

The Power of Trump's Big Lie: Identity Fusion, Internalizing Misinformation, and Support for Trump

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ABSTRACT

Former president Trump has maintained broad support despite falsely contending that he was the victim of electoral fraud, also known as the “big lie.” We consider both the antecedents of this phenomenon and its consequences. We propose that Trump supporters’ already established deep personal alignment—*identity fusion*—with their leader predisposed them to believe the lie. Accepting it then set the foundation for other identity-protecting beliefs and attitudes. Using a three-wave panel of Trump supporters, we found that the more fused they were before the 2020 election, the stronger their belief in the big lie grew between 2021 and 2024. Accepting the big lie helped solidify fusion with Trump and had consequences for related attitudes. Belief in the big lie predicted downplaying the criminal charges against Trump and supporting his antidemocratic policy agenda. Fueled by and fueling further fusion, belief in the big lie is a primary component of a larger narrative that emboldens Trump and justifies antidemocratic behavior.

Donald Trump is the only US president to deny electoral defeat, claiming that his loss in the 2020 presidential election was due to widespread fraud. We contend that belief in this “big lie” is deeply intertwined with devotion to Trump. That is, those who were already deeply aligned with Trump were not only more inclined to accept the big lie; its acceptance fostered ever deeper alignment with the former president. This alignment fueled other pro-Trump attitudes, related to both Trump’s felony indictments and his policy goals should he be reelected in 2024. These phenomena illustrate how the fusion of personal identity to a political leader can lead to acceptance of a single piece of misinformation that itself can serve as a base upon which other misinformation may propagate and insulate the original fiction against falsification. We begin by putting these phenomena into historical context.

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REPUBLICANS’ RESPONSE TO TRUMP’S BIG LIE

The emergence of Donald Trump as a player in the Republican party has dramatically reshaped American politics. Despite winning only a minority of the popular vote for president in 2016, he has come to exert enormous sway over the Republican party. So much so, in fact, that he was able to incite a group of his supporters to ransack the US Capitol in an effort to halt the legitimate certification of the election of his opponent Joe Biden. In the aftermath, a majority of Republican members of Congress refused to condemn or punish him for his actions (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2023, chap. 5) and Republican voters rewarded those legislators for doing so (Bartels and Carnes 2023).

For select Republicans, the attempt to violently nullify the election on January 6, 2021, went either too far or not far enough. Some were repelled and distanced themselves from Trump and the Republican Party (Eady, Hjorth, and Dinesen 2023; Frye 2024). Others, convinced by Trump’s “big lie,” remained steadfast in their support for Trump and the Republican Party (Arceneaux and Truex 2023). In fact, in the wake of the insurrection, Trump supporters were more likely to embrace his antidemocratic, norm-violating sentiments (Clayton et al. 2021; Hall and Druckman 2023) and those

whose identities were highly “fused” (personally aligned) with Trump were more likely to endorse political violence against Democrats (Martel et al. *forthcoming*).

Belief in the big lie has been part of a narrative of adversity and injustice that Trump began spinning even before the 2020 election. That narrative has only grown since Trump was indicted

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in 2023 on 88 criminal charges in four criminal cases, ranging from falsification of business records to conspiracy to defraud the United States (Smart et al. 2024). And the spinning continues: His 2024 convictions on 34 of the counts of criminal activity

Specifically, we tested the degree to which identity fusion in November 2020 (our baseline) predicted belief in the big lie in 2024, beyond attitudes toward Democrats in 2020.

inspired prominent politicians such as the House majority leader Mike Johnson to join Trump in his efforts to discredit the justice system that delivered his convictions.

