



QAnon and the 2020 US Election: What Trump's Loss Means for the pro-Trump Conspiracy ICSR Insight by Research Fellow Blyth Crawford

Amid continuing turbulence surrounding the results of the 2020 United States election, and outcries of [mass voter fraud made by the president himself](#), question marks remain over what this means for the future of the QAnon conspiracy which so emphatically backed the re-election campaign of Donald Trump.

QAnon, an [unfounded conspiracy](#) which originated just three years ago in 2017, has been a novel presence both in the Presidential election - with Trump repeatedly failing to solidly condemn the narrative - and in the race for Congress, where 31 (mainly

Republican) candidates competing in the congressional primaries [had some affiliation to the conspiracy](#). Of these candidates, [two have won seats in Congress](#): Georgia's Marjorie Taylor Greene, and Colorado's Lauren Boebert. Although both candidates have attempted to distance themselves from QAnon, in the early stages of their campaign each were [explicit in their support for the conspiracy](#), and the extent to which Greene has truly abandoned her pro-Q beliefs [remains dubious](#).



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The conspiracy has also seen major growth online throughout 2020 with the membership of [QAnon communities on Facebook growing by 120% in March](#), seemingly propelled by growing public anxieties surrounding the coronavirus pandemic. Despite [major crackdowns on QAnon from social media platforms](#) like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, the conspiracy continues to thrive online, reaching new audiences on Instagram having found a stronghold within the (predominantly female) [wellness influencer community](#), as well as on alternative conservative platforms like [Parler and Gab](#).

After smearing the name of Democratic Party members for the last three years, and gearing towards Donald Trump's re-election, one might expect that support for the QAnon conspiracy might begin to wane in the face of Biden's electoral victory. However, while some followers [do appear to have become disillusioned](#) with the conspiracy, others have enthusiastically continued their support, suggesting that the QAnon conspiracy could be a continuing force within American politics, with, or without Donald Trump as President.

QAnon and its Evolution in 2020

While technically a conspiracy *theory*, QAnon is perhaps best understood as an omnibus of conspiratorial narratives spiralling from the premise that a US Government insider known only as 'Q' – owing to their presumed 'Q-level



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clearance' – is exposing 'Deep State' corruption through a series of posts made to anonymous online image boards. The first of these posts, known as 'Q drops', was made to 4chan's '/pol/' (politically incorrect) board on 28 October 2017, and threatened that Hillary Clinton would be arrested imminently.

Since this initial drop, Q has made nearly 5,000 cryptic posts, moving from 4chan to its sibling site 8kun (then 8chan) in November 2017. Taken together they paint a picture of endemic Deep State corruption, and frame President Donald Trump as a valiant 'sleeping agent' warrior, working to uncover a secret underground cabal of Satan-worshipping paedophiles with connections to the Democratic party, as well as various 'elites' in Hollywood, the broader USA and beyond. As Amarnath Amarasingam and Marc-André Argentino outline, [this narrative has its roots in the 2016 "Pizzagate" conspiracy](#) which purported that secret codes contained in John Podesta's emails connected Hillary Clinton and other high-level Democrats with a (fake) child sex trafficking ring operating out of a pizza restaurant in Washington D.C.

Beyond these central tenets, various, smaller factions of the QAnon community espouse a collection of more niche conspiracies. At the most extreme level, QAnon narratives [dissolve into open antisemitism](#), pushing the same beliefs upheld by factions of the extreme right.



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Throughout 2020, QAnon has experienced considerable online growth, and as the conspiracy becomes increasingly mainstream, large sub-sections of supporters have embraced a [softer, repackaged version of the narrative](#) spread under the banner of 'Save our Children', or 'Save *the* Children'. This iteration of the Q narrative focusses heavily on ending child sex trafficking, and frames Donald Trump as the only candidate capable of tackling and exposing its links to elites and corrupt members of the Democratic Party. While the narrative is often grounded in false or misleading information – leading the registered charity 'Save the Children' to publicly [distance itself from the online movement](#) – it has achieved considerable spread among online parenting, and health and wellness communities who often appear unaware of the slogan's links to QAnon.

Reactions to the US Election and Q's Silence

From the conspiracy's inception, Q has consistently used disinformation both to discredit members of the Democratic Party and to elevate Donald Trump to a God-like status, thus framing his re-election as an almost inevitable victory of 'good' over 'evil'. As such, Trump's electoral defeat came as a shock to many QAnon supporters, some of whom had predicted a sweeping 50 state victory for the current President. As more states announced their counts over the days following 3 November, and chances of Trump winning the election appeared to be increasingly slim, many awaited word from Q to make sense of the situation.

However, crucially Q left followers hanging for over a week without posting, sending some into a tailspin of uncertainty. Some turned towards the final Q drop made before the election for some sense of guidance, which – confusingly – read: “Together we win” and linked to the ‘Last of the Mohicans’ soundtrack.



The last ‘Q drop’ made before the election.

