

# The Racial Politics of Misinformation: How Nostalgia Narratives Enable Conspiracy Receptivity in Political Discourse

Zara Zaidi<sup>1</sup>, Ridley Sendow<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Brooklyn Technical High School, New York, NY, USA

<sup>2</sup>School of Business, La Sierra University, Riverside, CA, USA

Email: zaraz6@nycstudents.net, ridley.sendow@pcakorea.org

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## Abstract

American political rhetoric often invokes a lost national golden age, a period of prosperity and security to be restored. This paper argues that such nostalgia is rarely neutral: it tends to glorify a period when a particular group held a secure, dominant position, while remaining silent about whose subjugation made that golden age possible for others. Drawing on Social Identity Theory and research on collective nostalgia, it proposes that this selective remembrance manufactures a sense of outgroup threat, and that this threat is hypothesized to supply the conditions under which conspiracy explanations become appealing, a path it calls the racialized-nostalgia gateway. Three cases illustrate the pattern at rising scales: the birther movement, which questioned the legitimacy of the nation's first Black president; the Great Replacement theory, which imagines the nation's demographic future as a plot against it; and the 2020 "Big Lie," which recast a national election as a theft. The paper states the conditions under which the pattern should not hold. It addresses the leading counterargument that these patterns reflect partisanship and the psychology of political loss rather than race. It closes by considering what the argument implies for the work of countering misinformation.

## Keywords

Nostalgia, Conspiracy Theories, Racial Resentment, Social Identity Theory, Misinformation, American Politics

## 1. Introduction

American political campaigns rely on a broad spectrum of communication strat-

egies, ranging from targeted digital advertising to extensive opposition research. While these tactics reflect a highly dynamic media landscape designed to mobilize voters, their effectiveness depends largely on appealing to deep-rooted emotional drives.

Among these appeals, political nostalgia has emerged as a particularly strong mechanism. Defined generally as a bittersweet longing for the past, nostalgia is politically repurposed when leaders invoke idealized eras of prosperity as models for modern governance. However, this idealized past is rarely universal. It tends to glorify a period when a particular demographic held a dominant position while obscuring the systemic inequalities and subjugation that made that dominance possible for others.

In modern political rhetoric, slogans promising to restore national greatness depend on this deliberate historical ambiguity. As media theorist Svetlana Boym argues, nostalgia is rarely a neutral act of remembrance, but rather a selective reconstruction of history structured around what a particular group has lost (Boym, 2001). When that lost past is applied to the nation, the group whose position is being mourned is typically the same group that held the most secure status within the preexisting social hierarchy. The result is a narrative that can glorify a period of dominance for one group, indifferent to its corresponding subjugation of others.

This selectivity matters because of what it enables psychologically. Behler et al. (2021) find that collective nostalgia for the nation's past is associated with heightened racial prejudice, and that this relationship holds even though personal nostalgia, longing for one's own past rather than the group's, shows no such effect. This suggests that national nostalgia does not merely describe a longing for economic or social stability. It can also function as a vehicle for status-based grievance, in which the perceived loss of a group's former standing is reframed as a loss experienced by the nation as a whole. Once decline is understood in these terms, the search for an explanation and a cause becomes politically potent.

This paper proposes that nostalgia-driven narratives do not merely coexist with conspiratorial thinking but may help create the conditions under which it becomes appealing. The following sections trace how political nostalgia becomes racially coded within the American context, state the conditions under which this framework does not apply, and examine three case studies where this dynamic unfolded: the birther movement, the Great Replacement theory, and the 2020 Big Lie.

