disagree with or are even detrimental to them in favour of a greater good. It is trust that sustains belief in the fairness and justice of those democratic processes (Easton, 1965). Political trust is also linked to system support; that is to say the legitimacy of democracy itself. The distaste with which the public views political elites is a familiar narrative, but these actors come and go.

Declining trust in the institutions that make up democratic governments (or even democracy itself) speaks to a more stubborn, structural malaise, which is perhaps of greater concern (Putnam 2002; Dalton 2004). In parallel with Easton's analysis of system support (Easton, 1965), a more diffuse distrust in the instruments and institutions of government may have profound implications for the public's belief in the integrity of elections, and democracy itself. A recent survey of citizens and local leaders in Michigan¹⁷ by the *Ford School of Public Policy* found a significant increase in those who believe there is "a total breakdown of democracy" at state and federal levels between 2020 and 2021. Local leaders who believe that democracy in the U.S. is in a state of "total breakdown" tripled during this time, and when surveyed, more than half said it is at or near "total breakdown".

There are potentially significant downstream effects associated with declining political trust supported by research that shows low political trust has an impact on legal permissiveness; i.e. low trust can lead to a reduced inclination to abide by laws, and thus can disrupt the effective governance of the modern democratic state (Marien and Hooghe, 2011). A sense of injustice that the government is not operating in the public interest, or worse, that the government is working to enrich the lives of other people leads to a reduced willingness to engage in civic norms, including abiding by laws, paying taxes or resolving conflict through democratic means (Levi, 1997; Tyler, 2006).

¹⁷ Full details of the survey and findings <https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/95/michigan-local-officials-assessments-american-democracy-state-and-federal-levels#embed>

Social trust has a role to play, too. Both particular and general social trust are necessary conditions for political trust (Newton and Zmerli, 2011), which implies that the way that citizens feel about each other is materially important to the trust we have in our political leaders and institutions. It is this positive association between the different forms of trust that is the focus of this research as it investigates whether that relationship may be distorted through encountering a Wedge Lie. Is it possible, for example, that the Wedge Lie may exploit that distortion to the extent that the trust warrant can recede and the need to verify the credibility of a message is abandoned.

These questions are an extension, rather than a refutation, of the rich body of work of the social capital theorists (see Bourdieu, 1972; Loury, 1977; Coleman, 1988; Wellman and Wortley, 1990; Putnam, 2000; Putnam et al., 2003) who concur that the concepts of political and social trust are intricately linked. I acknowledge the robust foundation that scholarship provides but seek to establish whether elite lies, and in particular the Wedge Lie, expose a complexity not fully addressed by social capital theory.

Although more investigation is needed to fill that particular gap, it has been repeatedly shown that social trust is an important determinant of trusting behaviours that would, in turn, promote democratic health. Social trust has been demonstrated to foster cooperation and ease anxieties about exploitation (Rathbun, 2011), it both drives empathy with those from a different background (Uslaner, 2002) and encourages the building of bonds across generational or racial boundaries (Rathbun, 2011). Social trust also fosters prosocial behaviours, including community engagement (Sonderskov, 2011).

One of the key theories of social trust is what Delhey and Newton (2003, p.96) term the *social success and wellbeing theory* (proponents of this theory include Putnam, 2000 and Orren, 1997; & Inglehart, 1999). This model centres the lived experiences of individuals as the key determining factor of trust; i.e. society's 'winners' (those with secure jobs, financial security and high levels of job/life satisfaction) are more trusting than life's 'losers' (those with poor education, low income and low status). While this goes some way to build on the approach of Uslaner (1999), among others, that trust is intrinsically linked to personality (i.e. that a more optimistic person will be more trusting), I argue that neither theory sufficiently explains the complexities of trust judgements in the context of elite lies and liars.

2.5 Targeting Trust with Wedge Lies

A substantial research literature investigates the cognitive processes people use when making decisions about whether they trust people or institutions. People frequently seek paths of least resistance in decision-making, deploying a variety of shortcuts when deciding who to trust in varying circumstances (Messick and Kramer, 2001; Brewer, 2008). Lightening the cognitive load in our everyday life is not an unusual process. Humans need to organise and understand new information and experiences, and to do so in a manageable way requires a set of cognitive frames that help people to do this efficiently. Trust and distrust operate this way, and as such give people a structural framework to contextualise their views of a relationship or experience (Lewicki and Brinsfield, 2011).

One such way to ease the burden is the use of heuristics. Decision-making shortcuts or “rules of thumb” are an established method of reaching a judgement through “fast and frugal” thinking (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999). There are a number of upsides to this tendency, including the ability to avoid the time-consuming and laborious process of amassing and reviewing vast quantities of information, risking becoming incapacitated by the volume or complexity. Indeed, Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier (2011) argue that in “large worlds” of information and experience, there is a tipping point at which “more is less” i.e. there is such a thing as too much information. This becomes an important benefit; research has repeatedly demonstrated that the evaluation of a political candidate (or indeed any other person) habitually takes place on-line; that is to say that the information is processed immediately and continuously upon receipt (see Hastie and Park, 1986; Lichtenstein and Srull, 1987).

Studies have demonstrated support for the claim that trust (and indeed distrust) may function as a decision heuristic in and of itself (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2011). This argument has drawn robust and consistent empirical backing from Hetherington and Globetti (2002), whose experimental survey on racially targeted policy proposals yielded strong confirmation of the claim that political trust would increase white people’s support for policies specifically designed to benefit black citizens. As Rudolph (2017) notes, the trust heuristic was originally seen as being applicable where the trustor would be required to sacrifice material interests in their support of a policy. However, the trust heuristic also applies to instances involving the sacrifice of ideological principles (Rudolph and Evans, 2005). It is

arguable that this theory provides at least a partial explanation for the support of former US President Donald Trump (particularly in 2016 before he had met their demands for action such as the repeal of Roe vs Wade) from Christian Evangelicals despite a very public record of behaviour and statements that would seem to directly contradict Christian Evangelical ideology.

The significance of trust as a heuristic should not be seen only from the perspective of the trustor; the trustee has much to gain if they can short-circuit cumbersome cognitive analysis and utilise a groundswell of trust to garner support for otherwise controversial policies or behaviours. Such benefits include an increase in the likelihood of citizens believing the promises made by political elites, because trust increases the probability of message acceptance (Hovland et al, 1953). This is an important function of the trust heuristic in the context of elite lies and liars, as it alludes to a crucial vulnerability that Reagan warned about with his call to “trust but verify”; a citizen who trusts a political elite is more likely to accept the content of a message without feeling a compulsion to verify its credibility.

If, as I have set out above, there is consensus that political trust is key to a healthy democracy, it follows that there would be severe consequences for democracy were it to wither. I contend that the Wedge Lie is an effective tool to undermine political trust and suggest the following reasons why political elites may seek to weaken their own system of government. Populist leaders, or those who would like to be, are keen to portray themselves as disruptors, shaking the status quo and cutting through a bloated, corrupt elite (Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Nai & Coma, 2019). Yet in promising to be the true voice of the people, they frequently adopt strategies that seek to undermine the representativeness and accountability of government for the people, by the people. These strategies may include exploiting resentment and anger (Taggart, 2000; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) or fostering a narrative of crisis (Canovan, 1999; Rooduijn, 2014)

The effects of these may be to delegitimise democratic institutions (Mudde, 2004; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), or weaken accountability mechanisms (Merkel, 2004; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). A Wedge Lie offers leaders willing to uncouple from the truth an opportunity to undermine trust on demand.

Hypothesis 4: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will have a negative effect on political trust judgements.

Unlike the ingroup audience, the outgroup does not get the benefit of what Jones et al. (2020), call “subtle identity performances” (or entirely ostentatious identity performances) that draw trust in a leader out of ingroup audiences. Recalling the third feature of the Wedge Lie (its capacity to polarise the ingroup and outgroup audiences), encountering the lie as a member of the outgroup necessarily sets the outgroup social identity at odds with the social identity of the ingroup. Indeed, the collective defence of the ingroup is inversely reflected in the outgroup’s coalescence around a defence against a perceived threat from both the ingroup and their self-appointed champion, the elite who deploys the Wedge Lie.

For the outgroup, that champion is an encapsulation of the ingroup identity writ large; but at times they may also be a liar in a position of power over the outgroup. The outgroup’s scepticism toward the ingroup’s credibility leads to an increased scrutiny of information disseminated by ingroup leaders and as such, exposes the Wedge Lie for the falsehood that it is. The consequences of this are significant; the fact that the lie is told so brazenly, in the face of readily available contradictory evidence elevates the Wedge Lie to a form of “epistemic abuse”, or gaslighting (Beerbohm and Davis, 2022 p.1). However, I do not hold the view that this form of gaslighting intends to ultimately manipulate and coerce the victim to endorse the gaslighter’s beliefs (Abramson 2014; Spear 2018). Rather, the outgroup’s awareness of the mendaciousness of the information disseminated as the Wedge Lie feeds a sense of powerlessness and drives trust in the liar downwards.

This chapter has discussed the differences, elided by a stubborn portion of the literature, between political trust and system support. And while I hold that the difference is certainly real and of importance to any robust inquiry that seeks to measure democratic health, they are also intricately linked (Hetherington, 1998) and therefore both worthy of inclusion in this research. Hetherington’s observation that declining political trust is a “powerful cause” (Hetherington, 1998 p.791) of dissatisfaction in the broader political system is of particular relevance here.

The anticipated outcome of a negative impact on political trust judgements cuts across both the ingroup and the outgroup, but is a product of different drivers. For the ingroup, diffuse support for the system is undermined by diminishing trust in the outgroup. In a multi-pillar democracy such as the US, the system is populated, or even partially dominated, by representatives of the outgroup (for example through multiple members of the Supreme Court, or leadership of one of the two Houses of Congress), leaving those institutions open to the same intergroup

suspicion as targeted at the outgroup members themselves. For the outgroup, the perceived threat to their social identity is institutionalised when the Wedge Lie emerges from the political elite. Victims of a sort of gaslighting, as detailed above, the outgroup's confidence in the integrity and ability of their government *and system of government* is undermined.

It is this hypothesis that may be of the greatest significance to the concept of democratic health, speaking as it does to the diffuse support for the institutions and mechanisms of democratic governance. If, as discussed above, both social and political trust are essential conditions for voluntary compliance with democratic norms (Lenard, 2008), diminished trust along both axes suggests a potential decreased willingness to play by those rules. Furthermore, in the case study employed by this research (the 2020 US Presidential Election and President Trump's persistent claim that the results were illegitimate: see Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the case study selection), the Wedge Lie in question directly challenged the legitimacy of both the election results and the machinery of the elections themselves. But aligning with Hetherington's argument of a causal relationship between political trust and system support, I argue that the specific content of this Wedge Lie only partially explains the declining system support; the polarisation caused by the Wedge Lie and its associated after-effects will also be responsible for declining system support.

Turning to social trust, equally important for a healthy democracy, there too lies a potential target for a leader willing to lie. Social trust, as discussed in this chapter, acts as an emollient, smoothing what would otherwise be inherent conflicts in our nonvoluntary organisation in a democratic society (Warren, 2018). The familiarity and knowledge across cultural, socio-economic and generational divides fostered by high levels of social trust is key to a stable and prosperous society (Fukuyama, 1995). As with political trust, there are reasons why political elites may see the appeal in damaging that foundation. Exploiting social fissures through appeals to fear and anger, especially through the mobilisation of these emotions against an "other" can provide populist elites an easy narrative to address what are in fact highly complex problems including economic inequality or crime (Wodak, 2015; Mounk, 2018). Equally cynical is the undermining of the social capital that is created by high levels of social trust (Putnam, 2000). The organisations and collectives associated with civil society are often viewed with caution by populists as a source of meddlesome opposition (Berman, 1997; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

The effect is a consolidation of power for the ruling political elite through the weakening of democratic norms such as a willingness to compromise (or to reward political compromise), engage in civic participation or even respect differences with fellow citizens (Fukuyama, 1995). In the resulting environment of distrust and polarisation, citizens are vulnerable to demagoguery and an increasing dependence on a leader positioning themselves as the only one able to solve their problems¹⁸ (Müller, 2016). The theoretical framework of the Wedge Lie suggests that it may provide the means to achieve precisely that.

Hypothesis 5: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will damage social trust judgements between ingroup and outgroup members, increasing affective polarisation.

Social trust, that between individuals as they embark upon everyday, non-political activity is equally important to a well-functioning democracy as is political trust (Lenard, 2008). It confers a sense of security that our fellow citizens, even those outside of our own ingroup will play by the democratic rules. It has been well documented as a positive and central force in well-functioning societies (Uslaner, 2002; Dinesen and Sønderskovb, 2015) facilitating cooperation and cohesion (Bachman and Zaheer, 2015), it is not easily built or maintained (Brewer, 1997). Furthermore, social psychologists have long identified the inclination of ingroup members to favour or show bias towards fellow ingroup members to the exclusion of outgroup members (see Brewer, 1979; Kramer and Brewer, 1984 for strong examples) simply by virtue of being categorised into those two groups. Under stress, intergroup trust is increasingly vulnerable to manipulation or distortion by a savvy and unscrupulous leader. Indeed, studies have shown that authoritarian regimes benefit from a “disorganised” citizenry, split over policy and politics (Chen and Xu, 2017).

A Wedge Lie offers an opportunity to prise open the natural but relatively benign gap between ingroup and outgroup into just such a schism with consequences for both intergroup and intragroup trust. The polarising effect of the Wedge Lie further increases suspicion of, and a sense of alienation from, members of the other group. The stress of the Wedge Lie can be expected to have a deleterious effect on intergroup trust, reinforcing the perception of threat to each group’s identity. This leads to a further outcome and a potentially self-perpetuating cycle: the increased perception of external threat prompts a doubling down on support for, and trust

¹⁸ Indeed, Trump’s 2016 campaign was punctuated by claims that he was the only one able to “Make America Great Again” <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/trump-rnc-speech-alone-fix-it/492557/>

in, ingroup members. I would expect this to result in a reduced inclination to verify the credibility or veracity of information disseminated by ingroup members (or their self-appointed champion), leaving those ingroup members increasingly vulnerable to the effects of the Wedge Lie.

Americans may be fractured along many lines, with clear racial, religious/secular, and even urban/rural divisions visible in political discourse. But as I discuss more fully in the following chapter, they are not as polarised on key contentious issues as is frequently portrayed in the press or by political elites themselves. Nonetheless, America is a bitterly divided nation. Multiple studies have found the powerful impact of partisan sorting on polarisation, where issue positions are far less oppositional (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Bafumi and Shapiro, 2009). The way that citizens *feel* about those across the partisan divide has itself driven polarised (and polarising) behaviour including activism, partisan biases and generalised anger (Mason, 2015).

In that widening chasm, the Wedge Lie finds fertile ground to accelerate those feelings of anger and distrust towards outgroup members by aggravating the way citizens feel about each other. This presents a number of benefits as a strategy: if an unscrupulous elite seeks to drive ingroup and outgroup audiences apart, it is far easier to do so if one does not have to find a factually accurate policy difference with which to drive the wedge. Secondly, social identity theory tells us that in order to protect that identity from a perceived threat, ingroup members increase loyalty to one another, whilst further excluding outgroup members. When political partisanship is the social identity, we can expect to see strong emotional responses (Huddy and Bankert, 2017).

Affective polarisation reinforces ingroup trust in the liar as well as reducing trust in outgroup members, and as such, it is a desirable outcome for a Wedge Lie. Upon receipt and processing of a Wedge Lie, I expect to see an increase in affective polarisation between the ingroup and outgroup audiences. This increase in affective polarisation may have additional benefits for the ingroup and its leaders through strengthened internal identity and trust.

Hypothesis 6: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will result in a positive effect on trust judgements of ingroup members.

A central premise of the Wedge Lie is that it targets two distinct audiences with different consequences, an ingroup (those with whom the liar, and by extension the Wedge Lie, share the same world view) and an outgroup (those who do not share this world view). In the case of the ingroup, the Wedge Lie both reinforces their worldview, and their place within it. This serves an important function; group identities are not secure (Grant and Brown, 1995), and are vulnerable to threats, both perceived and real (Stephan and Stephan, 2000). These dangers go beyond the security of the structure and cohesion of the group, and to the heart of a group member's social identity. There is a mutually perpetuating cycle for "high-identifiers" when a value threat is identified (one which attacks the attitudes, social beliefs or norms of the group). If that threat is targeted at an individual high-identifier, they will extend the offence; an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us. If the threat attacks the group, the high-identifier will see it as a direct assault on their own identity (Voci, 2010; Branscombe et al., 1999).

This cycle, in turn, has two notable outcomes. The first is that high-identifiers, sensing a threat, will mount a defence of the group as a means of protecting their own self-image (Voci, 2006). The second is that ingroup members, when perceiving an external threat, seek familiarity (Allport, 1954) to reassure their own social identity. Building on Allport's rather timid description, ingroup members will preferentially assess people, events and information that reaffirm their worldview and thus validate their social identity. This is not a new concept, and follows research that has demonstrated that individuals are more likely to trust those who share the same worldview (Lewicki et al., 1998; Gillespie and Mann, 2004). Jones and George (1998) take this further to argue that shared values are the key to reaching "unconditional trust"; a potentially material concern if a leader needs to build trust without an adequate warrant.

In this context, an elite willing to lie emerges as a beacon shining a reassuring light to guide ingroup members to a place of safety and security. A Wedge Lie, deployed by such an unscrupulous elite, can simultaneously demonstrate a threat to the ingroup by the outgroup, and identify the liar, or a target of their choosing, as a valiant defender of the ingroup. I argue that the Wedge Lie does not cause this as a sort of happy byproduct. Rather, one of the primary features of the Wedge Lie is to soothe threatened social identities, thus elevating the liar as a protector of the ingroup, and driving ingroup trust in the ingroup (and in particular, the liar) upwards.

2.6 Summary

This chapter set out to achieve a number of goals in its review of the existing academic literature on political trust. First it questioned whether researchers have been asking the right questions about political trust, using the most appropriate conceptual framework. I have dedicated significant space in this chapter to a detailed review of the theories and concepts that underpin that framework of trust, highlighting a gap in the literature on the interplay between social and political trust when encountering elite lies (and in particular a Wedge Lie). Finally, this chapter has set out the means by which both political and social trust are at risk of exploitation by liars and lies. The threats to veracity and credibility in modern political communication come from politicians, pundits, citizens, “bot farms”, and even teenagers operating out of their bedrooms in countries such as Macedonia (McGranahan, 2017). As this I argue, it is at this nexus of trust and lies that we find a new, substantial threat to democratic health. I laid the foundations for an examination of the impact on trust (both political and social) when individuals encounter elite lies, and in particular, a Wedge Lie.

The following chapter moves on to focus on the multifaceted role of emotions as a mediating factor in the relationship between elite lies and trust, and the consequences for democratic health. Emotions have been shown to be a response to the demands of the environment (Scherer and Eckman, 1984) and are *typically* intense but brief experiences (Elfenbein, 2007). Research is thin on the consequences for political and social trust of a citizenry that is relentlessly targeted with information designed to activate affective responses, creating a state of near permanent emotional agitation. It raises the question, what are the risks to democratic health from perpetually agitated and angry citizens who are seeking to reaffirm these affective states through information search biases? And what impact do elite lies have on exacerbating those emotion-led responses and their related consequences? The next chapter assesses how our propensity to fall back on emotion-led decision-making leaves us vulnerable to elite lies, and in particular, Wedge Lies.

Chapter 3: Emotion as a Tool and a Target

“The nature of lies is to please. Truth has no concern for anyone’s comfort...”

Katherine Dunn

3.1 Introduction

Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis established a framework for the introduction of the concept of the Wedge Lie, looking at the wealth of scholarship on both the nature and impact of lies and lying, and the mechanisms through which trust forms and maintains in the political and social contexts. In Chapter 1, I argued that when elites lie and freely engage in the act of lying, a potential threat to our social fabric emerges through both epistemic damage, and the deleterious effect it has on both social and political trust. Chapter 1 also introduced the theoretical framework for what I have called the Wedge Lie, a type of falsehood that is distinctive in its form and effect. As a brief reminder, the key characteristics of the Wedge Lie are as follows:

1. To weaponise modern mass communication, largely through social media platforms.
2. To galvanise emotional responses from ingroup and outgroup audiences.
3. To polarise further an already agitated public.

It achieves this, in contrast to other types of lie that seek to persuade as many people as possible of its truth, by speaking to two separate audiences (an ingroup and outgroup) with different anticipated outcomes, including an impact on citizens’ trust, both in their political elites and institutions, as well as in each other. Through a review of the literature on both social and political trust, Chapter 2 reinforces the significance of political and social trust to a healthy democracy, aligning this research with a long history of scholarship that considers trust to be a key condition of democratic governance. As I note in the previous chapters, the rich vein of research that exists on trust and democratic health so far falls short of analysing what, if any, damage is done to the functioning of democracy when elites slip the binds of truth for political gain.

This Chapter explores the third key component to this analysis; the role of emotion in the impact of the Wedge Lie. Research on affect and emotion has grown at a fast pace (Houghton, 2009; Brader, Marcus, and Miller, 2011), establishing a trend away from a predominant focus on cognition-led decision-making. Certainly, this is a welcome development. Yet there is

relatively little research that enquires how emotion, through its invocation within, and its saturation of, political communication, may be so significant to democratic health. In this Chapter, therefore, I address the role of emotion on the impact of a Wedge Lie. I do so through two distinct lenses. The first identifies the importance of emotion as a tool; woven into political communication to maximise engagement with the content and trigger emotional responses from ingroup and outgroup audiences. The second, equally important, is emotion as the target of manipulation by the liar. As I will set out in detail below, through a manipulation of (predominantly negative) emotional responses within both ingroup and outgroup members, the architect of a Wedge Lie can additionally manipulate trust, with emotion acting as a mediating factor. Through a review of the dominant schools of thought on the processes of political decision-making (cognitive-led or emotion-led reasoning), as well as building on the well-established research on affective polarisation, I will set out the predicted outcomes for an investigation into how emotion plays an aggravating role in the impact of a Wedge Lie on both ingroup and outgroup audiences.

3.2 Emotion vs Cognition

One of the central tenets of the Wedge Lie is its use of (and interaction with) emotion and affective responses. It is therefore important at this stage to set out justification for aligning this thesis with the increasing consensus that emotion plays a fundamental role in our political decision-making processes (Lerner & Keltner; 2000; Marcus, 2000, 2002; Marcus et al, 2000), including deciding who to trust or who to vote for.

There have been two prevailing schools of thought in the approach to the underlying mechanisms of trusting behaviours in a political context. Historically, political scientists drew heavily on the framing of voters as rational processors, dispassionately considering new information in the context of their existing beliefs, and *then updating those preferences accurately*. However, increasingly, research has demonstrated that this cognitive-led approach fails to fully account for the range of unconscious biases that work to further embed historic preferences as opposed to rationally revising them in the light of new information (Redlawsk, 2002). A rich vein of research across multiple disciplines, such as political psychology, organisational science and neuroscience emphasises the central role played by emotions as a driver of the trust-formation process (e.g. Elspach and Barr, 1999; Loewenstein et al., 2001; Lerner et al., 2023). It is through this lens that the potential impact of the Wedge Lie can be

properly understood; indeed, I argue that those who employ Wedge Lies actively seek to trigger emotion-led responses precisely because they are so significant to subsequent decision-making processes.

Rational learning

Starting with the historic approach, much of the research into political trust, and the causal factors that may impact those trust judgements, failed to substantially address the human behaviours that feed our decision-making processes (Theiss-Morse and Barton, 2017), drawing instead upon the rational choices that an individual will make about the trustee and the likelihood of them acting in the trustor's best interests (Hardin, 1999). Where scholarship later emerged about the individual behaviours that lead to a decision to trust, mistrust or distrust, it largely viewed the concept as removed from emotive forces (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). Detaching trust judgements from emotionally-driven processes assumes that with trust, a coolly methodical assessment of information to reach a rationally motivated decision can be called upon. This edges close to rational choice theory, which in turn is underlined by "the assumption that complex social phenomena can be explained in terms of the elementary individual actions of which they are composed" (Scott, 2000 p.127).

Whilst acknowledging that the general public frequently operates whilst under-informed on key issues, studies have shown that the public's perceptions do change in response to external events or shifting conditions; "learning seems to occur" (Gerber and Green, 1999, p.190). It can be argued that the same principle would therefore apply to trust judgements; in which case, even an ill-informed or disengaged public can still be persuaded by new knowledge in a rational way, and update their trust or distrust accordingly in a running tally of government performance (Hetherington, 2005). Furthermore, existing partisan alignments or prior beliefs would not be a barrier to rationally-motivated trust adjustments.

However, as Hardin (1999) makes clear, to trust someone requires knowledge with which to develop expectations about likely behaviour. In the political context, the knowledge needed to make cognitive trust decisions comes indirectly because the average citizen cannot acquire direct experience of the trustee; only a fraction of the general population may have close relations with a member of the political elite, and direct experience with a federal employee such as a postman cannot be transposed onto an evaluation of the federal government as a whole (Theiss-Morse and Barton, 2017).

In addition, scholarship in psychology has demonstrated that people seek ways to lessen their cognitive load, preferring to use less mental effort in a decision-making process (Lewicki, and Brinsfield, 2011), and so choosing instead a heuristic route, which this chapter will address in relation to the assessment of the liar, below. This offers an opportunity to deploy a Wedge Lie that will trigger and manipulate emotional responses without the risk of the ingroup spending too much effort interrogating the veracity of the content.

Hot Cognition

Throughout the literature on decision-making heuristics, there is a clear thread on the importance of the role of emotion (Saini, 2006; Slovic et al., 2007; Lerner et al., 2015), if not complete agreement on the nature of that role or the varying impacts of different emotions or their respective triggers.

Political psychologists have increasingly identified the phenomenon of hot cognition (or motivated reasoning) as a dominant force in political decision-making (Lodge and Taber, 2005; Bolsen and Palm, 2019; Bakker et al., 2021), including in the formation of political trust. Unsatisfied with the cognitive theorists' assertion that citizens operate with a cool and rational assessment of information throughout the decision-making process, researchers increasingly consider emotion as equal in importance (if not greater) to cognitive approaches in understanding trust (Theiss-Morse and Barton, 2017).

There is ample evidence to support the claim that people routinely seek ways to lessen the cognitive load of everyday life (as this chapter turns to in detail, below), and in doing so, rely on decision-making heuristics. There is a powerfully effective route to further simplifying the cognitive burden (Rahn, Kroeger and Kite, 1996; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012) by responding to emotional cues (or lack thereof) to assess political information. For the rational theorists' view of political decision-making to hold, significant incongruences must be overlooked; firstly, modern neurology suggests that it would be extremely unusual for people to be able to completely isolate the cognitive functions of their brain from influences from the emotive functions (Lieberman, 2003). Further, as has already been discussed in this chapter, the overwhelming majority of citizens operate within the political context markedly under-informed, suggesting that a purely cognitive, rational approach to processing political information would present a fundamental challenge (Popkin, 1991; Hooghe et al., 2012).

Far from needing to address emotion as a discrete phenomenon, important developments have been made in both psychology and neuroscience that improve our understanding of how emotion and cognition are deeply related: Lodge and Taber (2000) demonstrated the principle that affect and cognition are intimately bound together, which was later reconfirmed by empirical studies of the human brain by Lieberman (2003), and theoretically by Forgas (2012). Despite this, Theiss-Morse and Barton (2017) note that while there is increasing recognition of the role of emotion in the conceptual understanding of interpersonal trust, there remain comparatively few empirical studies of affective processes in political trust judgements. In either case, there is good reason to accept the arguments of Lodge and Taber (2000), Theiss-Morse and Barton (2017 and Bakker et al., (2021) that emotion plays an integral role in trust-formation. Recalling the literature on trust as affect, it remains unsettled whether emotion is part of trust, or if it plays a mediating role in its formation. For the purposes of this research, I align with the suggestion that emotion plays a mediating or brokering role in trust judgements.

Indeed, as I set out throughout this thesis, the Wedge Lie offers a political elite willing to shed the confines of the truth the opportunity to manipulate trust judgements through appeals to our emotional responses, which in turn mediate an impact on trust. In a direct challenge to critiques (see e.g. Gerber and Green, 1999), it is in accepting the central role of emotion that we find a compelling explanation for both how political trust is formed, and subsequently how it is maintained *even in the face of disconfirming information*. Extending this argument, it is arguable that motivated reasoning enables a Wedge Lie to take hold amongst ingroup members, even when presented with evidence as to its falsehood.

Recalling the underlying theme throughout research on heuristics, the desire to reduce our cognitive burdens, we find that for motivated reasoners, this ‘least effort principle’ also holds true. This chapter has previously noted the reduced cognitive load in affective processing in comparison to rational assessment, but research additionally suggests there exists an automaticity in the activation of affect (Anderson, 1981). In effect, motivated reasoners when faced with information about a candidate or issue of importance, will experience the affect already associated with salient existing knowledge “to form a virtually instantaneous assessment of the new information” (Redlawsk, 2002 p.1023). In the context of political trust, a voter who already holds a positive affect towards a candidate and has formed a favourable trust judgement of them is likely to activate that positive valence on receipt of new information,

even if that new information is unfavourable to the candidate. In the context of the Wedge Lie, this would offer some explanation for those trust judgements and positive valence being maintained in the face of backlash against the lie and the liar.

A challenge for political stakeholders and academics alike is how to overcome this chain reaction, which serves to lock-in first impressions. It is not an easy task. For motivated reasoners, political trust may be maintained through citizens' desire to confirm and reinforce existing feelings (Kunda, 1987; 1990). When in receipt of information that would present a challenge to existing positive (or negative) valence, motivated reasoners may disregard or even completely ignore it (Lodge and Taber, 2000). Through this lens, the Wedge Lie is a powerful tool for a leader to deepen support amongst the ingroup audience, especially if a concrete record of achievement doesn't quite stack up. The leader may choose a subject that is particularly emotive and can be used to craft a narrative that suits their political (or personal) purposes with little need to consider the truth.

Motivated reasoners don't simply rely on emotional cues when assessing information on receipt. The influence of emotion feeds into biased judgements by impacting the search for new information (Druckman and McGrath, 2019; Petersen and Iyengar, 2021). Confirmation bias is a long-established phenomenon in which an individual's search for new information is coloured by their desire to have their existing views confirmed (Peters, 2022). Motivated reasoners, led by affective cues, do not merely wish to be confirmed as being right, but also seek to maintain their goals, group identities or emotive state (Bayes et al., 2020). In the context of political trust, if a candidate has established a positive valence with a citizen that has led to a trust judgement, that citizen will spend more time searching for information that reinforces those feelings, and will seek to avoid both unfavourable information about their preferred candidate and *any* information about candidates they dislike (Redlawsk, 2002). Additionally, in engaging in trusting behaviours (i.e. investing time and effort into learning about their favoured candidate, recommending them to peers, and finally voting for them), the cognitive judgements are both reinforced and strengthened (Luhmann, 1979). The ultimate outcome of this affect-led process of political trust formation is that a citizen may choose to trust (and vote for) a sub-optimal candidate in large part because they make the citizen feel good. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that new, incompatible information doesn't simply stimulate a stubborn refusal to re-evaluate an existing position, but in fact produces *increased* support for, or trust in, the existing position (Lodge, Taber and Galonsky 1999; Lodge and Taber,

2000). Those elites who consider deploying a Wedge Lie therefore tread a difficult line with their ingroup members; their message must trigger positive affective responses towards them, but (as the theory of the Wedge Lie demands) generate a negative affective response towards the outgroup. The answer may lie in the particular emotions triggered, as I now discuss.

It would be easy to conclude that humans' susceptibility to their own emotions is a significant problem when it comes to making decisions, or forming judgements. Certainly, there is a wealth of research in the organisational sciences that demonstrate the challenge emotions present to the quality of strategic decision-making and implementation (see Powell, Lovallo and Fox, 2011; Huy, 2011; Liu and Maitlis, 2014). Other alarm bells should start to ring reflecting on findings from the organisational and behavioural sciences: firstly, negative emotions such as anger, fear and distress are associated with increased inducement of exploitative strategies, as opposed to explorative ones (Hakonsson et al., 2016). Secondly, research also supports a link between anger and increased risk-seeking behaviour (Lerner, Gonzalez, Small and Fischhoff, 2003), and an increased dependence on stereotypes (Tiedens and Linton, 2001). Lastly, anger is self-perpetuating; it has been shown to be activated in response to angry cues (Wilkowski and Meier, 2010). Strategic choices made during times or circumstances of uncertainty (Elsbach and Barr, 1999), such as elections, are particularly susceptible to emotional influence, with anger playing a key role (Angie et al., 2011).

Anger is certainly considered a negative emotion due to its varied consequences, only some of which are discussed above. But whilst anger is negative in valence, it shares characteristics with (and can therefore feel similar to) emotional states that are positive in valence, such as excitement or determination (Carver and Harmon-Jones, 2009; Harmon-Jones et al., 2011). In other words, anger can both be negative in consequence, but feel positive after appropriate triggers. Not just this, but anger experienced as a group (as a result of identifying as part of that group and then perceiving a transgression against that group) leads to deeper identification with the ingroup and greater animus towards the outgroup (Kessler and Hollbach, 2005). This outgroup anger, in turn, is the strongest predictor of willingness to participate in aggressive or violent political action (Huddy et al., 2007).

Taken altogether, the findings on the effect of affect and of negative emotions, are of profound importance in understanding why Wedge Lies may be so consequential, and therefore an

attractive tool for an unscrupulous political elite. The ability to manipulate anger, in particular, offers this elite the ability to generate anger with the potential to do harm, but feel good.

The affect heuristic

Chapter 2 discussed the theory of trust as a heuristic for democratic behaviours. Heuristics may also help to explain the importance of emotion to trust formation. Research suggests that there are four general heuristics that may affect the decision-making process that leads to a trust judgement (Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2011). Of these (the representativeness heuristic, the availability of information heuristic, the anchoring & adjustment heuristic, and the affect heuristic) the affect heuristic bears particular relevance for this research. Almost three decades of intensive research into the behavioural and cognitive foundations of decision-making stubbornly omitted the role of affect. As Finucane et al (2000) note, as late as 1993 a whole issue of the journal *Cognition* was dedicated to reason-based choice; a thorough defence of rational decision-making. However, a growing body of research (see Bower, 1981; Bower and Forgas, 2000; Schwarz and Clore, 1983) began to recognise the central role of affect in decision-making, judgement and memory; all key components in the formation of trust judgements.

As with other heuristics, the affect heuristic seeks to lighten the cognitive burden of evaluating the pros and cons, or benefit and risk of any given situation or individual by relying on a readily available affective assessment. McAllister (1995) suggests that trust established from affective cues better withstands informational challenges than cognitive-based trust. Additionally, the heuristic also works to conflate mood with information (Schwarz, 1990), i.e. how we *feel* about something, becomes a proxy for what we *know* about it. This is revealed as particularly important in understanding political trust formation and maintenance, as in a political context, citizens are largely under-informed on the complexities of policy and governance. In combination, the affect-as-information and the cognitive simplification provide a valuable opportunity for political elites; a politician who can generate the “feel-good factor” may have to worry less about in-depth scrutiny of his policies or even his own record.

A further characteristic of the affect heuristic presents a direct challenge to high-quality decision-making; good moods are enjoyable and sought after. Once achieved, a person could reasonably be expected to want to maintain it, taking care to avoid anything that might puncture the bubble. Indeed, following the affect-congruent effect, people become more likely to absorb

information that confirms and sustains their existing affective state; and conversely they will reject or disregard information that would otherwise upset it (Bower and Forgas, 2000). In the context of political trust, a citizen made to feel positively by a politician or party may reject informational challenges to that mood during the formation of trust and the maintenance of it, furthering increasing the likelihood of poor-quality decision-making. Lewis and Weigert (1985 p.969) capture both the appeal and the inherent risk in this process: “to trust is to live as though rationally possible futures will not occur”. This is salient for the theory of the Wedge Lie; if an elite can make an ingroup audience feel good, they may be able to encourage those group members to inure themselves to unfavourable, disconfirming information. If an elite is willing to lie, then the narratives to achieve this can be tailored to respond to very specific grievances or insecurities.

3.3 Emotion and the Content of the lie

As noted above, the first key feature of the Wedge Lie is its ability (and desire) to manipulate emotionally-led responses from its audiences. In the course of the information journey of the Wedge Lie from liar to audience, there is an opportunity to shape the affective responses of its audiences via emotional signals within the linguistic content of the lie, as well as the choice of the issue at the heart of the lie itself.

Research has long shown that audiences are highly susceptible to emotional cues (whether audial, visual or textual) and that these, in turn, have the power to shape political evaluation, framing and behaviour (McHugo et al., 1985; Brader, 2005; Schemer, 2014). Part of emotion’s power comes from the speed at which it drives evaluations of the world around us, to the extent that we conduct an emotionally-led appraisal of a person, information or a situation five times faster than the brain produces a cognitive assessment (Brader and Marcus, 2013). Indeed, an emotional response can already occur before conscious awareness (Rolls, 1999; Rolls, 2005). This is significant to the success of the Wedge Lie; primed with the right emotional triggers, the content of the lie can elicit the desired emotional response before the audience is even aware that there is information to process. Moreover, studies have shown that people act upon those pre-conscious assessments based on a purely affective response (Todorov and Ballew, 2007).

It is useful here to set out which emotions are the predominant targets for a Wedge Lie, and why. A good starting point is the well-established idea of “basic emotions” (Ekman and

Cordaro, 2011). Proponents of the basic emotions vary in their assessment of how many there are, but assertions typically range between six and twelve. For the purpose of this research, references to the basic emotions are drawn from Robert Plutchik's (see 1980, 1991, 2013 (with Kellerman)) preeminent work on the theory of emotion. Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions indicates eight primary emotions and their associated feelings. Those eight primary emotions are: anger, anticipation, joy, trust, fear, surprise, sadness and disgust.

Those basic emotions can be broadly divided into two groups of positive and negative feelings. Research has shown that individuals have different reactions to political information that invokes negative or positive emotions (Brader and Marcus, 2013). This bears significance for the Wedge Lie, and in particular which emotions it seeks to trigger through its own linguistic content. But the picture is somewhat more complex than it first appears, because it is not simply the case that triggering negative emotions (predominantly fear, anger or disgust) will also accomplish the Wedge Lie's other desired function of galvanising action following its receipt.

Recalling the concept of 'approach' and 'avoidance' emotions (Lodge and Taber, 2013; Taber and Young, 2013), anger can be seen as both a negative *and* approach emotion (Carver, 2004), and it is anger that I argue is the emotional core of a Wedge Lie. Anger permeated through the dissemination of the "Stop the Steal" narrative in the run up to the US Presidential Election of 2020, and during the transition period (see Chapter 5). It was an effective tactic. A study of tweets by members of the 116th Congress has shown that the more the content of a tweet conveys anger, the more engagement that tweet will receive (Webster, 2021). It is important to note that Democrats as well as Republicans disseminate communications that convey anger (and in turn elicit higher levels of engagement), and I do so not simply to present a balanced argument, but as a demonstration of the galvanising effect of the Wedge Lie on *both* ingroup and outgroup audiences.

Anger has other benefits to those elites who choose to employ it; research suggests that there is a link between anger at outgroup leaders and loyalty towards the ingroup leader (Webster, 2020). But this readiness to employ anger has consequences beyond agitating an already polarised public, and ossifying those divisions. I argue throughout this research that the Wedge Lie has the potential to present a material threat to democratic health; this assertion is underscored by Clayton et al.'s (2021) study that demonstrates that elite rhetoric has the ability to undermine democratic norms. In this case, the angry rhetoric of President Trump's tweets

attacking the credibility of the election results was shown to weaken trust in elections and democratic processes in those identifying as supporters of Trump.