Q does not always post on a daily basis, and in the past has gone months without comment. However, given the shock of Joe Biden's win, the lack of a new drop did appear to shake some supporters' faith. For instance, the days after the US election, a number of adherents of the conspiracy took to 8kun



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to express their frustration and confusion at Trump's apparent loss, with one begging "Q throw us a bone here". Nevertheless, following this initial despair, many Q followers continued to remain hopeful.

Much of the rhetoric surrounding the QAnon conspiracy hinges on the slogan "trust the plan", which has been continuously repeated in Q's posts. It has never been clarified exactly what the plan *is*, but most regard the phrase as a reassurance that current events are unfolding as part of a controlled narrative promising the eventual triumph of good over evil. Current reactions to Trump's loss, therefore, generally hinge on whether supporters view his defeat as a continuation or a violation of 'the plan'.

At present, a large base of Q supporters appears to view Joe Biden's apparent electoral win – paradoxically – as a key stage in Q's overarching plan which will lead to the eventual declaration of Donald Trump as the true winner of the election. 'Joe M', a popular QAnon influencer, has [dubbed Biden's victory as a "Necessary Scare Event"](#), arguing that President Trump had to allow mass levels of fraudulent votes to be submitted in Biden's favour, in order to eventually expose this illegal activity and declare himself the rightful winner of the election. For instance, on Parler [Joe M has written](#):

"For the next few days, maybe weeks, patriots [Q supporters] are going to suffer. After that it will be the turn of our deceived friends. At the end of it all, the extent to which our elections have been manipulated for decades will no



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longer be a dark secret that stays in the shadows for eternity. This was necessary.”

This narrative has been echoed by a number of Q supporters throughout social media, with hashtags like “#TrustThePlan” and “#ItsNotOver” gaining traction on Parler. Similarly, others like the pro-QAnon wellness Instagram influencer ‘Rose Uncharted’ have pushed conspiracies suggesting that the Biden administration has commandeered a powerful supercomputer system known as ‘The Hammer’ in order to [‘hack into the election’](#) and ‘steal’ the vote. Framing this activity within the broader QAnon narrative, ‘evil’ Democrats are therefore believed to have attempted to fraudulently ‘steal’ the election, to unseat Donald Trump, the only man they believe capable of combatting their involvement with child sex trafficking.

Many supporters have viewed Trump’s [recent tweets](#) in which he has made [baseless allegations](#) of widespread voter fraud and promised “we will [still] win”, as direct evidence that they should continue to trust in QAnon and wait for Trump’s eventual electoral victory. Thus, for the time being at least, it appears that significant numbers of Q supporters have doubled down on their belief in the conspiracy despite Donald Trump’s electoral loss and Q’s ten-day silence.



The Future of QAnon

While belief in the QAnon conspiracy continues to persist, it is uncertain whether or not this support will hold as time goes on and Joe Biden (presumably) is inaugurated as president in January 2020. Importantly, QAnon is as much an exercise in creative writing as it is a political phenomenon, meaning it is particularly difficult to predict its exact future trajectory. However, there are several factors worth noting when considering whether or not Q will continue to draw support.

In the past, predictions made by Q have also been disproved and have [not led to a substantial drop in support](#). It is possible that the cult-like nature of the conspiracy may allow QAnon to withstand greater threats to its ideological integrity such as Trump's loss of the election, which contrasts with the movement's framing of Trump as a triumphing force over para-theological evil.

In their classic sociological work 'When Prophecy Fails', [Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken and Stanley Schachter demonstrate](#) that in some cases when people with cult-like beliefs are confronted with unequivocal evidence to the contrary of their ideology, they may seek to resolve this cognitive dissonance by recruiting more members to their community rather than abandoning their convictions - leaving a core group still faithful to the belief-system.



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Adding nuance to this concept, Lorne L. Dawson has outlined several ways in which [groups may attempt to persist in the face of disproved beliefs](#) including proselytising, rationalisation, and reaffirmation - where groups increase their focus on internal group dynamics. Dawson highlights that the success of these strategies is partially contingent on a number of factors, including “scope and sophistication of an ideology”. He notes that prophecies anchored in “a broader and more complex set of beliefs that frame a fairly comprehensive worldview, sense of mission, and collective identity” are less likely to disband in the face of specific disconfirmations. Thus, while of course some supporters are likely to become disillusioned with their beliefs when faced with prophetic failure, certain dynamics may also enable other members to remain firm in their faith. Indeed, of the thirteen groups examined by Dawson, he emphasises that only one collapsed entirely after the failure of a prophecy.

While Q drops may not necessarily have explicitly ‘prophesised’ Trump’s win, the broader narrative of the conspiracy and the current President’s positioning within it, seem to have been gearing towards his re-election. Certainly, belief in QAnon led many supporters to predict Trump’s victory was somewhat inevitable as part of Q’s plan, and his loss has, for many, violated the fundamental tenets of the conspiracy. Therefore, while QAnon can’t be regarded as a prophecy as such, elements of this kind of analysis can be useful in theorising how a movement may persist despite serious threats to its ideology.