## 2. Nostalgia, Identity, and the Making of an Outgroup

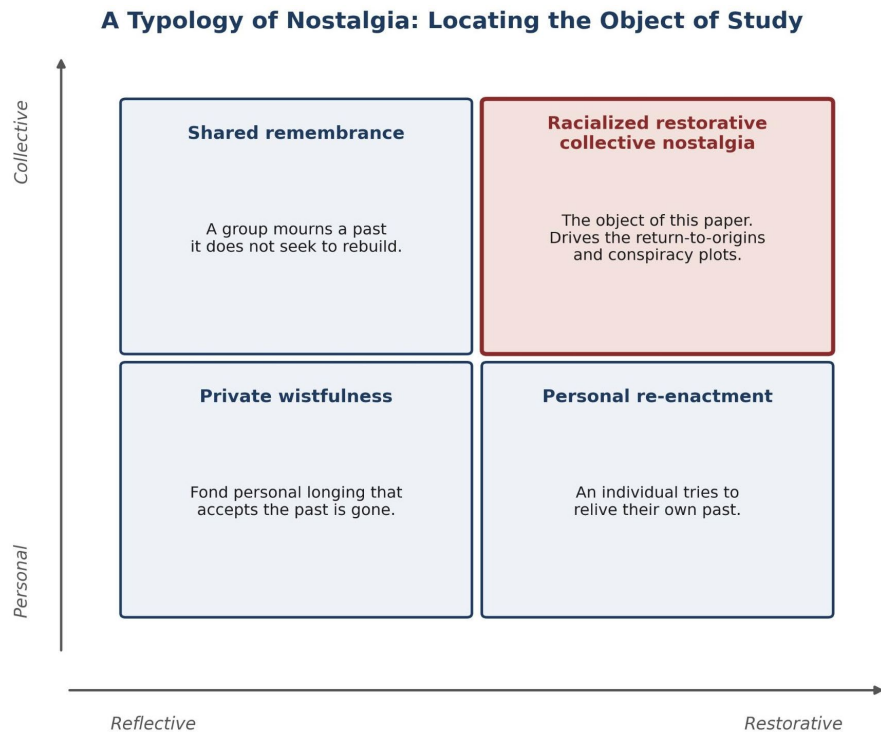
The impulse driving this kind of appeal is not new. Presidents have leaned on the promise of a restored national greatness for decades. Nixon's 1968 nomination acceptance speech called for new leadership to restore respect for the United States, and Reagan's 1980 campaign popularized "Let's Make America Great Again" on buttons and convention materials, a slogan later shortened and revived by Donald

Trump. However, the version of the past invoked by that slogan is inseparable from the history of segregation and the civil rights struggles that defined the same decades now remembered as a golden age. Gross national product more than doubled between 1945 and 1960, a period of growth sometimes called the Golden Age of American Capitalism. However, that growth ran alongside a GI Bill whose benefits, though formally race-neutral, were administered locally in ways that systematically denied Black veterans equal access to its home loan, education, and employment provisions (Katznelson, 2005); redlining that locked Black families out of the suburban housing markets; and Jim Crow laws that legally enforced segregation.

Psychologists have a framework for why this selective memory does the political work it does. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) claims that people categorize themselves and others into ingroups and outgroups, and that maintaining a positive sense of the ingroup often comes at the expense of how the outgroup is perceived. Applied to nostalgia, an ingroup that idealizes its own past defines who does not belong in that past, and by extension, who threatens its return. Smeekes et al. (2023) tested this directly and found that national nostalgia is related to more ingroup identification, but also to more prejudice toward immigrant outgroups. Graham et al. (2021), analyzing a 2019 survey of white Americans, similarly found that racial resentment and a desire to preserve the country's existing demographic makeup were among the strongest predictors of faith in Trump. This argument does not assume that everyone drawn to nostalgia holds prejudiced views. Rather, it suggests that nostalgia creates a perception of an outside threat that makes prejudice appear justified rather than irrational.

Analyzing these dynamics requires distinguishing between different modes of nostalgic reflection. Boym (2001) differentiates reflective nostalgia (an acceptance of temporal loss) from restorative nostalgia, which aims to reconstruct a perceived past and present it as an absolute truth. Cross-referencing this distinction against personal versus collective memory creates a four-part framework (Figure 1). This study focuses on collective restorative nostalgia, which mourns and seeks to restore a group's diminished social standing. Empirical research confirms that national collective nostalgia specifically correlates with prejudice, while personal nostalgia does not (Behler et al., 2021). Treating nostalgia as a simple, monolithic concept would mask the core phenomenon that this paper seeks to examine.

Threat perception of this nature extends well beyond prejudice. In their analysis of the psychological drivers of conspiracy belief, Douglas et al. (2017) identify three foundational motives: the need to comprehend a complex environment, the need to secure safety and control, and the desire to maintain a positive in-group identity. A narrative that frames an out-group as an existential threat to the nation directly addresses both safety and identity maintenance. It yields a sense of control by substituting a structural decline with an identifiable target of blame. Consequently, the out-group threat generated by collective restorative nostalgia is not just a trivial by-product. It constitutes the precise psychological vulnerability that conspiracy theories are designed to exploit.