Political pundits, and indeed the Congressional committee established to investigate the events leading up to the insurrection on January 6th 2021, have dedicated considerable time to some of the most explicitly inciting tweets from Trump and his surrogates, including Trump's encouragement of his supporters to join the planned protest on January 6th, noting that it would "be wild". However as I demonstrate in Chapter 5 through an analysis of tweets from the period running up to the election and the subsequent violence at the Capitol, the Wedge Lie was disseminated through hundreds of less directly instructive messages but was suffused with anger from the outset as a strategic choice.

The linguistic content of the dissemination, therefore, is of material consequence to the Wedge Lie; the emotionally-laden language serves all three of the Wedge Lies features. But the deployment of emotional appeals doesn't just affect the reception of the lie by both ingroup and outgroup audiences; emotional responses to the lie also impact ingroup and outgroup assessments of the liar. The next section of the Chapter moves on to discuss the intersection between emotion, social identity and leaders.

3.4 Affective Polarisation and the Wedge Lie

As I outlined in Chapter 2, there are multiple drivers of trust formation that are significant to the Wedge Lie. I identified circumstances where the power of trust as a heuristic is clear, and one that can be targeted as a valuable resource. Similarly, I argued that social identity is a powerful motivator of ingroup trust, as well as outgroup hostility. So far, this chapter has addressed the foundational role of emotion in decision-making, including in the formation of trust. Emotions have been shown to be a response to the demands of the environment (Scherer and Eckman, 1984) and are *typically* intense but brief experiences (Elfenbein, 2007). Urgent questions arise of the possible impacts on democratic health of a citizenry relentlessly targeted with information designed to activate and perpetuate affective responses. Moreover, what are the risks to social and political trust from a continuous cycle of agitated and angry citizens who are seeking to reaffirm these affective states through the information search biases?

The question of why political elites are drawn to appeal to an emotionally intense response (one that they have no guarantee of controlling) from their target audiences perhaps finds its answer in the fact that despite the tenor of news coverage and political communication suggesting the contrary, Americans are less divided on contentious issues than it appears (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008; Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes, 2012). The 2022 decision by the Supreme Court to overturn the historic *Roe vs Wade* landmark abortion legislation brought this paradox to the fore. A survey conducted before the ruling found 71% of respondents from a nationally representative sample were in favour of a woman's right to choose in at least some cases. This plurality is at odds, not just with the Supreme Court's decision, but also with the idea of abortion as an insurmountably polarising issue. Many conflicts may occur because of "who we think we are, rather than over reasoned differences of opinion" (Mason, 2018, p.4). To circumnavigate an inconveniently issue-aligned public, a different appeal must be made by elites to put clear blue water between constituencies (and their social identities). Recalling Chapter 2 of this thesis, social identity has a foundational role in our trust formation judgements as well as our worldview alignment. Partisanship is a powerful social identity (Iyengar et al, 2019), and it is in this framework that this Chapter now moves to address the significance of affective polarisation, and its salience for understanding the potential power of a Wedge Lie.

Tracing a line from Tajfel (1978), partisan division is well primed to become a source of agitation and emotionally-charged judgements, because even relatively inconsequential commonalities elicit a powerful sense of shared identity (and on the flip side, a common outgroup). Those identities are well documented as being particularly stable and robust (Campbell et al., 1960), formed at an early age, and reinforced at regular intervals by election campaigns. It is, as Iyengar et al (2019) note, unsurprising that Americans increasingly see the world through a "partisan prism". It is this deep-set alignment that becomes a rich target for Wedge Lies; precisely because the issue at the heart of the Wedge Lie, be it abortion, critical race theory, or election integrity is secondary to the generalised distrust and distaste with which ingroup and outgroup partisans view each other. Taken further, the issue at the heart of a particular Wedge Lie can be distorted, misrepresented or outright fabricated, and it will come under less scrutiny if partisan divisions are stoked by the lie as well.

It would appear that politics is an especially negative environment, with outgroup hostility a stronger driving factor in affective polarisation, rather than any positive pride in, or love for,

copartisans (Iyengar et al. 2019). In other words, it appears to be a more successful political strategy to stoke negative emotions about the other side, than it is to exalt ingroup members. Indeed, I argue that invoking negative emotional responses is a key characteristic of the Wedge Lie:

Hypothesis 7: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will increase reported negative emotions

The theory of the Wedge Lie posits that, in order for the lie to be effective, it must both have its own emotional content (as discussed in Hypothesis 2), while also manipulating emotional responses of both the ingroup and the outgroup. This emotional manipulation is central to the lie's power, as it taps into deep-seated identity-based concerns and grievances. Anger, in particular, is a highly consequential emotion to provoke, as discussed in detail in Chapter 3. By stirring anger, the Wedge Lie fuels conflict and division, which has the potential to escalate into real-world repercussions such as protests (Gaffney et al., 2018), voter mobilisation (Valentino et al., 2011), or even violent disorder (Armaly and Enders, 2024).

The Wedge Lie is especially potent in the way it provokes a sense of powerlessness and frustration within the outgroup. When members of the outgroup feel that their political worldview is being threatened by the lie, anxiety and fear may be common emotional responses. This anxiety stems from the perceived undermining of their values and beliefs, creating a sense of instability and insecurity in their political standing. The outgroup may feel overwhelmed by the lie's spread and its ability to sway public opinion, further intensifying their emotional reaction. On the other hand, the ingroup may experience anger or even rage, not just because of the lie itself, but in response to the strong backlash from the outgroup. The ingroup's anger is often reinforced by a sense of loyalty and righteousness, believing that they are being unfairly targeted or vilified by the opposition. This dynamic may create a feedback loop, where the ingroup's emotional investment in the lie deepens, and their resentment towards the outgroup grows.

As a result, it is expected that after interacting with the Wedge Lie, individuals from both the ingroup and the outgroup will report a noticeable increase in negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, and frustration.

How we *feel* has been shown to influence levels of trust and distrust (Theiss-Morton & Barton, 2017). Theiss-Morton & Barton (Ibid) also raise a lingering gap in the empirical study of the

relationship between emotion and political trust; namely to explore if affective information supplants cognitive, or knowledge-based information. Picking up this thread, I suggest that in the case of elite lies (and particularly Wedge Lies), emotion does indeed play a mediating role in the impact of the lie, exacerbating any deterioration of trust.

Hypothesis 8: A reported change in negative emotion moderates the reduction in political and social trust.

As extensively discussed in Chapter 2, and in alignment with the findings of Newton and Zmerli (2011), social trust is necessary for the effective functioning of democracy (Newton and Zmerli's (2011) find this is due to its strong association with political trust). Social trust allows citizens to engage with one another and with institutions in ways that promote cooperation, stability, and a shared sense of civic responsibility. However, in this thesis, I argue that one of the defining features of the Wedge Lie is its potential to provoke further action upon being received. If, as set out in Hypothesis 5, the Wedge Lie disrupts social trust between ingroup and outgroup members, I would expect emotion to play a mediating role in this.

Historically, emotion has been viewed as unreliable, unsophisticated, and less valuable than reason, particularly when it comes to decision-making, but a growing consensus has emerged that recognises the powerful role emotion plays in driving action. Whether we view that role as desirable is another question. Scholars such as Damasio (1994), Elster (1999), and Ben-Ze'ev (2000) have all pointed to the causal links between emotion and behaviour, noting that emotions can influence individuals' decisions and prompt them to act in ways that pure rationality might not. This shift in understanding aligns with the recognition that emotions are not simply an end product, but are central to motivating and shaping consequential human behaviour.

This understanding dovetails with increasing research into how partisanship affects social behaviours. For instance, studies have found that partisan discrimination can sometimes surpass even racial discrimination (Iyengar and Westwood, 2015), illustrating how deeply political identities can divide people. Additionally, strong partisan identities can negatively affect personal relationships, as seen in findings that show a reluctance to engage in romantic relationships with nonpartisans (Huber and Malhotra, 2017), and even reduced physical attraction to someone with differing political views (Nicholson et al., 2016). These studies highlight how political partisanship has become a powerful force that not only shapes political

attitudes but also impacts the social fabric, altering interpersonal interactions in surprising and far-reaching ways.

In short, triggering emotional responses- such as anger, fear, or resentment- may have significant consequences. If one of the key characteristics of the Wedge Lie is its ability to undermine both political trust and social trust, then it follows that emotions may play a crucial mediating role in this process. As emotions intensify, they can deepen mistrust and further strain relationships between ingroup and outgroup members, leading to broader social fragmentation. Therefore, I anticipate that the negative emotions provoked by the Wedge Lie will directly influence the degree to which trust erodes, serving as a catalyst for the social and political consequences that follow.

3.5 Social Media, Emotion and Wedge Lies

Social and digital media has offered an enticing opportunity for political communication to be both taken to new audiences, and delivered by new messengers. The low barriers to entry in social media and internet publication is rightly hailed as a great leveller. Citizens, as well as political elites, have unprecedented access to information and the means by which to publish and disseminate it to each other. Crucially, social media provides a vehicle through which emotionally-led responses to political information can be galvanised against any individual or external group that presents a threat to existing group co-operation (Hibbing and Alford, 2004; Bell and Buchner, 2009).

The design of social media infrastructure, and the ways in which individuals coalesce into groupings is significant to the study of the impact of Wedge Lies, because of the ease with which both information and emotion spreads from user to user. This is borne out in studies that have found that the weaker personal ties experienced on social media platforms facilitate the spread of anger more than the spread of joy (Fan et al., 2020). In this crucible, a Wedge Lie can find a happy home, fomenting intense emotional responses at an exponential rate.

There is a long history of research that has highlighted the role of citizens as active disseminators of political information, and subsequently, influencers on voting decisions (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1987; 1991; 1995; Pattie and Johnston, 2002). An engaged electorate is, as previously discussed, a broadly positive characteristic for a well-functioning democracy

(Norris, 2011), but as Norris asserts the engagement must be fortified with a critical eye that scrutinises and assesses information in order for the engagement to remain a positive force. Researchers have begun to more fully explore what consequences arise when citizens are actively disseminating disinformation, either knowingly or unwittingly, spotlighting peer-to-peer communication of political information in the formation and maintenance of political trust, or distrust (Bøggild, Aarøe and Petersen, 2020).

Recalling this chapter's earlier discussion of the role of emotion and psychological biases on information processing, these mechanisms come into sharp relief in understanding how interpersonal communications on social media are instrumental in political trust formation and maintenance. Studies have demonstrated the effect of psychological biases on the motivations for sharing information (Aarøe and Petersen, 2018; Carlson, 2019). Their findings reveal a significant bias towards sharing 'strategy-framed' (material designed to achieve strategic aims) information over 'substance-framed' (material that largely elucidates an issue through facts and substantive argument) stories, with the communication being more detailed in the strategy-frame (Aarøe and Petersen, 2018). Taking the example of the issue of immigration, people are more likely to share stories about the characters of individual immigrants or immigrant populations, than they are to share stories largely about generalised information and statistics. Boiled down even further, stories with emotional cues are more likely to be shared than those offering appeals to rational information processing. Additionally, on receipt of affective-led information such as a rumour of scandalous behaviour, a person will retain that knowledge in memory even if the rumour is publicly debunked (Thorson, 2016).

The great paradox of social media is that it simultaneously creates an infinitely connected world, and an anomic citizenry; alienated and disengaged from political discourse in the real world, atomised in bedrooms and living rooms, connected to both everyone and no one. How we self-identify and organise into peer groups on social media is now a key factor in understanding how trust is formed online (Shareef et al. 2020); and in turn has lessons for the formation of political trust in a space where no primary information from political elites may be present. Research in the field of social media marketing has demonstrated that peers in a social media group develop "synchronised perceptions of shared content, as they have compatible personalities and share common interests" (Shareef et al. 2020, p.2; see also Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011; Ems, 2014). Social learning theorists suggest that not only do people learn from observing and imitating the behaviours of others (Bandura, 1977), but that

they are biased towards learning from social interactions that dovetail with their own views and judgements. Shareef et al. (2020) assert that such mechanisms at work in social media groupings will cause the individuals in that group to gradually assimilate, producing feelings of a common identity, “which results in unconditional trust amongst social media peers” (Shareef et al. 2020, p.4).

As discussed at length in Chapter 2, this has a profound effect on the perceived need to verify the veracity of the information presented, or the credibility of the messenger; the unconditional trust (Bandura, 1963) that forms between peers enables members to disregard assessments of trustworthiness (Griffin et al. 2015). And herein lies the opportunity for an unscrupulous politician, party or pundit to exploit both the infrastructure and the psychological biases that are activated within it to slip the binds of truth without material consequence.

A final point of note on the subject of modern political communication infrastructure is the extent to which it has undermined the traditional periodic political campaign/governing cycle. Political campaigns were historically intensive, discrete periods of time in which potential voters were inundated with communications such as party political broadcasts (in the UK), political advertisements (in the US), canvassing, pamphlets and town hall style events. These “pre-modern” campaigns were locally focussed and founded on direct interaction between candidates and voters (Norris, 2004). Through the expansion into mass media communications, national campaigning strategies, and the professionalisation of political campaigning, the discussion of partisan political differences (and preferences) moved beyond traditional election campaign periods (see Gibson and Römmele, 2001; Ornstein and Mann, 2000; Blumenthal, 1980). The comparatively low cost of social media communications, and the demonstrative power of peer-to-peer communications as discussed in this section, has enabled political actors (and citizens) to disseminate highly emotive content at low cost when best suits them.

3.6 Political Elites, Governing and Wedge Lies

Thus far, I have focussed on the impact of Wedge Lies upon citizens. But there is another cohort of actors who are not immune to Wedge Lies or their theorised impacts. Political elites themselves are pivotal actors in democratic societies. Tasked with taking decisions for their constituents, their approach to those decisions may naturally, if not always wisely, be buffeted

by the vociferousness of their constituents or the media. In the tumultuous political era of the late 18th Century, Edmund Burke observed that “your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays you instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion”¹⁹. Thus, the behaviours of political elites are materially important to the effective functioning of representative democracy.

Those behaviours and characteristics of political elites have been a subject of keen academic interest (e.g. Caprara & Silvester, 2018; Weinberg, 2020; Vis, 2024). Research Question 4 establishes political elites as a key component in the potential impact of Wedge Lies. This investigation builds on existing scholarship that has centred political elites as the unit of analysis. Three key themes in this literature are salient to this research: polarisation (both amongst their own cohort and responses to polarisation amongst their constituents), party (or leader) loyalty vs representativeness, and the role of emotions in legislative behaviours (although this research is largely concerned with the granular details of the drafting of legislation or policy). Each of these has their own consequences for democratic health, but none directly deals with how lies (particularly Wedge Lies) and lying may interact with those phenomena. Studies looking at polarisation amongst elites have (as noted in this Chapter) revealed that elites are more polarised than the general public, leading to a disconnect between the American public and the elected officials who represent them (Fiorina & Levendusky, 2006). However, these studies have almost exclusively been concerned with ideological or issue-based polarisation (Hetherington, 2001; Hare & Poole, 2014; Banda & Cluverius, 2018). Those studies that have begun to focus on the affective polarisation of political elites as compared to mass affective polarisation has found that here, too, elites are more polarised than their constituents (Enders, 2021).

If, as Hetherington and Rudolph (2015) conclude that to a previously unseen extent, Republican and Democrat Americans simply do not like one another in lieu of actual issue-based differences, there is little reason to believe that political elites would be immune to that phenomenon. The significance of this assumption is that political elites operating based on emotion-led decision-making, have the potential to cause highly consequential legislative outcomes that are more extreme in their negative partisanship than is felt by the majority of

¹⁹ Politician and philosopher, Edmund Burke, made this remark in a speech to the Electors of Bristol, 3rd November 1774

their constituents. In order to understand the potential impact of Wedge Lies on the democratic behaviours of political elites, I return to trust.

Hypothesis 9: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will have a negative impact on elites' trust in their legislative colleagues across the aisle.

Politics is inherently a strategic and diplomatic endeavour. The process of drafting and passing legislation, particularly in the US, involves a careful dance of dealmaking and quid pro quos. It is a business built on relationships, where lawmakers must navigate competing interests, personal alliances, and political priorities to achieve their objectives. Success in this arena requires not only skill in negotiation but also a deep understanding of the delicate balance between cooperation and self-interest.

As with any form of dealmaking, trust plays a crucial role. Even when the desire for compromise is low, there must be an underlying belief that all parties will hold up their end of the bargain. Without this basic level of trust, negotiations can quickly fall apart, and the legislative process grinds to a halt. This trust allows lawmakers to engage in the kind of behind-the-scenes bargaining necessary to secure support for bills, even when such deals may involve difficult concessions.

However, in the modern age of mass communication, conducting politics has become more challenging. Lawmakers find it increasingly difficult to obtain the discretion, or "cloud cover," they need to make deals that require compromise. The 24-hour news cycle, social media, and constant public scrutiny make it harder for politicians to operate behind closed doors, where tough decisions can be made away from the spotlight. This heightened visibility often forces lawmakers to adopt more rigid, uncompromising positions for fear of backlash from their constituents, making it harder to reach the kinds of deals that have historically been essential to effective governance.

One of the key components of trust is the ability to rely on the predictability of a trustee's actions. Trustors seek a sense that the trustee will act in a way that is reliable and that these actions will not be purposefully harmful or deceitful. This relationship between policymakers is central to the enterprise of bipartisanship, and ultimately to the healthy functioning of democratic government. This trust becomes especially vulnerable to damage when a Wedge Lie is introduced into the political discourse, especially in the context of the political pressures

outlined below in Hypothesis 10, making it more difficult for political consensus or collaboration to occur. Thus I anticipate, reflecting the same expectation of members of the general public, that trust between colleagues across the aisle will decrease.

As I noted above, a deeply polarised political elite has the potential to codify that polarisation through legislative behaviours, including partisan-motivated legislation. If, as I hypothesised above, that trust between opposing political elites decreases as a result of a Wedge Lie, then it follows that there will be a subsequent effect on the desire and ability to work in a bipartisan way to reach consensus. Hypothesis 10 speaks to the very real impact that the Wedge Lie may have on the day-to-day business of governing.

Hypothesis 10: Engaging with the Wedge Lie decreases efforts to seek bipartisanship and consensus.

For almost forty years, the US has experienced a significant decline in political consensus building²⁰. The ability to work across the aisle was once seen as an essential feature of effective governance, often touted as a strength during elections²¹. Politicians who demonstrated an ability to engage in bipartisan efforts were rewarded with voter approval, as cooperation was associated with the greater good. However, this practice has steadily eroded over the years, giving way to deepening obstructionism and a growing reluctance to compromise.

Indeed, in recent years, cooperation itself has become increasingly viewed as a weakness by segments of both the Republican and Democratic parties (Wolak, 2022). Some party loyalists see compromise as a betrayal of core principles or an indication of vulnerability. This shift in perception has made it difficult for politicians to reach across party lines without risking the loss of support from their more partisan voter base. Instead of celebrating collaboration, voters on both sides of the political spectrum sometimes punish it, leading to an environment where political leaders feel pressured to remain uncompromising to preserve their political standing. In the US, in particular due to the party primary system, this is driven by a fear of being beaten at the ballot box, not by a political opponent from the other party, but from a more extreme candidate from within their own.

²⁰ <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-bipartisanship-in-the-Senate-is-dying/>

²¹ It is notable that this example followed so soon after Mitch McConnell's declaration of his intention to behave in the exact opposite fashion <https://www.politico.com/story/2012/10/romney-pushes-bipartisan-credentials-in-ohio-082979>

Furthermore, a pivotal moment in this trend of declining bipartisanship occurred during the Obama presidency when Mitch McConnell, the Senate Majority Leader at the time, openly articulated the Republican strategy of legislative obstruction²². McConnell famously declared that his party's primary goal was to make Obama a one-term president, signalling a deliberate refusal to cooperate with the administration's legislative agenda, simply because it was the opposition's agenda. It is certainly true that confrontational partisanship was a feature of US politics long before this moment, perhaps most notably under Newt Gingrich's congressional leadership in the 1990s (Zelizer, 2020). However, this very public declaration of wilful obstructionism marked a turning point in modern US politics, reinforcing the idea that blocking the opposing party's efforts, rather than seeking areas of compromise, was a legitimate political approach.

In this environment, I would expect to see decreased efforts to seek bipartisanship or consensus after engaging with the Wedge Lie from those political elites who display strong partisan identity. But additionally, as a result of the political pressures from within their own party, I would expect to see the same decrease from those elites who are more moderate, but wary of their own political fortunes were they to dissent.

3.7 Summary

I began this Chapter with an overview of the competing schools of thought about the nature of decision-making; whether humans are predominantly rational and cognitive-led, or if there is a core emotional component to decision-making that can result in choices that seem to run counter to a basic common-sense appraisal of a given situation. I highlighted the importance of the heuristic tools available to individuals to lessen the cognitive burden, many of which rely directly on responding to how we *feel* about a subject. Deferring to the complexities of human decision-making or opinion formation, it is not my intention to oversimplify the process by attempting to label it as either as a wholly emotional or rational one, but rather to emphasise the increasing consensus that emotion plays a foundational role in how humans process information and act upon it. I then moved on to a discussion of the role of emotion in being able to drive polarisation between the ingroup and outgroup audiences. I argued that a public less polarised on substantive issues than would be conducive to a traditional 'divide and rule' strategy, can be driven apart by an emotive emphasis on ingroup-outgroup incompatibility. Lastly I set out the contextual framework of the online crucible in which the

²² <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna40007802>

interplay between the Wedge Lie and an emotionally agitated public becomes so potentially problematic, highlighting the role of peer-to-peer communication and the formation of worldview social groupings on social media platforms.

This concludes the theoretical review and analysis of this thesis. Taken together, the preceding three chapters illustrate the research landscape in which this investigation is situated, and highlight where there are existing gaps that I seek to address. The following section of the thesis turns to the research design, including a detailed explanation of the research questions and hypotheses, a justification for the selected case study, and a detailed chapter setting out the chosen methodological approaches for each strand of data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The previous three chapters have set out the theoretical framework in which I position this research, and which has shaped the series of questions and hypotheses that I explore in this thesis. I now set out the details of the three-strand research design, data handling and methods of analysis.

4.1 Case Study

The concept of the Wedge Lie introduced in Chapter 2 builds upon research into the role of lies and lying in politics that has occupied scholars for over two millennia. It is this conceptual development, and the hypothesised outcomes of its existence that demands the rigorous scrutiny of this investigation; the goal to demonstrate that this type of lie is particularly damaging to political and societal trust, and consequently to democratic governance.

The US Presidential election of 2020, and the subsequent transition period to the incoming Biden administration, offers a promising opportunity to develop and test the theory that the Wedge Lie presents a serious threat to democratic governance.

The Stop the Steal narrative employed by both US commentators and politicians refers to Donald Trump's continuing false assertion that he was the true victor in the US Presidential Election in November 2020, and that Biden's victory was the result of electoral fraud on a massive scale. Before the final results from each state were verified, and even months before the election itself, Trump and his closest allies declared that the election was being stolen. The lie dominated right-wing political discourse in the days and weeks following election, and remains the subject of fierce discussion on social media, cable news channels and talk radio in the US.

Trump's Big lie as a Case Study

Stake (2005) delivers a noteworthy distinction in his assessment of case study research by disassociating it from research methodology. The case study, he argues, does not prescribe the direction or process of the research, but rather the research questions and theory in development provide guidance as to the most appropriate case study. As such, case study is not a method

but, like the subject of a camera viewfinder, it is the defined window of what is to be studied. In this investigation, the selected case study has been chosen for its specific characteristics that are significant to the effective testing of the theory, namely:

The case study is a clear example of the concept of the Wedge Lie and its consequences. As I argued in Chapter 1, the Wedge Lie has three defining characteristics;

- a. it weaponises a falsehood through mass communication. Research by Just Security using social media search tools discovered more than 8000 online news articles containing keywords “Stop the Steal” or “#StopTheSteal” between Sept. 1, 2020 and Feb. 2, 2021. Those articles garnered more than 70,000,000 engagements on different platforms, with approximately 75% of those engagements occurring in December 2020;
- b. it polarises the two target audiences (those the lie is *for*, and those the lie *excludes* or is *against*). The Stop the Steal narrative directly employed by Trump and other prominent right-wing figures fomented division through repeated claims that “we” (Trump and his supporters) would win/have won the election if “they” (Democrats/liberals/Biden supporters) hadn’t stolen it through fraud. The narrative continued despite multiple failed lawsuits to overturn the results, as well as repeated assurances from Republican election officials in key states that the results were legitimate;
- c. lastly it galvanises those in-group and out-group audiences into taking actions as a result of the lie itself. (See Figure 1.2 for a model of the Wedge Lie’s function). During the prelude to election day, right-wing figures used the Stop the Steal narrative to encourage vigilante activity at polling stations to counter the perceived threat of election fraud. Trump’s own adoption of the Stop the Steal narrative culminated with a call to his supporters to join protests in Washington DC, and nationwide, to coincide with Congress’ certification of the election results on January 6th, 2021. Conversely, the proliferation of the Stop the Steal narrative galvanised Democrats and left-wing figures to strengthen their get-out-the-vote operations, prepare for legal fights over any disputed results and encourage their own supporters to fight for democracy itself.

As such, Stop the Steal is an attractive candidate to test the theory of the Wedge Lie and its impacts. Additionally, this research is concerned with the role of emotion-led responses in both

political and inter-group trust judgements, and any implications these may have on democratic governance. The volatility of that period, hallmarked by vitriol and acutely emotive communication; a key hallmark of Stop the Steal was the heightened emotional language used in the narrative. Common motifs were the notion of betrayal, fighting, war, traitors and freedom. This offers the possibility of an in-depth investigation into what role emotion-led responses played in decision-making, and the presence of any causal relationship between the narrative and changes in levels of inter-group and political trust following exposure to it. A mixed method approach using this case study would allow for a comparison between findings from an experimental dynamic process tracing environment and qualitative interview data probing emotional responses to Stop the Steal.

The challenge of definition

Even at the most fundamental level, being able to acceptably define a case study in the context of social science research, draws disagreement. Objections arise from nominalist quarters that case studies are theoretically, and practically, constructed by the researchers themselves (Ragin and Becker, 1992), embedding an artificiality and even confirmation bias into the study. One way to counter such concerns is to ensure the case has clearly defined boundaries *that occur in the natural setting*, i.e. the researcher has not determined them. In the case of Stop the Steal, these boundaries exist on multiple planes:

- a. Temporally: from 7th September 2020 (the first high-profile mention of Stop the Steal on social media) until January 6th (the date of the violent riots at the US Capitol building that sought to prevent Joe Biden's victory from being validated by Congress).
- b. Geographically: despite the alleged role of international actors in fanning the flames of the Stop the Steal narrative, the natural setting of the case study is contained within the US. Additionally, the case study's natural geographic boundaries allow for a comparative analysis between individual states to further investigate any differences in impacts found therein.
- c. Linguistic: Although the US Presidential election of 2020 was characterised by torrents of misinformation, Stop the Steal stands out as an attractive case study because its proponents defined it themselves through the strategic use of social media including hashtags and Facebook group names. Stop the Steal is, in effect, a brand slogan. It refers, specifically, to any activity designed to undermine the election before

its occurrence, or to fraudulently distort the results of the election in order to illegitimately install Joe Biden as President.

Why employ a case study?

Whilst frequently applied, the use of case studies in the social sciences is contentious; I will address the most frequent concerns about their use in the course of this section. To begin with the potential advantages of using a case study, Yin (2009) summarises that at their most effective, case studies can provide a test site for theory. Studying a particular case provides an opportunity to test whether the theory holds true in reality. It is following the deductive logic that serves the needs of this investigation so well; the hypotheses set out in this research are in service to the development of the theory that liars and lies (and particularly so the Wedge Lie) present a material risk to effective democratic governance.

Despite lingering questions about the ability to generalise from the findings of an individual case study (see below for a more detailed counter argument), the narrow focus of a case study permits a more in-depth investigation of a situation than a broader approach. In the case of Stop the Steal, this allows for an analysis of *why* the Wedge Lie is potentially so harmful, not simply *whether* it exists. Furthermore, it provides an opportunity to discover how the many dynamic components of the case affect one another. As Merriam (1988, p.41) argues, “the case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon”.

Case studies have long been thought of as primarily a tool of qualitative research. Whilst that may (or may not) be statistically true, Denscombe (2014) provides a pertinent reminder that effective case studies actively promote the use of mixed methods to achieve what Van Wynsberghe and Khan (2007) identify as the sixth key feature of robust case study design; multiple data sources. Stop the Steal offers rich opportunities to build a holistic understanding of the complex dynamics present during the febrile period of the 2020 US election and its aftermath through the deployment of mixed research methods. Quantitative content analysis of prominent Twitter and Facebook accounts, hashtag use and cable news broadcasts can elucidate the saturation of the media with the Stop the Steal narrative, whilst data from interviews with key audience groups may illuminate the complex social consequences of that ubiquity.

Countering objections

Concerns about the use of case studies in the research process manifest themselves on a scale from raising awareness of the potential pitfalls when employing case studies, to the outright rejection of the method as a robust investigative tool. The nature of the challenges to the credibility of case study coalesces around distinct, but related concerns, which I will now address in more detail.

Firstly is the issue of representativeness. Essentially, how good an example of a particular phenomenon is this case? For the purposes of this research, the phenomenon of the Wedge Lie is thus far untested, and so Stop the Steal cannot yet be said to be a representative example. However, the case is a strong example of a verifiable falsehood, disseminated through mass media. Protestors and rioters subsequently cited that falsehood during the armed insurrection at the Capitol Building on January 6th 2020, providing an opportunity to explore any causal relationship between the Stop the Steal narrative and the violence seen during the certification process.

Arguments may be made that even if Stop the Steal presents an agreeably robust example of the possible impact of lies in political discourse, the findings from any investigation into the case may be unique to those particular set of circumstances. It is outside of my authority to claim that the results from the Stop the Steal case will not be unique to that setting, but that is not the only counter argument to this particular challenge. Denscombe (2014, p.101) provides a neat analogy for the function of a case study; it should not, he argues, be seen as a slice of a cake whose role it is “to reveal the contents of the whole cake”. Instead, the case study is akin to an individual experiment (Yin, 2009, p.14); the results can be generalised to “theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes”. Rather than case studies serving as a sample, the findings of the case study should be ascribed value in and of themselves. Potential for further research, or theory building may arise from those findings, and thus they do not need to be final or absolute in order to be of merit.

The issue of generalisation features regularly in the critique of social sciences research, and is a familiar challenge to the use of case studies (Descombe, 2010). To emphasise, I argue that the fixation on generalisation risks obscuring the intrinsic value of findings from case studies in their own right. This is not intended to be a dismissal for the desirability of generalisation, but rather is an argument for perhaps a more nuanced process *post hoc* of transferability. In the

case of Stop the Steal, I argue that although there are certainly aspects in which the circumstances are unique or extreme, it is an example of broader phenomena: lies told by political actors through mass communication; politically motivated violence; and emotive political communication. Thus the findings of any investigation into Stop the Steal may reasonably be argued to be transferable to other settings where those phenomena are also present.

Lastly, the researcher themselves comes under scrutiny in critiques of case studies, concerned with the potential for bias to permeate the research design; effectively the researcher shaping and moulding the case study to reflect their own assumptions or motivations. They are vulnerable to the researcher's predisposition toward "offering subjectively compelling explanations" (VanWynsberghe and Khan, 2007, p.87). Flyvbjerg (2001) not only sees this as a myth, but suggests that case studies offer a rare opportunity, through immersion in a single case, for the researcher to facilitate a dialogue between theory and data during the progression of the research. The researcher is encouraged by this dialogue to address weaknesses in their own preconceptions about the research itself. Again, it would be hubristic to place myself above the possibility of preconceived notions pervading the research design, but this same admission would be necessary with the selection of any other research method or tool; it is not exclusive to the case study approach. The goal, then, is to recognise the limitations of this investigation and seek mitigating strategies to address those weaknesses as the research progresses.

Conclusion

Acknowledging that while case studies have natural limitations (as with all other methods and tools), I argue that the counter arguments presented above demonstrate that the potential advantages of the case study approach outweigh concerns over their use. In essence, it is not the decision to employ a case study that determines its success, but rather *how* it is used, both as a discrete tool, and as part of the wider research design. Stop the Steal offers a clearly defined case study, of significant relevance to the subject of the investigation, and one whose findings can reasonably be argued to be transferable to other settings.

4.2 Research Design

Thus far, I have set out a detailed contextual and theoretical basis for this project. In the course of the previous chapters, I have established the need for further exploration into the specific threat that elite lies pose to democratic health, and have set out a robust research agenda to achieve just that, seeking to break new ground in our understanding of the effect on key markers of democratic health; political and social trust.

Chapter 1 addressed the comprehensive literature on democratic health, with a particular focus on trust and how it is formed, aligning with those scholars (Newton et al., 2018; Newton, 1999; Zmerli and Newton, 2017) who have asserted the importance of its interplay with intergroup or social trust. Chapter 2 then introduced the concept of the Wedge Lie, distinguishing it as a particularly acute threat to democratic health because of its ability to weaponise modern mass communications, galvanise emotionally driven responses from its audiences and polarise ingroup and outgroup members. It did so by situating this research in the context of previous scholarship on lies and lying in politics, which has largely dealt with normative concerns about the practice, perhaps most notably by Arendt (1972), but many others have trodden this path (Jay, 2010; Grant, 2019; McGranahan, 2017). Chapter 3 focused on the role of emotion, in the context of motivated reasoning as well as its ability to have a mediating effect on trust.

Together, they laid the ground for the introduction of the Wedge Lie, that I have argued presents a particular threat to democratic health. To test this new concept, I offered a robust justification for my chosen case study; the 2020 US Presidential election and Trump's claims that the result was as a result of widespread electoral fraud and systematic cheating. I outlined a research agenda of four interrelated questions, which for completeness, I set out here. Through an in-depth exploration of the literature that contextualises these questions in previous chapters, I have taken an actor-focused approach, differentiating this work from a significant portion of the literature on both political trust, democratic health and lies. In doing so, I have introduced a series of hypotheses that address that historic blind spot (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research Question	Hypotheses	Data Source and Chapter
RQ1: <i>How do Wedge Lies spread and how emotive are they?</i>	H1: Public discussion and dissemination of the Wedge Lie will correlate (in volume and temporally) to dissemination or repetition of the lie by the liar. H2: Discourse focussed on the Wedge Lie will display predominantly negative sentiment. H3: Negative emotional language in the public tweets is directed both vertically towards political elites <i>and</i> horizontally towards out-group individuals.	H1: Twitter data, Chapter 5 H2: Twitter data, Chapter 5 H3: Twitter data, Chapter 5
RQ2: <i>To what extent do Wedge Lies impact social trust and political trust?</i>	H4: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will have a negative effect on political trust judgements. H5: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will damage social trust judgements towards the outgroup, increasing affective polarisation. H6: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will result in a positive effect on trust judgements of ingroup members.	H4: Survey experiment data, Chapter 6 and Interview data, Chapter 7 H5: Survey experiment data, Chapter 6 and Interview data, Chapter 7 H6: Survey experiment data, Chapter 6 and Interview data, Chapter 7
RQ3: <i>What role do emotions play in the impact of the Wedge Lie?</i>	H7: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will increase reported negative emotions. H8: A reported change in negative emotion mediates the reduction in political and social trust	H7: Survey experiment data, Chapter 6 and Interview data, Chapter 7 H8: Survey experiment data, Chapter 6 and Interview data, Chapter 7
RQ4: <i>What impact do Wedge Lies have on the democratic behaviours of elites?</i>	H9: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will have a negative impact on elites' trust in their legislative colleagues across the aisle. H10: engaging with the Wedge Lie decreases efforts to seek bipartisanship and consensus	H9: Interview data, Chapter 7 H10: Interview data, Chapter 7

This chapter now turns to an exposition of the methods used to test these hypotheses, and the reasons for choosing them in the following sections: Section 1 details the process of gathering secondary data from Twitter (now X). Section 2 focuses on an online survey of US citizens, addressing both design and sample selection criteria. Section 3 discusses the semi-structured interviews used to compliment the quantitative aspects of the research design with a rich layer qualitative insight.

4.2.1 Secondary Data Collection

RQ1 seeks to understand how Wedge Lies spread via modern mass communication, and the emotional content of those communications. In order to investigate this phenomenon, I sought data from the social media platform, Twitter (now X). The use of secondary data in the first of two quantitative aspects of the research design serves two purposes. The first concerns the rather perfunctory issues of availability, proliferation and cost, however the second speaks to Rogers' (2019, p.21) argument that the study of the internet should move away from the paradigm of the "virtual" world as separate and distinct from the real one. Rather, he argues, studies of the internet (and its unprecedented production of data) should be able to identify patterns of far wider cultural and societal change. This built upon the transformative research at the turn of the 21st Century (see Miller and Slater, 2000) that established that internet users were "staging" their respective cultures in the online space. Thus, it is arguable that data gathered from the internet encapsulates the shifting societal, political or cultural dynamics playing out in the real world, as opposed to representing a distinct, alternative public sphere.

Developments in both social media platforms and accompanying digital methods research in the last decade have prompted consideration of a set of nuanced facets to working with "big data" (Rieder and Röhle, 2012; Puschmann and Burgess, 2014). These include the "methodological, epistemological, logistical, legal, ethical and political dimensions" (Borra and Rieder, 2014, p.2) of the study of data that captures the interactions and expressions of potentially hundreds of millions of users (Borra and Rieder, 2014). It is beyond the purview in this thesis to fully address each of these, yet they remain important considerations for the robust employment of such a dynamic tool. For the purposes of this section, I will focus on those concerns most pertinent to this research and the data it intends to capture: methodological validity and logistical practicalities.

The logistics of data collection from online sources vary from platform to platform. It is important to note that whilst each of these platforms serves a broadly similar function, the means and limitations of potential data selection and extraction are determined to a great deal by the properties of the companies' respective systems (Borra and Rieder, 2014). I will therefore address the opportunities and challenges presented by Twitter specifically.

The choice of Twitter as the source of data to analyse the Wedge Lie's dissemination through modern mass communication platforms was informed by two key elements in its favour. The first is that, for the entirety of Trump's 2016 Presidential campaign, and then the period of his Presidency up to the date his account was suspended, Trump's primary method of communicating with the public was his Twitter account. He was notoriously unfiltered on this account, and his predilection for tweeting about Presidential matters resulted in clarification being urgently sought that those tweets should in fact be classed as official Presidential communications, with all the weight and obligations that brings.

The second factor in selecting Twitter was a practical one. At the time of data collection, Twitter's APIs (Application Programming Interface/s) offered an Academic Research Product Track for those seeking to utilise its full archive for research purposes, to which I applied and was subsequently approved for access. This became a necessity in order to analyse historical Tweets for the period of the research; even DCI-TCAT's (see Borra and Rieder, 2014) powerful retrieval tool cannot delve into the archive beyond seven days into the past. This academic access allows for the selection and retrieval of key information including Twitter user data, Tweet contents, and geographic records. For the purposes of this research, I employed a number of parameters by which to refine the collection of data and avoid becoming swamped by an unwieldy dataset.

Temporal Parameters

References to "Stop the Steal" can be found dating as far back as October 2016, when Roger Stone set up a website to solicit donations on the premise that the Democrats were plotting to steal *that* election. However, to focus the parameters of the case study, Tweets were collected from a reasonable definition of the US general election season; from 00:01 on 1st August 2020 (after both Donald Trump and Joe Biden had secured their parties' nomination for President, but before the respective national conventions). Collection continued until 23:59 on 20th January 2021 (the end of the day on the date of Joe Biden's inauguration as President).

Geographic Boundaries

Research conducted on social media is fraught with potential pitfalls in the quality of the data compiled. It is notoriously rife with fake accounts (that is, bot farms, governments, corporate entities or individuals operating accounts that purport to be someone they are not), designed to manipulate and shape public discourse (Shao, C. et al. 2018; Bessi and Ferrara, 2016; Woolley, 2016). As a study primarily of the relationship between US citizens, US political discourse and US democracy, it is a necessary condition of the data collected that it reflect the user experience of actual citizens. That said, I argue that this investigation is concerned with how the lie spreads on social media, and the language and sentiment associated with it. If the narrative is adopted by bots or agents provocateur, that remains valid data within the sample as those accounts are rarely identified as being bots by other users of the platform. However, to limit the risk of contamination from tweets created and posted from non-US citizens abroad, I placed a geographic filter on the *Twitter* search to only include tweets originating in the US.