IDENTITY FUSION WITH TRUMP AND DOUBLING DOWN ON THE BIG LIE

In the wake of Trump's criminal charges, his supporters were once again forced to decide whether to strengthen their bond to him or let it go (Arceneaux and Truex 2023, 872–73). Why were so many of Trump's base supporters willing to stick by him? We propose that in these instances Trump supporters' identities became “fused” with Trump. Identity fusion refers to a “synergistic union between the personal self and the target of fusion” page 276 (Trump in this instance) (Swann, Klein, and Gómez 2024). In contrast to social identity analyses (Tajfel and Turner 1986) in which the social self eclipses the personal self, when fusion occurs, the boundary between the personal self and the target of fusion becomes porous (Swann et al. 2012; Swann, Klein, and Gómez 2024). These porous borders make Trump's conquests akin to personal conquests and motivate strongly fused Trump supporters to take steps to preserve an image of Trump as a beleaguered hero who had the election stolen from him. Believing the big lie thus helped foster stronger fusion to Trump, which primed acceptance of his rhetoric of victimhood and retribution heading into the 2024 election.

This reasoning led us to expect that strongly fused persons would be particularly receptive to assertions made by Trump. Furthermore, such receptiveness would affirm their feelings of fusion with Trump which would, in turn, feed into acceptance of additional components of his narrative. We thus predicted that (1) the more strongly fused supporters were to Trump before January 6, 2021, the more likely they were to accept his big lie; (2) accepting the big lie helped maintain their fusion with Trump, after which (3) they were more likely to accept other components of Trump's innocence narrative and policy agenda.

SURVEYING A SAMPLE OF CORE TRUMP SUPPORTERS FROM 2020 TO 2024

To study this interplay of personal identity and the acceptance of misinformation, we leveraged three years of panel data to analyze within-person interplay of fusion with Trump and belief in the big lie. We also investigated the consequences of this interplay for

attitudes relating to Trump's pursuit of office again in 2024. Specifically, we tested the degree to which identity fusion in November 2020 (our baseline) predicted belief in the big lie in 2024, beyond attitudes toward Democrats in 2020 (Mason,

Wronski, and Kane 2021; Piazza and Van Doren 2023). We then examined whether strengthening belief in the big lie occurred concurrently with strengthening fusion and to what extent it was associated with stronger belief in Trump's innocence and support for his policy agenda.

Over the three-year period from late 2020 to early 2024, we found that fusion with Trump and belief in the big lie were closely entwined. First, the more fused supporters were before the election, the more they strengthened their belief in the big lie between 2021 and 2024, independent of their attitudes toward Democrats. Second, within-person *changes* in fusion occurred alongside changes in belief in the big lie. Third, the establishment of the big lie laid the groundwork for more pro-Trump attitudes heading into the 2024 election season. Those who more strongly believed the big lie in January 2021 were more dismissive of Trump's criminal cases and more supportive of his policy agenda.

In short, more than any other variable we measured during the aftermath of January 6—including perceived threat posed by Democrats, fusion with Trump, and support for the insurrection itself—belief in the big lie predicted adherence to Trump's innocence narrative and agenda. These results suggest that fusion with Trump and belief in the big lie played key roles in fostering allegiance to Trump. Fusion with Trump led supporters to believe the lie and belief in the lie aided Trump's attempt to avoid accountability and retake office. In this scenario, a single piece of misinformation served as a base upon which other identity-protective misinformation could propagate.

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

We analyzed an original three-wave survey of self-reported Trump voters recruited on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)'s Mechanical Turk ($N = 130$). We collected the first wave between November 4 and 9, 2020, after the election, and the second wave between January 11 and 19, 2021. We collected the third wave three years later, between February 23 and March 7, 2024. We retained 32% of our wave 1 ($N = 402$)

participants through wave 2 ($N = 284$) and wave 3 ($N = 130$).¹ The final sample was 52% female and 85% white; 58% had a bachelor's degree or higher; and the average age was 54. Except for education, our sample was very similar to Republican-identifiers in the 2022 American National Election Studies (ANES) pilot sample, who were 53% female and 89% white with an average age of 54. Our sample had almost twice the rate of college graduates (58% to 30%) but was nearly identical on the 7-point ideological identification scale assessed in the ANES sample (5.56 to 5.63).

