

Populist Transparency: The JFK Assassination Records Act, Executive Order 14176, and the Normalization of Conspiratorial Thinking in US Politics

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Introduction

In the days before his second inauguration, President-elect Trump teased that “as a first step toward restoring transparency and accountability to government” he would declassify records related to the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy (JFK), Robert F. Kennedy (RFK), and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK).¹ On January 23, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order (EO) 14176,² which triggered the declassification of “all records related to the assassination of President Kennedy” pursuant to the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992 (hereafter, JFK Records Act).³ He had balked at the opportunity to fully declassify these records in 2017 during his first term, inviting scrutiny regarding the motive for his recent eagerness to do so. Moreover, EO 14176’s inclusion of orders to declassify records related to the assassinations of RFK and MLK, releases of which have not been directed by any Act of Congress, suggests broader motivations than merely carrying out the JFK Records Act. Conspiracy theories surrounding each of these assassinations have circulated since they occurred, and (as we will see) Donald Trump is no stranger to using conspiracist rhetoric to mobilize his constituents.

In this paper I contextualize EO 14176 and its legislative impetus by (1) examining the historical events that precipitated them and (2) comparing them to earlier declassification initiatives under Presidents Obama and Clinton. Considering both this analysis and scholarship on the resurgence of mainstream conspiratorial thinking in US political discourse, I argue that Trump’s order reflects a broader transformation in American politics, specifically that, with President Trump’s reelection, conspiracism has become a dominant mode of political engagement in the United States. EO 14176, then, serves as an example of how

mechanisms of government information dissemination—in this case, the transparency-building process of declassification—may be leveraged to appeal to a conspiracy-minded public.

The JFK Records Act in Context

On November 22, 1963, Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated JFK during a presidential motorcade in Dallas, Texas. Two days later, Oswald himself was fatally shot by nightclub operator Jack Ruby while Oswald was being transported through Dallas Police Headquarters. On November 27, 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed EO 11130, which established a commission to investigate the assassination, known unofficially as the Warren Commission.⁴ Ten months later, the Warren Commission released its final report, concluding that Oswald and Ruby acted alone in carrying out their respective murders.⁵

Elites and non-elites alike met the Warren Report with skepticism. Journalists, historians, and legal experts published works critiquing, and ultimately opposing, the conclusions put forth in the report. Likewise, according to a 1966 survey, 50% of respondents—normal, everyday Americans—indicated that they held conspiracist beliefs about the circumstances of JFK’s assassination and its governmental investigation.⁶ A federal response to public resistance to the Warren Report finally came in the wake of the release of Oliver Stone’s 1991 film, *JFK*, whose screenplay drew heavily conspiracy theories surrounding JFK’s assassination and reignited public skepticism. The bill proposing the JFK Records Act was introduced in the Senate in July 1992, seven months after the film’s release; it was signed into law that October.⁷

The law stipulated the creation of a collection of records related to JFK’s assassination at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the establishment of the

Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB), an independent agency tasked with overseeing the identification and review of assassination-related records.⁸ The JFK Records Act emphasized that these records “should carry a presumption of immediate disclosure” and that all should be made available twenty-five years after enactment unless the President discerns “an identifiable harm to the military defense, intelligence operations, law enforcement, or conduct of foreign relations” that “outweighs the public interest in disclosure.”⁹

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the JFK Records Act’s enactment came in 2017 during President Trump’s first term, but a blanket declassification did not come immediately. Instead, he invited agencies to recommend records for continued postponement of declassification, ultimately agreeing to keep some records classified and ordering their continued review over the next three years.¹⁰ The COVID-19 pandemic, however, heavily impacted NARA’s ability to coordinate with federal agencies to review the remaining classified records, prompting President Biden to further postpone a comprehensive release in October 2021.¹¹ Reviews continued and more documents continued to be released, but some records remained restricted.¹² By June 2023 99 percent of the JFK assassination records were made available to the public, with “4,684 documents remain[ing] withheld in whole or in part.”¹³

Donald Trump was re-elected in 2024. Soon after his inauguration he issued EO 14176, which triggered the declassification of all remaining JFK assassination records and ordered the immediate declassification of all records pertaining to RFK and MLK Jr. As of March 18, 2025, “all records previously withheld for classification that are part of the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection are released.”¹⁴

To better understand the unique context and impact of the JFK Records Act, we may compare it to other recent federal declassification and transparency-building initiatives. Below, I contrast the JFK Records Act with President Bill Clinton’s (hereafter Clinton) Executive Order 12958 and President Barak Obama’s (hereafter Obama) Argentina Declassification Project.