Hashtags and Phraseology

Twitter's employment of hashtags (#s) allows users (and researchers) to track thematic content from millions of users over a longitudinal period or across national borders. The potential linguistic permutations of the Wedge Lie "Stop the Steal" are prohibitively complex and as such, I limited the data collected from those tweets that contained the hashtag #StoptheSteal.

#StoptheSteal was certainly not the only language used to refer to the claim that the US 2020 Presidential election would be/was rigged or the subject of widespread fraud. #RiggedElection was also widely used, as well as #ElectionFraud. I made the decision to focus on #StoptheSteal as the other examples were too generic; the sample would be susceptible to contamination by tweets discussing other countries or historic examples. #StoptheSteal was used by Trump's most high-profile surrogates during the early stages of the campaign, was the name for coordinated social media groupings²³ on both Twitter and Facebook²⁴, and was adopted by the mainstream press as a shorthand for the broader claims and narrative put forward by Trump and his allies²⁵. Similarly, many assessments of the 2020 election in mainstream media outlets,

²³ See <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/pro-trump-operatives-coordinated-viral-stopthesteal-events-facebook-shut-them-n1246655> for examples of those groupings and Facebook's response

²⁴ This article gives a good overview of the timeline and origins of the Stop the Steal efforts as they became a coordinated movement online <https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>

²⁵ For examples of news media usage of the phrase Stop the Steal, see: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-55009950>
<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/06/trump-linked-figures-boosted-stopthesteal-movement-434733>

academic literature and political commentary refer to “The Big lie”, or Trump’s “Big lie”. And indeed this is how those in the outgroup would be more likely to refer to it. But this is clearly not how the lie was disseminated or referred to by those perpetuating it, and so for the purposes of this analysis, the hashtag #StoptheSteal was the most appropriate identifier to understand how the lie spread via Twitter (Hypothesis 1). It should therefore be noted that this data overwhelmingly represents the lie’s spread through the ingroup.

As briefly referenced at the beginning of this section, Twitter presents two fundamental challenges to researchers; its full archive is not publicly available, and despite having an advanced setting, Twitter’s own search function does not allow for adequate control over the parameters of the data search. In answer to these obstacles, developers have sought to create tools to exploit the vast Twitter archive for academic and commercial research. For example, Borra and Rieder (2014) developed DMI-TCAT to both capture and analyse data from Twitter. In doing so, they provided the means to operationalise what Cioffi-Revilla (2010, p.260) calls “the instrument of investigation that drives the development of theory and understanding” through computational social science. Others developed packages for R to facilitate data analysis of the full archive. I used the freely accessible TwitteR package, installed using RStudio, to scrape data from Twitter using the following code:

```
tweets <-  
  get_all_tweets(  
    query = "#StoptheSteal",  
    start_tweets = "2020-08-01T00:00:00Z",  
    end_tweets = "2021-01-21T00:00:00Z",  
    data_path = "data",  
    n= Inf  
  )
```

Data Handling

For both the tweets collected from Trump’s own account, and the much larger dataset harvested from all users, the following data handling methods were applied. In the case of the Trump tweets, I used Brendan Brown’s open access archive²⁶ of all of Trump’s tweets from its creation

²⁶ Brown’s archive is an historic resource. Scraping tweets every minute meant he was able to capture tweets that were later deleted, as well as provide an easily searchable archive that the public can access with much greater ease than by using Twitter’s API. That has since become even harder after Elon Musk’s takeover of the site brought about far greater limitations on the amount of information that could be scraped from the site without fees or content limits. The full archive is here: <https://www.thetrumparchive.com>

in 2016 to the final tweet posted on January 8th 2021 after which Trump was banned from the site. For the tweets by all users, I used the TwitteR package in R to scrape the data using a keyword search within the specific date and time parameters. I included retweets in both datasets as I argue that even a retweet containing no author-originated additions is still an act of dissemination and will contribute to the shaping of Twitter's algorithm which is based on engagement. I limited tweets to those posted in English to avoid any need for translation in which original sentiment may be distorted.

In both cases, the extracted tweets went through preprocessing steps to clean the data for analysis. Tweet data is rich with hyperlinks and emojis, all of which were removed; the hyperlinks through matching the prefix "https" and deleting all matching results, and the emojis through a Unicode recognition power query Microsoft Excel (U+D83C to U+DFFF, which covers all the emojis in the Unicode standard). The text of the tweets was then tokenised into individual tweets in order to analyse the sentiment of each tweet before aggregating the scores. Sentiment analysis is used primarily to detect the polarity of text (i.e. its position on a scale from negative to positive) rather than to identify specific emotions contained therein, and so, in this case, tweets were assigned a score on a scale from 0 (most negative) to 1 (most positive) and then categorised as positive, neutral or negative.²⁷ I used a lexicon-based model to analyse the tweets against a preset dictionary, in this case I chose to use the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) dictionary (Pennebaker et al., 2001) as it has been successfully applied and verified in other Twitter-based studies (e.g. Bae and Lee, 2012; Choi and Kim, 2013). In cases where there was mixed sentiment, the number of positive words was balanced against the number of negative words to give the sentiment score as an expression of overall positivity or negativity, rather than classed as a separate category of "mixed" emotion tweets.

4.2.2 Online Survey Experiment

The pursuit of RQ2: *To what extent do Wedge Lies impact social trust and political trust?* and RQ3: *What role do emotions play in the impact of the Wedge Lie?* requires an understanding of the Wedge Lie's interaction with two key dependent variables: trust and emotion.

Here, I set out the specifics of designing and recruiting participants for an online survey experiment as a means of testing Hypotheses 4-8, demonstrating its validity and desirability as

²⁷ The cut off for each of those categories in the score assignments was as follows: 0-3 negative, 4-6 neutral, 7-10 positive

an instrument in measuring the effect of the Wedge Lie in a sample of the general US population.

The survey was designed to field a memory-based experiment to test the impact of the Wedge Lie on US citizens more than two years after the lie's peak dissemination. Memory experiments have a long history in political psychology scholarship, due to their potential to deliver insights into the public's interaction with, and retention of political information. Memory experiments have been employed to explore political decision-making (Lodge and Taber, 2013), information exposure and the media (Zaller, 1992), misinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2017), and partisan bias (Redlawsk, 2002) to name a small sample. In this case, the memory-based experiment offers an opportunity to test the impact of the Wedge Lie in controlled conditions. The timing of the experiment (thus rendering the lie a memory for respondents) helped to control for residual emotional responses that may have been present at the height of the lie's dissemination. It also enabled an exploration of the longevity of the effects of the lie.

If survey responses cannot be said to be "direct measures of beliefs, values or emotional states" (Marcus et al., 2017), they can be instructive in providing evaluations of unobserved phenomena, such as ideologies, opinions and partisan alignment (Borsboom et al., 2003). Online surveys may overcome the prohibitive costs of face-to-face canvassing, and the inherent difficulties in covering large geographic areas in countries like the US. They have already been established as a credible method for looking at the role of emotion on decision-making, judgement-forming and action-taking (Brader and Marcus, 2013). Operationalised carefully, and with all possible steps taken to reduce errors associated with survey-based research (see the next subsection), surveys can project the prevalence of a particular phenomenon in a population of millions by canvassing only a fraction of that (Dillman et al., 2014).

The use of surveys to gather data on both emotional responses and indicators of trust is certainly not new (Marcus et al., 2017; Marien, 2011). But the availability of such a deep pool of methodological expertise to draw upon doesn't diminish the risks associated with conducting academic research through surveys. Rather, it shines a light on the potential pitfalls, but does offer guidance on how to mitigate those risks. The following section discusses the development of the survey, setting out its methodological benefits, and addressing potential limitations.

Data Collection

I conducted the online memory-based survey experiment using the research participant sourcing site, Prolific. *Prolific* has been used for academic studies across the social sciences and compares favourably to other commonly used platforms such as *MTurk* (Palan and Schitter, 2018). In order to secure a high number of responses, I used *Prolific*²⁸ to recruit survey participants from the US adult population with a 50/50 gender split. The sample size was set at 1,000; the highest possible number within financial and time constraints of the project. The survey was conducted over two waves to establish a baseline for the trust questions across an extended period of time to track the *change* in trust levels. Participants were informed before commencing the first wave that they would be asked to complete a second instalment of the survey approximately two weeks after completing the first. This prompted a further concern of the possibility of a high non-retention rate. This was mitigated with a small financial compensation for completing the second wave, as well as a reminder communication that the second instalment was ready for them to complete.

Participants

A nationally representative sample was not a necessity for this investigation; the key demographic information needed for this research was the party ID in order to compare the effect of the Wedge Lie on the ingroup and outgroup audiences, as opposed to understanding what the effects are on the “average American” (for full details of the sample, see Table 6.1, (p.131). Using *Prolific* ensured a diverse sample of 1,000 US adult citizens. Therefore, despite Democrat respondents outnumbering Republican almost 2:1, robust findings were nonetheless achievable.

Survey Design

To reflect the complexity of the phenomena being tested, the study was conducted in line with the principles of Dillman et al.’s (2014) tailored survey design. In essence, both the questions and the surveying methods were tailored to the target respondents, the resources available and the time constraints of the data gathering period. The survey operationalised for this research was designed to mitigate and limit to acceptable levels, the key errors associated with survey

²⁸ *Prolific* generates its survey samples by recruiting a diverse group of participants from a range of demographic and geographic backgrounds. They operate an opt-in model where individuals voluntarily sign up to participate in studies. Researchers can then filter participants on specific criteria such as age, gender, or education level

design; coverage error, sampling error, non-response error and measurement error (Groves, 2005). The survey comprised the following blocks of questions:

Demographics

The first wave of the survey collected basic demographic information in the first block of questions. Standard questions, taken from the ANES for their established validity and reliability, covered gender, ethnicity and age. Further standard questions moved onto socio-economic details; Household income, highest educational attainment and political party identification. Lastly, I included a question on the strength of partisan identity, see Figure 4.1 (Huddy et al., 2020).

Figure 4.1 Huddy et al.’s Strength of Partisanship Measure

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly Agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
When I meet someone with the same political viewpoint as me, I feel connected to that person. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When other people praise this viewpoint, it makes me feel good. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When other people criticise this viewpoint, it feels like a personal insult (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When I speak about the party I identify most with, I refer to them as "my party". (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Huddy’s work has extended how we conceptualise and measure partisanship, which feeds into the growing academic focus of partisanship as social identity (Bankert et al., 2017), which I discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Control vs Treatment Prime

The second wave was scheduled to go live two weeks after the first. All 1,000 respondents completed the first wave, and were then reminded to complete the second wave. The participants in Wave 2 were randomly assigned to a control group or a treatment group before being taken through the blocks of questions. Where possible, in questions asking for the consideration of multiple targets (e.g. Qs 1,3,4 in Wave 2; Appendix 1) the order of the targets

was randomised. In the only open text question of the survey, those in the control group were given a neutral prime: *Thinking about the last movie you saw, tell me as much as you can recall about the plot and characters?* Those in the treatment group were given the following prime: *Please can you tell me as much as you can remember about the 2020 US Presidential election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden?* The treatment prime did not mention the narrative of the Wedge Lie, or any specific events surrounding the election in order to avoid leading participants to discuss the Wedge Lie if it was not brought to mind by thinking about their memories of the election in general (further discussion of this choice is found in Chapter 8). Participants then completed the remainder of the second wave of the survey, with each group being asked the same remaining questions as each other in the same order to isolate the influence of the memories of the election.

Political Trust

The primary aim of the survey was to explore how the interrelated concepts of social and political trust may be impacted by a Wedge Lie (RQ2: *To what extent do Wedge Lies impact social trust and political trust?* Hypotheses 4,5 and 6). Given how dynamic political landscapes are, it is surprising that the way we measure political trust has stayed virtually static for over five decades (Seyd, 2016). To illustrate, the battery of questions²⁹ used to measure political trust in the first American National Election Study in 1958 is almost identical (save a substitution of the word “crooked” for “corrupt” as that used today).

Previous literature exploring the design of survey questions interrogating trust has raised valid concerns about the individuality of respondents understanding an interpretation of the language or concepts in the question (Schaffer, 2010; Bulloch, 2013; Crepaz et al., 2014). So much so, that there is a risk of those nuances in understanding and interpretation may present as material differences in the responses to the question, skewing analyses in favour of differences that aren’t really there (Sturgis and Smith, 2010). For example, the ANES question “*how often can you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right?*” leaves room for interpretation about the definition of “right”. Does it mean right for me, the participant, or does it refer to broader moral judgements? For this reason, I amended the trust question in the online survey to ask how much each participant trusted a particular target, without the qualifier of “to do what is right”.

²⁹ For the ANES questions on trust, see: <https://electionstudies.org/data-tools/anes-question-search/>

Survey-based research has also thus far struggled to adequately address the complexities of people's feelings about their political leaders and institutions to the extent that studies have revealed agnosticism or a desire to express both negative and positive assessments about a target (McGraw and Bartells, 2005). These concerns are, in this case, outweighed by the longstanding inclusion of the questions by the ANES, conferring a broad acceptance of its validity. I therefore chose to include a close variation of their question *how often can you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right?*³⁰ in the survey experiment.

Additionally, due to the limitations on financial resources, and the risk of respondents not completing the survey if it was too long, my questionnaire required brevity. I aimed to strike a balance between simplicity, clarity and depth of interrogation. Mindful of the concerns about single-item questions, noted above, I used a multiple target, 10-point Likert-type scale in a radio button format to ask respondents to assess their level of trust in a range of government or public institutions and actors. For clarity and ease of response, the wording of the question was simple, and the named targets were clearly defined. *“On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being “completely distrustful” and 10 being “completely trusting”), how much do you trust the following institutions or people to behave fairly?”*. These included partisan neutral targets such as the police and military to gauge the effect of the Wedge Lie on trust in non-partisan targets as well as partisan ones (see Appendix 1 for the full questionnaire). The use of multiple targets within the same question echoes the longstanding YouGov question on confidence: *“how much confidence, if any, do you have in the following parts of the British political system?”*.

Social Trust

To gauge the impact of the Wedge Lie on intergroup trust, I employed the standard question used by the US General Social Survey to measure generalised trust, *“Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?”* However, like others who have written at length about the suitability of this question and its limitations (Nannestad, 2008; Hardin, 2006), I hold concerns about its lack of specificity and clarity. And so, for the purposes of this research, the question was adjusted to read *“Generally speaking, would you say that most conservatives can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful when dealing with them?”* This question was then repeated substituting the word “liberals” for “conservatives”. Participants were able to then select from two answers: *“Most*

³⁰ The longstanding question was last fielded in the 2020 ANES with question code V201233. Results for that year can be found here: <https://electionstudies.org/data-tools/anes-variable/variable.html?year=2020&variable=V201233>

(conservative/liberals) can be trusted” or *“Can’t be too careful when dealing with (conservatives/liberals)”*. This decision was made to narrow the possibilities for different interpretations by respondents. Following the precedent of other studies including Iyengar and Krupenkin (2018), I also chose to ask about conservatives and liberals, rather than Republicans and Democrats to draw respondents away from assessing political leaders or representatives of those political parties and focus on members of the public with those worldviews, making this a test of social, and not political, trust.

The questions were fielded in both the first and second wave of the survey. The first wave provided a baseline indication of intergroup trust levels, while the inclusion in the second wave measures the impact of the Wedge Lie recollection on that trust. In the second wave, the question appeared after the randomised split of the respondents into the control and treatment groups and their open text responses to the priming questions had been recorded.

Emotion

The theoretical framework of the Wedge Lie asserts that interacting with the lie would trigger emotional responses in both ingroup and outgroup audiences, and that those emotions would play a mediating role in the impact of the Wedge Lie on political and social trust (RQ3: *What role do emotions play in the impact of the Wedge Lie?* Hypotheses 7 and 8). Attitudes have long been recognised as an effective indicator of political behaviour, largely through the medium of partisan identification (Campbell et al, 1960). Attitude theory, as most notably espoused by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), sets out three aspects (Allport, 1954; McGuire, 1969) to the formation of attitude: 1. the cognitive element (what we know); 2. the affective element (how we feel about it); and 3. The behaviour element (what we do about it) (Marcus et al., 2017). The second of these components is explored in the survey as being of material importance to trust formation, and political behaviour. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 3, the role of emotion is central to the potential impact of the Wedge Lie (by virtue of the Wedge Lie’s ability to manipulate emotional responses).

By way of a historical benchmark, the American National Election Study continues to field questions exploring emotions felt when considering “how things are going in the country”. Whilst it is reassuring to see recognition for the role of emotion in political judgements and behaviours, there is little capacity in a survey of this scale to dig into any depth about *how* emotions galvanise attitude into behaviour change. In order to achieve this, I sought to compare

the affective state of participants before and after either a control or treatment prime, in the second wave of the survey. I utilised a truncated (through the selection of a smaller range of emotions) version of Watson and colleagues' (1988) Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS, allowing for a measurement of a battery of positive and negative emotions). I selected a standard valence model³¹ for the ease of measurement, and as this was to be measured before and after a stimulus, this mitigated the otherwise lack of an arousal dimension (Marcus et al., 2006).

I acknowledge Marcus and colleagues' (2006) argument that politics is a complex environment for testing emotional responses, and indeed that caution should be applied in employing straightforward social psychological measures in a political setting, not least because these approaches do not adequately take into account the dynamic nature of emotional responses in the political environment (Abelson et al., 1982). In this instance, the measurement of emotion targets a response to a specific political event, and not more dynamic concepts such as a candidate assessment over the course of a campaign. I accepted this limitation as acceptable for the purposes of this research. The 6 emotions chosen presented a mixture of positive and negative feelings (happiness, calm, frustration, worry, anger and sadness). The question enables respondents to express the extent to which they feel an emotion in a given time period. In this case, and to avoid the pitfall identified by Watson (1988) in which participants are often unable to distinguish *how often* they felt an emotion as opposed to *how much* they felt it, I asked respondents to consider the extent of their feelings of the range of emotions "right now", so as to limit the participants' attention to the immediate moment.

4.2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews of Political Elites

Thus far, this Chapter has provided a detailed explanation and justification of the quantitative methods employed in the pursuit of the research agenda's three interrelated questions. This section now details the qualitative portion of this thesis.

As I established in Chapter 3, an exploration of the impact of elite lies on democratic health would be incomplete without assessing those impacts on political elites themselves. In a representative democracy, those elites are tasked to make highly consequential decisions on

³¹ A standard valence model can be used to explain how individuals evaluate political candidates, parties, or policies based on their perceived attributes. The model is grounded in the idea of valence, which refers to the intrinsic attractiveness (positive valence) or aversiveness (negative valence) of a target.

behalf of their constituents- often in the face of opposition from a significant proportion of them. In order to understand the impact of the Wedge Lie on the democratic behaviours of political elites, I sought in-person interviews with political elites as a means to establishing a trusting relationship with me as I explored their views on the contested election narrative.

The interviews were conducted in pursuit of RQ4, to test Hypotheses 9 & 10. It would, of course, have been possible to interrogate these hypotheses through the use of another survey, but I elected to pursue interviews as a means to more reflective qualitative data (Adler and Clark, 2014; Jain, 2021). Similarly, I sought to pursue a more interactive approach (Adams et al., 2007; Adler and Clark, 2014) to data collection, allowing for responsive follow-up questions or allowing the interviewee to revise a response. I balanced this against the increased challenges of getting access to political representatives for the time needed to conduct an interview and felt that securing a lower number of interview participants than survey respondents was a desirable trade off to gather the richer data of an interview transcript.

The semi-structured interview approach offers a number of key advantages. Firstly, it enabled an interview design tailored to best answer the three research questions at the core of this project. It also facilitated a deftness to pick up on newly surfaced information, ask follow-up questions or probe deeper, and reflexively change the order of the questions as needed. (Brinkmann, 2014; Petrescu et al., 2017; Adams, 2015) Lastly the open-ended character of virtually all the questions elicits a large volume of data in a relatively brief time, making it an attractive method for a researcher who is time, and resource, poor.

The Preference for In-Person Interviews

In-person interviews have been considered superior to those conducted remotely (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 1998), despite emerging scholarship on the effectiveness of video-call interviews (Krouwel, et al., 2019); an increasingly common feature of academic research during the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst telephone or video-call interviews have merits in and of themselves (Oltmann, 2016), the desirability of conducting interviews with citizens face to face in this project is manifold.

The recruitment and eventual interview process was designed to overcome any initial distrust by making me (as the researcher) as accessible and visible as possible, and the research itself transparent and clearly communicated. Thus, in-person interviews were prioritised as the

preferred method. Secondly, interviews conducted in person allow each party to respond to non-verbal cues as well as the spoken word (Hiller and DiLuzio, 2004). Even the advent of cost-free and widely accessible video-calling tends to only give an interviewer a head-and-shoulders view of the interviewee, restricting observation of other non-verbal cues such as adjustments to seating position or some hand gestures. These non-verbal data may provide an enriched understanding of the verbal communication offered by the interviewee (Carr and Worth, 2001). Furthermore, the sharing of personal space has been argued to facilitate the more effective building of rapport between interviewer and respondent due to each party's access to the non-verbal cues of the other (Shuy, 2003).

Data Collection from US Political Elites

Despite securing funding to travel to the US for a period of two weeks in September 2023 to conduct fieldwork, collecting data from political elites presented a complex set of obstacles. A hard-earned list of considerations was shared by Philip Cowley (2020) and drawn upon for this work including overcoming creeping suspicion of academia/experts, requesting something for little in return, and being mindful of political motivations clouding responses to questions. Whilst acknowledging Walgrave and Joly's (2018) observation that political researchers effectively study two faces of politics (those that are occurring within the machinery of government, and those that are occurring in society), I argue that I have demonstrated the need for investigation into the relationship *between* those two faces, especially in the study of lies and trust.

Much of the research into the politics occurring within government institutions steers clear of establishing individuals as the unit of analysis, instead focusing on aggregated outputs and impacts. In essence, the behaviours and attitudes of those individual elites have been far less scrutinised than the institutions and constituencies they serve (see Weinberg, 2020; Walgrave and Joly, 2018). This may be, at least in some part, due to the frequently prohibitive challenges to collecting data for analysis in the first place. There are two key challenges for this research that I will expand upon in this section:

1. Access to, and recruitment of, participants from a notoriously hard to reach population;
2. Gathering sensitive, personal information with a need for a high degree of confidentiality.

Access

The immediate barrier to conducting research with political elites, particularly those located overseas to the researcher is simply ensuring the initial approach actually reaches its target. All elected members of state general assemblies have government email addresses, an office phone number, and a corresponding postal address. However, as multiple studies confirm, simply having the correct contact details is no guarantee of communication being received, far less being acted upon (see Rice et al., 2021; Dietrich et al., 2012), especially when those details are also available to the public, and already receive large volumes of unsolicited communications. Rice et al. (2021) also reinforce my own experience of working in a legislative office; that staff act as gatekeepers for the representative and there is a significant chance that any communication fails to penetrate this initial barrier.

To minimise time-costly attempts at “cold” communication with serving political elites, I sought to learn from those with experience of working in that environment. I was able to secure an initial meeting with a former Congressman, now academic researcher, from New York City via a video call. This call was pivotal as he was able to provide valuable guidance in the protocol and etiquette of approaching political elites in the US. Acting on his expertise, I developed an outreach plan to maximise the potential for accessing serving elected representatives from both parties. I decided to focus on state legislators, as opposed to those at federal level to increase the chance that any willing participants would have the time and geographical proximity to meet with me and there would be an increased likelihood of a snowball sample effect. A focus on a single state and its representatives would be more likely to deliver a sample of participants all focused on the broadly similar issues and experiencing the same political setting. Georgia was selected for this reason. To maximise positive engagement with my request, I was mindful that the perception of the author and the authenticity conveyed through the communication presented a risky moment of initial interaction (Dillman, 2014). I drew up a short, professional biography and brief details of the research project (Burnham et al., 2004), and included this in my initial emails to those contacts, including multiple methods of response. My email contained an explicit request for an approximately 45-minute interview at a time of their convenience during the period of time I was due to be in Atlanta. I also offered the option of an online video interview during those dates or within a month either side of that trip to suit their preferences. Once secured, I reiterated the offer that interviews could be conducted via telephone or a video call platform of their choice if a last-minute obstacle prevented an in-person meeting. Each of the interviews

that were eventually conducted took place in the government offices of each of the representatives that participated.

Sensitivity and Confidentiality

In order to establish trust, and convey trustworthiness, I made sure to demonstrate my own credibility through each communication with potential participants. I included the University's logo and formal contact details as well as my own direct contact information. Details of the research project and its intended impact were included for transparency. Communication was always personalised but formal, to build a perception of credibility and professionalism.

As with previous research (see Weinberg, 2020; Singer et al., 1995) conducted with political elites, particularly that of a sensitive nature, robust assurances of strict confidentiality (interview transcripts were to be used solely for the purposes of this research, and would be held in secure data storage until their destruction after 3 years post-submission) and anonymity (all personal identifying remarks or details were removed from the transcripts) were provided. Clear details of both the research project's data management plan and ethics approval were also given.

Interview Design and Power Dynamics

Blakeley's (2012) instructive review of the approaches to interviewing elites provided guidance on navigating the power dynamic between interviewer and respondent, as well as developing trust in a very short space of time. Due to the sensitive nature of what was being discussed, repeated reassurances were given about confidentiality and anonymity at the outset of the interviews, along with a reminder that they were able to withdraw from the process at any point. During the interview, I struck a careful balance between encouraging further disclosure and avoiding any sense of wanting to elicit salacious, privileged information. I made effort to ask for clarifications and to repeat anything that seemed unclear to present the importance I placed on an accurate recording of their words. I maintained a neutral or positive demeanour where the interviews were in person or via a video-call.

The interview questions were grouped in three sets to pursue the fourth research question: *what impact do Wedge Lies have on the democratic behaviours of elites?* The first set asked respondents to focus on their trust in the credibility and integrity of other political elites (Hypothesis 9), including their colleagues (whether in Congress, the Executive or state-level

representatives), in light of the Wedge Lie. It explored the relationship between any distrust of out-group members to their views of political elites as a cohort. The second block of questions asked respondents to consider how that same distrust may have impacted upon their views of the credibility and integrity of democratic institutions and processes, including the Georgia General Assembly and elections themselves. Lastly, the third block asked respondents to discuss their constituents, particularly focusing on polarisation within the US public, to establish whether that polarisation led to behavioural changes in their role as an elected representative (Hypothesis 10), i.e. thinking about polarisation in their state/district, how does that make them feel about seeking compromise or bipartisanship in their institution? (See Appendix 3 for the full set of interview questions).

The Interviews and Interviewees

The interviews were conducted between 5th and 16th September 2023 in Atlanta, Georgia. In 12 cases, I met with the interviewee in their office at the Georgia StateHouse. The remaining 4 were conducted via a video call. I met with 11 Democrats and 5 Republicans. 5 participants are sitting State Senators, and 11 are members of the House of Representatives. The interviews varied in length, with the shortest taking approximately 35 minutes, and the longest lasting almost 90 minutes. The interviews were designed to explore the legislators' own experience of governing at a state level through the prism of the election fraud narrative. To investigate RQ4: *What impact do elite lies have on the democratic behaviours of political elites?*, I developed a set of core questions that encouraged the participants to think about a number of key concerns:

1. their professional relationships with their colleagues on both sides of the aisle;
2. their communications from (and responses to) constituents who were concerned about the Wedge Lie and its potential effect on future elections
3. their ability to govern effectively in a time of high polarisation
4. their own views about the current and future state of democracy in the US

These questions are important because there is evidence to suggest that there is an increased likelihood of bipartisanship leading to legislative success at state level, even on contentious issues such as climate change (Lee and Stecula, 2021; Martin and Saikawa, 2017). There is further evidence to suggest that the US public have a considerably more favourable opinion of

their state governments that the federal government (*Pew Research*, 2024)³². To meet the criteria of a Wedge Lie, I have argued that consequential actions should arise as a direct result of the lie (both the act of lying, or being lied to, and the content of the lie).

Data Handling

For the interviews, each interviewee consented to an audio recording of the interview. Those audio files were then transcribed using speech-to-text software, and then manually checked for accuracy and cleaned. The transcripts were then analysed using a customised set of themes and subthemes (see Table 7.1), designed to examine the data against the theoretical framework of the Wedge Lie, and establish confirmation (or rejection) of that thereof. As such, Table 7.1 identifies those themes key to the theory of the Wedge Lie: trust (both social and political), emotion, polarisation and democracy. I also included codes for the discussion of election fraud (as the central assertion of the Wedge Lie), *and also* the act of the lie itself, as an opportunity to test my argument that it is both the specific content of the lie, as well as the act of lying, that drives the negative impacts of the lie.

This approach also has an additional benefit in acknowledging and mitigating the inevitable biases that arise through qualitative research, both those of the interview subjects, and my own as the researcher. Critics of qualitative analysis challenge the elevation of subjective interpretation when permitting subjects to self-report their own version of events (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Added to this is the potential for my own subjectivity in the analysis of an already fuzzy record (MacLean, 2013). Applying the customised coding outlined in Table 6.1 serves to focus the analysis on identifying existing indicators, or contra-indicators of the theoretical framework of the Wedge Lie.

But the subjectivity of the data collected through the interviews is not to be seen as a negative characteristic. Indeed, this research has sought to understand precisely how members of the lie's ingroup and outgroup audiences report their interaction with the lie and the impacts it may have had (or still has) on their worldview, their emotional state, and their trust (both social and political). As such, the qualitative data should be seen as complimentary to, and not confirmatory of, the quantitative data analysis detailed in the two previous chapters. Rather, the interviews add a rich layer of nuance to the more clinical quantitative findings, and I have

³² Detail from a *Pew Research* survey in April 2024 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/11/americans-rate-their-federal-state-and-local-governments-less-positively-than-a-few-years-ago/>

included a section in this chapter that goes beyond the coding in Table 7.1 to include interpretive analysis in which I explore the unanticipated themes emerging from the interviews (see Chapter 7).

4.3 Summary

This chapter has set out a detailed case for the methodological choices I have made in this research in the testing of the ten hypotheses associated with the four interrelated research questions. I have set out how, and why, those choices were the most desirable for the task at hand, and argued for their use balanced against acknowledged limitations. In the following section of this thesis, I now turn to an analysis of the empirical and qualitative data collected through these methods.

Chapter 5: Twitter Results and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

False information, and the general public's seeming inability to discern fact from fiction in political discourse is not a new concern. Neither is the role that new communication technologies play in the spread of false information, and how they may make it harder for the public to verify the veracity of the information, or the credibility of the information source³³. Underpinning this anxiety is the equally well-established identification of a well-informed public as a pillar of a healthy democracy (Grinberg et al., 2019); so much so, that “political information is to democratic politics what money is to economics; it is the currency of citizenship” (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996, p.8).

I now turn, therefore, to an empirical analysis of the dissemination of the stolen election narrative (the Wedge Lie) through a modern mass communication platform. To understand the potential impact of Wedge Lies on democratic health, and to work towards a means to blunt their impact, we need to first understand how they spread, and the nature of the discourse they create (RQ1; Hypotheses 1-3). For this analysis, I used Twitter as my data source. Twitter has been widely studied as a crucible for disinformation and fake news (Vosoughi et al., 2018) by a range of groups, both state-sponsored and independent actors (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). During the 2020 election, as with his Presidency and long before, Twitter was Trump's preferred vehicle for disseminating his personal narrative. It follows, then, that Twitter should be a crucible for so much of the disinformation that was associated with, and critical to, the embedding of the election fraud claims, backed by a constant stream of anecdotal and visual “evidence”. But it would be wrong to think of Twitter as a particularly extreme example of communication disseminating the lie and planning action to counter the effects of fraud. Indeed, other social media sites such as Facebook³⁴ were similarly used to harness the ability of peer-to-peer communications to spread the information at an exponential rate, *and* to come with the credibility of being disseminated by members of a clearly defined and motivated ingroup.

³³ So much so that in 1925 *Harper's Magazine* contained an article by E. McKlernon, 'Fake news and the Public', fretting not only over the impact of fake news, but also how emerging communications technologies were contributing to its spread.

³⁴ This is a good overview of how Facebook was used by the Stop the Steal movement to spread the claims of election fraud and orchestrate responses to it <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/22/1048543513/facebook-groups-jan-6-insurrection>

I collected a sample of 961,166 tweets from all users (within the parameters set out in Chapter 4) containing the hashtag #StoptheSteal between 1st August 2020 (the beginning of the month of the parties' national conventions, traditionally seen as the official beginning of the general election campaign period) and 21st January 2021 (the day after the inauguration of Joe Biden as President of the US). The tweets were scraped using Twitter's API Academic Track.³⁵ (Full details of the data collection and handling can be found in Chapter 4, p.89). For clarity and to save repetition, the use of the term "all users" in this research refers to those users who used the #StoptheSteal hashtag within those parameters mentioned above.

Recalling the three main characteristics of a Wedge Lie (weaponization of mass communications, driving emotional responses from the ingroup and the outgroup which further polarises those two groups, and galvanising consequential actions from the ingroup and outgroup), this chapter underscores each of those characteristics through three strands of analysis: the timeline and volume of all users' tweets using #StoptheSteal; Trump's own proliferation of the lie on Twitter (and elsewhere) and its impact on the wider dissemination of the lie on Twitter; and content and sentiment analysis looking at the themes and polarity contained within the text of the tweets.

5.2 Timeline and Volume

In testing Hypothesis 1, I identified the dynamic between Trump as the figurehead of the Wedge Lie, and its spread on Twitter. The phrase "stop the steal" significantly predates the 2020 election. The prominent hard-right provocateur and political operative Roger Stone is widely credited with coining the phrase as far back as 2016. In fact, it was in February 2016, during the Republican primary contest, that the URL www.stopthesteal.org was registered. The site encouraged visitors to participate in the Trump Ballot Security Project by calling an advertised toll-free number to report any perceived voting irregularities. Suspensions were directed not at the Democrats, but at an amorphous "political establishment" committed to preventing the rightful ascension of Trump to the nomination and eventual presidency³⁶.

³⁵ For a more detailed reflection on the use of Twitter for data collection, particularly during the transition to Elon Musk's ownership and its rebranding as X, see Chapter 8

³⁶ The New York Times published a valuable long form review of the timeline of Stop the Steal as a movement: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/19/magazine/stop-the-steal.html>

Trump himself, although not using the #StoptheSteal hashtag, fertilised the ground for the 2020 stolen election narrative long before the launch of the ‘official’ campaigns. In November 2018, in reference to the gubernatorial and Senate elections in Florida, Trump declared:

“The Florida Election should be called in favor of Rick Scott and Ron DeSantis in that large numbers of new ballots showed up out of nowhere, and many ballots are missing or forged. An honest vote count is no longer possible-ballots massively infected. Must go with Election Night!”³⁷

In a tweet of 30th July 2019, Trump called into question the integrity of the voting system nationally: *“we should immediately pass Voter ID @Voteridplease to insure the safety and sanctity of our voting system. Also, Paper Ballots as backup (old fashioned but true!). Thank you!”*.³⁸ By early 2020, Trump’s narrative had sharpened to regularly undermine the security of the election, and the (unsubstantiated) accusations became more explicit: *“Mail in ballots substantially increases the risk of crime and VOTER FRAUD!”*³⁹ By April, Trump had found a consistent theme: *“GET RID OF BALLOT HARVESTING, IT IS RAMPANT WITH FRAUD. THE USA MUST HAVE VOTER I.D., THE ONLY WAY TO GET AN HONEST COUNT!”*⁴⁰ Long before the Republican National Convention and the start of the general election period, Trump had linked weaknesses in election security to the existence of a conspiracy to rig the result:

“The US cannot have all Mail In Ballots. It will be the greatest Rigged Election in history. People grab them from mailboxes, print thousands of forgeries and force people to sign. Also, forge names. Some absentee OK, when necessary. Trying to use Covid for this Scam!”⁴¹

Trump was not the only high-profile source of the election fraud narrative, and so to plot the longitudinal dissemination of the Wedge Lie, I tracked the weekly occurrence of tweets that contained the hashtag #StoptheSteal (Table 5.1). Significant usage of the hashtag began in the week commencing 17th October, three weeks before election day, but the lie began to spread on Twitter well before that at the beginning of the pre-election period (Figure 5.1). This

³⁷ <https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1061962869376540672>

³⁸ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1156243330952507394>

³⁹ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1249132374547464193>

⁴⁰ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1250067500190089217>

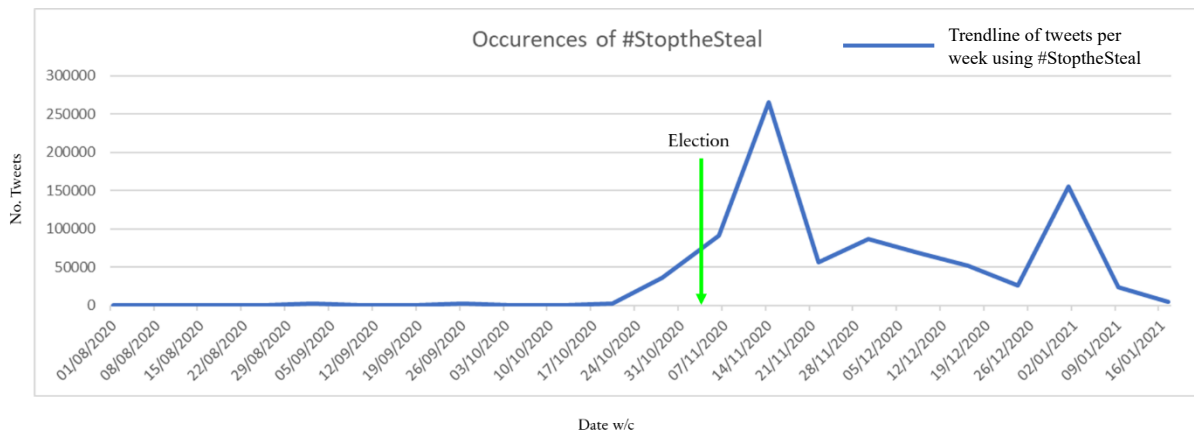
⁴¹ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1264558926021959680>

suggests that the lie was a deliberate and proactive strategy deployed for Trump’s political advantage.

Table 5.1 Weekly Tracker: Tweets, Rallies and References

Week Commencing	No. of All User Tweets Using #StoptheSteal	No. of Trump Tweets Suggesting Election Fraud	No. Of Trump Rallies	Reference made to Election Fraud at Rallies?
01/08/2020	102	3	0	X
08/08/2020	28	0	0	X
15/08/2020	52	4	3	Y
22/08/2020	14	7	1	N
29/08/2020	1,950	3	1	Y
05/09/2020	503	2	3	Y
12/09/2020	476	11	4	Y
19/09/2020	2,081	4	5	Y
26/09/2020	484	5	2	Y
03/10/2020	181	2	0	N/A
10/10/2020	2,094	5	4	Y
17/10/2020	36,464	3	8	Y
24/10/2020	91,083	6	11	Y
31/10/2020	265,192	9	14	Y
07/11/2020	56,453	26	0	N/A
14/11/2020	86,117	34	0	N/A
21/11/2020	69,200	22	0	N/A
28/11/2020	51,624	28	0 (but video speech on election fraud)	Y
05/12/2020	26,482	14	1 (for GA Senate runoffs)	Y
12/12/2020	25,856	18	0	N/A
19/12/2021	24,096	12	0	N/A
26/12/2020	56,853	11	0	N/A
02/01/2021	155,238	14	1	Y
09/01/2021	5,185	0	0	N/A
16/01/2021	4,023	0	0	N/A
Total	961,166	243		

Figure 5.1 A Timeline of All User Tweets Using #StoptheSteal



Building a movement

In alignment with the theory of the Wedge Lie, early adopters of the hashtag weaponised modern mass communications and its ability to cascade messages at an exponential rate. In the pre-election period, the spread of the lie through the usage of #StoptheSteal was dominated by highly visible activists and political commentators (see below). Trump himself only used the hashtag six times during the entire period of data collection, and all of these were in the days immediately prior to the violence on 6th January 2021. In the pre-election period, the dissemination of the lie *through the hashtag* was driven by prominent far-right Trump supporters and online media outlets who were actively declaring the formation of a movement.