*Note: Behler et al. (2021) found that collective (national) nostalgia, but not personal nostalgia, predicted racial prejudice, which is why this paper isolates the upper-right quadrant.*

**Figure 1.** A typology of nostalgia, locating the collective-restorative form as the object of study.

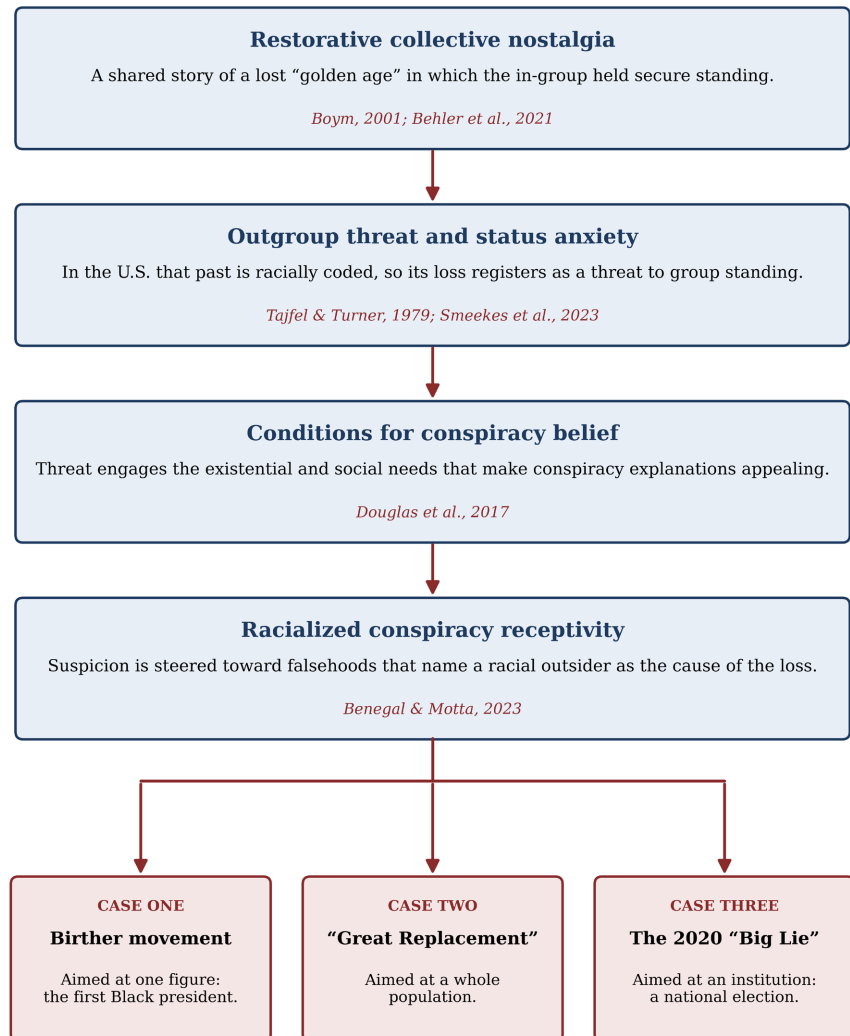
### 3. Nostalgia as a Racialized Gateway

It is important to clarify the structural mechanism proposed in this paper as it forms the foundational framework for the subsequent analysis. This paper names this framework as the racialized-nostalgia gateway: a path that links collective romanticized memory to belief in covert, malicious collusion, with racialized identity serving as the hinge that connects the two (Figure 2).

This proposed pathway operates in four distinct stages. It is theorized to begin with a nostalgic story about a lost golden age that is racially coded regardless of the explicit discourse. This narrative would function by generating perceived status threat, turning a vague sense that things have changed into a perception of something being taken away. This heightened threat perception would then create conspiracy ideation, as members of a historically dominant group seeking to explain perceived status loss reach for causal explanations and identifiable targets of blame. Ultimately, because the initial grievance is rooted in race, the resulting scapegoating would target the racialized out-groups. Consequently, within this theoretical framework, conspiracy belief is conceptualized as more than just an extrinsic phenomenon that is linked to nostalgic feelings. It also represents the potential logical outcome of restorative nostalgia's internal ideological framework.