EO 12958, signed by Clinton April 17, 1995, aimed to overhaul the systemic management of all classified information across federal agencies. It mandated the automatic declassification of records twenty-five years or older unless they qualified for exemption under national security criteria. It also emphasized agency accountability and public access, establishing the Information Security Oversight Office (ISOO) and the Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel (ISCAP) to oversee implementation.¹⁵ Whereas the JFK Records Act sought to restore public trust in response to popular skepticism and conspiracy theories surrounding a single event, EO 12958 represented an attempt to institutionalize informational transparency across

the federal government. Although it was amended and eventually fully replaced by subsequent administrations, this EO laid a foundation for large-scale archival releases and further developments in classification policy.¹⁶

The Argentina Declassification Project was an executive declassification initiative grounded in foreign policy and human rights objectives. Announced by Obama during a 2016 visit to Buenos Aires, the project sought to assist Argentina’s reckoning with its 1976–1983 military dictatorship, during which thousands of citizens were “disappeared” or killed. Unlike the JFK Records Act, this effort was prompted not by domestic political pressure but by international diplomacy and moral responsibility; it is among the first uses of the foreign policy tool known popularly as “declassification diplomacy.”¹⁷ Managed by the National Security Council (NSC) and Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), the project coordinated the release of almost 50,000 pages across roughly sixteen federal agencies, including the CIA, State Department, and Department of Defense. These documents have played a crucial role in “hold[ing] accountable those responsible for human rights abuses” in Argentina.¹⁸

Each of these efforts illustrates different motivations for and implementations of declassification policy (see Table 1 for a comparative summary of these policies). The JFK Records Act sought to address a domestic lack of public trust surrounding a singular event. It was not motivated by external relations and had minimal institutional impact. Conversely, Clinton’s EO 12958 sought to broadly impose a more comprehensive administrative vision of transparency, aiming to embed openness within the bureaucratic mechanisms of classification itself. The Argentina Declassification Project demonstrates the strategic use of declassification as an instrument of diplomacy and historical justice, achieving tangible, wide-reaching impacts abroad. Collectively, these cases underscore that declassification as policy is a deeply political act, one that can be leveraged to serve various purposes and can have varying degrees of impact. With this in mind, we can now better understand the motivations and significance of Trump’s EO 14176.

Understanding EO 14176 and the (Re-) Growth of a Conspiracy-Minded American Public

According to Michael Butter, Donald Trump has reshaped the role and status of conspiracy theories in American political culture. Conspiracy theories, which had once been widely accepted in US public and political discourse, became stigmatized in the public sphere after the 1950s due to social-scientific development and media critique.¹⁹ While conspiracism never truly left fringe subcultures, the rise of the internet enabled these theories to

<i>Category</i>	JFK Records Act (1992)	E.O. 12958 (1995)	Argentina Declassification Project (2016–2019)
<i>Type</i>	Congressional legislation	Executive Order	Executive-led initiative
<i>Initiating President</i>	George H. W. Bush (signed)	Bill Clinton	Barack Obama (initiated), concluded under Donald Trump
<i>Motivation</i>	Public pressure and distrust after <i>JFK</i> film	Reform of classification/declassification bureaucracy	Human rights and diplomacy with Argentina
<i>Primary Focus</i>	JFK assassination records	System-wide declassification of 25+ year-old records	U.S. policy during Argentina's military dictatorship
<i>Oversight Mechanism</i>	ARRB	ISOO; ISCAP	NSC, ODNI (no independent body)
<i>Legal Mandate</i>	Yes – Congressional statute; executive order 14176 concluded	Yes – executive order	No – voluntary executive action
<i>Audience/Stakeholders</i>	U.S. public, media, conspiracy theorists	Federal agencies, archivists, transparency advocates	Argentine government, human rights groups, historians
<i>Impact</i>	Mixed – reinforced some public distrust due to ongoing delays	Institutional – reformed declassification norms	Positive – aided investigations, praised internationally
<i>Legacy</i>	Symbol of transparency struggles in U.S. democracy	Foundation for future executive transparency policies	Model of declassification as diplomatic/humanitarian tool