The first notable spike in the occurrence of the hashtag was found in the week commencing 2nd September, correlating to a tweet of 7th September by Jack Posobiec, a prominent Trump supporter and far-right media personality in which he declared “*#StoptheSteal 2020 is coming...*”⁴²

Also on 7th September, Ali Alexander (another high-profile far-right activist) uploaded a Periscope⁴³ video (since removed) in which he announces the creation of a “StoptheSteal” movement, with the express aim of assembling a “physical presence” anywhere that election fraud is suspected:

⁴² Source: <https://archive.is/mNYyb>

⁴³ Periscope was a live-streaming video app developed for Android and iOS which was acquired by Twitter but shut down in 2021.

*We will map out where the votes are being counted and the secretary of states. We will map all of this out for everyone publicly and we will collect cell phone numbers so that way if you are within 100-mile radius of a bad secretary of state or someone who's counting votes after the deadline or if there's a federal court hearing, we will alert you of where to go...*⁴⁴

The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, alongside Georgetown's Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection conducted an analysis of domestic extremism in the context of political communications during the 2020 election campaign (see Holt et al., 2021 for a comprehensive review of this and other data in their construction of the Stop the Steal timeline). They identify those two tweets as the first significant event in the timeline of the mass dissemination of the lie. This is supported by the sample collected for this research: in the week commencing 2nd September, 95.8% of tweets using #StoptheSteal occurred on or after 7th September.

Similarly, a spike can be seen in the week commencing 26th September. On 29th September, the far-right media outlet The Gateway Pundit posted a tweet linking to an article claiming that *"Trump Observers Are Being Blocked Entry to All Satellite Voting Locations in Philly"*.⁴⁵ Despite the commencement of early voting in some states which likely focussed the minds of activists and the public (18th September 2020 in Minnesota, Virginia, Wyoming and South Dakota, 21 September in Vermont, 24 September in Illinois and Michigan, and 28 September in Pennsylvania), the majority of the #StoptheSteal references occur after this tweet. In the week commencing 26th September, 65% of all tweets using #StoptheSteal occurred within 24 hours of The Gateway Pundit's post. 52% of all tweets using #StoptheSteal in that week were retweets or copied text content of The Gateway Pundit's post. As predicted by the conception of the Wedge Lie, narratives, as opposed to facts, are the dominant influencer in spreading the Wedge Lie.

The effect is a priming of the ingroup audience, building on narrative that had developed over the previous four years, to expect illegality and a fraudulent result, and that expectation has been baked in by election day itself. In the context of Ali Alexander's statement, above, Stop

⁴⁴ Source: <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/gop-operative-says-hes-building-system-to-dispatch-protesters-where-ballots-are-counted/>
NB Alexander's original broadcast was removed from Periscope

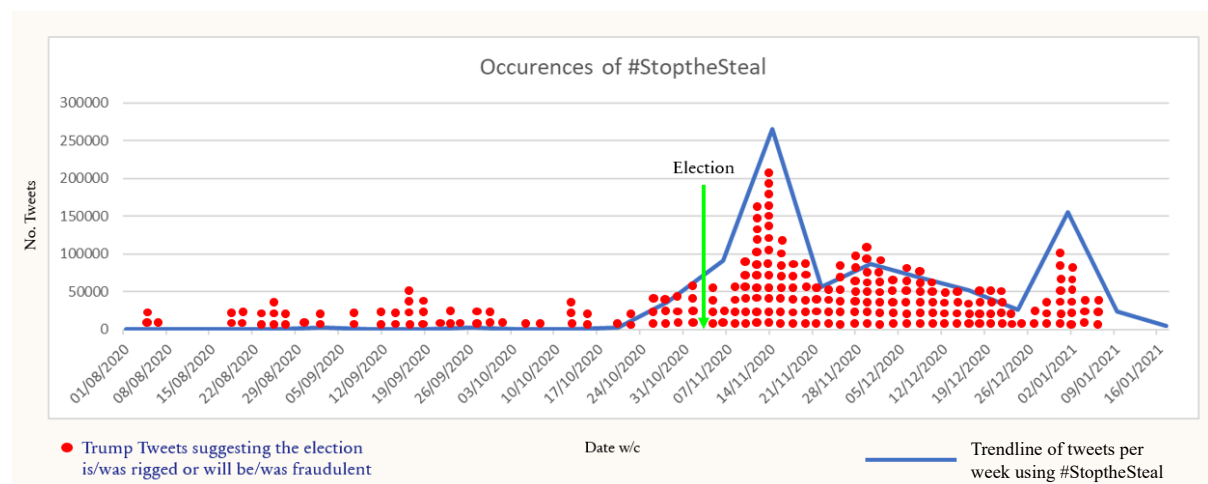
⁴⁵ Source: <https://twitter.com/gatewaypundit/status/1311012186974760962>

the Steal should be seen as a coordinated attempt to establish a political movement that was ready to act upon what would certainly be seen by the ingroup as an unjust result in the event that Trump lost.

Trump's Timeline of the lie

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Trump himself rarely uses the #StoptheSteal phraseology. Instead, he focuses on using more direct language referencing election fraud or the rigging of the results. Each of the red dots on Figure 5.2 marks a Trump tweet that contains the word “election” *as well as* either the word “rigged” or “fraud”. Plotting the timeline of those tweets demonstrates a clear correlation to the volume of the #StoptheSteal tweets among all users (Hypothesis 1, positive finding). In total, Trump either alludes to or directly alleges election fraud 243 times on Twitter between 1st August 2020 and 20th January 2021.⁴⁶

Figure 5.2 A Timeline of Trump's Wedge Lie on Twitter



As with his high-profile supporters, Trump engages in the pre-election sowing of doubt in the integrity of the election process with 11% of his references to “fraud” or the election being “rigged” occurring before election day itself. However, his own use of the hashtag #StoptheSteal all occur in the week immediately prior to the violence at the Capitol on January 6th 2021. As I have sought to demonstrate throughout this thesis, one of the three key characteristics of the Wedge Lie is the galvanising of responses as a result of interacting with the lie. In this light, Trump’s use of #StoptheSteal takes on an imperative tone; a call to direct

⁴⁶ I identified tweets authored by Trump between 1st August 2020 and 20th January 2021 that contained any of the words “fraud”, “rigged”, “illegal”, “hoax” and “scam” and manually verified that these were referring to the 2020 election. This does not include Retweets.

action. This is supported by his online and offline narrative in the two weeks before January 6th. On 26th December, Trump tweeted:

*“If a Democrat Presidential Candidate had an Election Rigged and Stolen, with proof of such acts at a level never seen before, the Democrat Senators would consider it an act of war, and fight to the death. Mitch and the Republicans do NOTHING, just want to let it pass. NO FIGHT!”*⁴⁷

The online message was reinforced at his rally on January 6th itself, as he exhorted his followers to “fight like hell”⁴⁸, and a tweet on the same day instructed “get smart Republicans, FIGHT”⁴⁹.

It is also important to highlight the significance of Trump’s other major campaigning tool, his rallies. As Table 5.1 shows, Trump intensified his rally schedule in the final weeks of the election, but he used them as a platform to rail against the rigging of the election from the beginning of the election period. At a Keep America Great rally in Arizona on 18th August 2020, Trump warned his followers to “be careful with your ballots”⁵⁰. In Ohio on 21st September, he instructed the crowd, “when you see them cheating on the other side, I don't say if, when, when you see them cheating with those ballots, all of those unsolicited ballots, those millions of ballots, you'll see them, anytime you do, report them to the authorities”⁵¹. The following day in Pennsylvania, the familiar narrative returned, “...early voting, if you didn't know it, has already begun and watch it and watch those fake ballots, you got to go out and turn them in”.⁵²

Although it is not within the remit of this research to explore the direct impact of Trump’s rallies on Twitter content and trends, video and live-tweet coverage of the rallies saturated Twitter in real time and took his election fraud narrative far beyond the rally arena. What is clear is that Trump is the primary source of the election fraud narrative *as identified by Republican voters*. A poll of Republican voters who believe there is evidence of widespread fraud in the 2020 election conducted by *Morning Consult* between 22nd-25th January 2021

⁴⁷ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1342817496924086278>

⁴⁸ The full transcript of Trumps remarks on January 6th before the violence at the Capitol is here: <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial>

⁴⁹ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1346693906990305280>

⁵⁰ <https://www.c-span.org/video/?474842-1/president-trump-remarks-yuma-arizona-immigration>

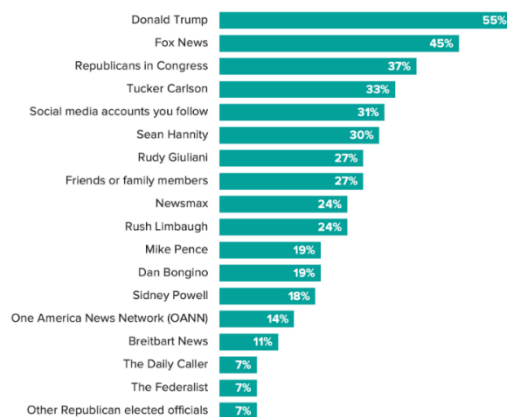
⁵¹ <https://www.c-span.org/video/?475943-1/president-trump-campaign-remarks-swanton-ohio>

⁵² <https://www.c-span.org/video/?475975-1/president-trump-holds-rally-pittsburgh>

found that Trump was overwhelmingly cited as the source of information that persuaded Republican voters to believe the election had been rigged (Figure 5.3).⁵³

Figure 5.3 *Morning Consult for Politico* Poll on the Source of the Election Fraud Narrative

Republican voters who believe there is evidence of widespread fraud in the 2020 U.S. presidential election were asked which of the following sources, if any, helped lead them to believe that information. Respondents could select all that apply:

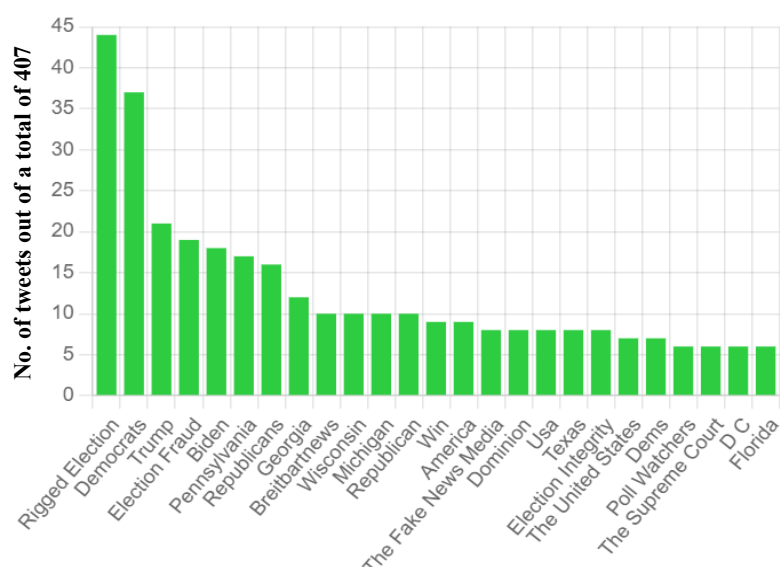


5.3 Thematic Analysis

The *Morning Consult* poll demonstrates Trump’s position as the primary source of the election fraud narrative for Republican voters, and so it follows that testing Hypothesis 1 more fully requires a comparative thematic analysis of the relationship between Trump’s tweets and the general public’s. This section details that thematic analysis, starting with how Trump constructs the narrative in his own tweets to explore the language, tone and sentiment surrounding the lie as it reaches both the ingroup and outgroup audiences. As I have asserted throughout this investigation, a Wedge Lie weaponises mass digital communication to galvanise responses from either, or both, of the ingroup and outgroup audiences. These responses are driven by emotional triggers within the messaging of the lie, and elicit emotional, as opposed to cognitive, responses. The language and tone of the lie’s narrative is therefore materially important to its success (Hypothesis 2). Textual analysis of Trump’s tweets that contain the word “election” reveal key themes, see Figure 5.4.

⁵³ See here for further polling data <https://morningconsult.com/form/tracking-voter-trust-in-elections/>

Figure 5.4 Histogram of top 25 key themes by volume in Trump's tweets containing the word "election"



Most prominent are the direct references to the rigging of the election, and election fraud when combined.⁵⁴ But he was also careful to flesh out the accusations of fraud with details of how and where it occurs. The recurrence of the references to Dominion voting machines⁵⁵ gave Trump's supporters, and right-wing media outlets a tangible *modus operandi* for the means by which the results could be rigged. Similarly, the treatment of poll watchers became a key focus as evidence of the conspiracy when videos and anecdotal tweets purported to demonstrate that those poll watchers acting on behalf of Trump had been prevented from carrying out their observations in contravention of electoral law. Each of those claims were either debunked, or state courts corrected any contraventions within the counting period.⁵⁶ Despite this, poll watchers and transparency in the very literal sense of the demand to be able to *see* the votes as they are being counted, is still a central theme (often accompanied by calls to action) in Donald Trump and the Republican Party's messaging heading into the 2024 Presidential election year. On 2nd December 2023 at a campaign event in Des Moines, Iowa, Trump stated "*so the most important part of what's coming up is to guard the vote. And you should go into Detroit and you should go into Philadelphia and you should go into some of these places, Atlanta*".⁵⁷ It is key to note that these are all Democrat-dominated cities situated in key swing states.

⁵⁴ It is important to note that these occur in each of the three time periods defined above. There are predictions that fraud/rigging will occur, claims of evidence that it is occurring in the present, and references to incidences of it having taken place.

⁵⁵ Dominion Voting Systems Corp is a US-based company that manufactures and sells electronic voting machines. In the 2020 US Presidential election, Dominion machines were targeted by President Trump and his supporters as being a key component in election fraud. Trump's references to the company in his Tweets suggest they were manipulated or otherwise hacked by Trump's opponents. These claims became the subject of a lawsuit. See <https://apnews.com/article/fox-news-dominion-lawsuit-trump-2020-0ac71f75acface52ea80b3e747fb0afe> for an overview.

⁵⁶ See <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fact-check-trumps-claims-poll-watchers/> for a fact check on the claims Trump himself made about poll watchers

⁵⁷ Coverage of that rally can be found, here: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-12-03/Trump-urges-supporters-to-guard-the-vote-in-Democratic-run-cities-1peNyBGr23m/index.html>

With the exception of Texas, each of the states that recur in Trump's narrative are familiar in recent Presidential campaigns as the key swing states, and the ones which (in various combinations) are seen as "must-win" for any Presidential candidate. In Trump's narrative, however, they are (perhaps unsurprisingly) the sites of major efforts to commit electoral fraud. The references to Texas occur after the election as Trump seeks to encourage more states to join the lawsuit filed by the Attorney General of Texas, Ken Paxton, challenging the results of the election in the four swing states also cited in Figure 5.4. That case was ultimately thrown out by the US Supreme Court, who ruled that the Attorney General had no standing to bring the case. This accounts for each instance of the references to the Supreme Court, as Trump rails against the decision to refuse to hear the case.

Also notable is the prominence of the references to Republicans. Certainly, Democrats (as a whole, Joe Biden, and other prominent individuals such as Nancy Pelosi and key candidates in swing states) feature strongly as targets for the accusations of fraud. But Trump's references to Republicans were not, as might be expected, a show of solidarity or gratitude for colleagues working to secure his victory. Instead, Trump used his platform to challenge Republicans to "do their job", decrying those in key positions⁵⁸ that he saw as being "weak" or Republican in name only (RINO). This challenge is arguably a shibboleth to reaffirm the right to be included inside the ingroup. This exploits the "loyalty moral foundation" (Clifford, 2017) which posits that loyalty to a group serves a binding function, as well as driving a more intense partisanship. In other words, the challenging of ingroup members to demonstrate fealty in order to be considered truly part of the group will drive members to visibly meet that challenge or be cast as an outsider, or in Trump's language, an "enemy".

References to the media are certainly not new to Trump's strategy for controlling the narrative around him, and so it is no surprise that "The Fake News Media" features in his tweets. What is notable is the presence of Breitbart News in Trump's tweets as a recurring reference. It has long been established that political candidates use social media to carefully curate a positive narrative around them, using digital communications to shepherd supporters (and potential supporters) towards engaging with the candidate and the campaign to their benefit (Stromer-Galley, 2014). Trump's persistent criticism of the "Fake News Media" allows him to both

⁵⁸ Republican officials such as Brad Raffensperger, the Secretary of State for Georgia were the targets of Trump's (and his supporters') anger as they resisted pressure to refuse to certify the results of the election. There is further exploration of this dynamic in Chapter [?] of this thesis in the analysis of the interviews with lawmakers in the state of Georgia.

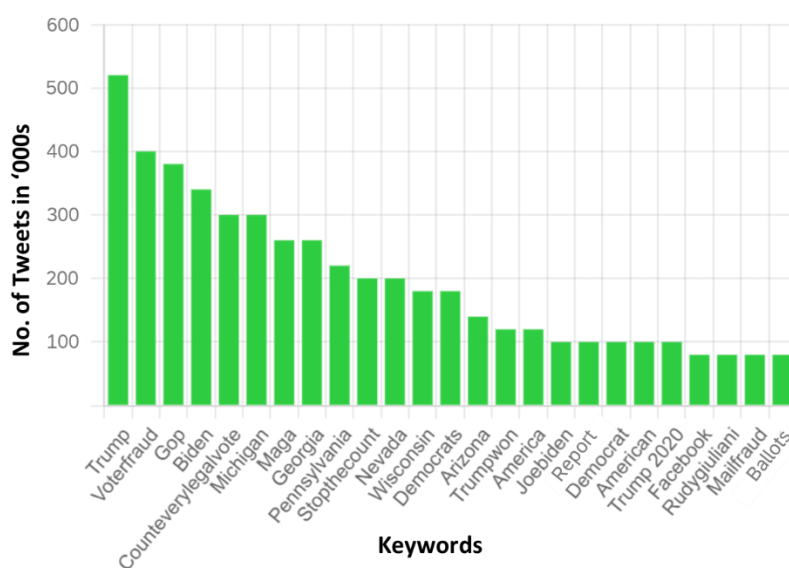
deflect criticism against his own false information as coming from sources that were themselves fabricating information (Ross and Rivers, 2018), but also to discredit those sources of information most likely to damage his reputation. Instead, by routinely sharing information from more favourable sources such as Breitbart News, Trump can reinforce his own narrative as well as directing his supporters to those sources that he deems authentic. In the context of the Wedge Lie, sharing these “news” sources materially contributes to the weaponizing of mass communications through social media infrastructure. Recalling Sharif et al. (2020) and Grinberg et al. (2019), ingroup members will seek out information confirming their worldview and validating the views of the group.

Finally, it bears noting that contrary to what one might expect from a political candidate, not one of Trump’s 407 tweets that contain the word “election” reference his own record in office or policy priorities if elected. Fraud, and the rigging of the result, *is* Trump’s election campaign narrative on Twitter.

#StoptheSteal and the Public

As noted above, and demonstrated in Figure 5.2, there is a clear correlation between Trump’s tweets warning of, or claiming evidence of fraud, and the volume of tweets using the hashtag #StoptheSteal. I now turn to the second thematic analysis (Figure 5.5), this time of the content of the tweets posted by all users during the same period (1st August 2020 to 21st January 2021) to explore how this compares to Trump’s narrative, in answer to Hypothesis 1.

Figure 5.5 Histogram of top 25 themes by volume in all users’ tweets using #StoptheSteal



Trump’s narrative themes are clearly present throughout the general usage of the hashtag #StoptheSteal (see Figure 5.4 for comparison). There is a significant bias towards the end of the time period reflected in the key themes (such as the “counteveryvote”, a hashtag used to warn against irregularities allegedly taking place at the vote counts), and this is due to the dramatic increase in the volume of tweets using the #StoptheSteal hashtag in the immediate aftermath of election day, and again spiking towards January 6th 2021. Consistent with Trump’s messaging, tweets from all users were heavily focussed on the swing states where the counts (and recounts) were both close, and highly contested. The hashtag #StoptheCount was particularly prevalent as polls closed on election day, and for the following days as states counted, and recounted their votes. An adjacent narrative strand became slightly more ubiquitous in the same period as the hashtag #counteverylegalvote spoke to the concerns of Trump supporters that illegal ballots were being included in the tallies for Joe Biden. This echoes Trump’s narrative about the susceptibility to tampering of the electronic voting machines, but also the prominent allegations that mail-in ballots were being manipulated by “the Democrats”⁵⁹, reflected here in the presence of “mailfraud” as a key theme. As with the claims made against Dominion, these allegations were systematically debunked, in real time by factchecking organisations⁶⁰, and after the fact by studies including that by Eggers and colleagues. (2021). But there is a risk of the worldview backfire effect, in essence, a doubling down by the believer on the misconception that the contrary evidence was trying to disprove (Swire et al., 2017). Indeed, the effect of confirmation bias amongst Trump supporters may have led to the debunking efforts being seen as evidence of the conspiratorial effort to steal the election.

Concerns about illegality surrounding mail-in ballots, and at the counts themselves prompted Trump supporters and high-profile advocates to “report” what they had observed⁶¹. The galvanising feature of a Wedge Lie is supported here through a direct call to action. Encouraging people to report illegality lent credence to the allegation that illegality was occurring. The call was taken up by activists and Trump supporters, particularly in swing states, where thousands of reports were made of votes being cast in the name of dead people, ballot

⁵⁹ An example of the narrative of mail-in ballot fraud is found here: <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2020/11/07/philadelphia-gop-alleges-dead-people-voted-pennsylvania/>

⁶⁰ This is one example of many such articles written in the days after the election as Trump’s campaign and some state Attorneys General filed lawsuits challenging the results of the election based on claims including mail-in ballot fraud <https://www.factcheck.org/2020/11/thin-allegations-of-dead-people-voting/>

⁶¹ This Tweet, posted the day after the election by the then US Congressman for Georgia’s 10th Congressional District, encourages Trump supporters to report any voter fraud <https://twitter.com/JodyHiceFRCA/status/1324013668292562951>

harvesting and duplication. A report commissioned by President Trump⁶², as well as a project by the right-wing thinktank The Heritage Foundation to track voter fraud⁶³, found no evidence to substantiate the claims. In fact, The Heritage Foundation's project could find no cases of voter fraud in the key swing state of Georgia in the 2020 election.

There is a clear throughput from Trump to his supporters as he included unsubstantiated claims about China in his narrative which also recur throughout the sample of all users' tweets. Trump's references to China take on two themes; the first is that the Joe Biden was working with the Chinese to rig the election (thus mirroring claims about Russia's involvement with the Trump campaign in 2016), and the second is that the Covid-19 pandemic (or as Trump referred to it "the China virus") was leaked from a Chinese laboratory. The references to "CCP" (Chinese Communist Party) seen in the key themes of the sample of all users' tweets echo those allegations. Many took Trump's allegations a step further to accuse China of an elaborate hoax (or in some cases the deliberate release of the virus) as part of a conspiracy to install Joe Biden in office. As I discuss later in this Chapter, this narrative continues to pervade right-wing spaces on social media.

If, as I have conceptualised, a Wedge Lie specifically seeks an ingroup and an outgroup response, then it must define and emphasise who belongs to those groups⁶⁴. Trump himself refers to Americans with a value attached to it, i.e. only true Americans are welcome in his sphere, and thus only those in his sphere are true Americans. This filters into the key themes found in the tweets by all users; references to "patriots" mark out those who are in the ingroup. Those in the outgroup are un-American, or worse, "traitors" (also delivering a positive finding for Hypotheses 2 and 3). This shoring up of the ingroup boundary both serves to strengthen ingroup identity (Brewer et al., 1992), and demarcate an "other" or an "enemy". This phenomenon is cyclical and self-perpetuating; the actual act of othering strengthens feelings of identity and belonging to the ingroup (Pickett and Brewer, 2004). The result is an increasing animosity and distance between the two groups (Abramowitz and Webster, 2018).

⁶² <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/mar/17/trump-research-voter-fraud-claims-debunked>

⁶³ <https://www.heritage.org/voterfraud>

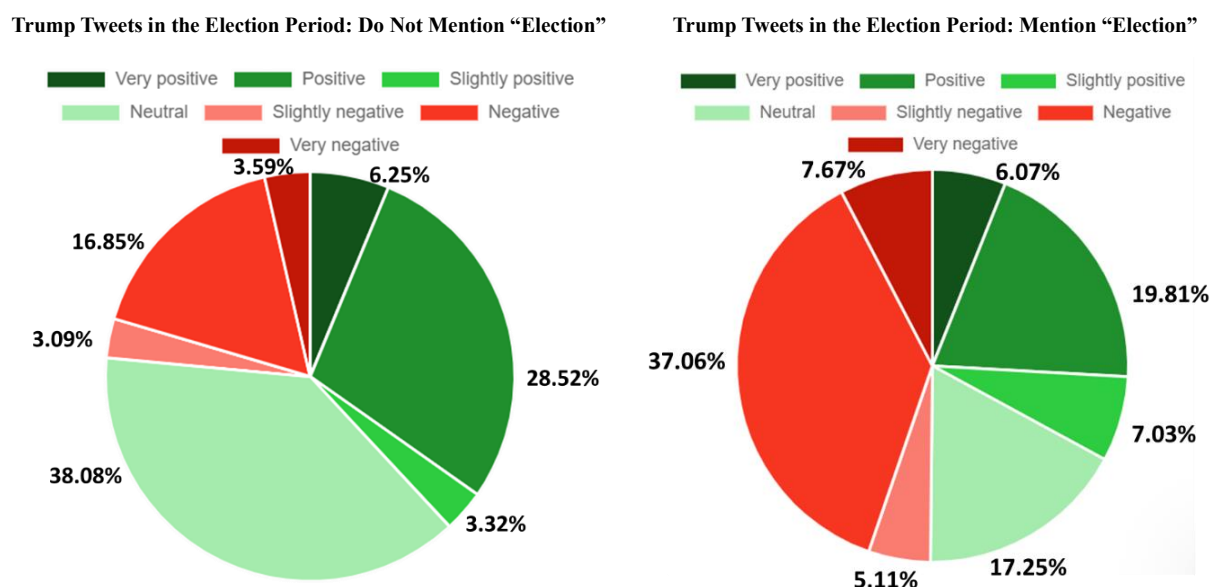
⁶⁴ Due to the constraints of time, as well as the size of the sample, it is not feasible to categorise the tweets by worldview or party alignment. To do so would require an unacceptable level of assumption based upon the handle names of each user in the sample, or an in-depth analysis of their tweet history to determine with more accuracy their political alignment. For these reasons, this chapter focuses on the ingroup response to the lie. Additionally, it is worth noting that while the phrase #StoptheSteal was a shibboleth for Trump supporters, those who would be identifiable as the outgroup in this context used other language, notably "The Big lie" or "Trump's Big lie", and so they are likely to be highly underrepresented in the sample.

5.4 Sentiment Analysis

As stated in Hypothesis 2, the narrative of the Wedge Lie will be overwhelmingly negative in sentiment. Studies of Trump’s use of Twitter have found a clear trend towards negativity as a political strategy (Enli, 2017; Ott, 2017). Whether this is by design or more a symptom of his broader approach to dealing with others (or indeed a deliberate combination of both) is not clear, but certainly he is associated with a deeply negative rhetoric. As I set out in Chapter 3, previous research has demonstrated the link between negative campaigning and affective polarisation (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Miller & Conover, 2015; Mutz, 2015), lending a greater significance to the negativity of Trump’s narrative. To assess the relative negativity of Trump’s tweets directly referencing the election I conducted a sentiment analysis of the 407 tweets that contain the word “election”, and then an analysis of all of his tweets from the election period.

Trump’s tweets mentioning the election were noticeably more negative in tone than was the case for all his tweets over the election period, with 49.84% of his tweets that contain the word “election” being overall negative, as compared to 23.53% overall negative tweets during the whole period (see Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6: Sentiment Analysis Comparison of Trump’s Tweets



These figures are not as overwhelmingly negative as I had anticipated, although as I discuss in more detail later in this chapter the sentiment conveyed in the content does not necessarily need

to be explicitly negative to be able to convey deeply negative messages. There is a broad consensus in the literature that negative campaigning has a dampening effect on voter behaviour, reducing people's likelihood of participating in politics, with many arguing that negative campaigning can have significant consequences for democratic health, for example through a depressed turnout (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Iyengar & Ansolabehere, 2010; Costa, 2021).

It is unlikely, in reality, that the majority of Trump's tweets were that carefully crafted, and certainly not those he authored himself. He used Twitter with an "ongoing tendency to author his own tweets through his personal Twitter account in a display of 'gut-feeling' and impulsive tweeting that is significantly different than professional, focus group-tested tweeting" (Ross and Caldwell, 2020 p.14). Contrary to the sense that Trump trades predominantly in negativity, he is equally well known for his self-aggrandisement, which manifests as positive messaging, even if the context of that messaging paints a bleak picture.⁶⁵ While Trump's known need for loyalty (not just from his inner circle, but also demanded from his supporters often accompanying requests for financial donations⁶⁶) has followed him from his business career into politics, it serves a motivational function for his base- those in the ingroup. The positivity in his tweets as seen in the sentiment analysis is nuanced. On 23rd September 2020, Trump tweeted: *"I was honored to be back in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania with thousands of loyal, hardworking American Patriots. This election is a choice between Pennsylvania and China. If Biden wins, China wins. When we win, Pennsylvania Wins, and AMERICA WINS!"*⁶⁷ The message is overtly positive and reaffirming, but it doubles down on the deeply negative messaging conflating the ingroup (and thus those that would support him) with patriots. The lack of definition of the outgroup allows a void to be filled by the reader with whatever term may fit best for them. Traitors? Enemies? Similarly, on 18th November 2020, more than two weeks after election day, Trump tweeted *"Wow! Michigan just refused to certify the election results! Having courage is a beautiful thing. The USA stands proud!"*⁶⁸ As with the previous example, the language is unquestionably positive ("courage" and "beautiful"), but there is an implication in the description; if Michigan's actions were courageous, and something for

⁶⁵ Trump has long positioned himself as a saviour of the 'forgotten' America. His 2016 nomination acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention is a key indicator of this approach, declaring that "I alone can fix it", in reference to what he described as a violent, damaged and weak America. This has taken on quasi-religious language among his followers and some senior staff. For a good overview of this development, see <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/04/30/donald-trump-evangelicals-god-1294578>

⁶⁶ Trump's fundraising emails are highly indicative of his desire to cultivate loyalty and ultimately test it through acts of fealty.. <https://www.vox.com/culture/21440412/trump-emails-campaign-fundraising-rhetoric-explained> has a good overview of the rhetoric in those emails

⁶⁷ Trump tweeted this on 23rd September 2020, that tweet has since been deleted

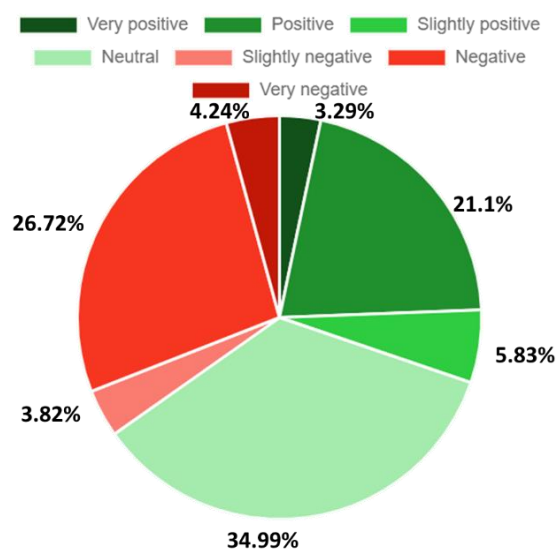
⁶⁸ <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1328883405837258753>

American to be proud of, what does that say about those states who did not challenge the election’s validity? The implication is deeply negative. The result is a campaign narrative that can at once *feel* positive to his ingroup but convey highly negative sentiment toward the outgroup (Hypothesis 2, mixed finding).

All Users’ Sentiment

In continuing the testing of Hypothesis 2, the following section also speaks to Hypothesis 1, in which I predicted that the public would take their cues from Trump; this was proven to be accurate in terms of the timeline and frequency of the tweets posted, and I now present evidence of narrative cues reflected in the public tweets. Sentiment analysis of the Twitter content from the sample of all users’ tweets using #StoptheSteal (Figure 5.7) demonstrates a more nuanced picture than Trump’s own sentiment scores.

Figure 5.7: Sentiment Analysis of all users’ tweets using #StoptheSteal



As with the analysis of Trump’s own tweets, the sentiment analysis of all users’ tweets using the hashtag #StoptheSteal produces a textured result (Hypothesis 2, mixed finding). Despite the phrase #StoptheSteal describing what appears to be a deeply negative viewpoint, there is almost a three-way even split between the content that is overall positive, neutral, and overall negative, with 30.22% of sentences being overall positive, 34.99% being neutral, and 34.78% of sentences overall negative. However, as with Trump’s content, both the neutral and the positive content of the sample of all users is not straightforward. For example, one user tweeted

on 4th November 2020, “*Stand Strong With Trump. Hold The Line. #StoptheSteal*”.⁶⁹ While the sentiment analysis categorised this as a positive message, and certainly an ingroup member may see this as an invigorating cry of solidarity, the language invokes a battle cry. “Hold the line” is a recognisable military term and imbues the tweet with the connotations of war and a fight for survival. This tendency to positively reinforcing the ingroup, whilst negatively alluding to the outgroup is pervasive in the fraudulent election narrative from both Trump and the public.

Consistent with Trump’s narrative, the public Tweets direct much of their negativity towards Republican elites who they deem to be insufficiently active on Trump’s behalf (Hypothesis 3, mixed finding). 63% of tweets referring to “traitors” are describing Republicans who have refused to meet what they see as being adequately on Trump’s side (e.g. GOP elected officials refusing to acquiesce to demands to decertify the election results).

The negative content in the public tweets is more extreme than Trump’s. Trump’s insinuation of his political opponents (and anyone who doesn’t voice their full-throated support) as being un-American or traitorous, is taken further by users of the #StoptheSteal hashtag in frequent occurrences of dehumanising language. The phrase “*demon rats*”⁷⁰ (and variations on it e.g. “*demonrats*”) appears in the election week sample over 400 times, including one post from 4th November 2020 declaring, “*to those DEMON-Rats that think they 'won' yesterday/today/tomorrow; a reminder: 18 U.S. Code § 2381.Treason and shall be incapable of holding any office under the US. DEATH another possibility #StoptheSteal*”.⁷¹ The phrase “Demon rats” was coined by Fox News host Jeanine Pirro as a derogatory term for Democrats during the Brett Kavanaugh confirmation hearings. The words “rats” or “rat” are found in 387 tweets from the sample, with 56 of these also containing the antisemitic reference to “globalists”.

Much like Trump does in his own tweets, the tweets collected from all users frequently reflect a positive *and* negative sentiment in an individual tweet. For example:

⁶⁹ This was tweeted by a user who subsequently had their account suspended

⁷⁰ See more here <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2018/09/30/fox-newss-jeanine-pirro-calls-kavanaugh-saga-crucifixion-former-altar-boy/>

⁷¹ <https://twitter.com/ScreamingIEagle/status/1324038720320950273>

#PatriotsforTrump unite!! May God shine a light and save America from demonic Democrats. It's now or never #patriots!! Bring in the legal votes and #VoteRed2020ToSaveAmerica!!#GodSaveAmerica #GodBlessPresidentTrump #SaveTheChildren #StopTheSteal #TRUMP2020ToSaveAmerica
Tweet posted on November 4th 2020⁷²

As with Trump's tweets, this dual sentiment in the same message is able to be at once deeply negative but reinforce positive feelings amongst members of the ingroup towards their fellow group members, Trump himself and their cause (in this case, fighting for the rightful outcome of the election).

5.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have set out a comprehensive timeline of the Wedge Lie's dissemination on Twitter, showing the origins and early drivers of that narrative, as well as how the content posted by all users correlates over the period of data collection with Trump's own Twitter activity where he repeats the lie in its various different forms. I have also argued that, as demonstrated by the *Morning Consult* poll (see Figure 5.3), Trump is the individual most associated with the rigged election narrative among those who believe there was widespread fraud. As such, I presented a thematic analysis of all his tweets between August 1st 2020 and January 8th 2021, and contrasted that with the same analysis of his tweets that contain the word "election" during the same period. The same was then done for the data collected from the sample of all users' tweets that contained the #StoptheSteal. This revealed a clear correlation in the key themes identified in the histograms of Figure 5.4 and Figure 5.5 in a positive finding for Hypothesis 1. I also detailed a positive finding for Hypothesis 2 through sentiment analysis of those same datasets and found that both Trump and all users display a mixture of positive and negative sentiment both in the general corpus as well as within individual tweets that serves the dual purpose of reinforcing the ingroup whilst ostracising the outgroup.

Overall, the #StoptheSteal narrative on Twitter served two key functions. It offered an opportunity to reaffirm and deepen ingroup identity and solidarity, and it ostracised (or even demonised) the outgroup. This is consistent with the expectations of the dissemination of the Wedge Lie, the ultimate effect of which is to drive those groups further apart and increase animosity, or affective polarisation toward the "other".

⁷² <https://twitter.com/CandyNimrod/status/1324098819206897669>

Chapter 6: Survey Experiment Results and Analysis

“Civility is not a tactic or a sentiment. It is the determined choice of trust over cynicism, of community over chaos.” George W. Bush, 2001 Inaugural Address

6.1 Introduction

The previous Chapter detailed the journey of the Wedge Lie through the social media platform, Twitter (now X). It established a correlation between Trump’s dissemination of the lie and the public’s reiteration of it in their own tweets, in terms of both timing and volume along the timeline of the test period, as well as a consistency in the sentiment and emotional content of the narrative themes. But in order to explore the impact the Wedge Lie had on trust (Hypotheses 4-6), as well as the role of emotion in the impact of the lie (Hypotheses 7 and 8), I conducted an online survey experiment with US citizens. The survey’s value was twofold; it provided the means by which I could test the effect of the Wedge Lie in more controlled conditions through a manipulation of the participants’ memory of the lie. In addition, it served to counter the fuzziness of the data available from Twitter (see Chapter 8 for its limitations). The survey’s robust design (see Chapter 4) delivered the ability to test Hypotheses 4-8 with far greater accuracy.

This chapter will set out three strands of inquiry. Firstly, the theory of the Wedge Lie hypothesises that the lie will have a detrimental impact on political trust. That is, citizens’ trust in the institutions, process and actors of democratic governance. Secondly, as I have argued throughout this thesis, the Wedge Lie has a deleterious effect on social trust; the trust that communities of citizens have in each other. In this case, these are defined as the ingroup and outgroup audiences of the Wedge Lie. And lastly, I demonstrate what mediating role emotional responses triggered by the Wedge Lie may play in the changes in trust judgements.

6.2 Context

This research builds on a solid foundation of literature that has placed trust as a keystone of a well-functioning democracy. Behind the general downward trajectory of political trust in the US since the 1960s⁷³, there are ebbs and flows as might be expected in response to global or

⁷³ See <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/public-trust-in-government-1958-2023/> for a detailed tracker

domestic events such as wars, financial crises and elections. The regularity of elections that punctuate democratic societies, and the demand they place on citizens to accept the result and carry on, is built on the shifting sands of broad political trust. Best expressed in the scholarship on “losers’ consent” (Anderson et al., 2005; Anderson, 2005; Tilley and Hobolt, 2023), trust allows the losing side, however begrudgingly, to accept that they lost in a game that was fundamentally fair. That trust has multiple targets that can each serve to strengthen or weaken democratic health; trust in political leaders (Zmerli and Newton, 2007), trust in the media (Turner, 2018), trust in democratic institutions (Warren, 2018) and trust in the electoral process itself (Mauk, 2020).

