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WRI 1000

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### The Current Status of Political Paranoia

In his 1964 essay, Richard Hofstadter uses the term “paranoid style” to address the tendencies of right-wing conservatives in the Goldwater campaign to demonstrate a particularly detrimental frame of mind. He notes “I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind”, and in doing so he highlights the tumultuous psychosis displayed across the political spectrum that is hidden under the surface of our democracy (77). Hofstadter’s claim was reexamined by Greg Dimitriadis in his 2011 article “The Political Paranoid in Contemporary Politics”, which includes the insight of a notable “erosion of the public sphere”, “absolute good versus absolute evil”, and the use of evidence by sufferers of political paranoia (390-391). These terms coincide with how political paranoia has progressed and reconfigured itself to catalyze distrust in the political arena today. Although Hofstadter wrote his article noting the relationship between how the paranoid style is deeply rooted in the psyches of extremists, it is necessary to distinguish that the paranoid style is thriving in current American politics in a multiplex cycle. Cohesively, the mass of Americans uneducated in critical thinking, the intensifying culture of partisan politics, and a confirmation bias are working in tandem to create a violent and volatile tension between left and right leaning citizens, ultimately augmenting a country afflicted with widespread political paranoia.

In accordance to Henry Giroux’s article “Assassination Talk, The Banality of Evil, and the Paranoid State of American Politics”, the origin of political paranoia today stems from the

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established educational systems that “celebrate the inability to think” and value the quick intake of information over the process of developing knowledge through informed discussion and critical analysis (49). With this declining appreciation for knowledge and critical awareness, the formation of an ever widening gap exists between the minority of Americans capable of observing and discussing politics in analytical ways, and those Americans that are detached from reality who see politics as black and white. Giroux further explains this concept in his article regarding how the above mentioned educational systems that inform Americans of politics “readily eliminate institutions and public spheres” and “intensify the connection between non-thinking, thoughtlessness, and the routinization of misery” (49). Due to the absence of a public sphere, there ceases to be an outlet for politically active people to come together and communicate their concerns and observations which results in heightened tension between believers of opposing political interests and therefore provides a prime environment for paranoia to fester.

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Once paranoia grabs a foothold in society, it continually worsens and eventually peaks during election times. This paranoid fervor is directly mentioned by Alan Abramowitz in his article “The Only Thing We Have to Fear is the Other Party” when he concludes that these polarized groups of people that are divided by paranoia spark “negative partisanship” which is a term used to define the phenomena of voters “voting against the opposing party rather than for their own party” due to distrust and fear of what could result if an opposing party member is sworn into office (26). This is in direct correlation with Giroux’s explanation that political paranoia is not a ailment designated toward one side of the political spectrum or a curse Americans get when they gain the right to vote; but rather, people in this country have been conditioned for years to distrust people with views different than their own. Consequently,

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Americans tend to foster animosity toward left or right leaning politics due to misunderstanding and lack of education, which in turn causes the margin for compromise to shrink, and the number of politically paranoid citizens to swell.

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When paranoia in America rises, the extent to which negative partisanship increases as well. Negative partisanship often times goes hand in hand with straight ballot voting, which Abramowitz states as voters voting strictly in favor of one party for president, Congress, and House members without regard for their policies or the qualification of their opposing candidates (26). According to Abramowitz “The 2012 election saw the highest levels of party loyalty and straight-ticket voting since the American National Election Studies began tracking American voting patterns in 1952” (26). Some may argue that this issue is easily explained by the growing rift between conservative and liberal policy alone; however, the true underlying issue is rather a combination of uneducated extremist voters and a confirmation bias. The confirmation bias, as Emma Roller explains in her article “Your Facts or Mine?”, is “the urge to believe only things that confirm what you already believe to be true” which directly results in people holding more steadfastly to their preconceived notions of politics and discounting any contrasting ideas (63). That is, people’s perception of the value of differing perspectives has diminished almost entirely, leaving people unwilling to consider compromise. Therefore, in the current era there is a blatant disregard for the opinions of those with opposing beliefs and the country has become so polarized in their political stances that politics is no longer about deciding what is best for the country, but who is right or wrong, good or evil.