Table 1. Comparative Summary Table of Recent US Declassification Initiatives: JFK Records Act, Argentina Declassification Project, and EO 12958.

re-emerge visibly and widely in online spaces. Trump's embrace of conspiratorial rhetoric in 2011 regarding Obama's citizenship and eligibility for the presidency contributed to bringing conspiracist ideas back into the political mainstream, especially within the Republican Party and its media ecosystem.²⁰

During his 2016 campaign, Trump used conspiracy theories strategically. He often merely suggested, but did not fully endorse, conspiracy theories—e.g., prefacing his statements with “a lot of people are saying...”—to appeal both to conspiracy-believing and more moderate voters.²¹ His shift to more explicit conspiracist messaging, such as accusing Hillary Clinton of collusion with global elites, intensified as the campaign progressed. While Trump returned to deploying conspiracism more cautiously once in office, he had nevertheless positioned himself as unafraid to engage with conspiracist discourse. After his 2020 defeat, Trump's rhetoric escalated. Failing to prove electoral fraud in practically every legitimate arena, Trump leaned into promoting his conspiracy theories, convincing more than 40% of the American public that Biden was an illegitimate president.²² This strategy culminated in the Capitol riots on January 6, 2021, at

which point, Butter argues, conspiracy theory moved from the fringe to the center of Trump's political movement.²³

Butter concludes that conspiracy theories have become foundational to the modern Republican party, shifting from marginal discourse to a central political tool. The party's increasing embrace of this conspiracist thinking illustrates a fragmentation of American political discourse, a bifurcation of “publics” in which one side has normalized conspiracism and the other continues to stigmatize it. Butter suggests that this fragmentation poses a growing threat to democratic institutions, as it “makes meaningful public debate... impossible.” Moreover, conspiracist rhetoric regarding election interference has motivated policies that are “allegedly meant to make voting securer but are in effect making it more difficult for groups that tend to support the Democrats, most notably people of color.”²⁴

Seen in this light, Executive Order 14176 marks a significant departure from earlier declassification efforts, not only in scope but also in rhetorical strategy and political function. While the JFK Records Act was a response to public pressure and the Clinton and Obama-era initiatives pursued institutional reform and

diplomatic goodwill, EO 14176 operates within a conspiracist political logic that transforms the transparency-building mechanism of declassification into a symbolic gesture. It demonstrates how informational processes are currently being deployed to appeal to a conspiracy-minded constituency.

Beyond merely carrying out the JFK Records Act, which was legislatively mandated and focused narrowly on a single historical event, EO 14176 unilaterally expands its scope to include the assassinations of RFK and MLK, events not previously subject to comprehensive federal declassification frameworks. This expansion is politically significant. All three assassinations are touchstones in American conspiracist discourse. By grouping them together, the order signals solidarity with the conspiracy-believing public, offering what appears to be long-denied validation of their suspicions that multiple parties were involved in these figures' assassinations and/or in deliberate "cover-ups" by government agencies. The timing of the order—signed just days after Trump's second inauguration—further supports this interpretation. Whereas Trump deferred full declassification of JFK files during his first term, his renewed urgency to do so in 2025 suggests that transparency is no longer a technocratic concern but rather a campaign promise fulfilled, a move to re-engage a base energized by distrust of a "deep state."

In this way, EO 14176 mirrors the symbolic function of the JFK Records Act while recontextualizing it within the post-2020 conspiracist mainstream Butter described. If the JFK Records Act tried to restore public trust, Trump's order instead exploits distrust. This instrumentalization is especially clear in the language of the order itself, which frames declassification both as a bureaucratic duty and as a reckoning with hidden truths. I argue that this points to a critical shift; whereas earlier declassification efforts were aimed at producing accountability (whether public, institutional, or international), Trump's order aims chiefly to affirm conspiracist belief, whether accurate or not. Thus, the information contained within the declassified documents matters little. Rather, the very act of disclosure is the proof, a signal that there was always something hidden, even if the documents released ultimately reveal little that is new.²⁵ In this sense, EO 14176 represents what we might call a "populist declassification," one in which pre-existing belief or suspicion motivates and is reinforced by the disclosure.