Given the long duration of our sample, it is not surprising that some attrition occurred. Weaker Trump supporters were more likely to attrit than others. Respondents who dropped out of the sample from 2021 to 2024 were 0.37 points less fused to Trump ($p = 0.048$) and felt 6 points warmer toward Democrats (on a 101-point scale, $p < 0.001$). Our sample is thus more educated and fused with Trump than Trump supporters generally, limiting the generalizability of our claims. However, our sample includes respondents across the entire range of fusion with Trump (see histogram in the online appendix figure C3). Although these details lead us to be cautious, our sample permits insights into processes of change in a vital sector of Trump's base.

Empirical Strategy and Measures

We were interested in how identity fusion, belief in the big lie, and political attitudes of Trump supporters (individuals who said they voted for Trump in 2016) changed from the January 6 Capitol insurrection to the 2024 presidential primary season. We estimated linear models of change between those two periods (taking the first difference) and controlled for baseline levels in the period prior to January 6 (wave 1) (Allison 1990; Finkel 1995). Modeling the difference between periods is akin to a fixed-effects model (Allison 2009, chap. 1) but allowed us to differentiate the effects of change from the effects of the baseline values. We did this to test whether prior values predicted future change; for example, were those more fused with Trump *prior to January 6* more likely to entrench their belief in the big lie between 2021 and 2024?² This strategy also allowed us to model levels of variables specific to wave 3 (attitudes toward Trump's court cases and his policy agenda) in the same way.

Along with attitudes toward Trump's criminal charges and his policy agenda, our dependent variables were changes in identity fusion with Trump and belief in the big lie. Because previous research has found that animus toward Democrats predicted support for Trump (Mason, Wronski, and Kane 2021), we controlled for the perceived threat posed by Democrats. Additionally, because fusion with the US has been found to predict pro-democratic attitudes among Trump supporters (Martel et al. *forthcoming*), we controlled for fusion with the United States. We included controls for support for the January 6 insurrection, ideological identification, faith in democracy, and support for authoritarian actions against Democrats. See table 1 for details on the timing of measurement across waves.

Identity fusion with Trump (and the US) was formed as the average of a three-item fusion scale (Gómez et al. 2011), including agreement with questions like, "I have a deep emotional bond with Donald Trump" and "I make Donald Trump strong" ($\alpha = 0.90$). Responses ranged from 1 ("completely disagree") to 7 ("completely agree"). Using the same response options, belief in the big lie was tapped using the average of a three-item scale, which included such items as "Donald Trump actually won the 2020 presidential election" ($\alpha = 0.96$). Attitudes toward Trump's criminal cases were

Table 1
Timing of Waves and Measures

	Wave 1 (Nov. 2020)	Wave 2 (Jan. 2021)	Wave 3 (March 2024)
Fusion with Trump	✓	✓	✓
Belief in Big Lie		✓	✓
Trump Innocence			✓
Trump Priorities			✓
N	406	284	130

Note: Dependent variables and the waves in which they were measured, denoted by check marks. All measured on 7-point scales.

captured using two items, including agreement with "The legal actions against Donald Trump are appropriate and should be pursued" ($\alpha = 0.90$). Support for Trump's policy priorities headed into the 2024 election consisted of five agreement/disagreement questions taken from a USA Today National Issues Poll (USA Today 2023). Policies include "Strip[ping] civil service protections from tens of thousands of federal workers" and "Send[ing] troops to the southern border and order[ing] the mass deportation of illegal immigrants" ($\alpha = 0.80$). Our measure of perceived out-party threat was a five-item scale, using questions such as "I think the future of the American way of life is under threat from Democrats" ($\alpha = 0.95$).³ Full question wording is in online appendix G.