In a signal of a presumed shift in public attitudes towards the trustworthiness of US elections, The American National Election Study (ANES) time series questionnaire in 2020 included for the first time a question specifically asking respondents to consider their trust in election officials where they live⁷⁴. 23% of respondents indicated that they trusted election officials “not at all” or “a little”. A further 32% only trusted election officials “a moderate amount”. A plurality of respondents were lukewarm at best in their trust of those overseeing the integrity of elections. The 2020 ANES time series was also the first time a question was included asking respondents how often they thought people who were eligible to vote were denied the right to vote⁷⁵. 49.6% of respondents to that question felt that eligible voters were denied their right to vote at least some of the time.

It bears highlighting that these questions were only asked in the pre-election wave, and so it is not possible to assess how the election itself may have impacted those figures, but it is clear that at the height of the election fraud narrative in the pre-election period, there was already a significant proportion of respondents who felt that the integrity of the election and voting rights were at risk. The choice of trust targets in each of those questions tracks with the central narrative themes that ran through the dissemination of the lie (for more detail, see Chapter 5 for detailed analysis of the narrative of the lie on Twitter).

⁷⁴ The question was asked in the first wave of the survey, taken before election day. It is disappointing that the question was not included in the second wave of the survey, conducted after the election. There is good reason to believe that there may have been a significant decline in trust in election officials among Republican or Republican-leaning voters, mirroring the sharp decline in trust in the election process overall as found in the *Morning Consult* referenced throughout this thesis, and found here: <https://morningconsult.com/form/tracking-voter-trust-in-elections/>

⁷⁵ As above, this question was also only fielded in the Pre-election survey, limiting the ability to analyse the effect of the events of the election period on respondents’ assessments.

The election itself, depending on whether you belong to the ingroup or the outgroup of the Wedge Lie, either made the lie manifest, or confirmed that the lie was in fact just that. A timeseries survey conducted by *Ipsos* for *Axios* tracked confidence in election fairness in 2019 and 2021 (see Figure 6.1). The impact of the election (including the build-up to it and its aftermath) is stark. Whilst confidence in the fairness of the next presidential election remains broadly consistent overall, there is a virtual flip between Democrats' and Republicans' confidence levels either side of the 2020 election. Thus the net stability in the overall level of confidence masks considerable gross volatility, which is heavily structured by partisanship.

Figure 6.1 Timeseries confidence in the fairness of the next US presidential election

Thinking about the rules and processes in place for voting in U.S. presidential elections, how much confidence do you have that the next presidential election will be open and fair?

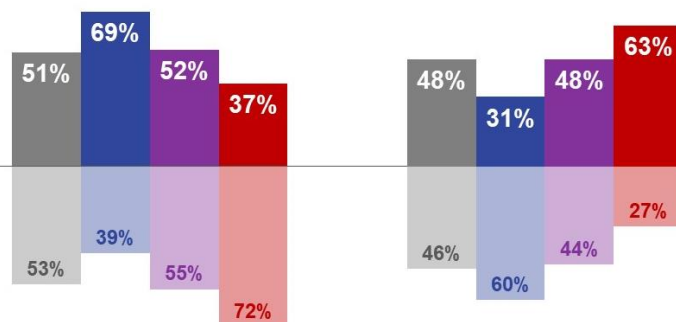
■ All Americans
■ Democrats
■ Independents
■ Republicans

A great deal/A fair amount of confidence

Not too much/No confidence

November 2021

September 2019



© 2021 Ipsos



Source:

Ipsos⁷⁶

It is arguable that this is consistent with the effects of winner/loser status (Anderson and LoTempio, 2002; Dassonville, 2023), however I have contended throughout this thesis that it is the nature of this Wedge Lie (both in its content, and in the act of being lied to) that drives the particularly deleterious impact on trust in the institutions and mechanisms of democracy seen in Figure 6.1. I have not been able to find comparable studies from elections prior to the Trump era that would enable a firm assessment that the 2020 shift post-election is unusually large. Perhaps the fact that 2020 saw increased polling (and in this case, the inclusion of a pre- and post- election comparison) on the perceived integrity of the US election system is an indication itself that pollsters, at least, felt the issue now necessitated investigation.

⁷⁶ For the full report on the poll, see <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/Axios-Voting>

Elections are, as Anderson and Anderson (2005, p.1) observe, *the* place to find winners and losers in sharp focus. The case of the 2020 US Presidential election reduced that clarity to a much murkier picture, I argue, not simply because of The Big lie, but because of the type of lie it was; a Wedge Lie. To test the concept of the Wedge Lie and its impact on trust, I now turn to the second strand of this investigation's design, presenting the results of the online experimental survey of US citizens. As discussed in Chapter 4, I prioritised sample size over representation along multiple demographic variables due to budget restrictions, and the experimental nature of the survey. Prolific delivered an initial sample of 1000 US citizens with a 50/50 gender split (Table 6.1).

The survey was designed to be completed in two waves (see Chapter 4), the second wave two weeks after the first. The time lag between the two waves was selected to allow participants to put the questions of the first wave largely out of their minds, whilst retaining interest in completing the second wave, thus providing a better opportunity to explore my causal claims by utilising longitudinal data. Each of the 1000 participants that completed the first wave was invited to also complete the second wave. 849 of the original 1000 first wave participants completed the second wave, delivering a retention rate of 84.9%.

An additional control was introduced as the survey was live to split the second wave into two halves, separated by a week. This decision was made to mitigate any priming effect of the news of Trump's conviction in the E. Jean Carroll civil case, which coincided with the planned deployment of the second wave⁷⁷; in fact, no such effect was found across the split sample. As such, 500 participants were contacted two weeks after the first wave, and the remaining 500 were contacted three weeks after completing the first wave.

⁷⁷ [Jury finds Donald Trump sexually abused E. Jean Carroll in civil case \(cnn.com\)](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/27/justice/trump-sexual-abuse-carroll/index.html)

Table 6.1 Socio-demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants

Political Party ID	All (n=1013)		Democrats (n=486)		Republicans (n=184)		Independents (n=306)	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender								
Female	493	49.01	271	55.99	85	46.96	120	39.47
Male	500	49.7	207	42.77	96	53.04	179	58.88
Other	13	1.29	6	1.24	0	0.00	5	1.64
Age								
18-24	89	8.79	56	11.52	7	3.80	26	8.50
25-34	382	37.71	190	39.09	56	30.43	120	39.22
35-44	287	28.33	136	27.98	57	30.98	83	27.12
45-54	136	13.43	59	12.14	33	17.93	43	14.05
55-64	74	7.31	27	5.56	20	10.87	22	7.19
65+	45	4.44	18	3.07	11	5.98	12	3.92
Household Income								
Less than \$25,000	139	13.75	61	12.60	19	10.33	51	16.67
\$25,000-\$49,999	234	23.15	116	23.97	34	18.48	74	24.18
\$50,000-\$99,999	383	37.88	176	36.36	88	47.83	104	33.99
\$100,000-\$199,999	208	20.57	108	22.31	36	19.57	61	19.93
\$200,000+	47	4.65	23	4.75	7	3.80	16	5.23
Highest Education								
High School	298	29.74	131	27.12	60	32.97	99	32.78
Bachelor's Degree	474	47.31	246	50.93	85	46.70	123	40.73
Master's Degree	141	14.07	67	13.87	14	7.69	56	18.54
Doctorate	38	3.79	19	3.93	7	3.85	11	3.64
Trade/Vocational	51	5.09	20	4.14	16	8.79	13	4.30
Ethnicity								
White/Caucasian	737	72.75	339	69.75	151	82.07	221	72.22
Asian - Eastern	81	8.00	48	9.88	9	4.89	24	7.84
Asian - Indian	12	1.18	5	1.03	1	0.54	5	1.63
Hispanic	66	6.52	32	6.58	12	6.52	16	5.23
African American	71	7.01	40	8.23	5	2.72	24	7.84
Native American	5	0.49	2	0.41	1	0.54	1	0.33
Mixed Race	34	3.36	20	4.12	2	1.09	11	3.59
Other	7	0.69	0	0.00	3	1.63	4	1.31

6.3 Political Trust

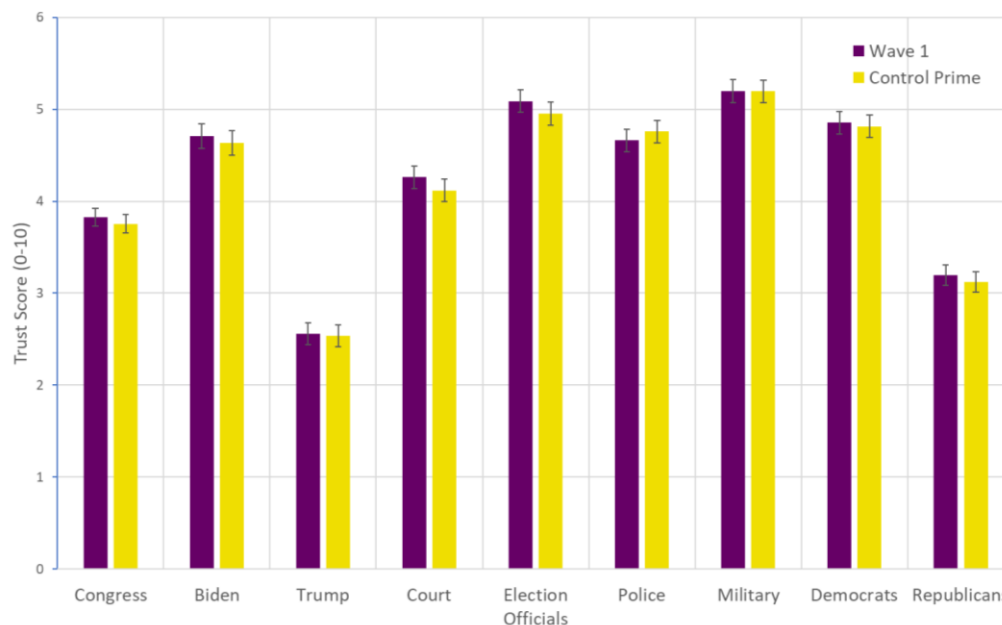
It is no revelation that trust in political actors and institutions is historically low, and has been on a stubbornly downward trend since the tumultuous social changes of the 1960s⁷⁸. As shown in Chapter 2, past research on the links between political trust and support for the political

⁷⁸ Detailed trust tracking conducted by Pew, here: [Public Trust in Government: 1958-2023 | Pew Research Center](#)

system shows that, at best, declining trust leads to a growing sense of democratic malaise (Norris, 2011) and at worst to a crisis of legitimacy (Dalton, 2004). However, even in times of high anxiety about the health of democracy in the US, some scholars, often writing in traditional media outlets (Fukuyama, 2017; Ura and Theriault, 2021) offered reassurance that democracy could withstand the deeply negative attitudes towards political actors because of the strength of the institutions of democracy and public confidence therein.

In order to investigate trust in the actors and institutions of government, I fielded a standard trust assessment question on a range of nine targets: “on a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being very distrustful, and 10 being completely trusting), how much do you trust the following institutions or people to behave fairly?”. This question mirrored standard measurements found in large-scale and cross-national surveys such as the ANES and the World Values Survey (WVS). The question was fielded in Wave 1 of the survey, and then repeated in Wave 2 after the randomised split of the sample into control and treatment groups. In Wave 1, participants were asked this question immediately after standard demographic screening questions so as not to prime responses with any mention of politics. Respondents in the control group exhibit virtually no difference in their trust assessments across the two waves (see Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2 Pre- and Post- Average Trust Scores for Participants in the Control Group

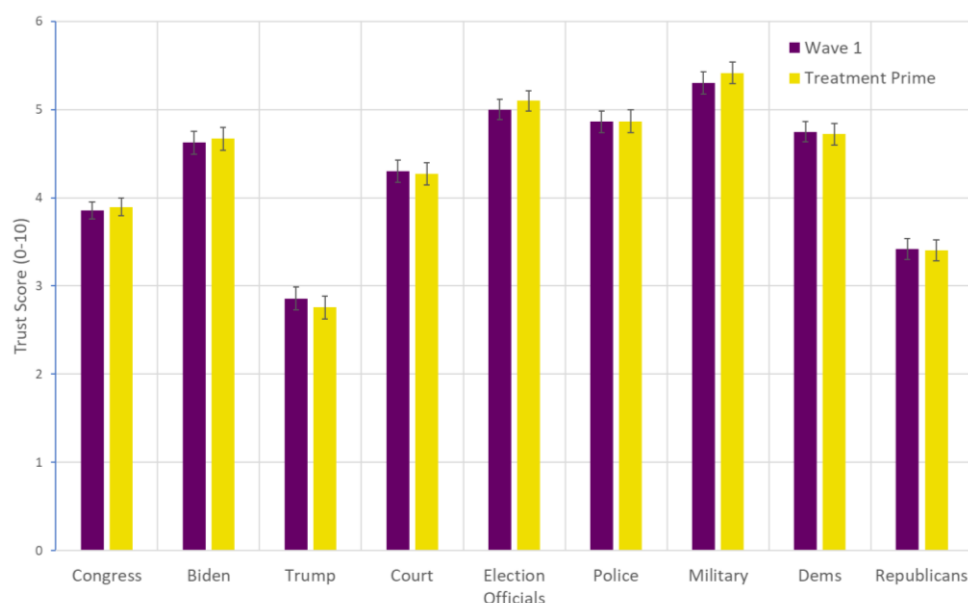


(Total n = 425. 95% CIs)

In line with almost all historic polling on political trust⁷⁹, the results indicate low levels of trust in political leaders, with higher levels of trust in the partisan-neutral institutions such as the military, the police and election officials. The comparatively low scores for both Trump and Republicans is a reflection of the under-representation of Republican or conservative-identifying respondents (Table 6.1).

The concept of the Wedge Lie predicts a negative impact on political trust. Having asked respondents in the treatment group to recall their memories of the 2020 election, Figure 6.3 presents the average trust scores for that group in a pre- and post-prime comparison.

Figure 6.3 Pre- and Post- Average Trust Scores for Participants in the Treatment Group

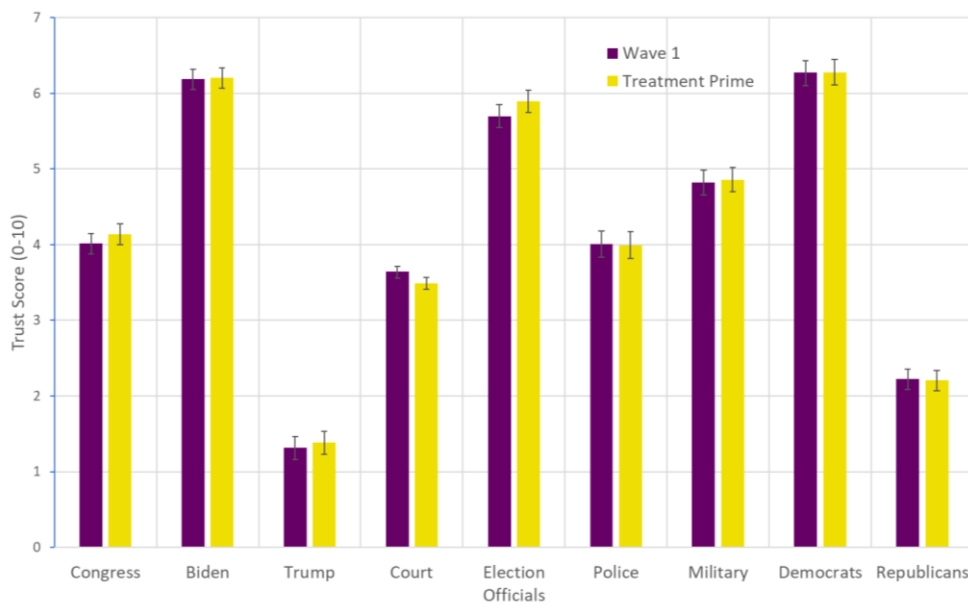


(Total n = 418. 95% CIs)

Amongst all respondents, there was no statistically significant difference between the Wave 1 responses and those given after the treatment prime. While this indicates that the treatment had no effect, the theory of the Wedge Lie proposes that it will polarise the ingroup and outgroup such that the average trust scores may mask shifts in each of the partisan groups. To explore any partisan differences in the effect of the treatment, I broke the treatment group into Democrat, Republican and Independent respondents. Those partisan results are detailed in Figures 6.4 to 6.6.

⁷⁹ See here for a tracker in political institutions [Tracking U.S. Adults' Trust in Institutions | Morning Consult](#)

Figure 6.4 Pre- and Post- Average Trust Scores for Democrat Participants in the Treatment Group

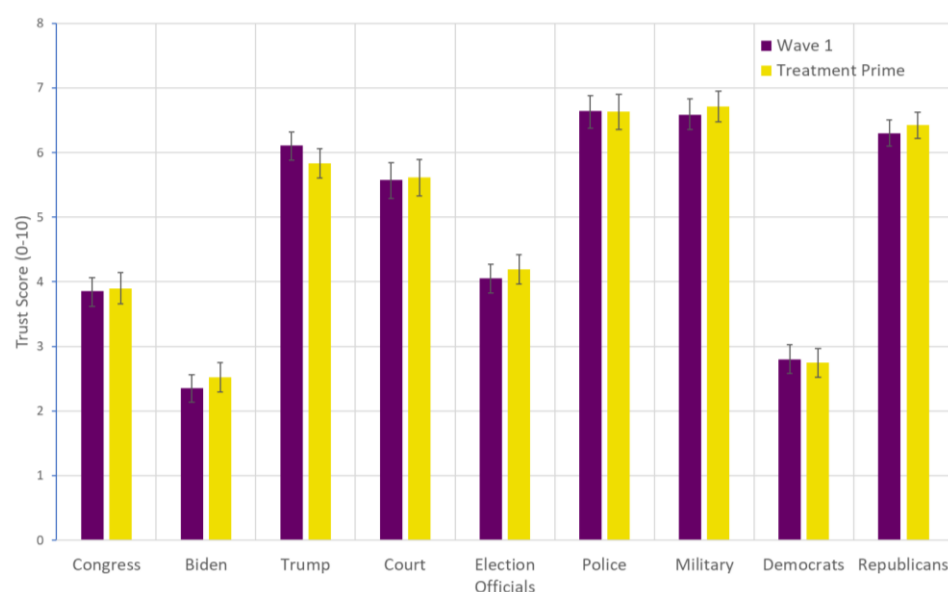


(Total n = 201. 95% CIs)

Contrary to the expectations of the Wedge Lie theory, Democrat respondents (Figure 6.4) exhibited virtually no change in their trust assessments after recalling the 2020 election. Despite, as I will set out in detail later in this chapter, there being frequent articulations of anger directed at those political leaders and institutions, this does not translate into a further deterioration of trust in those same targets. There are a number of possible explanations for this, including the “baked-in” effect; that partisan divisions are now so entrenched that trust judgements are calcified, leaving little room for change even in the face of otherwise emotionally provocative triggers. This, though, would not explain the static trust in the partisan-neutral targets such as the military and the police, which may be better explained by the passage of time since the heat of the election and its immediate aftermath. It is perhaps notable that the only target with even a moderate shift is a positive impact of the treatment prime on trust in election officials, who found themselves (presumably unwillingly) as a target for claims of election fraud.

Notably, Republican respondents (Figure 6.5) even displayed a modest increase in their trust of President Biden, almost exactly commensurate with a drop in trust of President Trump. In other words, ingroup division was triggered by memories of the election; something that is borne out in detail in the open text responses as I demonstrate later in this chapter.

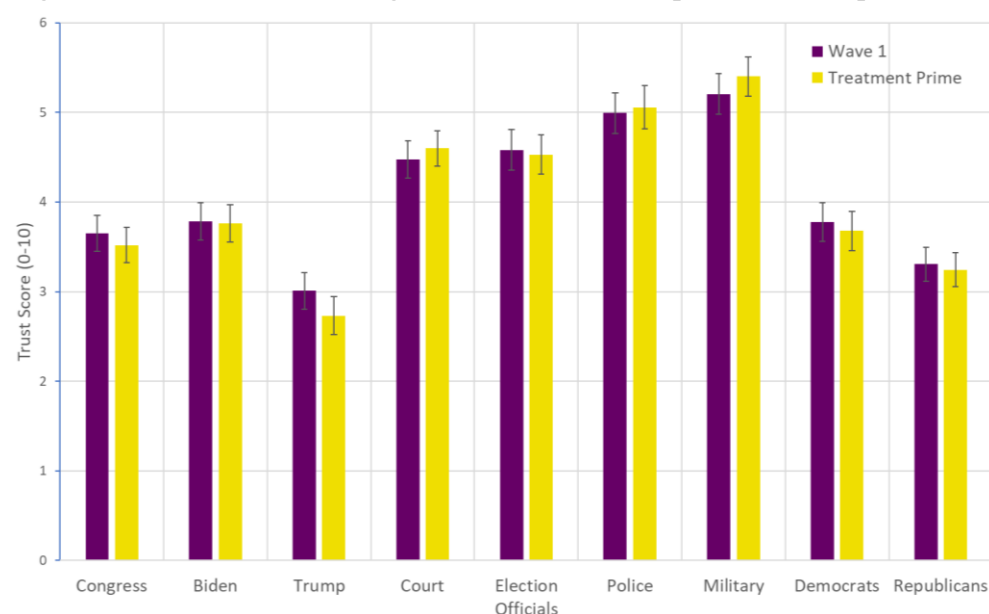
Figure 6.5 Pre- and Post- Average Trust Scores for Republican Participants in the Treatment Group



(Total n = 90. 95% CIs)

Those points of interest aside, Republican respondents also demonstrate virtually no change in their trust assessments of these targets. Taken with the open text responses detailed below, it is possible that the ingroup divisions may be masking a reduction in trust from some respondents, cancelling out a rise in trust exhibited by others. Whilst I was not able to test this within the scope of this research, this possible dynamic offers an interesting new avenue of potential research into the impact of Wedge Lies on intragroup relations. Independent respondents (Figure 6.6) are similarly static across the two waves.

Figure 6.6 Pre- and Post- Average Trust Scores for Independent Participants in the Treatment Group



(Total n = 127. 95% CIs)

Independents display a slightly higher levels of trust in Republicans and Republican leaders in comparison to their Democrat equivalents, and as discussed in the next section of this chapter, this also translates to their assessments of conservatives and liberals. But for the purposes of this research, it is clear that in all three partisan subgroups, political trust appears to be broadly inured to the effect of the Wedge Lie within the conditions of the survey experiment, certainly once considerable time has passed since the lie was at its most salient (i.e. in the months immediately prior to, and after, the election). These results indicate a null finding for Hypothesis 4, which predicted a deleterious impact on political trust. As I shall discuss in Chapter 8 the next phase of research into the concept of Wedge Lies is to track political trust (as well as intergroup trust) in real time as a Wedge Lie is being disseminated and acted upon; two and a half years after the election itself has potentially allowed views to ossify. As a further reflection upon the design of the experiment, it is worth noting that longitudinal studies show stability in trust notwithstanding temporary shocks. Trust attitudes are broadly stable but appear to respond to short-term fluctuation. This experiment tried to recreate such a fluctuation and did not succeed; my assessment of the cause of that is that the treatment prime was perhaps too vague, testing more for any recollection of the Wedge Lie, rather than specifically asking respondents to focus directly on it out of an abundance of caution against over-priming respondents. I expand on this further in Chapter 8, but note that this presents a point of learning for others in designing trust experiments and interpreting the data that emerges.

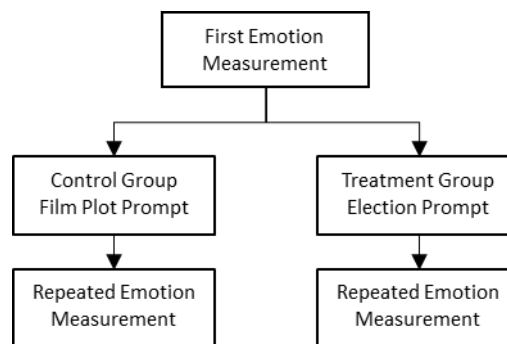
6.4 Emotion

In Chapter 3, I hypothesised that the mediating role of emotion becomes critical to the impact of a Wedge Lie. If we accept the premise, as I argue in that Chapter that we must, that emotions form a key part of decision-making, then it follows that we need to understand *how* and *which* emotions are engaged by the Wedge Lie and what impact that raised emotional state has on both the ingroup and outgroup audiences of the lie. Indeed, following Bonansinga's (2020) example, I now turn to an exploration of the peculiarity of the relationship between emotionality and Wedge Lies.

In order to assess the impact of the Wedge Lie on the emotional state of survey respondents, I fielded a standard self-reporting question (Marcus et al., 2017) to measure respondents' current intensity of feeling of six different emotions: anger, happiness, sadness, worry, frustration and

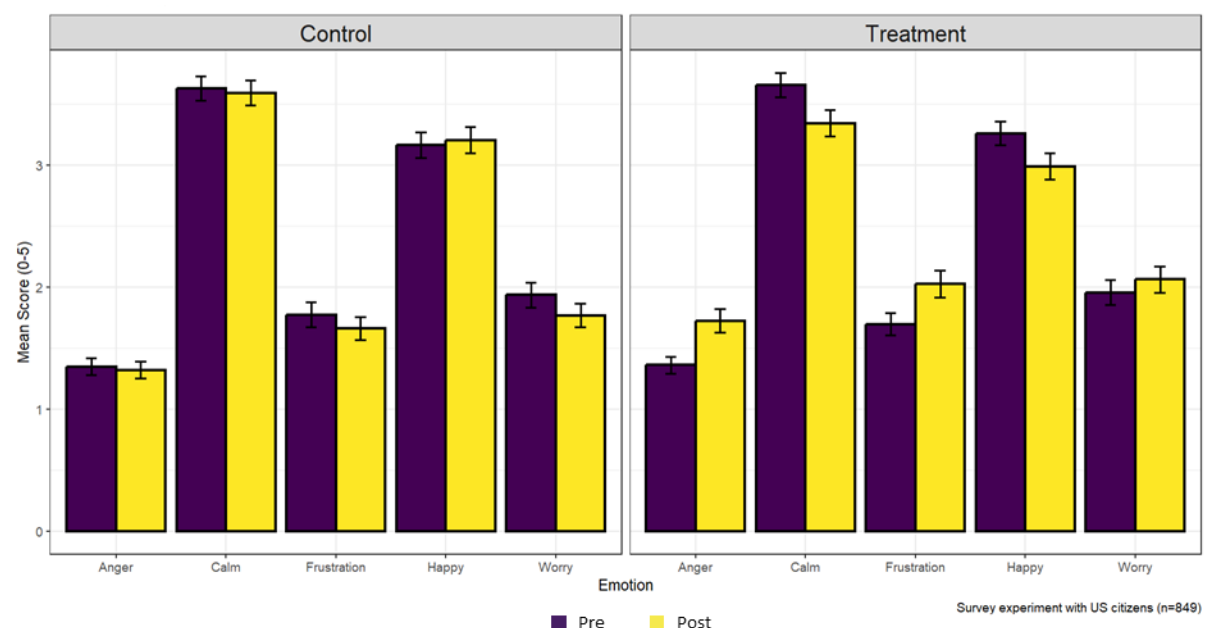
calmness. Following the prompt “*right now, to what extent are you feeling...*”, the emotions were presented in a random order, and respondents selected radio buttons along a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very strong feeling*. It was the first question of the second wave of the survey, before the split of the sample into control and treatment groups. I then repeated the question again, straight after the control and treatment prompts, as illustrated in Figure 6.7, to gauge the immediate impact of the election primer on respondents’ emotional state.

Figure 6.7 Emotion measurement question flow



The results of the pre- and post-prompt measurements are detailed in Figure 6.8 for both the control and treatment groups.

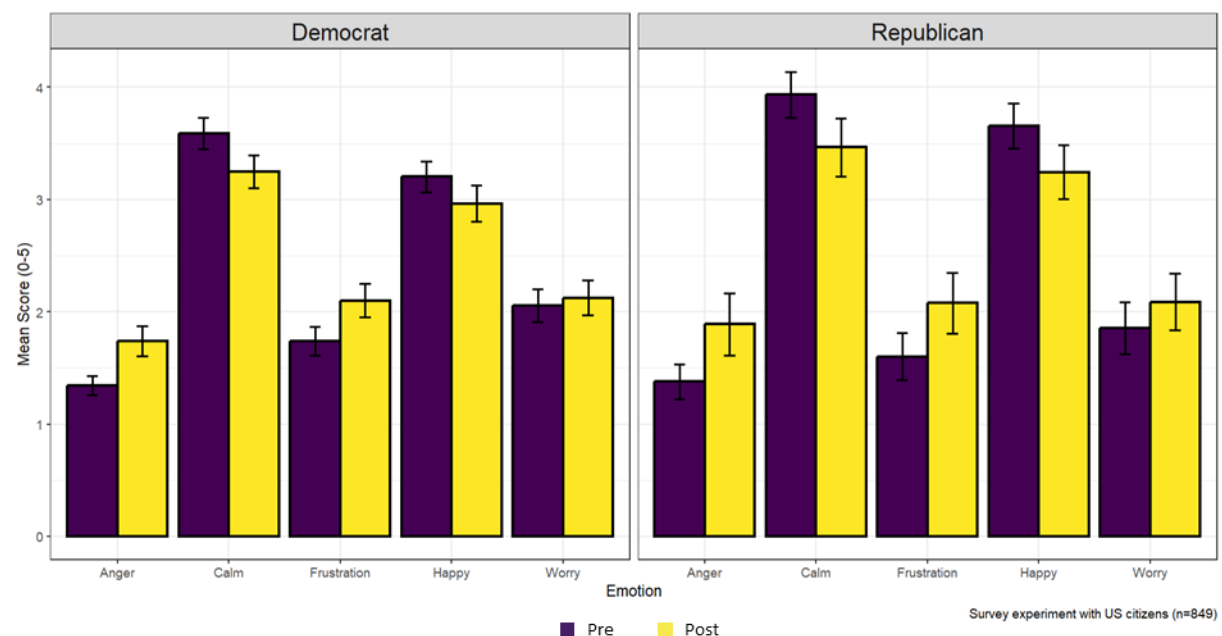
Figure 6.8 Pre and Post Scores for Emotion Questions (Control vs Treatment Conditions)



The results show the significant effect of the election prime treatment. With the exception of *worry*, each of the surveyed emotions show a significant shift after respondents recall their memories of the 2020 US election. In comparison with those in the control group, those in the election treatment group display significant reductions in positive emotions such as *happiness* and *calmness*. Conversely, there are significant increases in the negative emotions such as *anger* and *frustration*. Despite being a negative emotion, *worry* is comparatively static. It is arguable that the reduced effect on *worry* is due to the request for respondents to recall memories of a contentious time, as opposed to asking about their assessments of the future. In other words, I would expect to see greater increases in *worry* in response to a question asking participants to consider the Wedge Lie in the context of forthcoming elections.

As with the pattern that emerged in the trust measurements above, and as hypothesised in my conceptualising the Wedge Lie, I would expect to see both ingroup and outgroup audiences (in this instance broadly broken along partisan Republican/Democrat line) experience significant emotional change as a result of interacting with the lie. Figure 6.9 breaks down the election treatment group results into those self-identifying as Republicans and Democrats, again looking at the pre- and post-treatment scores.

Figure 6.9 Pre and Post Scores for Emotion Questions (Partisans in the Treatment Condition)



As predicted by my conceptualisation of the Wedge Lie, there are significant changes in recorded emotions after the election treatment in both the ingroup and the outgroup. Furthermore, the *direction* of the changes is the same across both partisan groups, e.g., anger

and frustration rise in both groups, while calmness falls for both. Notably, the greater differences can be seen in the Republican respondents. Arguably, this is attributable to being on the “losing” side of the election, but as the open text responses reveal, below, Republican anger and frustration is multidirectional; that is, there is more than one target for their negative emotions.

While the changes in the emotional state of respondents can clearly be seen across both the ingroup and the outgroup, the quantitative data alone cannot tell us anything about the specific triggers for each group, nor about the target of those increased negative emotions. The inclusion of an open text response (i.e. what they recorded for their memory prime) was designed to gather more nuanced qualitative data to give texture to the empirical results. The responses were collated and manually coded to identify those responses that referenced the Wedge Lie, those that explicitly expressed an emotion, and those that more obliquely used emotionally charged words or phrases such as “traitors”. To do this, I collated references to Trump, his supporters (including descriptives such as conservatives or MAGA) and the Republican Party, as well as the reverse for Biden, his supporters (or liberals) and the Democrat Party. Due to the relatively small quantity of text to be analysed, I was able to manually code the open text responses, rather than using publicly available sentiment dictionaries, an approach determined to yield favourably accurate results when compared to “off-the-shelf” sentiment dictionaries (Van Atteveldt et al., 2021). As might be anticipated, responses from those identifying as Democrats frame Donald Trump as the key target for their anger and frustration. Republican responses tell a more nuanced story (Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 Sentiment Analysis of Treatment Condition Open Text Responses

Democrat (n=201)	Mentions of Trump	Mentions of Biden
Total	206	152
Positive	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Negative	187 (91%)	11 (7%)
Neutral	19 (9%)	141 (93%)
Republican (n=90)	Mentions of Trump	Mentions of Biden
Total	82	66
Positive	48 (58%)	0 (0%)
Negative	12 (15%)	41 (62%)
Neutral	22 (27%)	25 (38%)

It is worth mentioning, although not in the remit of this research to further investigate, there is a marked difference in each partisan group's assessment of their own candidate. A plurality of Republican assessments of Trump are positive, with responses framed through the lens of him being a more visibly popular candidate (through the size of his rallies), as well as the worthy and rightful winner of the election. But, as I set out in more detail later in this chapter, Republicans are twice as likely to refer to their candidate negatively, displaying frustration and anger primarily at his conduct in the immediate aftermath of the election.

Although neither side make any positive references to the outgroup candidate, Republicans make frequent positive references to Trump while Democrats refer to Biden almost entirely neutrally. Indeed, Democrat respondents make no positive references to Biden at all, and 7% of references to him are negative. The negative framing is almost entirely linked to his age and cognitive abilities during the campaign; a point that continues to pervade candidate assessments of Biden going into the 2024 election⁸⁰.

The negative emotions expressed by Democrats towards Trump have two key focal points. The first, and most prominent, is his repeated assertion of the Wedge Lie; that the election was rigged, there was widespread fraud, and that he was the legitimate winner of an election that had been stolen from him. The second, less frequent expression of anger and even disgust revolves around his demeanour as a candidate and during his tenure in office.

When referring to the lie, there is palpable residual anger:

"I remember I wanted Biden to win and that we were informed of the results the day after the actual elections and Trump did not accept the results. A few weeks later the assault to the Capitol took place and I felt outraged at Trump and conservatives in general for causing that tragedy where people several people lost their lives." Democrat Respondent

"Donald Trump was incredibly overbearing and obnoxious during the 2020 US election. His fanbase was ridiculously manipulated into thinking the election was stolen from him. Trump also supported the outlandish idea that the election was rigged/stolen. All of his lies led to the January 6th insurrection. Trump's claims helped to further divide Americans politically." Democrat Respondent

⁸⁰ One of many articles framing Biden's age as a particular problem for his campaign is here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/10/us/politics/biden-trump-aging.html>

"Biden won the election with narrow victories in the rust belt states as well as Georgia, Arizona, and Nevada. Trump lied and his supporters, consistently divorced from reality and with the minds of spoiled children, were in denial of Biden's victory and eventually tried to overthrow the government on Jan. 6th." Democrat Respondent

"I understand there was so much going on and what all is a mystery to most of us. Donald Trump, as usual was a liar and trying his best to have the nation racist and so against each other. It was a trying time for a lot of people. I do remember how much Trump was going on about fraud and voting rights. I hope we never have to have him as a candidate again. He has caused so much terrible actions in the US it is unreal. I get sick when I hear his voice or see his ugly face." Democrat Respondent

However, not all references to the lie are emotionally framed, either positively or negatively. In 31% of Democratic responses that mention the lie, it is presented as a simple statement of fact: *"Biden beat Trump 306-232 in the electoral college but the margin to swing the election was about 70k votes in 3 states. Trump overperformed the polls but has spent the last 3 years claiming it was stolen from him and trying to incite violence"* (Democrat Respondent). It is arguable that these relatively muted responses, like the relatively unchanged levels in Democrat respondents' trust in Trump across the pre- and post- treatment trust questions in the survey, are indicative of a long baked-in assessment of Trump and the lie itself. There remain further opportunities for research looking at the emotional impact of Wedge Lies in real time, rather than reflecting on it over two years later. Nonetheless, I argue that the strong emotional current that runs through the recollection of the election by Democrats (as well as Republicans as I shall address in turn) is a clear indication of the power of the Wedge Lie to both galvanise an emotional response, and for that impact to retain its power over time.

As predicted by my conception of the Wedge Lie, anger and frustration are also directed horizontally. 16% of Democrat respondents directly reference Trump supporters, with key linked concepts of them acting like a "mob", the insurrection on January 6th, and them being unthinking in their support of Trump. A further 15% make more oblique references to Trump supporters through discussion of "riots" and "violence".

"The result – that Biden won – was stated on Saturday, four days after election. Trump immediately contested the results and continued to do so, riling up his supporters, to put

it mildly. The insurrection at the Capitol on January almost resulted in public officials being assassinated. T[rump] is a danger to humanity.” Democrat Respondent

“My personal feeling was a feeling of fear as I could not see this country surviving another four years of that egotistical monster. It blew my mind how his supporters did not understand how awful he had been.” Democrat Respondent

The demonstrable anger, frustration and incredulity at Trump supporters aligns with my hypothesis that a Wedge Lie will drive the ingroup and outgroup audiences further apart through an increase in polarisation. Turning to the Republican responses, the emotional agitation and polarisation that runs through the Democrat answers, also needs to be present on the Republican side to meet the conditions of the Wedge Lie:

“The election was very heated and strong with both sides tugging back and forth. Liberals were nasty and uncivilized which wasn’t appealing. Trump had his election stolen with lost votes and extra mail in ballots from Biden.” Republican Respondent

“They both hated each other a lot. Idiot democrats were so misled and willing to believe anyone too just because they hated Trump. Safe to say its been a disaster since. We had it made under Trump and the economy was so progressing.” Republican Respondent

In total, 21% of Republican responses referred to “liberals” or “Democrats”, with a further 8% referencing Biden supporters directly. In every case, the references are negatively framed.

Republican anger is consistently bound up in the memory of the Wedge Lie, but the Republican responses were more nuanced than Democrats in the direction of their negative emotion. As I will explore at length in the final results chapter analysing the data collected from the semi-structured interviews with US state lawmakers, Republican anger and frustration is directed towards the outgroup, but it also turns inwards to fellow members of the ingroup and to the leader of the ingroup, Trump himself. The divisions exposed by the open text answers to the survey question, as well as the interview data gathered from Georgia state lawmakers is drawn between those who might be referred to as “true believers”; those who have fully bought into the Wedge Lie, and as such see any deviation from that position as a betrayal of the ingroup and its figurehead.

“Biden, who hid out in his basement, aka “Basement Joe”, during most of the campaign, “won” via the use of fraudulent votes. He currently has an “approval” rating of only 36% and they all still think he won the election fair and square.” Republican Respondent

“Counting was shut down at 3am because people were tired, LOL. How corrupt is that? Then when everyone woke up, guess what? Biden was ahead in the votes. This is a pattern going on with elections around the world. All I can say is, people will get what they deserve.” Republican Respondent

On the other side of this internal division are more moderate ingroup members who retain enough peripheral vision to see a threat to the whole ingroup from the core of hardline true believers.