Ultimately, Trump's EO 14176 transforms the bureaucratic logic of declassification into a populist tool of ideological alignment. It validates conspiracism not by proving it, but by mimicking its worldview—that the truth is always just out of reach and only accessible through the intervention of a maverick leader. In doing so, it marks a profound shift in the function of US transparency policy from a mode of governance to a mode of political storytelling and manipulation.

Conclusion: Broader Implications of and Resistance to Institutionalized Conspiracism

To be sure, it is a good thing that the American public has access to the JFK assassination records; generally, the more information that is available to everyday Americans about the history and activities of their governing bodies, the better. However, in this paper I have argued that President Trump's declassification of the JFK records supports Butter's hypothesis of a fragmented American public sphere, in which one side embraces conspiracist logic and the other continues to stigmatize it. Butter recognizes that politicians who, and policies which, embrace the logic of conspiracy have succeeded in the political arena and gained decision-making power but asserts that, as of 2022, it is "impossible to say which of these publics is in the hegemonic position."²⁶ At a minimum, with the 2024 reelection of Trump, who won both the electoral and the popular vote, EO 14176 demonstrates that conspiratorial thinking has thoroughly taken root in American governmental institutions.

Just six months into his second term, this conspiracism has been a blessing and a curse for the Trump administration. It has served both as a tool for developing and promoting policies as well as a catalyst for controversy. For instance, Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who has spread long-debunked claims that vaccines cause autism, recently proposed a plan to implement a registry of Americans with autism, vowing to find a "cause" of autism by September 2025.²⁷ Conversely, President Trump has recently faced backlash from his own base of support due to newly uncovered information regarding his relationship with the financier and child sex offender Jeffery Epstein, whose activity and death have been the subject of numerous conspiracy theories. Although Trump had signaled support for declassifying Epstein-related information, more commonly known as the Epstein Files, before taking office, he has since expressed frustration over continued media attention to the case, and to his alleged involvement, despite a July 2025 Department of Justice memo stating that no incriminating "client list" exists and that no further disclosure was warranted.²⁸ This controversy is ongoing, but the sharp response it has engendered from Trump's supporters certainly demonstrates the volatility of conspiracism as a political tool, if not its ineffectiveness (which remains to be seen).

With an eye toward combatting the spread of public conspiracism and preserving institutional trust, Murty and Green suggest utilizing AI, machine learning, and other technological innovations in combination with human fact-checkers to detect, analyze, and warn against disinformation on the internet. They also encourage social media platforms to implement

disinformation policies and recommend governmental regulations to keep these platforms accountable.²⁹ However, I speculate that it may be too late for these large-scale strategies to be implemented and/or to be effective. As conspiratorial thinking continues to embed itself in media and governmental policy, we must contend with the fact that conspiracism is now a mainstream form of discourse.

More research must be done on how to contend with conspiratorial thinking in this rapidly evolving political climate, but I will conclude with some potential strategies. First, as traditional knowledge-building methods are de-emphasized in promoting federal policy, lawmakers and media outlets should consider focusing less on the rhetoric or even the facts with which conspiracist-motivated policies are presented and should instead emphasize to their audiences the concrete consequences such policies would bring about. Second, building off Murty and Green, community engagement through media literacy and critical thinking programs at local institutions such as public libraries could offer opportunities both to educate and to foster connection among diverse constituents in an increasingly fragmented political landscape.³⁰ Finally, and perhaps most simply, we as individuals should continue to engage in healthy discussion and to foster relationships with our immediate connections, such as family, friends, and communities—and especially those who think differently than we do.³¹ Achieving mutual understanding and addressing conspiracism from the bottom up may be a strong first step toward healing a fragmented public.

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Capital (Simon & Schuster, 2000). Putnam argues that technology, demographic changes, and other factors have reduced Americans’ participation in face-to-face social interaction and organization. This argument might suggest that the political fracturing observed by Butter is in part culturally conditioned and that Donald Trump merely effectively harnessed it for political gain.