RESULTS

To preview our results, we found that identity fusion with Trump set the stage for his supporters to believe the big lie that he was the victim of a stolen election. Believing the big lie itself fostered ever stronger fusion with Trump and promoted a swath of other pro-Trump beliefs and attitudes, including toward both Trump's legal issues and his policy agenda. These results suggest a dynamic in which fusion, beyond animus toward Democrats, encouraged supporters to accept misinformation that would protect Trump's image. As elaborated on below, this pattern suggests a reciprocal causal relationship in which fusion leads to belief in the big lie and belief in the big lie strengthens fusion.

Belief in the Big Lie

On average, belief in the big lie increased 0.40 points from 2021 to 2024 on the 7-point scale, ($p = 0.006$, paired two-tailed t-test). Baseline identity fusion with Trump, measured before January 6, 2021, predicted that deepening of belief. The 0.17 slope coefficient on baseline fusion (column 1 in table 2) means a maximally fused Trump supporter increased their belief in the big lie 1.02 points more than an unfused supporter (see also panel A of figure 1), all other things equal.

Identity Fusion with Trump

Fusion with the former president declined marginally from wave 2 to 3, about 0.25 points (on a 7-point scale) within-person on average ($p = 0.054$, paired two-tailed t-test), slightly more than fusion with the US fell (0.17 points, $p = 0.083$). The extent to which it changed, however, was associated with belief in the big lie, further suggesting that believing the lie served to bring them closer to him. Two effects imply this dynamic. First, the negative coefficient on belief in the big lie at wave 2 implies that the more

Trump supporters believed it in January 2021, the less their fusion with Trump changed in the following three years. Second, positive change in belief in the big lie corresponds with positive change in fusion with Trump (see panel B of figure 1 and column 2 of table 2). Concurrent changes in both variables imply a mutually reinforcing process; together, the two findings demonstrate the power of the big lie to fuel identity fusion with President Trump.

Belief in Trump's Innocence

Our estimates (column 3 of table 2) indicate a strong connection between the rhetoric behind the big lie and the rhetoric behind Trump's criminal cases. First, baseline belief in the big lie was a strong predictor of belief in Trump's innocence. A unit increase in belief in the big lie at wave 2 was associated with 0.42 points more

belief in Trump's innocence at wave 3, 0.26 SDs in the dependent variable. Second, those who deepened their belief in the big lie in the years following the insurrection were significantly more dismissive of Trump's legal troubles in 2024, visualized in panel C of figure 1.

Support for Trump's Policy Priorities

Support for Trump's policy priorities was, unsurprisingly, stronger among self-identified conservatives. It was even stronger, however, among long-time believers of the big lie. Just as with perceptions of Trump's innocence, baseline belief in the big lie had a large positive effect. A one-unit increase in the belief scale corresponded to 0.36 points (0.27 SDs) more support for Trump's policy agenda.

Further demonstrating the centrality of the big lie in the minds of Trump supporters was the fact that *change* in belief in the big lie was strongly associated with greater support for Trump's policy priorities, presented in panel D of figure 1. On average, a participant who became one point more convinced of the big lie in the three years after the Capitol insurrection was 0.33 points (0.25 SDs) more supportive of Trump's policy agenda heading into the 2024 election.

DISCUSSION

We followed Trump supporters over a tumultuous three-year period during which their candidate lost his bid for the presidency, falsely claimed to be the victim of electoral fraud, supported an attack on the US Capitol, and ran again for president. We leveraged these data to examine the effects of identity fusion on belief in misinformation (in the form of the big lie) and further commitment to Trump (in the form of dismissing his criminal charges and support for his policy priorities).

We found that Trump supporters' fusion of their personal identities with their leader primed them to believe his big lie, which served to stabilize their fused identities. More specifically, the more fused Trump supporters were during the 2020 election, the more their belief in the big lie strengthened between January 2021 and March 2024. We find evidence for a reciprocal relationship between identity fusion and the internalization of these beliefs. Not only did fusion lay the groundwork for believing the big lie, believing it fostered stronger fusion: the more strongly supporters believed the big lie in January 2021, the less their identity fusion with Trump changed in the ensuing three years. These effects hold controlling for how much participants disliked Democrats or supported the insurrection itself. In fact, attitudes toward the insurrection were not a significant predictor of change in fusion with Trump, suggesting that the events of January 6 did not lead to de-fusion from Trump in this group.