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Many would say that political paranoia only extends as far as the minds of the voters; where in actuality, the paranoid style is completely fueled by one-sided media outsources and disarming propaganda. With the majority of our news coming from partisan social media outlets,

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it can be hard to discern where the truth ends and propaganda takes over. As stated by Abramowitz “Negative perceptions of the opposing party are also reinforced by exposure to partisan news sources” which means that partisan news sources are aiding to readers’ susceptibility to a confirmation bias by insisting that there is no need to look beyond your set beliefs (27). Considering that Americans are not sifting through information and comparing that to other sources or fact checking authors, but simply taking each new story for factual evidence, the news sources they follow are often those that correspond to their own political views, therefore falling victim to the confirmation bias. With this in mind, voters are being targeted in the easiest way possible. Emma Roller highlights this by explaining when media superpowers like Facebook are “awarding coveted blue check marks to partisan accounts on the right and left, and lending them an air of credibility despite the fact that they have no responsibility to separate truth and fiction” (59). By recognizing these articles as “verified” readers get the sense that the information must be true and begin to hoard a collection of facts that are one sided and intend to widen the divide between Americans, thus creating more separation and furthering political paranoia.

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The lack of critical analysis, confirmation bias, and incursion of propaganda in American culture has left Americans isolated to communities of like minded extremists with rigid modalities of thinking. Hofstadter described this sense of isolation as “dispossession”, a cornerstone of the paranoid style that occurs after a set way of living or thinking is challenged (81). This is seen in Matthew Rozsa’s article “The ‘Paranoid Style’ of Alex Jones” when he gives the example surrounding President Obama’s election and the unwilling nature of racist right-wing extremists to enter into a dialogue about their concerns, leaving them feeling as if the things they valued most were being confiscated. These intense feelings catapulted them into a

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realm of isolation that eventually led to violent retaliation. Often times, people think that violence is spontaneous and unpredictable; but, in reality violence is direct mimicry of the repetitious stories brought to Americans through one sided media. In this case, the “partisan news” highlights stories of political violence because that is what sells, that is what appeals to readers and makes them want to keep reading and strengthen their already polarized opinions. The type of readers that continually engage in news of violence are the same voters that have been susceptible to confirmation bias and who have extremists tendencies and feelings of isolation and distrust toward their opponents. Rozsa mentions that back in 2009 when President Obama was in office, the Department of Homeland Security warned Americans that “the threat posed by lone wolves and small [domestic] terrorist cells is more pronounced than in years past” (36). Even in this case Americans are subject to distrusting opinions of others, even when the information is coming from supposedly nonpartisan officials. This escalation was no coincidence, it was in light of the election of the first black president that politically paranoid Americans felt they had no other option to express their feelings other than by resorting to violence.

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It is seen through all the aforementioned works that the paranoid style is a cyclical occurrence that has only gained momentum since the publication of Hofstadter’s article, and notably since the founding of the United States. The failure of education establishments to teach young Americans the objectivity of critical thinking, as mentioned in Giroux’s article, coincides with how citizens are voting in elections. This partisan voting that Abramowitz channels in his article is fed by the confirmation bias and severe distrust of others with opposing agendas. Considering how Emma Roller describes the confirmation bias in her essay, paired with how lack of critical dialogue and education resorts in violence when tensions run high, it is obvious

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that the paranoid style is evident in many processes surrounding politics. Even with the correct prediction from Hofstadter that “The paranoid style is not confined to our own country and time” it has become evident that its effects have progressed and will continue to progress unless there is some reconciliation between how Americans are educated, how media is presenting information, how candidates are appealing to voters, and ultimately how Americans are discussing politics and voting in response (86).

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This is a strong draft. This paper offers a very thoughtful commentary on many of the ways our current political climate has transformed the paranoid style in our present moment. In particular, I appreciate your claim that moves political paranoia from the fringes to a much more mainstream idea. This makes for an interesting reframing of Hofstadter's argument, and I think your paper does a good job of pursuing that claim down several complimentary lines of inquiry. The discussions of Giroux and Abramowitz strike me as most interesting in this regard. The discussion of Rozsa feels a little bit less connected, on the other hand—more of a "one of these things is not like the others" situation. I wonder if it might be helpful to offer more of a context for how a conspiracy theorist like Alex Jones—who, as far as I understand, is still on the fringes a bit—fits in with these other examples of the push toward paranoia in the mainstream. As you continue to explore these arguments, I'll encourage you to keep the bigger picture of your own argument in mind. How do you see these different texts with their different focuses speaking into the bigger picture of the paranoid style that you are arguing for. How do you want to challenge readers—who may be familiar with Hofstadter's or not—to think more deeply about these questions, and why is it important for how we think about politics today?

Dr. Hansen