## Nostalgia as a Racialized Gateway to Conspiracy

*A conceptual model linking a story of a lost past to belief in a racialized plot*



*Note: Arrows show the proposed, not empirically tested, direction of influence.*

**Figure 2.** Nostalgia as a racialized gateway to conspiracy, from restorative nostalgia to racialized conspiracy receptivity, illustrated by three cases.

### 4. Case One: The Birther Movement

The birther movement centered on the false claim that Barack Obama, the nation’s first Black president, was born outside the United States and was thus constitutionally ineligible for the presidency. Despite exhaustive empirical refutations and the public release of Obama’s Hawaiian birth certificate in 2011, the narrative persisted within mainstream political discourse.

This phenomenon exemplifies the racialized-nostalgia framework. For a segment of white Americans already primed by nostalgic rhetoric to see the presidency as an exclusive domain of the historically dominant ingroup, Obama’s election represented a structural rupture rather than a routine political transition. The birther

narrative provided a causal framework for this perceived disruption—the presidency had not simply changed hands; it had been taken through deception. [Jardina and Traugott \(2019\)](#), studying the roots of the rumor, found that adherence to the birther narrative among white Americans correlated strongly with racial resentment, peaking among individuals who were well-informed in politics. This finding indicates that endorsement of the narrative was not driven by information deficits, but rather by motivated reasoning anchored in pre-existing racial grievances.

The birther movement relied on an implicit nostalgic appeal to a pre-civil rights ideal of executive leadership, framing executive power as the exclusive heritage of the traditional dominant ingroup.

## 5. Case Two: The Great Replacement Theory

Where the birther movement targeted a single political figure, the Great Replacement theory targets broader demographic transformations. The theory states that political elites are deliberately orchestrating immigration to supplant historically dominant populations with an electorate perceived as more compliant. Although empirical evidence suggests otherwise, this narrative has been cited by perpetrators of mass violence and represents a critical case of demographic grievance.

The Great Replacement explicitly relies on a nostalgic architecture. Its thesis presupposes an idealized, ethnically homogeneous golden age threatened by a conspiracy. [Obaidi et al. \(2022\)](#) found that perceived demographic displacement drives out-group hostility and violent extremism, mediated primarily by symbolic threats to group status rather than tangible economic competition. Furthermore, recent survey data from [Rhodes et al. \(2026\)](#) show that endorsement of this narrative extends beyond extremist subcultures into mainstream conservative media. This mainstreaming aligns with this paper's core model, which predicts that status threat operates effectively across conventional public spheres.

## 6. Case Three: The 2020 Big Lie

Whereas the previous two cases targeted an individual leader or a demographic trend respectively, the 2020 Big Lie targets institutional legitimacy itself. This theory posits that the 2020 Election was fraudulent. Courts and bipartisan election officials systematically rejected these claims, making the phenomenon a key subject for sociological analysis.

Structurally, the narrative functions as a restorative project—a legitimate election result is reframed as a theft, necessitating the reclamation of lost authority. The idealized past in this context is a legitimate democratic order, the loss is political dominance, and the mechanism assigned blame is an organized conspiracy.

Critically, endorsement of this narrative is strongly racialized. [Filindra et al. \(2024\)](#) demonstrate that white racial grievance consistently predicts distrust in electoral integrity across national datasets. Similarly, [Benegal et al. \(2026\)](#) observe that anti-

Black racial resentment, rather than generalized in-group identity, serves as the primary predictor of belief in electoral fraud. Institutional skepticism in this case does not manifest in the abstract. It concentrated precisely where racialized grievances had already primed individuals to perceive loss.

The 2020 Big Lie operationalized restorative nostalgia through explicit calls to “stop the steal” and “take back our country,” invoking an idealized democratic past wherein election outcomes consistently reflected the political will of the dominant ingroup.

## 7. Where the Pattern Should Not Hold

The boundary of this model depends on whether a claim invokes lost group status, not its topic. For example, conspiracies about vaccines or 5G fall outside this framework if they only address general fear or bodily autonomy. However, if those same conspiracy theories are framed around elite plots to displace a dominant group, they connect directly to the racialized-nostalgia gateway.