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With this in mind, the complex nature of QAnon, with its detailed web of interwoven, mutually reinforcing conspiracies, and its resilient sense of in-group identity which casts believers as enlightened individuals pitted against evil – often satanic – forces, appears to be somewhat robust and potentially able to retain a number of followers despite serious blows to its core ideology. Again, this is not to say all QAnon adherents will remain believers, rather that, an already committed core of followers could continue to stay faithful to the conspiracy despite Trump's loss.

Furthermore, recent permeations of QAnon operating under the banner of 'Save our children' have not only attracted a new demographic to the conspiracy, they have also shifted the emphasis of the conspiracy to protecting children, rather than being so explicitly about the re-election of Donald Trump. While Biden's victory is a significant blow to these communities, researcher [Annie Kelly has noted](#) that the Save the Children rebrand has made it difficult to ascertain the degree to which followers are even aware of their links to the QAnon narrative. Thus, Trump's loss of the election is likely to have less of an impact on this softer strain of QAnon influencers who are so deeply embedded in various channels of misinformation and disinformation and may be less focussed on official predictions made by Q.

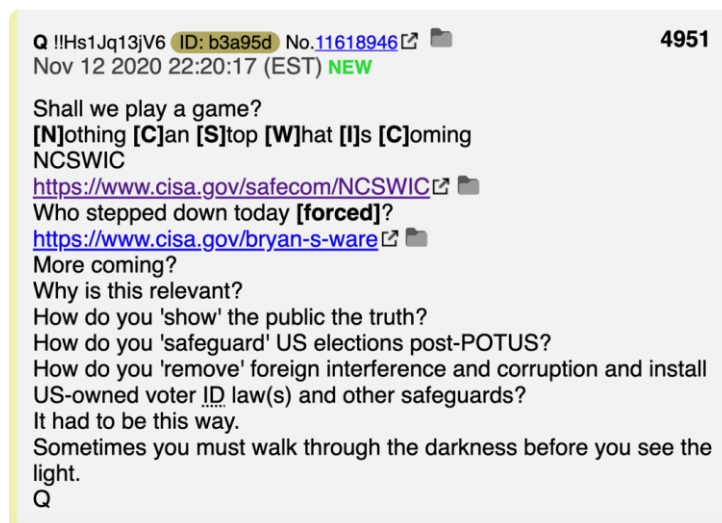
It should also be stressed that the role of Q drops may not be as central to the conspiracy as they once were. These days, Q drops often reflect or



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amplify pre-existing conspiracies which have already gained traction online before receiving endorsement from Q. In this respect, Q can be seen as more of a reactionary crowd-pleaser than a prophet, and in the face of prolonged silence on their part, Q-related conspiracies are likely to continue to circulate regardless.

For example, on 13 November when Q did eventually break their silence and finally release three new Q drops, they appeared to play into the narrative that US elections had been interfered with by outside forces, which had already become popular among followers of the conspiracy. While [Marc-André Argentino has observed](#) that a reference to a “post-POTUS” future made within the drop, has confused a number of QAnon supporters, others simply appear placated that Q has not abandoned them in their time of need.



One of Q's most recent drops.



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As, such Q remains important to the conspiracy's integrity, however it is also true that the narrative can withstand long periods of silence without a drop. In the past, QAnon researcher Travis View has emphasised the [importance of broader pro-QAnon influencer networks](#), stating that even if Q does not post for some time:

“QAnon promoters will fill in that leader vacuum. They won't provide the cryptic drops, but they will decide which conspiracy theories are canonical and which ones are heretical.”

Thus, in the absence of a new Q drop, much of the burden for propagating the conspiracy may be shouldered by pro-QAnon influencers, meaning that the longevity QAnon does not solely hinge on the word of Q itself.

In short, despite core tenants of the QAnon belief being threatened by Donald Trump's loss, and a ten-day silence on the part of Q, there are a number of factors which suggest the conspiracy may not immediately disappear in the face of these challenges.

Conclusion

For now, QAnon has survived one of the biggest ideological blows to the narrative's integrity since its inception – Trump's loss of the 2020 presidential election. Throughout 2020 the conspiracy has gained traction online and has



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reached an increasingly mainstream audience, and at present support for the narrative appears to remain strong. For the moment, buoyed by statements made by the President himself, the QAnon community largely appears to be continuing to trust Q's 'plan'.

It is impossible to predict how exactly the conspiracy will survive and shift in the coming year following Biden's inauguration, however, its cult-like nature and broad spread across social media mean that a number of followers are unlikely to abandon Q just yet.

It is almost inevitable that some adherents will become disillusioned with the conspiracy following Trump's loss of the election, and it is possible that as time goes on, more may turn away from Q. However, several factors suggest that should the current trajectory of the conspiracy continue, QAnon appears set to retain a meaningful support-base in the face of what, from an outside perspective, might appear to be abject defeat.