The big lie is thus a primary part of a larger narrative that Trump has promoted in his bid to retake the White House, and our data suggest that accepting the big lie led to wholesale support for the narrative Trump promoted. More specifically, we found that as they became more persuaded of the big lie, Trump supporters were also more inclined to accept his portrayal of his criminal charges as politically motivated and bogus. Thus, convincing them of one lie made them more receptive to others. Acceptance of the big lie may have served as a threshold which, once crossed, strengthened fusion to Trump and motivated supporters to accept other rhetoric. For instance, believers of the big lie were more likely to accept Trump's portrayals of his criminal cases' legitimacy. In our

Table 2
Linear Models of Change between 2021 and 2024 and Levels in 2024

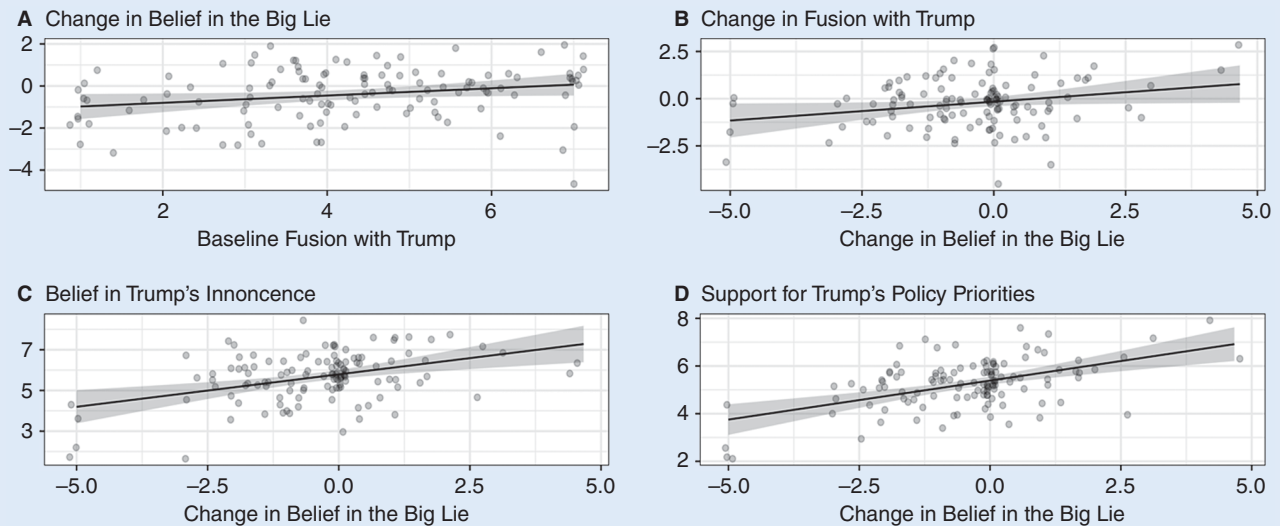
Variable	Change 2021–2024		Levels in 2024	
	Big Lie	Trump Fusion	Crimes	Policies
Change Variables				
Δ Trump Fusion	0.19*		0.21*	-0.01
	(0.09)		(0.08)	(0.07)
Δ US Fusion	0.07	0.31*	0.05	0.16
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.09)
Δ Big Lie		0.20*	0.32***	0.33***
		(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.07)
Δ Out-group Threat	0.41***	0.12	0.13	0.23**
	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.08)
Baseline				
Trump Fusion _{wave 1}	0.17*	0.08	0.06	0.05
	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.06)
US Fusion _{wave 1}	-0.01	-0.06	0.20*	0.06
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.08)
Big Lie _{wave 2}	-0.37**	-0.29*	0.42**	0.36***
	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.10)
Out-group Threat _{wave 1}	0.08	0.07	0.12	0.16
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.09)
Authoritarian Actions _{wave 1}	0.03	-0.11	-0.23	-0.02
	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.09)
Faith in Democracy _{wave 1}	0.01	-0.12	-0.04	0.07
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.10)
Support for Jan. 6 _{wave 2}	0.07	0.05	0.06	0.08
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.08)
Ideological ID _{wave 1}	-0.06	-0.03	0.41***	0.18*
	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.11)	(0.09)
Adj. R ²	0.35	0.22	0.47	0.52
Num. obs.	122	122	122	122