“It felt like it would be a normal election – a gracious loser. It was the strangest thing with Trump protesting his loss and insisting the votes were wrong. It was actually quite embarrassing for him I would think.” Republican Respondent

“I remember that Biden won, Trump lied and lied and lied, and then tried to stage a coup/temper tantrum.” Republican Respondent

Internequine anger was unanticipated in my conception of the Wedge Lie, but it runs through the Republican responses and as such offers a potential avenue for further research as I shall return to in the following chapters. It also helps to clarify and contextualise some of the unexpected results of the survey experiment. In the survey sample, 15% of Republican respondents referenced Trump supporters or Trump himself negatively.

6.5 Regression Analysis

Thus far, I have set out what emotional responses have been (and continue to be) triggered by the Wedge Lie through the survey experiment. But the theory of the Wedge Lie requires us to think beyond what emotions are stirred, and the impact that might have on trust, to what mediating effect they may have on trust judgements. To address this, I ran a linear regression analysis of changes in trust in the four most salient targets pre- and post-treatment. Based on the descriptive results (see Figures 6.2 - 6.6), I selected four salient targets (Biden, Trump, Election Officials and Congress) to investigate. To test the theory of the Wedge Lie, I needed to account for the stimulus (e.g. the treatment), the affective arousal caused by the stimulus

amongst different partisan groups, and participants' prior party ID (which also identifies them as the ingroup or outgroup in the lie) and a relevant outcome for democracy, e.g. trust. Therefore, for the sake of both parsimony and a tight focus on the Wedge Lie, I included three key independent variables in my linear regression;

1. treatment condition (movie plot control or election memory)
2. emotional change (specifically the change in anger pre and post treatment. Anger was selected as it showed the most movement in the pre- and post-treatment scores in the descriptive statistics, as well as being robustly documented as being a high-arousal emotion that is a strong predictor of consequential political behaviours (see Chapter 3 for full discussion))
3. party identification (to account for partisan motivated reasoning)

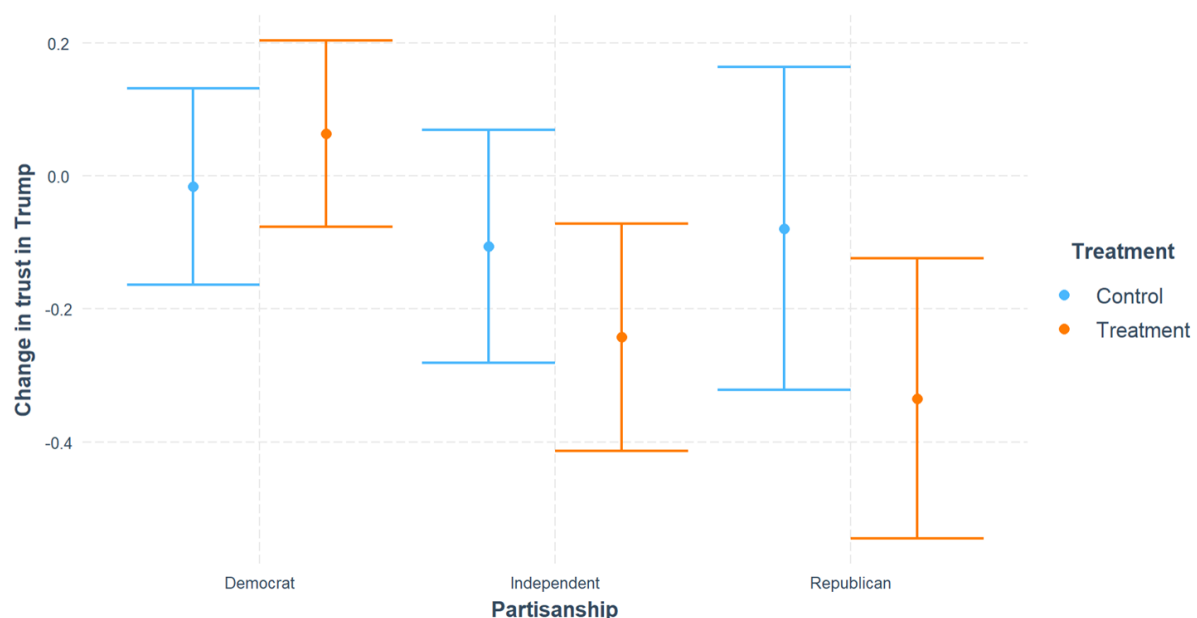
In the model, I ran interaction effects to account for the theoretical assumption that the impact of my stimulus will be dependent (and therefore differential) on both the level of emotional arousal and prior party ID. The full results can be seen in Table 6.3.

Table 6.3 Linear Regression Analysis Treatment/Party/Emotion Full Results

<i>Predictors</i>	Trump_Trust_Change			Officials_Trust_Change			Congress_Trust_Change			Biden_Trust_Change		
	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	-0.01	-0.14 – 0.12	0.877	-0.12	-0.39 – 0.16	0.408	-0.09	-0.30 – 0.12	0.383	-0.06	-0.23 – 0.12	0.536
Treatment [Treatment]	0.07	-0.13 – 0.27	0.498	0.41	-0.00 – 0.82	0.051	0.29	-0.03 – 0.60	0.076	0.13	-0.13 – 0.40	0.322
Anger Change	-0.03	-0.36 – 0.30	0.851	-0.29	-0.97 – 0.39	0.402	-0.20	-0.72 – 0.33	0.461	-0.25	-0.69 – 0.18	0.258
Party [Independent]	-0.02	-0.24 – 0.19	0.829	-0.12	-0.56 – 0.32	0.587	0.07	-0.27 – 0.41	0.684	-0.07	-0.35 – 0.21	0.631
Party [Republican]	0.02	-0.24 – 0.28	0.873	-0.04	-0.57 – 0.49	0.875	-0.05	-0.46 – 0.37	0.829	-0.08	-0.42 – 0.26	0.644
Treatment [Treatment] × Anger Change	0.06	-0.31 – 0.43	0.758	0.05	-0.71 – 0.81	0.900	0.02	-0.56 – 0.61	0.934	0.14	-0.34 – 0.63	0.565
Treatment [Treatment] × Party [Independent]	-0.32	-0.64 – -0.01	0.044	-0.22	-0.86 – 0.43	0.509	-0.42	-0.91 – 0.07	0.096	-0.03	-0.44 – 0.38	0.885
Treatment [Treatment] × Party [Republican]	-0.44	-0.82 – -0.07	0.020	-0.15	-0.91 – 0.61	0.700	-0.12	-0.71 – 0.47	0.686	0.15	-0.33 – 0.64	0.536
Anger Change × Party [Independent]	-0.41	-0.86 – 0.04	0.074	-0.50	-1.41 – 0.42	0.286	0.07	-0.63 – 0.77	0.837	0.05	-0.53 – 0.64	0.860
Anger Change × Party [Republican]	-0.52	-1.08 – 0.04	0.069	-0.13	-1.28 – 1.01	0.819	0.67	-0.22 – 1.55	0.138	-0.00	-0.74 – 0.73	0.997
(Treatment [Treatment] × Anger Change) × Party [Independent]	0.67	0.11 – 1.22	0.018	0.59	-0.54 – 1.72	0.303	0.18	-0.69 – 1.05	0.685	0.14	-0.58 – 0.86	0.698
(Treatment [Treatment] × Anger Change) × Party [Republican]	0.66	0.05 – 1.27	0.035	0.44	-0.82 – 1.69	0.496	-0.46	-1.42 – 0.50	0.348	0.14	-0.66 – 0.94	0.735
Observations	824			823			822			823		
R ² / R ² adjusted	0.042 / 0.029			0.019 / 0.005			0.010 / -0.003			0.010 / -0.004		

As per the descriptive statistics presented earlier in this Chapter, we see statistically significant movement in trust in Trump. However, the stasis in the trust in the other targets remains. This is significant because contrary to the theory of the Wedge Lie, there have been no spillover effects of a decrease in trust in other targets, which may indicate that the effect on trust is limited to the “liar”. Or that there may have been some treatment design impacts, both of which I shall discuss in Chapter 8. There is also evidence of a three-way interaction effect between the election memory stimulus, anger and party. In a positive finding for Hypothesis 8, emotion (specifically anger) plays a mediating role, driving the decrease in trust in Trump (see Figure 6.11).

Figure 6.10 Two-Way Interaction Between Treatment and Partisanship (Trust in Trump, Column 1, Table 6.8)

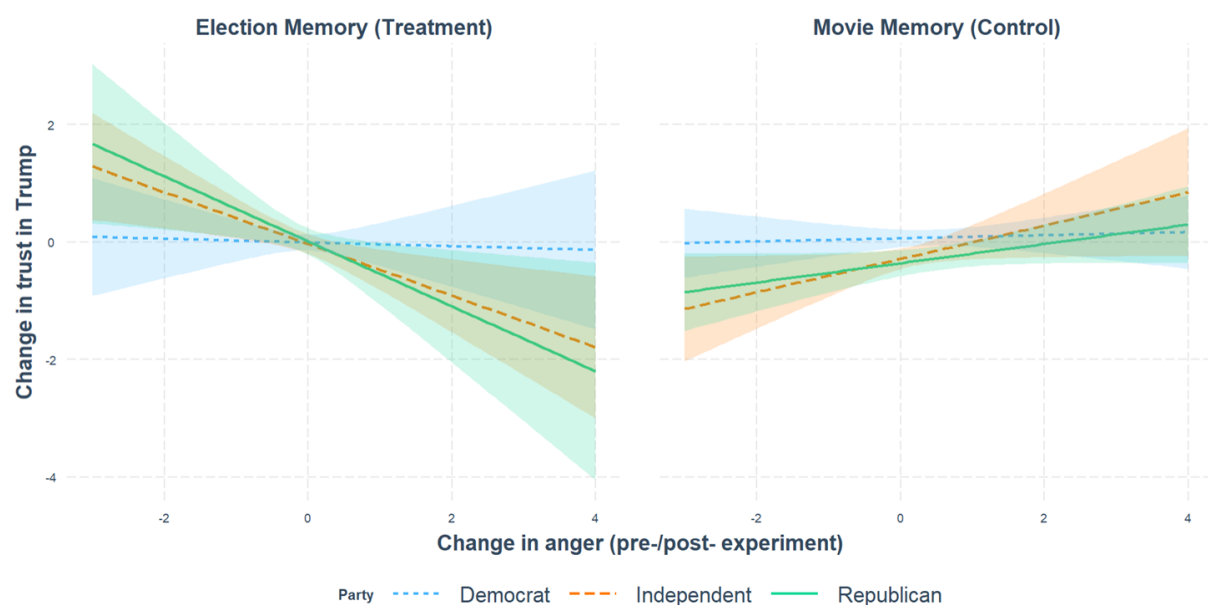


An unexpected finding emerged in the impact on trust in Trump in the two-way interaction between the election memory treatment and partisanship (Figure 6.10). It is clear there is no significant difference in the degree of change in participants’ trust in Trump, by partisanship, in the control treatment. However, there is significant difference in the election memory treatment, whereby Independent and Republican respondents showed a greater loss of trust in Trump than Democrats. There are two suggested causes of this phenomenon. The first is that Democrat voters’ trust in Trump is already so low as to leave little room to fall significantly further. The other, and more notable, suggested cause is the internecine split within Republican support between those who remain faithful to Trump, and those who have turned away from

him. I develop this in more detail in the following chapter. This may also explain the drop in Independent voters' trust in Trump due to the 'shy conservative' effect.

Once we move to a three-way interaction between treatment, partisanship and anger, we begin to see the impact of affect on trust levels (Figure 6.11). Once again, the control treatment prompts no change in trust levels. But once participants are prompted with the election memory treatment, the angrier they become, the more significant the fall in trust.

Figure 6.11 Three-way interaction between anger, treatment and partisanship (Trust in Trump, Column 1, Table 6.8)



Again, it is clear that Democrats' views of Trump are persistent despite the election prime treatment. As set out above, we may infer a suggested cause of this is that their trust levels in Trump were already anaemic. Long baked in, a rise in anger and the election prime treatment made little difference. Independents and Republican respondents were far more responsive to the interaction of the treatment and increased anger. It is Republicans who had furthest to fall with their trust in Trump, and they do so to a significant extent. This dynamic is strongly reinforced by the results of the elite interviews detailed in Chapter 7.

6.6 Social Trust

In Chapter 2, I set out the key role that social or intergroup trust has in the healthy functioning of democracy. This research follows Zmerli and Newton (2008) who argue that social trust is not in fact closely related to political trust, rather this social trust works alongside political trust,

to provide a broadly stable foundation for system confidence to sit upon. I have hypothesised that a Wedge Lie will undermine that critical foundation by driving polarisation between the ingroup and outgroup audiences. That polarisation is both affective, as I shall set out in detail in the next section of this chapter, as well as positional; by that I mean that the ingroup and outgroup become so far removed from each other as to have a deleterious effect on their trust in each other.

The question to gauge social trust was fielded in both the first and second wave of the survey. The first wave provided a baseline indication of intergroup trust levels, while the inclusion in the second wave measures the impact of the Wedge Lie recollection on that trust. In the second wave, the question appeared after the randomised split of the respondents into the control and treatment groups and their open text responses to the priming questions had been recorded. Tables 6.4 and 6.5 detail those that responded the target (liberals or conservatives) could generally be trusted, broken down by party affiliation.

Table 6.4 ‘Can be Trusted’ Target: Liberals

	DEMS	REPS	IND
Wave 1 Control Group	78%	29%	40%
Wave 2 Control Group	77%	24%	39%
Wave 1 Treatment Group	79%	28%	41%
Wave 2 Treatment Group	80%	13%	40%

Table 6.5 ‘Can be Trusted’ Target: Conservatives

	DEMS	REPS	IND
Wave 1 Control Group	24%	72%	30%
Wave 2 Control Group	21%	73%	28%
Wave 1 Treatment Group	23%	70%	31%
Wave 2 Treatment Group	16%	66%	23%

While Democrats and Republicans are predictably more trusting of liberals and conservatives respectively, Independent respondents are more likely to trust liberals over conservatives at the baseline. Additionally, Republicans are more trusting of liberals than Democrats are of conservatives at the baseline. Taken as a whole, there is a low starting point for intergroup trust, regardless of party identification, although identifying as an Independent voter is a predictor of higher baseline levels of trust in both liberals and conservatives. As might be predicted,

Democrat and Republican respondents filtered into the control group were largely consistent in their answers between Wave 1 and Wave 2.

Those respondents exposed to the election prime treatment reported altered trust scores between the first and second waves. However, a regression analysis (Table 6.6) reveals an unpredicted finding; the drop in social trust recorded in the survey was either caused by something exogenous to the treatment, or represents random noise in the survey results. Looking at the period of time between the first and second waves of the survey (during the first two weeks of May 2023), the most likely external influence was the verdict in the E Jean Carroll civil sexual assault case. That verdict was widely dismissed as politically motivated by Trump's supporters, and the subsequent order of damages to be paid to E Jean Carroll prompted his prominent advocates to call foul play.⁸¹ In response to the verdict, I staggered the second wave of the survey to mitigate against any priming effect on participants, but it appears at least quite likely that this did not go far enough. To test this more robustly I ran an ordinal linear regression of my social trust variable (Table 6.6). Here I followed the same modelling logic that I applied to my linear regression of political trust (specifically looking at the interaction between treatment, emotional arousal and party ID). For clarity, responses to my social trust variable were re-coded to a 3-way categorical variable where respondents either showed same, decreased or increased social trust in each target.

⁸¹ Responses to the damages awarded to E Jean Carroll are summarised, here: <https://www.newsweek.com/trumps-massive-monetary-verdict-carroll-trial-sets-maga-fire-1864504>

Table 6.6 Ordinal Logistic Regression Analysis: Social Trust

<i>Predictors</i>	Model 1: Change in Social Trust: Liberals			Model 2: Change in Social Trust Conservatives		
	<i>Odds Ratios</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Odds Ratios</i>	<i>CI</i>	<i>p</i>
Treatment [Treatment]	0.64	0.35 – 1.18	0.153	0.72	0.40 – 1.29	0.274
Anger Change	1.04	0.40 – 2.66	0.942	0.77	0.32 – 2.03	0.596
Party [Independent]	0.77	0.40 – 1.48	0.438	0.88	0.48 – 1.65	0.698
Party [Republican]	0.46	0.22 – 1.00	0.049	1.16	0.55 – 2.44	0.698
Treatment [Treatment] × Anger Change	1.43	0.50 – 4.15	0.521	1.43	0.49 – 3.92	0.509
Treatment [Treatment] × Party [Independent]	1.44	0.56 – 3.76	0.453	2.18	0.87 – 5.50	0.097
Treatment [Treatment] × Party [Republican]	2.05	0.67 – 6.28	0.208	0.90	0.31 – 2.67	0.853
Anger Change × Party [Independent]	1.38	0.38 – 4.81	0.622	1.52	0.42 – 5.04	0.512
Anger Change × Party [Republican]	1.76	0.37 – 7.73	0.452	4.50	1.07 – 20.07	0.043
(Treatment [Treatment] × Anger Change) × Party [Independent]	0.79	0.17 – 3.69	0.763	0.95	0.21 – 4.35	0.948
(Treatment [Treatment] × Anger Change) × Party [Republican]	0.40	0.08 – 2.20	0.276	0.28	0.05 – 1.36	0.118
Observations	825			825		
R ² Nagelkerke	0.073			0.060		

In separate models, identifying as a Republican and reported increased feelings of anger are the strongest indicators of a decrease in social trust. This is supported by looking at the marginal effects revealed by the regression analysis; Tables 6.7 and 6.8 demonstrate the effect of increased anger between the two measurements on changes in social trust in conservatives. Democrats whose anger increased by four units between t-1 and t-2, there was a 12% predicted probability that their social trust in conservatives decreased (Table 6.7), indicating a marginal effect in support of Hypothesis 8 that emotion plays a mediating role in driving trust in opposing group members downwards. Therefore, identifying as Republican was more important for changing trust in liberals, whereas anger was more instrumental in changing trust in conservatives. It therefore appears that the ingroup (Republican) respondents are motivated by a threat to their social identity, while outgroup (Democrat) respondents are more motivated by increased anger.

Table 6.7 % chance of increased anger leading to a decrease in trust in conservatives

# Response Level = Decrease in Trust Anger Change = + 4 units between t1 and t2		
Party	Predicted Probability	95% CI
Democrat	0.12	[0.02, 0.54]
Independent	0.02	[0.00, 0.16]
Republican	0.00	[0.00, 0.05]

What is perhaps more instructive, is that there is a 0% predicted probability that Republicans reporting a 4-unit increase in anger will decrease their trust in conservatives. Although not statistically significant, it may suggest that Republicans whose anger increased the most, were not targeting that anger at conservatives. This is a possible indication that their anger is directed at the outgroup, which would support Hypothesis 5. This emotionally-driven polarisation is further supported by looking at the *increase* in trust in conservatives (Table 6.8).

Table 6.8 % chance of increased anger leading to an increase in trust in conservatives

# Response Level = Increase in Trust Anger Change = + 4 units between t1 and t2		
Party	Predicted Probability	95% CI
Democrat	0.04	[0.00, 0.25]
Independent	0.21	[0.03, 0.69]
Republican	0.58	[0.11, 0.94]

For Republicans whose anger increased by four units between t-1 and t-2, there was a 58% predicted probability that their social trust in conservatives also increased. The predicted probability of a similar increase for Democrats who experienced the same increase in anger was just 4% (and as the confidence interval crosses zero, it is arguable that their social trust in conservatives did not change at all). Increased levels of anger appears to be driving opposing groups further into their own camps. The role of emotion is a key tenet of the Wedge Lie's theoretical framework, and so I now turn to a more detailed analysis of the emotions expressed through the survey responses.

Central to the concept of the Wedge Lie, is the clear demarcation between the ingroup and the outgroup, and the further polarisation of those two groups. In the Twitter data, collated during the height of the Wedge Lie narrative, the language was highly emotive. Particularly for those in the ingroup, us vs. them was framed in the language of “patriots” vs “traitors” or “cheaters”.

AMERICAN #PATRIOTS are now Awake and Engaged... “We’re MAD AS HELL AND WE’RE NOT GONNA TAKE IT ANYMORE!!” We, my #PATRIOT Brothers and Sisters... WE ARE the #KRAKEN! #StopTheSteal #Overturn #StandWithTrump

Tweet by @flunn 23rd December 2020

The domestic terrorists and their complicit “revolutionary” traitors, are trying to martyr the woman who was shot in the course of an attempted coup. These people are deplorable and disgusting.

Tweet by @OwningMySpace 6th January 2021

In the survey open responses, a shift in the language towards simply identifying the other side as “Democrats”, “liberals” or “Trump supporters” indicates a lowering of the emotional temperature as might be expected two years beyond the election. But the framing of the responses is overwhelmingly negative as set out above, and so this moderation in the chosen descriptors should not be construed as a receding of the divisions exploited and exacerbated by the Wedge Lie. In fact, both the ingroup and the outgroup articulate the extreme polarisation of the American public and identify the 2020 election as a driver of those divisions.

“It was very chaotic. The results were contested by many in the republican party and some domestic terrorists incited an insurrection under Trump's direction. It was a very divisive and upsetting time.”

Democrat respondent

“I remember that this was probably the most divided the country has ever been. You were either all the way in with one of the two candidates. People were going insane and this stemmed from the media constantly talking about it. Mail in ballots were and [sic] issue and a lot of people lost trust in the USA voting system.”

Republican respondent

6.7 Lingering Narrative Themes

At the time of the survey’s distribution (in Spring 2023), the US was over two years past the inauguration of President Biden on January 20th 2021, the coda to the unprecedented election period. The open text question in the election prime treatment group was also designed to see how much the Wedge Lie still permeated memories of the 2020 election over two years later.

Table 6.9 Additional Themes Emerging from Survey Open Responses

Theme	Examples
Key States Republicans expressed continued perceptions of irregularities in voting or vote counting in the key states of Pennsylvania, Arizona and Georgia. Democrat respondents referring to those states largely poured scorn on that narrative, including multiple references to Trump's call to Georgia Sec. of State, Brad Raffensperger.	<i>"Trump was leading when I went to bed. Almost everyone thought Trump had it in the bag. The betting market was like 80% Trump. When I woke up, Trump had mysteriously lost the lead in all of the key swing states like Georgia and Arizona. The entire thing was/is a FARCE and will DESTROY America as it is on path to do so."</i> Republican respondent <i>"Donald Trump declared victory on Tuesday night and used the delays in counting votes to create chaos/confusion. Donald Trump called election officials in Georgia asking for them to find 11,000 votes for him so he could win."</i> Democrat respondent
Ballots Republican suspicions surrounding mail-in ballots, the Dominion voting machines ⁸³ , or otherwise fraudulent ballots. Democrats also recounted the controversy but there was a recurrent linking of mail-in ballots to the ongoing pandemic that led to dramatic increases in remote voting ⁸⁴ .	<i>"I remember all of the claims beforehand that the election was rigged. Since mail in voting was a popular option in the pandemic those votes were counted later so at first it looked like Trump had a lead until all of the mail in ballots started to be counted."</i> Democrat Respondent <i>"Trump was leading at about 10pm when polling stations said they were closing for the night. But they re-opened at about 2am and scanned mail in ballots that were fraudulent...There has been much evidence brought forward since proving the election was rigged."</i> Republican Respondent
Campaigns Competing explanations for the differences in the campaigning styles of Biden and Trump. Biden's refusal to hold large in-person events during the pandemic	<i>"Trump campaigned everywhere and had tons of people show up and Biden campaigned from his basement and still managed to steal the election."</i> Republican Respondent

⁸³ No evidence of vote rigging through the hacking of the Dominion machines was ever produced, forcing Fox News to settle a highly damaging lawsuit out of court, paying damages of over \$780m to Dominion. <https://apnews.com/article/fox-news-dominion-lawsuit-trump-2020-0ac71f75acfac52ea80b3e747fb0afe>

⁸⁴ Despite Republican narratives warning of a disproportionate advantage to Democrats through increased mail-in ballot initiatives, Several studies of mail-in voting in the US prior to the Trump years suggest the opposite, or found no partisan effect. See e.g. Karp and Banducci, 2000; Jeffe and Jeffe, 1990; Berinsky et al 2001

continued to be equated to a lack of public support⁸⁵, while Democrats identified the pandemic as the reason Biden held far fewer public events.	<i>“Donald Trump was actively campaigning and holding rallies, while Joe Biden was nowhere to be seen leading up to the election. Election night proved to be a farce and a letdown for freedom lovers.”</i> Republican Respondent <i>“Trump held these massive superspreader [sic] rallies in the middle of the pandemic.”</i> Democrat Respondent
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Many of these themes are also picked up in the elite interviews (see Chapter 7), reflecting a similar partisan-motivated perspective from both Democrat and Republican participants. The themes are also in line with key narrative elements of the Wedge Lie as disseminated by Trump and his allies. For example, the references to campaigning styles, and in particular the contrast between Trump’s rallies and Biden’s fewer in-person events (at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic) was routinely held up by high-profile Trump supporters as proof that Biden could not have won the election fairly because he had far less public support⁸⁶. Taken together, the Twitter data, the survey’s treatment group open text responses, and the interview data present a compelling case that the narrative of the Wedge Lie has remained consistent in its themes and emotional resonance.

6.8 Summary

This chapter’s contribution to the thesis has been to demonstrate the lasting impact of the Wedge Lie on survey participants’ emotional state. I found significant increases in negative emotions after discussing the Wedge Lie in both Democrat and Republican respondents. It also proved the mediating role of anger on political trust. I hypothesised that interacting with the Wedge Lie would have a deleterious effect on intergroup or social trust, and that was borne out in the analysis above. However, the same hypothesis but looking at political trust did not materialise in the results of this experiment. Notably both Republican and Democrat respondents recognised the scale of the division that currently pervades American political life. To explore this further, and to assess what impact Wedge Lies may have on this in the

⁸⁵ Fact checkers countered the claims that Biden stayed in his basement, including here:

<https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2020/oct/04/jason-miller/biden-isnt-basement-trump-campaign-keeps-saying-so/>

⁸⁶ Including this fairly dubious statistical analysis offered by the far-right website, The Gateway Pundit

https://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2020/11/proof-fraud-turnout-numbers-show-basement-joe-biden-scored-1-2666-year-win-highly-unlikely/?utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=PostTopSharingButtons&utm_campaign=websitesharingbuttons

context of trying to be an effective lawmaker in such a polarised climate, I now turn to an analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with Georgia State Senators and Representatives.

Chapter 7: Elite Interviews Results and Analysis

*No, I wouldn't be too serious about bipartisanship. It's a great myth that ought to be fostered. And don't bring too damn much scholarship to bear on it. You'll prove it out of existence if you're not careful...*⁸⁷

Dean Acheson (Secretary of State, 1949-1953)

7.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters looked at the effects of the 'Stop the Steal' Wedge Lie from the perspectives of US citizens. Chapter 5 added new layers of understanding about the role of modern mass communication platforms in the ability to spread elite lies and foment highly negative sentiment in doing so. Chapter 6 then set out new contributions to the literature on the impact of elite lies on citizens' trust in each other and the institutions and actors of democratic government. It also demonstrated significant increases in negative emotions after encountering the Wedge Lie, and showed that emotions played a mediating role in deteriorating political trust.

In this Chapter, I set out findings in answer to the question *what impact do Wedge Lies have on the democratic behaviours of political elites*. The inclusion of this strand contributes to an emerging literature, which is beginning to tackle the impact of elite lies on democratic actors (Bartels & Carnes, 2023), and to the more established work on governing in times of high polarisation (Alexander & Jacobs, 2023; Leavitt, 2024; Brant, 2024). In this case, understanding those behaviours and attitudes is materially important. The literature tells us that political elites are more polarised than citizens (Fiorina et al., 2011; Hill & Tausanovitch, 2015; Enders, 2021) raising questions about just how representative some of the more obstructionist or ideologically-driven politics and policies actually are. Furthermore, it has been established that the public take cues on affective polarisation from their polarised elites; the more polarised their political leaders, the higher levels of affective polarisation expressed by the public (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Banda & Cluverius, 2018).

⁸⁷ Taken from an oral history interview with Acheson in 1971. The full transcript can be found here: <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/oral-histories/acheson>

The third strand of this mixed methods research agenda explores how elected representatives experience and respond to the Wedge Lie, and what difference (if any) it has made to how they operate in the day-to-day business of governing. To do this, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with 16 State Senators and Representatives from the state of Georgia. I provide a detailed thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, demonstrating how the election fraud narrative pervades not just political discourse almost three years after the election⁸⁸, but how it continues to galvanise highly consequential action from political elites, both drawing from *and* feeding reported constituent concerns. Specifically, I posited that the Wedge Lie will have had a negative impact upon trust between opposing partisan elites (Hypothesis 9), and that interacting with the lie would lead to reduced efforts to seek opportunities for bipartisanship or consensus building (Hypothesis 10).

In this Chapter, I demonstrate that, among other impacts, the Wedge Lie presents a material threat to the potential for bipartisanship, and for public confidence in their state government. I also present evidence of a causal relationship between the Wedge Lie, and highly consequential legislation passed in Georgia to mitigate the claimed irregularities in voting in the state. Lastly, offering supporting evidence for Hypotheses 4,5 & 7, I also include an analysis of constituents' concerns with reference to the lie as reported by the elites themselves.

Recalling the detail set out in Chapter 4, the interview transcripts were analysed using a customised set of themes and subthemes (Table 7.1), designed to examine the data against the model of the Wedge Lie (Figure 1.2), and establish confirmation (or rejection) thereof.

Table 7.1 Themes and Subthemes Qualitative Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews

Theme	Subthemes	Description	Example from the Dataset
Political Trust	- Political leaders - Democratic institutions - Democracy - Election Integrity	References to trust (or distrust) or faith (or lack thereof) in institutions, actors or processes of democracy.	"Because at the very least, even if you don't believe this narrative, it creates doubt. Yeah. It creates doubt. Yeah. That has pervaded all of our institutions, impeachment, what's happening with the Supreme Court, all of that, even regardless of what side you're on, there are sides, it has created doubt."
Social Trust	- Polarisation - Affective Polarisation	References to trust (or distrust) or faith (or lack thereof) in colleagues, social groups (in or outgroup).	"Some of those folks that I was out fishing with all the time, working with these kids all the time, they were supporting Trump. And I asked them, why? You know, what I'm seeing you do with these kids and with these communities, that is not consistent with supporting Donald Trump. Wow, what's going on? And some got real nasty

			with me. And they thought that Donald Trump was the greatest thing for America. And I didn't see it. And it made it difficult for me to work with them with something that I had done with them for years.”
Emotion	- Anger - Fear - Frustration - Happiness - Calm	Interviewees express emotion or use emotionally charged language	“But they [interviewee’s constituents] also have another group that’s just screaming every month about, and they want people to come see, talk to them, who will infuriate them, who feed their anger, who feed their... Yeah. Conspiracy theories. Yeah, yeah, yeah.”
Action	- Legislative Measures - Participation - Civil Disobedience/Disorder	Interviewee discusses or references any action, or potential action, arising as a consequence of the Wedge Lie	“We did an election Bill [SB202]. And I was very active in the election Bill. And I was responding to my constituents.”
Democracy	- Everyday governing - Future/health of Democracy	Interviewees give their views on the current and/or future health of democracy in the USA or make references to impacts on everyday governing as a lawmaker	“There’s definitely some risk level [to the future of democracy] there. There’s definitely some risk level. I just can’t. I just can’t even call it. And that’s crazy. That’s crazy. I do not know which way this is going.”

7.2 Trust and Emotion: the Elite Experience

Analysis of the interview transcripts demonstrated that social trust, expressed through the lens of social and professional relationships has been deeply damaged by the Wedge Lie. 12 out of 16 respondents reported a decline in their own trust of colleagues in the House or Senate (Hypothesis 9): *“The way I think it affected most people is that the thoughts that you had about an individual [colleague], some individuals changed. Because you thought of a person one way, and then they started expressing their support for Donald Trump and expressing that there was, in their opinion, some sort of fraud or something happening”* (Interviewee 4, Democrat Representative).

Those expressing a *change* in their levels of trust in their opposing partisan colleagues were overwhelmingly Democrat interviewees. Out of the 12 who reported a change, 9 were Democrats. This can perhaps be best explained by an articulated belief held by the majority of Republican interviewees that it was to be expected that Democrats were already not to be trusted: *“I am very concerned because I believe that they [Democrats] have had election fraud for a lot of years, like dead people voting. I mean, that’s been going on for a hundred years.”* (Interviewee 16 Republican Representative).

Once again, this suggests that trust is being undermined, with all the adverse implications for democratic health that carries (Warren, 1999; Marien and Hooghe, 2011; Citrin and Stoker, 2018). The interviews demonstrate that the Wedge Lie has had a deleterious impact on both the

elites' trust in the institutions of democracy (Hypothesis 4) as well as their trust in their colleagues (across the aisle and in some cases within their own ranks) as set out in Hypothesis 9. But the transcripts also reveal that elites have suffered a decline in their social trust, as felt by them towards others, and as being on the receiving end of distrust and anger within their personal relationships (Hypothesis 5).

Indeed, 6 out of 16 interviewees, both Republican and Democrat, shared experiences of social relationships being negatively impacted by the lie (Hypothesis 5):

“When this all happened, some of those folks that I was out fishing with all the time, working with these kids all the time, they were [despite the lie] supporting Trump. And I asked them, why?... And some got real nasty with me. And they thought that Donald Trump was the greatest thing for America. And I didn't see it. And it made it difficult for me to work with them with something that I had done with them for years, socially...” Interviewee 11 (Democrat State Senator)

“There are people who my wife has been friends with forever who will not talk to her over the battle [about the election result]... Oh, I have lost friends over because I wouldn't [support the election fraud theory in Georgia]. I would not capitulate into supporting it. I have a friend, a guy I've known for 40 years. He's done with me because I would not compromise or whatever and support Colton Moore⁸⁹.” Interviewee 12 (Republican Representative)

As I discuss later in this chapter, the fatigue with this emotional impact presents a potential downstream threat if, as suggested by two out of five Republican interviewees, it leads them to withdraw from elected office: *“Yes, I'm tired, and I don't want to have to worry about me and my family getting yelled at or whatever all the time. I could have a quieter life...”*. Any departure of more moderate representatives risks leaving the ground clear for more extreme candidates to come through.

⁸⁹ Colton Moore is a Georgia State Senator, suspended from the Republican Caucus for his attacks on fellow Republicans for refusing to back his repeated calls to impeach DA Fani Willis. In August 2023 (less than two weeks before this interview took place) Moore threatened to draw his rifle, warning of a civil war, if Republicans did not act to remove Georgia DA Fani Willis from office. Most recently, he was banned from the State House following comments about the late Speaker of the Georgia House of Representatives, David Ralston.

Emotion

The previous chapter explored in detail how increased negative emotion is both a consequence of the Wedge Lie, and a mediating factor in its impact through an analysis of the online survey emotion measurement responses. In this next section, I look in particular at the negative emotions interviewees expressed. I demonstrate not only that political elites expressed the same negative emotions as those sampled in the survey, but that they report a groundswell of those emotions amongst their constituents. Multiple studies have highlighted the role of emotion (particularly anger) in political decision-making and behaviours (Valentino et al., 2011; Lerner & Tiedens, 2006; Meissner et al., 2021), but there is a comparative paucity of research of the impact of this consequential emotion on political elites themselves. This following section suggests a need to address this in future research.

During the analysis I applied the thematic coding in Table 7.1, to contextualise the expression of emotion within the framework of the Wedge Lie theory, but I have also included additional findings that were not anticipated in that conceptualisation. Unlike in the survey, I did not ask interviewees explicitly to discuss their emotional responses to the Wedge Lie; the examples included below are organic expressions of emotion as part of their answers to the questions I asked them about the ongoing narrative of the Wedge Lie, as well as questions about changes in their professional and social relationships in the context of that continuing narrative (for the complete set of core questions asked, see Appendix 4).

I coded subthemes for the same emotions tested in the survey. In total, I coded 176 direct expressions of, or references to emotions in the elite interviews. Out of those, 68% refer to constituents and are not direct expressions of the representatives' own emotions, but I shall turn to these in detail at the end of this chapter.

Negative Emotion

Out of the 56 references to, or expression of their own emotions, 45 were categorised as anger, fear or frustration. Anger is, by some margin, the most frequently cited emotion by interviewees. There were 27 (59% of the total) references to anger across all participants. Both Democrat and Republican interviewees referenced a general, pervasive anger associated with the Wedge Lie: *“there’s one side, you know, shouting about it. But the big lie, they call it stop the steal. Other people call it the big lie. Well, so many people are now mad all the time.”* (Interviewee

5, Democrat Representative). One Republican interviewee was acutely conscious of the anger within certain factions of Republican supporters that was directed at him and those GOP representatives who, like him, had refused to agree that the election had been stolen.

“[Public anger] just infiltrates your life totally. And some people just get tired of it. I mean, people are ridiculous. You know, I told one guy, I did tell one guy, he's so mad at me, I said, listen, you need to talk about this. Come see me. You know, you don't call me names and all this bullshit without looking at me. I'm an old guy, but we're not gonna put up with this. Are you threatening me? We're on the schoolyard now.” Interviewee 12 (Republican Representative)

Others noted anger that had more specific targets, some predictably found on the opposing side of the partisan divide, but others reinforcing the intense intragroup anger on the Republican side.

“There's video of people in Fulton County that dragged out suitcases from underneath [tables where officials were counting votes]. Now, we still don't know what was in those suitcases. And people want to know. They feel like they're not being heard and they're very very angry. So also, when the Governor [Brian Kemp, Republican] once again stands in front of a microphone and continues to say there is absolutely no election fraud, they're mad.” Interviewee 16 (Republican Representative)

Perhaps unsurprisingly as the figurehead of this Wedge Lie, there is considerable anger directed at Trump himself. But again, this emerges from both ingroup and outgroup members.

“Trump was really screaming about it [the Dominion voting machines]. So, I mean, it was just fever. It cost the party the damn Senate. So, that's gonna haunt him, haunt us. Even though it's just like they said, well, we're not gonna vote. We have people coming to me saying, I just can't trust the Dominion voting machine, I'm not gonna vote. Okay, we're gonna let Joe Biden in again. That's up to you. I'm gonna vote.” Interviewee 12 (Republican Representative)

Democrat interviewees' anger at Trump is largely accompanied by an inevitability to that emotion *“this is like a train wreck that we saw coming two miles away.”* (Interviewee 7, Democrat Representative). Being angry at Trump is not new for them, as was articulated in

many of the responses, but there is a renewed vigour to the anger and frustration that has risen in response to the Wedge Lie and the deeply negative impacts they feel it has had:

“You’ve got senators like Senator Colton Moore that are feeding off Trump by, you know, saying, hey, we got to get rid of all these cowards that are Republicans that won’t stand with Trump. And basically calling up a call to action for extremists to run for office in these extreme districts. Interviewee 7, (Democrat Representative)

As I expand upon in the next section of this chapter, actions taken as a consequence of interacting with the Wedge Lie form a key pillar of its theoretical framework. Both Republican and Democrat interviewees raised concerns that a direct consequence of the Wedge Lie has been an emboldening of more extreme candidates to challenge more moderate incumbents in primary elections, driven by (and arguably feeding) public anger and fear amongst the Republican base.

Hope

Hope emerges as the sole positive emotion explicitly articulated by interviewees. Hope is an inherently future-facing emotion, and so underlining the precarity of the political landscape in the US is an undercurrent of hope that their fears are ultimately misplaced. Expressions of hope came from predominantly from Democrats. But it is noteworthy that any positivity is caveated by a sense that it may well be misplaced, *“I really hope that Georgians, on the whole, have not lost their faith in the system. But I guess we’ll see as the next election comes.”* (Interviewee 7, Democrat Representative). Others see hope in the tenacity of their communities, *“This has always been the greatest country and now we’re hearing talks of civil war and I feel like we’re looking at a failing state. While we’re tired, Georgia gives me hope because we have not stopped fighting”* (Interviewee 3, Democrat Representative). One Republican also expressed hope that *“things are going to go well and get better. But what do I know? I’m just, you know, I’m one person.”* (Interviewee 13, Republican Representative). Notably, though, this interviewee was the participant most convinced by the Wedge Lie and so their assessment of “things” getting better was predicated on the belief that the election had been stolen.