Consequently, the model proposed here does not extend to these generalized theories. Conversely, racial resentment does not generate universal receptivity to all misinformation; as [Benegal and Motta \(2023\)](#) observe, racial hostility heightens belief specifically in racialized false claims while leaving non-racialized health claims unaffected. The racialized-nostalgia gateway functions precisely at the intersection of racially coded grievances and narratives that assign explicit blame for perceived status loss.

## 8. The Three Cases Compared

When evaluated together, these three case studies illustrate a unified conceptual framework operating across distinct analytical scales. The birther movement targeted an individual leader, the Great Replacement targeted an entire demographic population, and the Big Lie targeted core democratic institutions. Across each scale, the structural narrative remains constant. A historical period framed as belonging to a dominant in-group, a present condition defined by perceived status loss, and a covert mechanism assigned responsibility for that loss. [Table 1](#) maps these three cases across the different stages of the racialized-nostalgia gateway, highlighting the empirical literature supporting each dimension.

**Table 1.** A comparison of the birther movement, Great Replacement, and the 2020 Big Lie.

| Dimension         | Birther Movement                                 | “Great Replacement”                | The 2020 “Big Lie”             |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Scale of target   | A single figure                                  | A whole population                 | A national institution         |
| Lost “golden age” | A presidency that “belonged” to a certain leader | An ethnically homogeneous nation   | A legitimate electoral order   |
| Who is blamed     | An illegitimate outsider in power                | Elites orchestrating replacement   | A conspiracy of election fraud |
| What triggers it  | Election of a Black president                    | Immigration and demographic change | Loss of political power        |

Continued

|                |                           |                                            |                                               |
|----------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Key evidence   | Jardina & Traugott (2019) | Obaidi et al. (2022); Rhodes et al. (2026) | Filindra et al. (2024); Benegal et al. (2026) |
| Factual status | False; disproven          | False; debunked                            | False; rejected by courts                     |

Note: All three narratives share the same structure, a lost past, a present loss, and a hidden hand to blame; they differ mainly in scale and target.

9. Addressing Counterarguments

Alternative perspectives argue that conspiratorial ideation comes primarily from partisan alignment and the psychology of electoral loss rather than racial dynamics. Structural accounts, such as Uscinski and Parent (2014), frame conspiracy theories as resource mechanisms utilized by political out-groups to attribute defeat to malicious external forces. Given the relationship between race and partisanship in contemporary American politics, this alternative hypothesis warrants careful consideration.

Benegal and Motta (2023) demonstrate that racial animus predicts belief in racialized false claims even after controlling for partisan identity and ideology. While partisan elite cues supply the immediate motive for political distrust, partisanship alone cannot account for why racial resentment heightens misperceptions on racialized issues while remaining inert on non-racialized topics. Thus, partisanship and racialized nostalgia are best understood as complementary. Partisan cues activate alignment, while racialized nostalgia provides the narrative structure that channels status threat toward specific out-groups.

10. Limitations

Several methodological limitations should be noted. The synthesized literature spans diverse study designs not originally intended to form a single framework, and much of the evidence remains correlational. While experimental findings (e.g., Obaidi et al., 2022) support elements of this causal direction, comprehensive longitudinal or experimental testing of the full four-stage gateway remains a goal for future research. Additionally, because the empirical literature focuses mainly on white American populations, testing the applicability of this model to other national contexts or minority groups remains an open question.

11. Conclusion

In conclusion, collective memory functions as a power mechanism of social cohesion, yet selective historical remembrance, especially one that is centered on an idealized past contingent on the exclusion of others, shifts memory from a tool of unity to one of division. Narratives such as the birther movement, the Great Replacement, and the 2020 Big Lie illustrate how restorative nostalgia may construct out-group threats to facilitate conspiratorial belief. Addressing misinformation effectively requires recognizing that factual corrections alone are insufficient if the

underlying mechanisms of status threat and selective memory remain unaddressed.

## Author Contributions

**Zara Zaidi:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing—Original Draft, and Writing—Review & Editing; **Ridley Sendow:** Investigation, Writing—Review & Editing, Visualization, and Supervision. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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