Note: The dependent variables of the change models are first differences between wave 3 and wave 2. The dependent variable of the level models are values in wave 3. Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$;
** $p < 0.01$;
*** $p < 0.001$.

Figure 1

Predicted Outcome Values as Function of Change in Belief in the Big Lie



Panel A presents the predicted change in belief in the big lie from wave 2 to 3 as a function of fusion with Trump at wave 1. Panels B, C, and D show change in fusion with Trump, belief in Trump's innocence, and support for Trump's policy priorities as a function of change in belief in the big lie from wave 2 to 3. Ribbons are 95% confidence bands. Points are partial residuals.

sample, 86% of big-lie believers thought Trump's cases were inappropriate and should not be pursued, whereas only 47% of big-lie doubters thought so.

It makes sense that strongly fused Trump supporters would accept misinformation that seeks to protect his status from threat

limiting our ability to make inferences to the larger population of Trump supporters. Sample attrition led to a final sample that was initially more fused with Trump, thereby limiting further the generalizations we can make to all Trump supporters. Third, our data illustrate what Trump supporters thought early in the run-up

We found evidence of a dynamic in which identity fusion with a leader can set in motion a cascade of support for ideas promoted by that leader, including antidemocratic policies.

(Arceneaux and Truex 2023). What's less clear is whether following Trump in that narrative means also following him on his increasingly authoritarian policy agenda. We found that it did. Both stronger belief in the big lie in 2021 and deepened belief in it three years later significantly predict support for Trump's policy priorities. These results are worrisome insofar as they portend potentially unlimited support for Trump's more antidemocratic policy goals. Although some research shows that voters are willing to put aside partisanship and policy goals to punish undemocratic candidates (Frederiksen 2024), other work finds they are less willing to do so when they perceive threat from the other party or are highly partisan (Simonovits, McCoy, and Littvay 2022). We found evidence of a dynamic in which identity fusion with a leader can set in motion a cascade of support for ideas promoted by that leader, including unprecedented antidemocratic policies.

Although our data help provide insights into the nature and dynamics of support for Donald Trump, they do come with limitations. First, although the long duration of our panel is a significant advantage, it has its limitations. Many events occurred during the interlude between waves, making it difficult to assign causality to any single variable, including identity fusion or belief in the big lie (Finkel 1995). Second, we recruited an opt-in panel,

to the 2024 election. Their beliefs about his innocence may change in the wake of his felony convictions, although we would expect fusion with Trump to limit their effects.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096524001203>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Pelin Cunningham-Erdogdu, Trisha Lobo, God'swill Osa, and three anonymous reviewers for their feedback and Pelin Cunningham-Erdogdu again for her research assistance.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/M34FWI>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. Typical retention rates in short-term two-wave samples are around 70% (TESS 2024).
2. In the online appendix Table A2 and appendix Table A3, we also estimate models with fixed effects and models with lagged dependent variables and get substantively similar results. In the online appendix Table D6, we estimate a cross-lagged panel model and find that baseline fusion with Trump has a positive and significant effect on change in belief in the big lie.
3. As a robustness check, instead of perceived out-party threat, we also use a 101-point feeling thermometer toward Democrats as a measure of out-party hate (Mason, Wronski, and Kane 2021). See the online appendix Table A1 for results.

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