As a final note on emotion, three interviewees (all Democrat) reflected on the weaponization of emotional responses. This is a key tenet of the Wedge Lie theory; that an appeal to emotional responses is highly desirable for the liar, as they encourage the rejection of contrary evidence.

“We can't be like them. We can't appeal to fear. We can't appeal to anger. We have to just rely upon the evidence. And I guess the challenge I see perhaps going forward is that if people are entirely willing to disregard evidence because it doesn't suit their narrative. You're in a hole, really, if you then, you know, and where do you go from that?”

Interviewee 9 (Democrat State Senator)

“When you have people calling for civil war and all that stuff, to me, that's kind of like a last gasp. I think that is the, we're running out of things to say. We're running out of ways to justify. So now let's just talk about violence and scare people.”

Interviewee 10 (Democrat State Senator)

“All this anger, all this rage and riling people up, it's a political calculation...”

Interviewee 6 (Democrat State Senator)

7.3 Action

What, if anything, does this mean in practical terms? As was acknowledged repeatedly in the interviews, polarisation is not new, and neither is an agitated electorate. Beyond *feeling*, what impact has the Wedge Lie had on actions, or planned action (Hypothesis 10)? One pillar of the Wedge Lie theoretical framework is that the greater the interaction with the lie, the more likely both ingroup and outgroup audiences are to be galvanised into taking action in response to it, and this would include elite members of each group.

Legislative and Campaign Action

The natural recourse for elected representatives to address their own or constituent concerns is to seek legislative measures to address them. During the interviews with the five Republican respondents, each one detailed the desire to seek legislative action as a direct result of the election fraud narrative: *“we did an election Bill. And I was very active in the election Bill. And I was responding to my constituents”* (Interviewee 12, Republican Representative). Across those five interviews, 39 references were made to the efforts in the aftermath of the 2020 Presidential election (and subsequent Senate run-off) to secure Senate Bill (SB)202, the Election Integrity Act 2021⁹⁰. The Bill was developed by the Republican convened Georgia Special Committee on Election Integrity, led by State Rep. Barry Fleming (Republican). Key

⁹⁰ At the time of writing, SB202 was the subject of a further legal challenge, bringing the current total of lawsuits against the Bill to eight. Further information on the April 2024 case is here: <https://www.democracydocket.com/news-alerts/georgias-infamous-voter-suppression-law-heads-to-trial-for-the-first-time/>

provisions of the Bill included restrictions on ballot drop-boxes, a requirement for an official ID when requesting an absentee ballot, and increased controls on access to absentee voting. Responding to Governor Brian Kemp passing it into state law, President Biden called the measures enacted within it, “*Jim Crow in the 21st Century*” due to its likely disproportionately negative impact on black and minority voters.

It is notable that Interviewee 12 (quoted above) identified themselves as a “common-sense Republican”; they acknowledged they had Conservative views but felt strongly that the election fraud narrative in Georgia was misplaced and needed to be deemphasised. Despite this, they articulated concern that mail-in voting and ballot drop box initiatives were susceptible to widespread fraud. They worked to pass SB202 in direct response to the Wedge Lie, suggesting that the Wedge Lie offered opportunities to pursue an ideological agenda despite not necessarily believing in the veracity of the lie.

The implications of this were set out most clearly by Interviewee 11 (Democrat State Senator) when they articulated their firm belief that the Wedge Lie was seen by Republican lawmakers as an opportunity to justify suppressive voting restrictions:

“I realized that people actually tried to like codify lies... the preamble for SB202 I mean it's all of this election conspiracy stuff like and it doesn't end up in the code but it is in the law like in the bill itself. I just remember being blown away that such uninterrogated or like unprovable information could be you know included in a preamble for a bill, taking mistrust, things that cannot be substantiated or can only be substantiated by their own people who have created their own misinformation.” Interviewee 11 (Democrat State Senator)

Democrats also reported a surge in activity to increase their vote share in Georgia. This was partly because they had an acute awareness that their state might determine the balance of power in the federal Congress, but also as a direct consequence of the lingering election fraud narrative. 8 out of 11 Democrat interviewees drew the link between that narrative and the need to fortify their majorities in the state.

“Georgians have been here fighting for democracy we really have but we're tired yeah we're tired but we're trying to get everybody revved back up again for 2024 because state legislatures are really going to be super important for us to take seats yes as the stop the

stealers rise in power we have to get the majority” Interviewee 7 (Democrat Representative)

Taken together, these quotes demonstrate a positive finding for the Wedge Lie theory that suggests that the lie will galvanise action from ingroup and outgroup audiences.

Participation

Just as the quote above is indicative of the increased focus on voter participation on the Democrat side, every Republican interviewee expressed concern that the voter fraud narrative would depress Republican turnout in the 2024 elections. Notably (and I return to these differences at the end of this chapter), their fear stemmed from two starkly different viewpoints, suggesting a schism in Republican responses to the Wedge Lie. The first is aligned with Trump and those prominent supporters of the Wedge Lie, claiming that the election was rigged and there was widespread fraud:

“If you have watched Senator Colton Moore, he has taken to the streets and rightfully so because his constituents wanted something done, yes just like mine, and I have to lead him from this [the Georgia House of Representatives] side and I’m the only one from out of 80 Republicans. People demanding that we all do something you fix this prior to March of 2024 and we don’t get it right anytime soon. I mean who knows what may happen with this coming election, but people won’t vote with these rogue systems.”

Interviewee 16 (Republican Representative)

The second represents a more moderate Republican view that, whether or not some fraud existed (and many of these Republicans believe it did), the messaging of the Wedge Lie, from Trump himself, was highly consequential, and costly:

“Getting into the nuts and bolts of the election, I feel very much that there were like thousands, many thousands of people that did not go back to vote for our Senate run offs that was right after that because [Trump] said, don’t go out, the machines are invalid... And they didn’t go back. And that cost the Senate seat. They did not trust it. They did not trust the machines.” Interviewee 12 (Republican Representative)

Voter turnout is long-established as a key marker of democratic health, with studies looking at the relationship between turnout and satisfaction with democracy (Kostelka and Blais, 2018), turnout and legitimacy (Scully, Jones and Tristan, 2004), and most pertinent to this thesis, the

relationship between trust and turnout (Grönland and Setälä, 2007). The latter especially is a pressing concern for the Republican interviewees, whether they believe the central narrative of the Wedge Lie or not. But, as predicted by my theoretical framework, it is the lie itself that is the key driver for those concerns, leading to the belief that others will act upon the lie and decline to participate in a system they do not trust. It bears noting that this also lends credence to the theory that the Wedge Lie damages political trust in the institutions, actors and processes of democracy.

Civil Disobedience/Disorder

Worryingly, throughout the interviews, there were regular references to possible disorder or violence as a result of the Wedge Lie narrative permeating the 2024 Presidential election: “*basically so there is a fear about civil war and there’s no Mason Dixon clear line this time.*” (Interviewee 3, Democrat). Taken together with the reflections upon the emotional temperature of the political discourse in Georgia in the context of election integrity (explored in detail in the Emotion section of this chapter), those concerns point to a perceived threat of violence during the 2024 election and its immediate aftermath. Six Democrat and two Republican interviewees articulated a prediction that violence or serious disorder was likely to occur if Republican voters felt a second Biden win was also illegitimate or if Trump were to be convicted in the election interference legal case brought by the Fulton County DA Fani Willis⁹¹.

“If that man is convicted, I can’t remember the name of the pastor that they drank the juice and died... Was it Jim Jones? It could have been Jim Jones... Yeah, and they drank that juice. And I’m saying the day that he’s found guilty, if found guilty, we don’t need a Jim Jones. You don’t have to pass out any juice. They’re already juiced. They’ve been cult coached from day one.” Interviewee 7 (Democrat Representative)

In six of those cases, those expressing a fear of violence also suggested that there were significant minorities of voters for whom a Biden victory or a guilty verdict would be *confirmatory* of fraud and/or corruption.

“So will [a guilty verdict in the election interference trial] affect Trump? No. It doesn’t diminish his support that he has. Zero. It will increase. Increase the support. I mean the MAGA, they’re mad about that. These people are furious. These people want to overthrow

⁹¹ Full details of the indictment and co-defendants are outlined in this overview: <https://apnews.com/article/trump-georgia-election-investigation-grand-jury-willis-d39562cedfc60d64948708de1b011ed3>

the government as it goes on out to the tail end.” Interviewee 14 (Republican Representative)

These extracts demonstrate a positive finding for Hypotheses 5, that the Wedge Lie will prompt an increase in affective polarisation. They are also an indication of the Wedge Lie’s ability to galvanise consequential actions from both the ingroup and the outgroup.

Beyond the more intangible impacts that I have demonstrated the Wedge Lie has had, and continues to have, such as the degradation of trust and a continuing emotional agitation among both ingroup and outgroup members, it is clear that the Wedge Lie has also prompted very real consequential action to be taken by both of those groups. While it is certainly true that even a cursory study of the history of US electoral politics would reveal concerted efforts on both sides of the partisan divide to shore up their own vote share (and in many cases attempt to undermine their opponent’s) ahead of elections, the state lawmakers I interviewed with the authority to enact those legislative measures to restrict or improve voter access are citing the Wedge Lie as the driving force behind this activity since the 2020 election.

7.4 Democracy and Governing

What, if any, impact has the Wedge Lie had (or continues to have) on political elites’ own political behaviours and the ability to govern effectively for the people in their state? Two recurring subthemes emerged from the broader theme of democracy.

The first is the impact the lie has had on the day-to-day machinations of lawmaking: *“the state House in Georgia feels less like a functioning body, giving in to all the rhetoric. I think overall it comes down to less willingness to work together. Less trust.”* (Interviewee 1, Democrat). Republicans reported similarly renewed caution: *“I do think there’s a lot of misinformation on both sides. And it erupted immediately after the election, and it is still ongoing. Does it make it harder? Absolutely. I know I’m more careful about how I deal with everybody. Everybody.”* (Interviewee 15, Republican Representative).

The second is a more pressing assessment of the future of democracy in the context of the (at the time of the interviews) upcoming election in November 2024. Both Republicans and Democrats (14 out of 16 participants) reported significant concerns about the future, and 11 out of 16 interviewees indicated that they have changed their own behaviour as a lawmaker in

the wake of the Wedge Lie. The US has experienced a long period of fracturing consensus building and bipartisanship, long pre-dating the impacts unleashed by the Wedge Lie⁹². However, the division caused by the Wedge Lie appears to have made efforts at cooperation across the aisle even more problematic:

“The MAGA folk don’t want compromise. I have to make those calculations right and I’m trying to think before I ask a Republican to sign a bill that I’m carrying I’m trying to think through what are [MAGA Republicans] going to say about this bill...Now it has to be a part of the calculation or you’re never gonna get somebody to sign a damn bill.”

Interviewee 8 (Democrat Representative)

Furthermore, cooperation between party colleagues has been undermined by the distrust sown by the Wedge Lie, *“we’re now forced into making calculations of your own about how to sort of strategize around [governing] because you are dealing with people who are showing you one thing and showing the outside world another thing.”* (Interviewee 16, Republican Representative).

If day-to-day changes to the tactics and politicking of lawmaking have been subtle or incremental, assessments of the consequences of the Wedge Lie on democracy itself are much starker: *“I don’t see how you even have a democracy when people are acting not simply in a way that is tribal, but a way that is tribal under the influence of completely false information.”* (Interviewee 6, Democrat State Senator). 3 Republican interviewees reported their constituents were also anxious about the future of American democracy: *“what I’m hearing out here from the people is that we’re not going to have what we call a republic anymore, because we are a republic, but the democracy that goes with that republic is dying [because of] issues such as not trusting our own votes.”* (Interviewee 14, Republican Representative).

Every Democrat participant referred to the right-wing media landscape, and specifically their role in disseminating false information, including the Wedge Lie. Some tied the narrative and temperature of the discourse to the future of democracy:

⁹² The current conscious turn away from bipartisanship as a political strategy can largely be placed at the door of Newt Gingrich, but the more recent infamous obstructionist goals of the Republican leadership during Obama’s first term are well summarised here: <https://www.politico.com/story/2010/10/the-gops-no-compromise-pledge-044311>

“We could be living in a country that we don't recognize if things go badly. This toxicity is not a figment of our imagination. It is baked in now to millions of people in this country, millions. It's horrifying, a spectacle. And it's no exaggeration to say, democracy hangs in the balance here. And there are millions of people that will believe this false election narrative that gets pumped out by the right wing and Fox News or Newsmax or whatever they're watching.” Interviewee 7 (Democrat Representative)

The act of lying, and arguably the culture of elite lies that I argue has become normalised in the US (as well as other established democracies), is also identified as presenting a material threat to democratic health, whether through a dampening effect on participation, *“when you have these lies that kind of poisons the water and causes some people to stay home, I think that that's not good. It's not good for democracy.”* (Interviewee 1, Democrat); or through the lack of accountability for those who are unbound by the truth:

“The lie is just a stain on our nation's history as far as how elections go, the transfer of power, all of that. The lie is really the heart of it for me. If you have a system and not just a political system, but a media where people feel that they can say whatever they want, truthful or untruthful without recrimination, how is that democratic?.” Interviewee 4 (Democrat Representative)

The views of political elites, expressed through the interviews, reveal significant evidence to support the theoretical assertions of the Wedge Lie. A nascent literature is emerging focused on the impact of Trump's “Big lie” and US polarisation in its wake (Bartels & Carnes, 2023; LaPlant et al., 2024) The findings of these interviews extends that understanding on the role of elite lies in modern democratic societies by exploring the specific impact of Wedge Lies on how lawmakers navigate the business of governing in an increasing culture of falsehoods for political gain.

7.5 Unanticipated Themes

In order to explore how political elites experience and respond to Wedge Lies, I needed to encourage the interviewees to discuss as many of the different aspects of their work as a legislator as they felt relevant and appropriate. My choice to employ semi-structured interviews to collect data from political elites reflects the value of unanticipated findings that can emerge as the participants expand in their own words and through their own reflections. As such, I now present the most prevalent thematic findings from the qualitative data that fell outside of the

core themes set out in Table 7.1, but nonetheless are pertinent to the theory of the Wedge Lie itself.

Figure 7.1 Concept Maps of Interview Transcripts

The concept maps, in large part, reflect the core themes in Table 7.1, providing at least some confirmation of the Wedge Lie theory. But interesting new findings are revealed in both the content and the speakers. Although it might be expected that there would be overlap in the concepts between both Democrats and Republicans who are being asked the same core questions in an interview, it is nonetheless striking just how similar the emerging themes are.

There are clear focal points of concern across both the ingroup and outgroup notwithstanding each side approaching those concerns from opposing perspectives. If we take the “Trump” node as an example, both Democrats and Republicans refer to him with proportionally similar frequency. Democrat interviewees associated Trump with a characterisation of his “supporters” as “extremist” and “crazy”. There are also frequent links to the election meddling court cases that were just getting underway in Atlanta as these interviews were taking place, thus the references to “Fani Willis” (the District Attorney of Fulton County, GA, Democrat), “jail” and “court” are likely to be at least in part a reflection of the events taking place at the CourtHouse. It reflects the prevailing view of the Democrat participants that Trump’s behaviour should be framed in terms of criminality and justice. The concept maps do mask the nuance of the transcripts, in which it becomes clear that while it might look like Republican responses are homogenous, they in fact reveal a deeply divided internal ingroup view of Trump himself. Where Republican references to Trump remain connected to the ongoing court case, he is framed as a martyr, a target of persecution, but where the references to him link to his supporters, Republican participants were highly critical of his continued efforts to agitate his most ardent supporters (“MAGA” in the concept maps) with the election fraud lie.

Emerging from the interviews was an intragroup schism on the Republican side. Not obvious from Figure 7.1 (and thus a reminder that software of this type provides a useful if limited tool), this internecine tension was prominent in the full transcripts. Despite each belonging to the ingroup, there were two clear subgroups whose relationship with each other was just as acrimonious as the intergroup divisions. Each of the five Republican participants expressed frustration, anger and even betrayal when describing the actions and views of the other subgroup. Those groups are defined by their belief, or not, in the veracity of the Wedge Lie. Two out of the five interviewees were convinced that there had been widespread voter fraud and that it had cost Trump his rightful victory. They articulated anger most vociferously at the colleagues who were not giving their full-throated support to Trump by continuing to contest the result, *“Sometimes I get asked why I don’t go after the Democrats more. You know what I tell people, that I do go after them- I’m going after Raffensperger [Brad Raffensperger, Georgia Secretary of State, Republican] all day long.”* (Interviewee 16, Republican Representative).

The remaining three each expressed concerns about voter fraud but either did not believe it cost Trump the election, and/or were deeply frustrated with the ongoing fixation on that narrative as they moved into the final year before the 2024 election: *“[The election fraud narrative] is*

emotionally draining. It just is. They cannot see past it. It didn't matter that we got new roads. It didn't matter the money for education. All they care about is their ballot. And to me, that's very selfish, their almighty vote is the only one that counts." (Interviewee 12, Republican Representative). The anger and frustration are targeted at both the general public (*"they've proven that they would [continue to fight the election result]. It's almost like a compulsion or a disease. They're just so ingrained in what they believe, you're not going to change their mind."* (Interviewee 12, Republican Representative)), and their colleagues in the legislature, *"Here in Georgia, we've always had our far right. But one of them who's in the Senate now is rearing his ugly head right now, Colton Moore, he was in the House and when he left, we all went [sigh of relief]. But he was never this outspoken. This election stuff has been a gift for him."* (Interviewee 13, Republican Representative).

Republican internecine battles have been noted by Democrats. Their analysis of the increasing division amongst their GOP colleagues revealed a further unexpected dynamic. *I think that [the election fraud narrative] will create very strange bedfellows. So if Trump is convicted, the ultra MAGA folks who stand with Trump, I think that they will come and vote alongside of us around certain criminal justice reforms things.*" (Interviewee 4, Democrat Representative).

These reported intragroup divisions at a district and state level are certainly being repeated in other states, and in the national Congress as the Republican Party tries to navigate the impact of the election fraud lie⁹³. This dynamic was not hypothesised in my original theoretical framework, but its emergence as an additional impact warrants further investigation as I shall discuss in more detail in Chapter 8.

7.6 Reporting on Constituents' Responses to the Wedge Lie

The interviews with elected representatives added a rich layer of qualitative data to the findings of the online survey experiment. Each interviewee discussed in detail the impact of the Wedge Lie that they felt had been experienced by their constituents, and in many cases that constituents had reported to them. This additional data, therefore, comes with a necessary caveat that political elites may have an increased motivation to represent their constituent concerns in a

⁹³ A wealth of news articles and opinion pieces have been written about the resurgent divisions within the GOP as a result of the election fraud narrative. A good example is here: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/01/11/jan-6-hostage-comments-elise-stefanik/>

certain way. The findings, particularly salient for Hypotheses 4,5 & 7, should be seen as complimentary rather than confirmatory.

Political trust (particularly directed at the election process itself) emerges as a central concern of both Republican and Democrat interviewees when reporting on their constituents' responses to the lie⁹⁴, confirming a tenet of the Wedge Lie theory; that both ingroup and outgroup trust judgements are negatively impacted by the lie. Out of 16 interviewees, 13 (including all 5 Republican interviewees) recounted communications with their constituents in which those members of the public expressed doubt about the integrity of democratic institutions and/or processes. This is not unusual, particularly when those institutions are controlled by opposing partisans, “...there is this idea that in a district like mine, [where] 25% of the people are at or below federal poverty levels, that government has not worked for them. So I don't wanna say that at least in my district, that distrust in institutions is a new thing. It's not. But I can say that it has been amplified by all of this [the Wedge Lie narrative].” (Interviewee 3, Democrat Representative)

But both Democrat and Republican interviewees reported increased levels of political distrust as a direct result of the Wedge Lie. The distrust is seemingly not limited to Republican voters who have bought in to a lesser or greater extent to the narrative of the Wedge Lie: “[I] get questions about what's happening about the election systems. And these are questions that are not necessarily coming from those who believe that the election was stolen...” (Interviewee 3, Democrat Representative). Democrat interviewees also reported concerns amongst their (largely African American) own supporters that the lie had exacerbated an already precarious access to democracy, suggesting a positive finding for Hypothesis 4:

Question: “In your district, do you get a sense that people have trust in the systems in place... in democracy and the access to democracy that they have?”

Response: “They did have. They did have.” Interviewee 7 (Democrat Representative)

While Democrats reported concerns on both sides of the partisan divide within their constituencies, Republican interviewees were focused on the consequences the lie's narrative

⁹⁴ Reflecting on the survey experiment in light of the interviews, it is may have been beneficial to ask respondents to consider their trust judgements in the election process itself, as opposed to “election officials” which may have been too oblique a term for respondents to fully assess. Furthermore, the decision to include “election officials” does not allow for a response that encompasses a judgement on the literal machinery and processes of the election, most notably the Dominion voting machines and the increased availability of drop boxes and mail-in ballots.

had had on their supporters. In other words, how they were reckoning with the changes in the stated priority concerns of their Republican constituents.

“They [constituents] have absolutely [lost trust]. There is no doubt about it...when October rolls around, I will have town hall meetings every single month. And last year and all of this year when I had my town hall meetings, it was still about election integrity. How are we going to ensure that in our election my vote counts and is a true and fair election?”

Interviewee 13 (Republican Representative)

“They [constituents] are upset and they still believe that even our secretary of state Brad Raffensperger did not win his election. If you talk to anyone you say did you vote...they go I don't know, I didn't vote for him, did you? No? Then how the heck did he win his election? Right. So we don't even know if our own candidates are truly the elected official anymore and that is not a good thing. That points to a really widespread distrust.”

Interviewee 16 (Republican Representative)

Key points are revealed in these quotes. The first is that both Republican and Democrat (recalling that these are the ingroup and outgroup in this case study) interviewees report widespread concern amongst their constituents (in some cases both ingroup and outgroup members) about the structural integrity of the democratic system and elections process, as predicted in Hypothesis 4. The reference to Brad Raffensperger (Republican Georgia Secretary of State 2019- present) indicates the second key point from the excerpts above⁹⁵. The Wedge Lie has driven significant intragroup divisions on the Republican side, leading to a deleterious effect on trust within that group, as I also explored earlier in this chapter from the perspective of the elites themselves.

The political distrust revealed in the interview transcripts validates the mixed methods approach of this research agenda. Taken on their own, the results of the survey experiment would have suggested a largely unchanged picture of trust in the institutions and process of democratic government in the face of the Wedge Lie (although had I been able to run the survey much closer to the 2020 election, this may have picked up a decline in trust caused by the lie). But the ability of the interviewees to cast their minds back over a longer period of time reveals

⁹⁵ During my fieldwork in Atlanta, GA, I attended a rally held by Senator Colton Moore and Representative Charlice Byrd calling for a special session to remove Georgia DA Fani Willis. Each speaker at the event spoke of their anger at Raffensperger who they accused of being a Democrat and “un-American”. There was also repeated references to “cowardly” Republicans who were not “doing their job” in giving their full-throated support to Trump in the context of voting reform and the ongoing legal case in Georgia. There was comparatively little reference to the Democrats themselves.

a much more textured view, and one that compliments the assertion of Hypothesis 4 and 5. Almost three years after the 2020 election, state lawmakers are reporting that trust in the electoral system remains a central concern for their constituents. Some lawmakers have responded to those concerns with concerted efforts to tighten access to voting as I discussed previously in this chapter).

Interviewees also acknowledged the scale of divisions along partisan lines amongst the public that had been exacerbated by the Wedge Lie *“People don’t even trust their neighbour now. And they didn’t used to be that way. Yes. We relied on our neighbour. Now we’re relying on AI. Somebody on a flat screen is telling you this is the true story.”* (Interviewee 13, Republican Representative).

7.7 Summary

This chapter has drawn a clear link between the triggering of emotional responses for the purposes of the Wedge Lie, and consequential democratic (or even anti-democratic) actions being taken as a result. Taken together with the previous two analysis chapters, I argue that the findings from these three strands of research establish the Wedge Lie as a malignant force in modern democratic politics. The next Chapter of this thesis moves on to a detailed discussion of the implications of these findings in the context of the research questions outlined on page 178, before moving on to suggest potentially fruitful avenues of research to expand on this initial exploration.

Chapter 8: Discussion

“There go my people. I must find out where they are going so I can lead them...”

Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin

8.1 Overview

With this thesis, I have set out to answer what I have argued is one of the most pressing questions of the modern political age; *what are the consequences for democratic health when political elites lie to their citizens?* I moved beyond the recent (and vital) groundswell of attention paid to disinformation, towards a type of lie that is far more harmful to democracy than those used simply to cover up an inconvenient truth (though they should not be dismissed as being without harm, themselves). I introduced the theoretical framework of the Wedge Lie, which I have argued poses a material threat to democratic health (see Chapter 1). Through that conceptual framework, my mixed-method research agenda addressed four sub-questions in pursuit of that overarching inquiry:

RQ1. How do Wedge Lies spread and how emotive are they?

RQ2. To what extent do Wedge Lies impact social trust and political trust?

RQ3. What role do emotions play in the impact of the Wedge Lie?

RQ4. What impact do Wedge Lies have on the democratic behaviours of elites?

I grounded my interpretation of democratic health in the wealth of literature that preceded this research, and which broadly endorses political trust as one marker of a well-functioning democracy (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Marien and Hooghe, 2011; Warren, 2018). In addition, I aligned this research with those scholars who have also demonstrated ample justification to social trust as equally important to the health of a democracy (Badescu, 2004; Zmerli and Newton, 2006; Zmerli, 2008). Considering the model of the Wedge Lie (Figure 1.2) through the prism of those markers of democratic health, and the research questions above, I drew up a series of hypotheses (Table 8.1) against which to test my theory of the Wedge Lie. The principal findings are also set out in Table 8.1.

The contribution of those findings is both theoretical and empirical. In developing the theory of the Wedge Lie, I have introduced a new conceptual framework to give shape to our understanding of lying in modern political discourse, and the case study of Trump’s “Big lie”

offers a paradigmatic example of that concept. I have also delivered new empirical evidence about the impact of the Wedge Lie on both citizens and the political elites who represent them. Data from the survey experiment of 1,000 US citizens demonstrates the ability of the Wedge Lie to trigger significant negative emotional responses, which in turn impact trust judgements. This quantitative analysis is complimented by qualitative data from interviews with state lawmakers. These interviews are the first, to my knowledge, that seek to test the impact of political lies on the day-to-day business of governing. Together, these contributions offer a new perspective on the threat presented by this type of lie to the healthy functioning of democracy.

Table 8.1 Summary of Main Findings

Research Question	Hypotheses	Data Source and Chapter	Main Findings
RQ1: <i>How do Wedge Lies spread and how emotive are they?</i>	H1: Public discussion and dissemination of the Wedge Lie will correlate with dissemination or repetition of the lie by the liar.	H1: Twitter data, Chapter 5	H1: Positive Finding On Twitter, the volume and timing of tweets by the general public correlates strongly with Trump's dissemination of the Wedge Lie.
	H2: Discourse focussed on the Wedge Lie will display predominantly negative sentiment.	H2: Twitter data, Chapter 5	H2: Mixed Finding. Both Trump and the general public's Twitter content was more negative in sentiment than either positive or neutral. Additionally, many of the tweets deemed as positive in sentiment overall by Leximancer, contained deeply negative messages but using triumphant or vitriolic language that is identified as positive.
	H3: Negative emotional language in the public tweets is directed both vertically towards political elites <i>and</i> horizontally towards out-group individuals.	H3: Twitter data, Chapter 5	H3: Mixed Finding. Highly emotional (predominantly angry) content is directed both vertically and horizontally, but in an unanticipated finding, on the Republican side, the targets are <i>more</i> likely to be other Republicans who are not conforming to the author's view of Trump and the election.
RQ2: <i>To what extent do Wedge Lies impact social trust and political trust?</i>	H4: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will have a negative effect on political trust judgements.	H4: Survey data, Chapter 6 and Interview data, Chapter 7	H4: Mixed Finding. The survey experiment delivered a null finding for H4, showing virtually static virtual trust measurements across pre- and post-treatment questions. However, both Democrat and Republican interview participants noted a marked drop amongst their constituents in political trust as a result of the Wedge Lie.
	H5: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will damage social trust judgements towards the outgroup, increasing affective polarisation.	H5: Survey data, Chapter 6 and Interview data, Chapter 7	H5: Mixed Finding. The survey found little statistically significant drop in social trust to have been caused by the treatment. Some significant movement appears to have been driven by an unknown exogenous factor. As above, the interview data delivered a more nuanced result with substantial negative impacts on social trust reported. Unexpectedly, this negative change was more likely to occur between Republicans, as with H3 , above.
	H6: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will result in a positive effect on trust judgements of ingroup members.	H6: Survey data, Chapter 6 and Interview data, Chapter 7	H6: Mixed Finding. Both the survey and the interviews confirmed that there was some increase in trust of fellow group members, but that this was highly dependent on fealty to (and the ferocity of that fealty) the trustor's worldview. In other words, worldview is more important than party ID in

			trust judgements in the context of the Wedge Lie. E.g. Republican participants were more likely to direct their anger at fellow Republicans who did not share their world view, than Democrats.
RQ3: <i>What role do emotions play in the impact of the Wedge Lie?</i>	H7: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will increase reported negative emotions H8: A reported change in negative emotion prompts a reduction in political and social trust	H7: Survey data, Chapter 6 and Interview data, Chapter 7 H8: Survey data, Chapter 6 and Interview data, Chapter 7	H7: Positive Finding. Engaging with the Wedge Lie precipitates a significant increase in anger, in both ingroup and outgroup survey participants. Frustration and worry also rise (albeit more moderately). This trend is confirmed by the interviews conducted for Chapter 7 in which both Democrat and Republican participants reported anger and frustration as being the predominant emotions expressed to them by their constituents. Many also reported a rise in their own negative emotions when considering the aftermath of the election and to the present day. H8: Mixed Finding. There was little evidence to suggest a significant reduction in either social or political trust in the survey responses. However, for those who did report a drop in trust, interaction analysis shows this to be driven by an increase in anger. The role of anger in exacerbating social distrust is also found in the interview data. An analysis of the qualitative data from the interviews found significantly more evidence for the damage done to social trust caused by the Wedge Lie.
RQ4: <i>What impact do Wedge Lies have on the political behaviours of elites?</i>	H9: Engaging with the Wedge Lie will have a negative impact on elites' trust in their legislative colleagues across the aisle H10: Engaging with the Wedge Lie decreases efforts to seek bipartisanship and consensus	H9: Interview data, Chapter 7 H10: Interview data, Chapter 7	H9: Positive Finding. 75% of interviewees reported a decline in trust towards their colleagues across the aisle as a result of the Wedge Lie and the consequential events that followed its dissemination. However, in an unanticipated finding, 100% of Republican interviewees expressed anger or frustration with their own party colleagues that resulted in a reduction in trust. H10: Mixed Finding. There was some evidence to suggest that bipartisanship had suffered as a direct result of the Wedge Lie, but predominantly this was not, as anticipated, due to lawmakers' own worldviews driving that chilling effect. Instead, as a result of the Wedge Lie, lawmakers from both parties are trying to second-guess how extreme elements of the Republican party will respond to any proposed legislative activity before calculating how/if to proceed.

The discussion that follows sets out how the findings discussed in the previous results chapters both answer those questions and make new contributions to the field. I discuss where gaps remain, and where future research may find fruitful avenues in exploring the Wedge Lie.

8.2 Research Question Discussion

RQ1: How do Wedge Lies spread and how emotive are they?

The theoretical framework of the Wedge Lie identifies the weaponization of mass communication platforms as both one of its key characteristics, and a strategy for its success. There is no use in crafting or repeating any political message if it fails to reach its intended audience. I also theorised that to meet the criteria of a Wedge Lie, the lie's narrative should both be emotionally laden, and seek to provoke emotional responses from its ingroup and outgroup audiences. It follows, therefore, that there was a need to test how the lie spreads, and the emotional content associated with it.

Though it is hard to say definitively which is cause and which effect, the timing and volume of public references to the hashtag #StoptheSteal Twitter correlated closely with Trump's use of it: high when he mentioned it, lower when he did not (Figure 5.2, p.114) (Hypothesis 1), or if, as I contend is likely, there exists a cyclical dynamic where they both feed off each other. Scholars have surmised that populists are "*opportunists who, in practice, put themselves and their eternal hold on power above any democratic appeal that they may have in particular moments,*" (Scheppelle, 2019 p.331), and this certainly seems to be the case here. This supports the work of Barbara et al. (2019) whose analysis of the responsiveness of political elites to the public on Twitter indicated that elites broadly take their messaging cues from the public, perhaps predictably more so from their own supporters. Although Trump has frequently claimed election results as being rigged⁹⁶ (even those in which he was not a candidate), he appears to have taken his cue initially in 2020 from high-profile far right commenters (see p.112), perhaps seeing an opportunity to fan the flames to his personal advantage. Therein lies some confirmation that a Wedge Lie may be deployed by political elites strategically to further their personal political fortunes. Furthermore, these findings go beyond what has been an historic focus on the elite responsiveness setting political agendas on policy or issue priorities (Neundorf and Adams, 2018; Caughey and Warshaw, 2018), to offer insight into the

⁹⁶ For a concise overview, see <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-longstanding-history-calling-elections-rigged-doesnt-results/story?id=74126926>

responsiveness of elites to public emotional states. Through that lens, there emerges the potential for colleagues to examine more closely the online ecosystem of populist leaders, high-profile social media personalities and the public in order to find ways to interrupt that symbiosis.

Stop the Steal, as a calling card and as a political movement, begins not with Trump, but his long-time ally and far-right provocateur, Roger Stone in 2016. Content analysis of tweets containing the hashtag #StoptheSteal highlighted the extent to which the phrase remains on the fringes of political discourse until high profile supporters with significant followings start to spread doubt about the legitimacy of the election, beginning in the summer of 2020, long before the November poll. Once the narrative has been picked up by prominent right-wing social media commentators (including figures such as Jack Posobiec, Alexander Ali, and Ben Shapiro), the volume and frequency of the hashtag begins to grow (see Figure 5.1, p.112).

This augments studies that have illustrated the journeys of misinformation on social media (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2018; DeVerner et al., 2024) which have repeatedly shown that falsehoods flow from highly concentrated sources of high-profile, high-post-frequency accounts. However, I argue that in understanding the power of lies spread online, particularly Wedge Lies, the source of the information (to the extent that bots and fake accounts should be considered influential actors in their own right) and the journey it travels is of less importance than the content of the lie itself, and how it relates to an audience's political and social identities (see the discussion of RQ2, below).

The mixed findings for Hypothesis 2 (that the content of both Trump's and the general public's tweets referencing the Wedge Lie will be predominantly negative) nevertheless reveal a discourse that is punctuated by violent, rageful content. Considerable scholarly effort has been invested in understanding the impact of negative sentiment in political content, with important work detailing the impact of negative campaigning, that is directed from political elites (Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Iyengar and Ansolabehere, 2010). Some studies have demonstrated the role of emotions in mediating the effect political campaigns on voter behaviour (Kiss and Hobolt, 2012), as well as the impact of negative rhetoric on candidate assessments (Lin, 2024) and voter turnout (Costa, 2021). There is an overall consensus that negative campaigning has a chilling effect on voter assessments of candidates, parties and campaigns. However, the mixed results of the sentiment analysis within this investigation (in which the negative sentiment was balanced almost exactly by the same proportion of overall positive and neutral

tweets) offer support for an important novel interpretation of the impact of political communication sentiment. In the context of a Wedge Lie, the traditional dampening effect of negative rhetoric on candidate assessments or turnout may be impacted by a highly effective tactic of conveying deeply negative messages about the outgroup through language that nonetheless makes the ingroup *feel* positively about themselves, their fellow group members, and the author. This duality is characteristic of the content of the Wedge Lie as it appears on Twitter, and is core to the Wedge Lie's success at driving affective polarisation between the ingroup and outgroup audiences (see the discussion of *RQ3*).

Moving beyond the content of the tweets, the theory of the Wedge Lie proposes that the targets of negative emotional content being both horizontally and vertically directed is core to its character. Testing Hypothesis 3 (that the targets of this negative sentiment are both political and social outgroup members) delivered mixed findings. It was certainly the case that negative sentiment was directed vertically, overwhelmingly to the opposing candidate, party, or a more amorphous elite (often referred to simply as “they”). When specific states were being discussed, the targets also included other elected or election officials, such as Democratic House Minority Leader, Nancy Pelosi.

In an unanticipated finding for H3, Trump supporters using the hashtag #StoptheSteal were more likely to direct their anger horizontally and vertically towards other ingroup members rather than outgroup members. This finding is also supported in the survey and interview data (see below for further discussion). Indeed, 63% of tweets from Trump supporters that included the word “traitor” as well as the hashtag #StoptheSteal were directing that invective at Republicans who they felt had betrayed Trump, and the ingroup itself, by not offering their full-throated support for his efforts to overturn the election. In the context of social identity theory, this defensiveness is coherent; those who most fervently identify with their social ingroup are more motivated to embrace positive responses to their group, and reject negative responses or criticism (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This threat response is strong enough to counter Hornsey and colleagues' (2002) contention that criticism from prominent members of the ingroup (in this case from Republican leaders who backed away from endorsing Trump's Wedge Lie) may be more tolerable. I contend that this demonstrates the power of the Wedge Lie to manipulate a perception of threat against the ingroup, setting up a test of fealty to the group and its leader. There is an urgent question for scholars of established democracies regarding the extent to which threatened ingroup members will take action to defend their

group and leader, particularly when those actions are based on a grievance born out of fiction. I suggest that this offers at least a partial explanation for why Trump supporters travelled to the Capitol on 6th January 2021 and engaged in seditious violence.

RQ2: To what extent do Wedge Lies impact social trust and political trust?

The relationship between lies and trust is well documented by scholars of multiple disciplines. And indeed, lies in politics are nothing new. But I have argued that there has emerged, for reasons it is beyond the scope of this research to fully explore (although scholars may find fruitful avenues for further research to uncover these), a new type of lie that I have conceptualised and which does particular damage to the trust that underpins democratic health. In detailing the theoretical framework of the Wedge Lie, I hypothesised that those lies would have a deleterious effect on both political and social trust (Hypotheses 4 and 5).

It is arguable that political trust had very little further to fall in the US. Indeed the *Pew Research Center* Public Trust in Government Tracker Poll reports that a year before the 2020 election, a mere 19% of respondents felt that the government in Washington DC could be trusted to do the right thing “just about all of the time” or “most of the time”⁹⁷. And on the specific issue of lying, a general and deep malaise has seemingly befallen a public that no longer expects politicians to tell the truth, or much cares if they don’t (Stanley, 2012). Nonetheless, the theory of the Wedge Lie dictates that it will negatively impact on political trust (Hypothesis 4).

The survey experiment and elite interviews produced different results for Hypothesis 4. While all three partisan subgroups (Democrats, Republicans and Independents) were largely unmoved by the experiment treatment in the online survey, both Republican and Democrat lawmakers unanimously reported a decrease in political trust amongst their constituents.

Arguably, the most likely cause for unexpectedly flat trust scores across the two waves of the survey was that the response was largely baked in before the survey took place, so the experimental prime didn’t have the effect I anticipated. Another possible explanation was the lack of specificity in the election prime treatment. Out of an abundance of caution to avoid leading participants to contrived responses, I kept the prime as broad as possible, asking *can you tell me as much as you can remember about the 2020 Presidential election?* On reflection,

⁹⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>

this may have led to more descriptive, rather than analytical or reflective responses. Many of the responses were dominated by a recounting of basic facts about the election, such as “I remember that the election was between Joe Biden and Donald Trump, and that it was a very close election”. A more specifically directional question may have yielded more instructive responses without priming the participants to an unacceptable degree, e.g. *thinking about the 2020 Presidential election, can you tell me what you can remember about the claims that there was widespread voter fraud and that Trump should have been declared the winner?* This may have been enough to focus the participants on their responses to the lie, rather than in many cases, prompting them to simply acknowledge the existence of the lie without analysing its impact.

These caveats notwithstanding, perhaps the most concerning result from the investigation of Hypothesis 4 is the damage the Wedge Lie has done to the public’s trust in elections. Although not evident in the survey responses, both Republican and Democrat lawmakers reported a deleterious impact on their constituents’ trust in the electoral system. Detailed responses articulated suspicion of voting machines, mail-in ballots, the count and election officials (including those staffing the counts, as well as the elected state officials who oversee the elections)⁹⁸. All aspects of the election process have been tainted by the lie.

Despite the necessary caveat that political elites may have motivation to distort anecdotal data, even in a research interview setting, and should therefore be treated with caution, these findings broadly track with *Gallup*’s polling on trust in US elections, which recorded historic lows for Republican levels of trust after the 2020 election, and which continued to fall steadily towards the 2022 midterms⁹⁹. *Gallup*’s polling confirms that this decline in trust is largely confined to Republican voters, and further reports that Democrats’ trust in elections hit a high watermark just prior to the 2022 midterms, with 85% of respondents declaring that they were “very” or “somewhat” confident in the fairness of the coming midterms. However, Democrat interview participants reported a deep wariness within certain cohorts of their constituents, particularly African American communities, about the ability of the Wedge Lie to prompt further restrictions on their access to the polls, in effect raising their distrust that the election will be fair for them (see below in this chapter for further discussion of voter restrictions). Once again,

⁹⁸ It is likely that the restriction of the named target in the trust questions within the survey to “election officials” yielded a more muted response than if I had enquired about trust in “US elections”.

⁹⁹ Full analysis here <https://news.gallup.com/poll/404675/confidence-election-integrity-hides-deep-partisan-divide.aspx>

I present these particular findings with a note of caution that they are reported by politicians as being accurate representations of their constituents' views. As has been demonstrated by recent work by Weinberg (2023) and Lucas et al., (2024), politicians are neither terribly good at estimating public opinion nor necessarily without motivation to embellish, exaggerate or cherry-pick anecdotal evidence in an interview context.

There is a vast scholarly literature on the role of political trust in a functioning democracy, and indeed on its correlates, causes and consequences, as I set out in detail in Chapter 2. However, as I alluded to in that chapter, the literature on political trust has thus far not substantially explored why political trust may be a desirable object of manipulation by an unscrupulous leader of an established democracy, and how easily it might be done; through this thesis, I address that gap. It may be an effective tactic (Devine, 2024), with claims of strong effects of political trust levels on voter behaviour (Hooghe and Marien, 2013; Belanger, 2017), policy preferences (Hetherington and Globetti, 2002; Jeannet et al., 2023), and even compliance with the law (Scholz and Lubell, 1999; Tyler and Jackson, 2013). Elites looking to implement a hardline political agenda stand to benefit from a disengaged, jaded public. And, most worryingly, for a leader who is prepared to call on his supporters to “fight like hell”¹⁰⁰ to secure his political fortunes, a declining compulsion to remain within the confines of the law may also be appealing.

A similarly attractive target for manipulation through the deployment of a Wedge Lie is social trust. Chapter 2 set out a detailed argument for the inclusion of social trust as a key marker for good democratic health, but once again, the literature to date has largely steered away from any focus on a leader's ability to undermine that trust. The findings for Hypotheses 5, 8 and to a limited extent 9, underscore the importance of this thesis' focus. They reveal a degradation of the trust that underpins the social contract as a result of the Wedge Lie. Although it is beyond the ability of this research to ascribe any intent to diminish social trust to Trump and the other key disseminators of the lie, I argue that there are certainly benefits to leaders like Trump in doing so. Populist leaders walk a fine line between denigrating the “evil elite” (Marcos-Marne and Sendra, 2024. p.4) and convincing enough of the public that they should be elevated to precisely that position. To do so successfully, they position themselves as both a champion of “the people”, and one of them. Those “people” are the innate “good” (Castanho Silva et al.,

¹⁰⁰ Trump's speech at the Capitol on 6th January 2021 was widely considered to have contributed to the outbreak of violence
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-55640437>

2017) in the populist's Manichean worldview (Hawkins et al., 2019) which demands the elite fulfil the role of the "evil" (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020).

What pulls this away from an egalitarian, citizen-centric model of democracy is the populist's (and the public's) definition of who "the people" actually are. People who vote for populist parties or leaders (and who are therefore arguably populists themselves: Marcos-Marne and Sendra, 2024) have displayed an increased likelihood to trust "people" to a greater extent if they view those people as being "good" and part of the same group as themselves (Foddy et al, 2009). Scholars have long established that, for the populist leader, defining "the people" (Laclau, 2005) according to their own ideological preferences enables a cultivation of trust by positioning themselves as their champion. Furthermore, doing so necessarily creates an "other" or "non-people". As I discuss in the next section, this "othering", has opened the door to extreme and even dehumanising rhetoric to leach into the discourse surrounding the lie. They can also create "others", "traitors" or "enemies" from their own imagination. The motivation for doing this lies in the ability, through the use of a Wedge Lie, for a leader to be able to manipulate social trust, and therefore social division, both consolidating the ingroup's trust *and* putting greater distance between them and the outgroup. This makes ignorance, misunderstanding and mischaracterisation of the outgroup group more likely, but carries an electoral risk in a country with a two party (and broadly two presidential candidates) system: alienating out-partisans to such a degree may reduce the likelihood of any wavering voters crossing to the other side. In the case of *this* Wedge Lie, that appears to be a risk that Trump is willing to take.

RQ3: What role do emotions play in the impact of the Wedge Lie?

The theory of the Wedge Lie posits that emotional responses are triggered by interacting with the Wedge Lie, and that these emotions then play a mediating role in the impact of the Wedge Lie on ingroup and outgroup trust judgements. In testing Hypotheses 7 and 8, the complexity of the findings points to a textured picture. Certainly, when taken with the results of the Twitter data analysis, in which the explicitly emotive communication of the Wedge Lie from its high-profile sources drives a similarly vitriolic, emotionally heated discourse as the lie spreads, the central role of emotion becomes clear.

Those emotions triggered by the Wedge Lie are largely negative, and remain easily brought to the fore by memories of the Wedge Lie long after the white heat of the narrative has turned to

embers (Hypothesis 7). This research reveals that the negative emotion most associated with interacting with the Wedge Lie is anger, and this is perhaps not surprising. It supports a growing body of work, particularly since the 2016 US Presidential race (effectively the beginning of the “Trump era”) that has focused on the role of anger in driving mass polarisation (Webster, 2020), whether through the public’s response to elite cues to participate in uncivil discourse (Gervais, 2017) or take on a decidedly anti-deliberative, confrontational position towards democratic politics (Gervais, 2019). Webster (2020) draws a clear line between an angry public and voter loyalty. In order to achieve that loyalty, political leaders must ensure that the anger is directed at the right target, be that opposing partisans, a specified “other” or “enemy” or even at democracy itself. This vital work is timely, but had not yet connected this more in depth understanding of anger and rage in political discourse, with the opportunities afforded by freeing one’s self from the inconvenient confines of the truth.

This research, therefore, makes a new contribution by demonstrating how this anger can be, and is being, manipulated for political gain. Unbound from the truth, a political elite willing to lie is able to trigger anger on command with two key rewards; the first is an increasing polarisation from opposing partisans, and the second is greater loyalty from your angry supporters. While the interviews suggested broad decline in both trust and system confidence, the results of the regression analyses of the survey data using an interaction model confirms the role of anger in that damage to trust (Hypothesis 8). The greater the change in anger in response to the Wedge Lie, the greater the decline in trust. Indeed, the preliminary analysis suggests that the Wedge Lie may *only* work if it activates a suitable emotional response.

The ability to manipulate anger offers another boon to populist elites willing to lie to activate it; studies drawing on Affective Intelligence Theory (Marcus, 1988, 1991, 2002; Marcus, et al., 2000, 2011, 2017) find positive results for the mobilising effect of anger to achieve partisan-specific aims. These might be to participate in activities that would help to secure a win at the ballot box (Valentino et al., 2011) but in the American example at least, it is arguable that anger is driving a rise in political violence, which is at its highest levels since the 1970s¹⁰¹. In a new study looking at *who* supports political violence in the US, Armaly and Enders (2024) find that feelings of being unjustly victimised, and the associated emotional responses (including anger and rage) triggered by that feeling are the strongest predictors for supporting

¹⁰¹ <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-politics-violence/>

political violence. Taken with the results of the interviews, the findings for Hypothesis 7 reveal a deeply angry cohort, and an association with the feeling of being cheated at the 2020 election. Additionally, a recent study by Piazza (2024) identified the fear of social and demographic changes, as well as illiberal attitudes as being the key mediating factors in the support for political violence in the US. Flipping democratic norms on their head by stoking the key drivers of political violence may seem counterintuitive, but as Trump (and other populist leaders such as Bolsonaro of Brazil) has demonstrated, freedom from the truth delivers the opportunity to place the blame for such disorder on the “other” the “enemy” or the “traitor”, and then to reinforce their own perceived strength by quelling the unrest (Trump’s response to the white supremacist protest and subsequent murder of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which he labelled the “alt-left” as “very violent” is a good example¹⁰²).

It follows that stoking anger through Wedge Lies that increase affective polarisation between partisan groups leads to a further decline in trust between those groups (see below), which in turn makes it less likely that those groups will seek to share common spaces or engage in social interactions with each other (Govier, 1997; Scherer, 2022). This physical and emotional distance between the opposing groups opens the door to potentially severe consequences. Anger is a predictor of, motivation for, and support of political violence (Petersen and Zukerman, 2010), and angry people have been shown to place blame on other people rather than on situations or circumstances (Keltner et al., 1993). Studies of dehumanisation and extreme political rhetoric identify anger as a predictor of dehumanisation of outgroup targets (Buckels and Trapnell, 2013; Giner-Sorolla and Russell, 2019). Analysis of the Twitter data for Hypotheses 2 and 3, as well as the survey open text responses from *both* Democrat and Republican respondents in testing Hypothesis 7 revealed multiple instances of dehumanising language. This pervasive aggression and extreme rhetoric that has characterised the discourse on the Wedge Lie continues to take a toll on both the public and elected representatives, as I discuss in more detail below.

Like the occurrences of firefighters who themselves commit arson and then receive adulation for putting them out¹⁰³, political leaders willing to deploy a Wedge Lie are able to use anger to undermine critical faith in the democracy of their own nation before offering themselves as the

¹⁰² Full transcript of the press conference Trump gave in which he justifies his response to the events is here: <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/15/full-text-trump-comments-white-supremacists-alt-left-transcript-241662>

¹⁰³ <https://www.safc.gov/protection/law-enforcement/firefighter-arson-local-alarm/>

solution to the feelings of distrust, disenfranchisement and anger. Although, as was found in both the survey responses and the interviews, those leaders risk alienating those whose support level sits at the edges of the ingroup, who are not part of the core of true-believers and so must balance risk against the potential reward.

RQ4: What impact do Wedge Lies have on the democratic behaviours of political elites?

Empirical and theoretical studies of the health of a democracy rightly focus in large part on the public's relationships with the institutions, processes and leaders of democratic governments (Lenard, 2005; Kane and Patapan, 2012; Garnett, 2019; Kerr et al., 2024). Rank and file legislators, particularly those at a local level, are far less frequently the target of investigation. This comparative paucity, particularly in the scholarship on political trust, leaves an opening to understand a group that wield considerable power to shape the everyday lives of Americans. Their response to the Wedge Lie, I contend, is at least as consequential as the response of the public.

If the spirit of bipartisanship in the US has worn thin in the past 15 years, there certainly remain those lawmakers who have continued to seek consensus for purely political purposes if not for a sense of civic duty. The state Senators and Representatives I interviewed all proclaimed their own cross-party collaboration credentials. The fault for the breakdown in even the most transactional bipartisanship lay (perhaps unsurprisingly) at the door of someone else. Trust, and the paucity of it in the Statehouse, was a common theme (Hypothesis 9). 75% of interviewees reported a decline in trust towards their colleagues across the aisle as a result of the Wedge Lie and the consequential events that followed its dissemination. Those who study organisations and the conditions in which they operate effectively have demonstrated the integral role of trust in their smooth operation (e.g. Botwe et al., 2016). In particular, social trust helps to build personal interactions (Singh, 2012), and more readily predict or understand another's behaviour based on inferences about other people's character, their integrity and their future intentions (Tyler, 2001; Hardin, 2002). The ability to make reliable inferences about their colleagues' motives and likely behaviours was cited by 13 out of 16 interviewees as becoming harder in the wake of the Wedge Lie. suggesting an acute disfunction in the Georgia Statehouse. Even from an operational perspective, this poses a material threat to the healthy functioning of democratic governance at the state level. The optics of disfunction is a boon to those candidates who seek to exploit weariness with a status quo that can't or won't deliver for their constituents. Studies of candidate quality (Aragones and Palfrey, 2004; Hall, 2015) have

long highlighted the vacuum left when the middle ground is found wanting. Extreme candidates such as Marjorie Taylor-Greene are able to exploit the perfect storm of highly gerrymandered districts and a public ready to listen to populist arguments. Uncoupled from a sense of duty to tell the truth, the power of these candidates to undermine democratic norms is alarmingly potent.

As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, whilst trust between Republican and Democrat lawmakers has declined as a result of the Wedge Lie, perhaps the most consequential finding was within the Republican community. As emerged in the survey, a fracture has opened within the Republican legislative caucus as well, between Trump loyalists and those who see him and the election fraud narrative as a threat to their future electoral chances. 100% of Republican interviewees expressed anger or frustration with their own party colleagues that resulted in a reduction in trust. Indeed, the most animated and angry comments were reserved for those Republican colleagues and local party figures on the other side of that fissure.

There are very tangible consequences to that breakdown in intragroup trust. While there was some evidence to suggest that bipartisanship had suffered as a direct result of the Wedge Lie (Hypothesis 10), predominantly this was not, as anticipated, due to lawmakers' own worldviews driving that chilling effect. Instead, as a result of the Wedge Lie, lawmakers from both parties are trying to second-guess how extreme elements of the Republican party will respond to any proposed legislative activity before calculating how/if to proceed. The ability to forge a pragmatic path towards cooperation (if not consensus) that is more frequently seen at state level, as opposed to federal lawmaking, has been undermined by the Wedge Lie *and* by lawmakers' response to it. There are questions raised by these findings for those scholars of democratic legislatures about their effectiveness in the face of such extreme forms of politicking, in addition to the more naked partisan obstructionism (Howard and Roberts, 2015; Wallner, 2019) that has characterised the last decade in US politics. Those questions echo the jaded exasperation that washed over the Brexit negotiations as the governing Conservative party tried to balance highly complex trade negotiations with the EU, the concerns of their moderate wing, and the threat of rebellion from the hardline collective of MPs applying pressure for the most extreme version of Brexit possible (Quinn et al., 2024). Indeed, the comparison with Brexit is pertinent as it presents a further test case for the theory of the Wedge Lie, sharing many of the same characteristics as Trump's Big lie (as I return to, shortly).

Moreover, the lie has directly resulted in legislation built to counter systemic fraud despite that fraud not occurring to begin with. SB202 (see p.163 for details) was described by Professor Cas Mudde (both a scholar of democracy and a member of the faculty at the University of Georgia) “anti-democratic...it literally tries to undermine the one-person, one-vote principle that is at the core of democracy.”¹⁰⁴ Yet even the comparatively moderate Republicans that I interviewed wholeheartedly supported the Bill as a necessary step to protect election integrity. However, three out of the five Republicans I interviewed referenced consistent, vitriolic lobbying from constituents as contributing to their support for the Bill.

That pressure has led some Republican lawmakers to consider their future. Three Republican interviewees reported uncertainty about their desire to remain in politics, summarised by one as feeling “exhausted with it all”, especially how “emotionally draining” (Interviewee 12, Republican Representative) navigating the fallout of the lie had become. Many reported having lost friends and working relationships with longstanding colleagues as a result of the tensions unleashed in the fallout from the lie. These elected representatives each had been in office for more than 15 years, threatening to take with them the institutional memory of a less polarised, more pragmatic legislative climate. And once again, the vacating of the relative middle ground leaves the way clear for fringe or radical candidates to move in, perhaps most notably (and not uncoincidentally) in Georgia’s 14th Congressional district in which the relatively moderate Tom Graves (R) resigned his seat and the far-right Marjorie Taylor-Greene was elected in 2020. In either case, the legislative body is at risk of a leap to the more extreme elements of both parties, raising concerns about how representative this democracy actually is. The implications of the Wedge Lie, therefore, may usefully inform research on candidate quality, as well as the toll of abuse suffered by elected representatives.

8.3 Limitations

This research is not to be seen as the conclusion of an inquiry. Rather, it delivers a framework for further investigation to understand the implications of a new paradigm in democratic politics, in which some political elites feel unbound by the inconvenient confines of the truth. The theory of the Wedge Lie is just that; a work still in progress, with considerable evidence to support it set out in this thesis. There is, however, much more to be done. Time and financial resource presented the two most immovable limitations to the scope of this research; with more

¹⁰⁴ Quote from Cas Mudde given to Vox <https://www.vox.com/22352112/georgia-voting-sb-202-explained>

of each it may have been possible, for example, to obtain a more representative sample for the survey experiment. Republican voters were underrepresented in the sample, and while I was largely looking to understand the responses of the average citizen (as opposed to the average Republican or Democrat) the sample size did limit the extent to which I was able to identify meaningful effects with certainty. Those trends were certainly suggested, for example there were indications that Republican voters' trust in liberals deteriorated after the election prime treatment, but this was at the margins (see p.149). A larger sample size may have given a clearer determination of their significance.

The passage of time was similarly unavoidable and had a potentially dampening effect on the results of the survey, in particular. Two and a half years after the 2020 election had taken place was ample time for views to ossify and memories to fade. It is possible that this provides an explanation for the rigidity of the results across the two waves of the survey measuring both political and social trust. Given that previous studies (e.g. Dalton, 2004 and 2012; Norris 2011) have shown that in Western democracies the decline in trust in the previous six decades, though susceptible to periodic shocks, has otherwise been relatively steady, it is perhaps not surprising that the response to an attempt to recreate one of those shocks was muted. Indeed, the findings of the survey would seem to support Devine and Valgardsson (2024) who found that beyond adolescence, political trust is remarkably stable. Therefore, while these findings point more to the stickiness of political trust, there is an opportunity for a reproduction study to test the effect of a Wedge Lie using a different variable; social behaviours, for example.

However, the results of the survey remain instructive, as outlined above, and its limitations are mitigated in large part through a joint consideration of them with the interview data. As demonstrated in detail in Chapter 7, the interviews point to a far greater impact on trust (both social and political) as a result of the wedge lie than recorded in the survey responses. This suggests that while that deterioration occurred, it may have done so in the immediate aftermath of the election and the events at the Capitol on January 6th 2021. Certainly, the interviews both support Hypotheses 4 and 5, and suggest that the survey may have produced different results if conducted contemporaneously to the height of the Wedge Lie's dissemination.

Lastly, it would be remiss to include a large dataset from Twitter (now X) without acknowledging the very real methodological challenges it presents, and the ethical considerations that arise as well. In the context of this research, the primary concern with the

validity of Twitter data is the fact that it is self-selecting by definition; those who do not feel strongly about an issue are unlikely to post about it, and so the sample becomes a snapshot of the most vociferous elements of the population. As social media became an embedded feature in everyday life, scholars turned their attention to concerns about the validity and representativeness of the data (Ahmed et al., 2018). In particular, the anonymity of the online experience raised questions about how much the sentiment expressed was representative of people's behaviour or opinions in real life, exaggeration, and impulsivity (Beninger et al., 2014). While I am mindful of these concerns, and acknowledge that the data can provide only indicative evidence in research such as this, there are mitigating factors that warrant its inclusion in this investigation. As an open access source of very large-scale public opinion data, its availability and accessibility make it a valuable asset despite its limitations. More saliently, we know that Twitter was Trump's primary method of communicating with the public in order to circumvent the mainstream press (and indeed journalists, media outlets and commentators also use Twitter/X to inform media stories according to *Pew Research*¹⁰⁵). As such, it is the space that the Wedge Lie was most likely to be found *and* responded to by the public and other high-profile figures. In this regard, Twitter has some strengths as a data source; its use of hashtags makes collecting, collating and analysing large datasets more manageable (Ahmed, 2015). In response to ethical critiques that research using social media data struggles to satisfy the principle of informed consent, it is reasonable to argue that the inclusion of a hashtag demonstrates the author's intention for the tweet to be found and read by a broad audience, overcoming some concerns about consent and privacy (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). Taken altogether, there is good justification for its use in this investigation.

8.4 Implications and Next Steps

Turning to the issue of generalisability, the theory of the Wedge Lie identifies key characteristics that define the phenomenon. These are the weaponisation of mass communications (and their associated social groupings, (Shareef et al., 2020)), the manipulation of emotional responses to the lie, and galvanising consequential actions from both the ingroup and outgroup audiences. The 2020 US Presidential election stood out as a clear case with which to test the theory, but there are other events and issues in which it is arguable that one or more Wedge Lies has been deployed which offer the potential to test for replicability and through to generalisability. They include climate denial, Brexit, the US

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/06/27/twitter-is-the-go-to-social-media-site-for-u-s-journalists-but-not-for-the-public/>

abortion debate, immigration discourse and, vaccination/containment measures during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This research may usefully inform further studies in diverse fields grappling with modern challenges to democracy. These challenges have a common thread running through them; the strength they gain from slipping the binds of truth. Studies of culture wars, digital extremism, populism and the advent of AI/deepfakes may all benefit from an understanding of the power of the Wedge Lie to manipulate, agitate and polarise. I would encourage scholars in these fields to engage with this work and the studies which I hope will follow on from this doctoral research. The possibilities for the expansion of this research broadly falls into two categories. The first is to identify potential other examples of Wedge Lies in modern history and beyond the US setting. For example, the immigration discourse in multiple countries has been consistently coloured by falsehoods about links to criminality, reliance on government welfare and the “stealing” of native citizens’ jobs, houses or access to healthcare- to name a few. A comparative study about the impact of those falsehoods on the experiences of immigrants or the rise of ethnonationalism would bear potentially instructive results. Other potential examples include the Brexit referendum, climate denialism and LGBTQ rights. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that these have been some of the most prominent dividing lines in the “culture wars” of the last decade. Taking the Brexit referendum as an example, it may be useful here to briefly demonstrate how parts of the discourse on Brexit met the criteria of a Wedge Lie. Analysis of the Vote Leave campaign messaging has revealed a core component of creating moral panic (Zappettini, 2019), in this case linked to claims around immigration and border control. In line with the theory of the Wedge Lie, that discourse was highly emotive in its content (Hughes, 2019), and sought to “other” those immigrants that were “undeserving” or “bad” (Grinan-Moutinho, 2022), including the false assertion that remaining in the EU would allow Turkish immigrants free movement to the UK¹⁰⁶. Others have demonstrated the key role of social media both in the dissemination of the messaging, and in the ossifying of identity groups linked to the referendum, Remainers and Leavers (Brändle et al., 2021). Furthermore, the discourse during the referendum campaign, punctuated by a series of falsehoods presented on the immigration theme in particular¹⁰⁷, resulted in significant increases in affective polarisation and outgroup animus (Murray et al., 2017). Those falsehoods, creating epistemic damage, were broadly

¹⁰⁶ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/unfounded-claim-turkey-swing-brexit-referendum/>

¹⁰⁷ A good summary of immigration falsehoods during the Brexit campaign, and detailed rebuttal, here: <https://www.europeanlawmonitor.org/eu-referendum-topics/summary-of-vote-leave-misrepresentations-on-immigration.html>

transmitted verbatim without evidence or clarification by sections of the mainstream press as well as social media news outlets and commentators (Watson, 2018).

The second category of follow-on work concerns attempting to study a Wedge Lie contemporaneously to its dissemination. As I have set out above, the passage of time since the height of the Wedge Lie's saturation of the discourse in 2020 has likely dampened the effects of a memory prompt on survey participants. An opportunity emerges to identify Wedge Lies as they emerge and to test their effects on live panel studies.

My original contribution to a rich and vital literature is a proven demonstration of the potential of elite lies, and in particular, Wedge Lies to undermine the critical foundations of democratic health (political and social trust, as well as the risk of falling participation) through a manipulation of public anger. As with the theory I have sought to develop, this investigation was not undertaken solely to make new contributions to fields that are constantly growing and becoming revitalised with ambitious and innovative new research. Indeed, it is a privilege to situate my own research in such a rich tradition. But I intended this work to point squarely in the direction of providing an evidential base for an emergent material threat in some democratic settings, and (of equal importance) to begin to move towards solutions to counter it. As such, work continues beyond the steps laid out above, towards developing and delivering those solutions to key actors, including the news media, social media platforms, policymakers and the public themselves. The challenges detailed in this research are complex and far reaching, and they certainly will not be solved by the academic community alone.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Experimental Survey Questionnaire

WAVE 1

Experimental Survey Wave 1

Survey Flow

Standard: Block 1 (1 Question)
Standard: Block 2 (1 Question)
Block: WAVE 1 (12 Questions)

Start of Block: Block 1

Q0 Before you begin, please provide your Prolific ID

End of Block: Block 2

Start of Block: WAVE 1

Q1 What is your age?

- ☐ 18-24 (1)
- ☐ 25-34 (2)
- ☐ 35-44 (3)
- ☐ 45-54 (4)
- ☐ 55-64 (5)
- ☐ Over 65 (6)

Q2 What is your gender?

- ☐ Male (1)
 - ☐ Female (2)
 - ☐ Non-binary / third gender (3)
-

Q3 What is the highest level of education you have achieved?

- ☐ High School (1)
 - ☐ Bachelor's Degree (2)
 - ☐ Master's Degree (3)
 - ☐ Doctorate (4)
 - ☐ Trade/Vocational/Technical Training (5)
 - ☐ None of the Above (6)
-

Q4 What is the level of your annual Household income

- ☐ Less than \$25,000 (1)
 - ☐ \$25,000 - \$50,000 (2)
 - ☐ \$50,000 - \$100,000 (3)
 - ☐ \$100,000 - \$200,000 (4)
 - ☐ More than \$200,000 (5)
-

Q5 How would you describe your ethnic background?

- ☐ White / Caucasian (1)
- ☐ Asian - Eastern (2)
- ☐ Asian - Indian (3)
- ☐ Hispanic (4)
- ☐ African-American (5)
- ☐ Native-American (6)
- ☐ Mixed race (7)
- ☐ Other (please state below) (8) _____

Q6 Here is a 7-point scale describing political viewpoints that people might hold, ranging from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

- ☐ Extremely liberal (1)
 - ☐ Liberal (2)
 - ☐ Slightly liberal (3)
 - ☐ Moderate or middle of the road (4)
 - ☐ Slightly conservative (5)
 - ☐ Conservative (6)
 - ☐ Extremely conservative (7)
-

Q7 Which political party do you most identify, with?

- ☐ Republican (1)
 - ☐ Democrat (2)
 - ☐ Independent (3)
 - ☐ Other (please specify) (4) _____
-



Q8 To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly Agree (1)	Somewhat agree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Somewhat disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)
When I meet someone with the same political viewpoint as me, I feel connected to that person. (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When other people praise this viewpoint, it makes me feel good. (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When other people criticise this viewpoint, it feels like a personal insult (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When I speak about the party I identify most with, I refer to them as "my party". (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Page Break



Q9 On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being very distrustful, and 10 being completely trusting), how much do you trust the following institutions or people

	1 (very distrustful) (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (completely trusting) (10)
Congress (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
President Joe Biden (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Former President Donald Trump (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The Supreme Court (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Election Officials (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The Police (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The US Military (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Democrats (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Republicans (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q10 Generally speaking, would you say that most liberals can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful when dealing with them?

- ☐ Most liberals can be trusted (1)
- ☐ Can't be too careful when dealing with liberals (2)

Q11 Generally speaking, would you say that most conservatives can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful when dealing with them?

- ☐ Most conservatives can be trusted (1)
- ☐ Can't be too careful when dealing with conservatives (2)
-

Q12 Thinking about your neighbours or co-workers, how much does their political viewpoint affect your view of them?

- ☐ A great deal (1)
- ☐ Somewhat (2)
- ☐ Neutral/Don't know (3)
- ☐ Not very much (4)
- ☐ Not at all (5)

End of Block: WAVE 1

WAVE 2

Experimental Survey Wave 2

Survey Flow

Standard: Introduction and Consent Form (1 Question)

Standard: Block 3 (1 Question)

BlockRandomizer: 1 - Evenly Present Elements

Standard: WAVE 2 CONTROL TREATMENT (8 Questions)

Standard: WAVE 2 MEMORY TREATMENT (8 Questions)

Page Break

Trust in political institutions and people in times of heightened political activity

Katie Pruszyński, PhD Candidate

University of Sheffield

1. Purpose of this Research/Project

The purpose of this study is to learn about public trust in each other, in politicians, and in the way their government works.

2. Procedure

Thank you for completing the first part of this survey in recent weeks. This is the second, and final, part of this survey. It is made up of three short blocks of questions, including key information about your trust in a range of political institutions and people. It is anticipated that it will take you on average 6 minutes to complete.

3. Risks

There are no anticipated physical or psychological risks associated with participating in this study.

4. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

The survey is completely anonymous (we will not be collecting any personally identifiable details). Your responses will be combined with other respondents to look at overall patterns. This anonymous dataset will be stored in a protected folder in the University of Sheffield's secure Research Data Storage System at the end of the current project. The raw data will only be handled by Katie Pruszyński as the lead researcher on the project.

5. Freedom to Withdraw

You may choose not to answer specific questions or respond to study situations without penalty. Your participation is voluntary and you should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. However, by completing this survey you understand that your data, whilst anonymous, will not be able to be deleted from the research project after the date of publication.

6. Consent

By completing this survey, you acknowledge that Katie Pruszyński may use your data in relevant outputs so long as they agree to preserve the anonymity of the information as requested in this form.

Further information

This project has been ethically approved by the Department of Politics and International Relations' ethics review procedure.

The University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

Lead researcher: Katie Pruszyński k.m.pruszyński@sheffield.ac.uk

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In the event that you wish to make a complaint, the University of Sheffield’s Registrar and Secretary is Dr Philip Harvey. He can be contacted at the following address:

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The Registrar and Secretary’s Office,
University of Sheffield,
Firth Court,
Western Bank,
Sheffield
S10 2TN,
UK

End of Block: Introduction and Consent Form

Start of Block: Block 3

Q1 Please enter your Prolific ID to commence the survey

End of Block: Block 3

Start of Block: WAVE 2 CONTROL TREATMENT



Q2 Right now, to what extent are you feeling... (1 = not at all, 5 = very strong feeling)

	1 (not at all) (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (very strong) (5)
Angry (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Frustrated (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Worried (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Calm (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Happy (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sad (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Page Break

Q3 CONTROL GROUP

Thinking about the last movie you saw, tell me as much as you can recall about the plot and characters?

Page Break

Q3 TREATMENT GROUP

Please can you tell me as much as you can remember about the 2020 US Presidential election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden?

Page Break



Q4 Right now, to what extent are you feeling... (1 = not at all, 5 = very strong feeling)

	1 (not at all) (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (very strong) (5)
Angry (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Frustrated (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Worried (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Calm (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Happy (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sad (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Page Break



Q5 On a scale of 1-10 (with 1 being very distrustful, and 10 being completely trusting), how much do you trust the following institutions or people?

	1 (very distrustful) (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	10 (completely trusting) (10)
Congress (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
President Joe Biden (2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Former President Donald Trump (3)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The Supreme Court (4)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Election Officials (5)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The Police (6)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The US Military (7)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Democrats (8)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Republicans (9)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q6 Generally speaking, would you say that most liberals can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful when dealing with them?

- ☐ Most liberals can be trusted (1)
- ☐ Can't be too careful when dealing with liberals (2)

Q7 Generally speaking, would you say that most conservatives can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful when dealing with them?

- ☐ Most conservatives can be trusted (1)
- ☐ Can't be too careful when dealing with conservatives (2)

Q8 Thinking about your neighbours or co-workers, how much does their political viewpoint affect your view of them?

- ☐ A great deal (1)
- ☐ Somewhat (2)
- ☐ Neutral/Don't know (3)
- ☐ Not very much (4)
- ☐ Not at all (5)

Page Break

Q9 To what extent do you believe that there is any truth in Donald Trump's claim that the results of the 2020 Presidential Election were illegitimate?

Choose the number that best represents your view if 0 = I believe the claim is completely false, and 10 = I believe the claim is completely true.

	0 (completely false) (1)	1 (2)	2 (3)	3 (4)	4 (5)	5 (6)	6 (7)	7 (8)	8 (9)	9 (10)	10 (completely true) (11)
The results of the 2020 Presidential Election were illegitimate (1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Appendix 2: Experimental Survey Participant Information Sheet

Trust in political institutions and people in times of heightened political activity

Katie Pruszyński, PhD Candidate

University of Sheffield

1. Purpose of this Research/Project

The purpose of this study is to learn about public trust in each other, in politicians, and in the way their government works.

2. Procedure

This is the first of two parts of this survey. It is made up of three short blocks of questions, including key information about your trust in a range of political institutions and people. It is anticipated that it will take you no more than 5 minutes to complete. You will be invited to participate in the second wave of this survey in one week. It is entirely optional to participate in the second wave of this research.

3. Risks

There are no anticipated physical or psychological risks associated with participating in this study.

4. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

The survey is completely anonymous (we will not be collecting any personally identifiable details). Your responses will be combined with other respondents to look at overall patterns. This anonymous dataset will be stored in a protected folder in the University of Sheffield's secure Research Data Storage System at the end of the current project. The raw data will only be handled by Katie Pruszyński as the lead researcher on the project.

5. Freedom to Withdraw

You may choose not to answer specific questions or respond to study situations without penalty. Your participation is voluntary and you should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. However, by completing this survey you understand that your data, whilst anonymous, will not be able to be deleted from the research project after the date of publication.

6. Consent

By completing this survey, you acknowledge that Katie Pruszyński may use your data in relevant outputs so long as they agree to preserve the anonymity of the information as requested in this form.

Further information

This project has been ethically approved by the Department of Politics and International Relations' ethics review procedure.

The University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

Lead researcher: Katie Pruszyński k.m.pruszyński@sheffield.ac.uk
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University of Sheffield,
Firth Court,
Western Bank,
Sheffield
S10 2TN,
UK

End of Block: Block 1

Start of Block: Block 2

Appendix 3: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Interview Qs

- Consent form signing
- Consent to recording

General context setting

The presidential election of 2020 was notable, particularly here in Georgia, for the competing narratives about the integrity of the election, and its eventual outcome. The period since then has seen continued heated discourse about the result.

As a state lawmaker, you can give valuable insight into any ramifications this period may have had on your experience as a legislator, and the broader impacts on governing in a time of significant partisan polarisation.

Block 1 - faith in the credibility and integrity of other political elites, including colleagues in the state House.

1. Thinking about those competing narratives about the election result, could you reflect upon any impact this has had on your feelings towards national political leaders in the US?
2. And what about your colleagues- those you work with day-to-day, on both sides of the aisle? Has the ongoing dispute about the election result changed your opinion of them? **Follow up- do you think it has changed their opinion of you?**

Block 2 - how that same trust, or distrust, may have impacted upon their views of the credibility and integrity of democratic institutions, including their own place of work

1. Thinking about the period from election day in 2020 to now, could you talk about your own faith in the credibility and integrity of the institutions of US democracy? For example: Congress, the Supreme Court, State legislatures- and even the election infrastructure itself?
2. What about your colleagues here in Georgia? Do you think that their faith in those institutions has changed?
3. And thinking about that question from another perspective, what change (if any) have you noticed in your constituents' faith in those same institutions?

Block 3 - focusing on polarisation within the US public, to explore whether that polarisation led to behavioural changes in their role as an elected representative, i.e. thinking about polarisation in their state/district, how does that make them feel about seeking compromise or bipartisanship in their institution?

1. Thinking again about the contestation surrounding the 2020 election result, do you feel any change in the expectations your constituents have of you as a lawmaker?
2. Have you witnessed partisan polarisation in your district- and if so has it had any impact on your approach to your role? **Follow up about the appetite for bipartisanship, compromise or even progress? Follow up again about whether the competing narratives about the election has made any impact on that?**
3. What does the future look like for US democracy?

Appendix 4: Semi-Structured Interviews Participant Information Sheet

1. Research Project Title

An exploration of the impact of political communication on US democratic health

2. Invitation

You are being invited to take part in this research project. Before you decide to do so, it is important you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the project's purpose?

This research project aims to investigate the relationship between political and societal trust. This project builds on research previously carried out by political science researchers on the issues of political trust and democratic health.

4. Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because as a current/former lawmaker in the US' government, your perspective and opinions on the impact of lies/disinformation on the political environment is a key component in building an understanding of how this may affect democratic health in the US.

5. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be able to keep a copy of this information sheet and you should indicate your agreement to the online consent form. You have been sent the consent form alongside this information sheet. The form will ask you for your consent, and the interviewer will ask you to confirm that you have signed this form before commencing the interview. You can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason.

6. What will taking part entail for me?

You will be asked to participate in a one-to-one interview with the researcher; either via telephone, online video call, or in person, as best suits you and by prior arrangement. We anticipate that the interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. You may be contacted after this initial interview to request additional detail, but you do not have to agree to this.

7. What do I have to do?

Please answer the questions in the interview as best you can. There are no other commitments or lifestyle restrictions associated with participating.

8. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Participating in the research is not anticipated to cause you any disadvantages or discomfort, but you remain free to withdraw at any time before, during or after the interview. You will have an opportunity to review a transcript of your interview and request any passages not be used. You may still withdraw consent at that time.

9. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Although there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will have a beneficial impact on how political researchers understand the impact of elite lies on democratic health. It is also hoped that it will have a positive impact on how political actors value truth and trust.

10. Will my taking part be kept confidential?

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to members of the research team. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this. Due to the nature of this research, it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way. If you agree to us sharing the information you provide with other researchers (eg by making it available in a data archive) then your personal details will not be included unless you explicitly request this.

11. What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?

According to UK data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's [privacy notice](#).

12. What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?

Should the research stop earlier than planned and you are affected in any way we will tell you and explain why.

13. What if something goes wrong or I am not happy with the process?

If you have any complaints about the project in the first instance you can contact any member of the research team. If you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction you can contact the University of Sheffield's Registrar and Secretary to take your complaint further (see below).

14. Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

Your interview will be recorded for transcription purposes (using a dictaphone for in-person or telephone interviews, or digital recording software for online video calls). Written transcripts will be made of each interview, with all transcript documents securely stored on the University of Sheffield's X Drive. You may request to review the original recording prior to publication of the research. Once transcriptions have been completed, you will be sent a copy for review, and the original audio and/or video recording will be destroyed.

15. What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research project's objectives?

The interview will ask you about your opinions of current US political discourse, the role of lies/disinformation, and lawmaking in a polarised political climate. Your views and experience are a key part of what the project is interested in exploring.

16. What will happen to the results of the research project?

Results of the research will be published as part of the researcher's doctoral thesis, and possible further articles or publications. You will not be identified in any report or publication. If you wish to be given a copy of any reports resulting from the research, please ask us to put you on our circulation list.

17. Who is organising and funding the research?

The work is a doctoral research project by Katie Pruszyński, doctoral candidate from the University of Sheffield's Department of Politics and International Relations.

18. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved by the Department of Politics and International Relations' ethics review procedure. The University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University's Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

19. Contacts for further information

PhD researcher: Katie Pruszyński k.m.pruszynski@sheffield.ac.uk.

Supervisory team: Dr James Weinberg james.weinberg@sheffield.ac.uk and Prof. Charles Pattie c.pattie@sheffield.ac.uk

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The University of Sheffield's Registrar and Secretary is Dr Philip Harvey. He can be contacted at the following address: Dr Philip Harvey, The Registrar and Secretary's Office, University of Sheffield, Firth Court, Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK.