Reception and Resistance: How an Audience's Schemata Affect Its Collective Memory

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Public memories demonstrate the potent feedback loop of social narratives and collective schemata. Social narratives create a group's collective schemata or shared conceptual frameworks. The audience's collective schemata determine which narratives arrest its attention and become dominant in its recollection, resulting in a collective memory that then contributes to receptivity or resistance to future narratives. This essay focuses on the collective schemata that predisposed political conservatives to accept reframing narratives throughout 2020-2024 about the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol Building, Capitol rioter Ashli Babbitt, and the 2020 U.S. presidential election. It recommends intervening in the formation of schemata and attempting to redirect a resistant audience's attention to new or different schemata that may lead to a more truthful public memory and facilitate persuasion.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Public Memory, Collective Memory, Politics, Ashli Babbitt, January 6, Donald Trump, Elections

Conservatives may consume conservative media, but a media echo chamber alone cannot explain the false public memories that *should* have been reasonably accurate memories. People who exclusively consumed conservative media would have learned that Trump lost 86 of 87 election lawsuits, because they wanted to know the results of those legal challenges. Still, 60-70% of Republicans in multiple polls across 2021-2023 viewed Joe Biden's election as illegitimate.[1][2] The reporting on the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol Building was impossible to avoid. The images and video of violent rioters, including Ashli Babbitt trying to force her way into the House Chamber, were ubiquitous. Nonetheless, 27% of Republicans in a 2023 survey either strongly or somewhat approved of the January 6 riot,[3] and Babbitt became a martyr among the far right.[4] Then, in 2024, a majority of American voters elected a central figure in the Capitol attack, Donald Trump,

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[1] "CNN Poll on Biden, Economy, and Elections," *CNN/SSRS*, August 3, 2023, https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23895856/cnn-poll-on-biden-economy-and-elections.pdf.
[2] Daniel Cox,. "After the Ballots Are Counted: Conspiracies, Political Violence, and American Exceptionalism," *The Survey Center on American Life*, February 11, 2021, https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/after-the-ballots-are-counted-conspiracies-political-violence-and-american-exceptionalism/.
[3] Martin Pengelly, "More than a Quarter of Republicans Approve of Capitol Attack, Poll Shows," *The Guardian*, March 16, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/mar/quarter-republicans-approve-capitol-attack-trump-legitimate-political-discourse.
[4] Roseanan Mandziuk, "Memory and Martyrdom: The Transmogrification of Ashli Babbitt," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 12, no. 3 (2022): 150-70.

to a second term as president. Social narratives and collected schemata interact to affect public memory, with public consequences. Understanding this interaction, or feedback loop, can help rhetoricians and others disrupt it and construct a more truthful public memory, through which the body politic may reach more informed judgments and decisions.

The preceding paragraph states several terms and assumptions that I must define. First, I use the term "social narrative" to refer to a widely accepted story among a particular group of people. Second, schemata are organized conceptual frameworks that structure our perceptions, interpretations, and recollections. Schemata filter our attention on a nonconscious level, determining what we notice and ignore, without us noticing. They affect our "snap" judgment of information's importance as well as how we interpret information.[5] They are key mechanisms in individual "implicit memory," or the processes of memory beyond one's awareness.[6] Crucially, a schema often contains strong emotional content and resonance that creates powerful investment in holding that schema. Third, collective schemata are those conceptual frameworks generally shared within a group. Members of the same group, or discourse community,[7] tend to share similar schemata due to their social narratives and shared experiences, knowledge, and backgrounds. Collective schemata are a powerful device in public memory, defined as "the circulation of recollections of members of a given community."[8] Yadin Dudai describes public memory as three entities: a shared body of knowledge, a "distinctive holistic image of the past," and a process in which individuals influence the community's memory, and vice-versa.[9] Collective schemata contribute to a group's shared knowledge, holistic image of the past, and process of remembering. They influence the group's reception or resistance to a given narrative reframing of the past.

A group's collective schemata may increase or decrease its members' receptivity to certain (re)framing of past events. If public memory is a "circulation of recollections," then some recollections must first win out over others and become dominant. Collective schemata help explain why and how. No one, for instance, argued that January 6 was not a violent day; everyone shared the schema of a mob trying to force its way into the Capitol. However, conservatives suggested the riot was everything from a peaceful protest that escalated to a patriotic attempt to protect democracy, to members of Antifa infiltrating Trump's supporters and inciting violence. Such narratives fit the collective schemata of various conservative sub-groups, leading to their adoption within those communities. They did not fit the collective schemata of moderates and liberals, resulting in their broad rejection among those audiences. Thus, Trump could promise in his 2024 campaign to pardon the "January 6 hostages" without losing support among conservatives whose public memories distorted January 6, and minimized his role in inciting the riot. For another example, people who answered survey questions about the overall state of immigration, inflation, and the economy *incorrectly* were much more likely to vote for Trump, while people who responded correctly to these questions were much more prone to vote for Harris.[10] The accuracy of public memory has consequences for the public.

[5] H. Markus, "Self-schemata and processing information about the self," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 35, no. 2 (1977): 63-78, https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.35.2.63

[6] Astrid Erll, "The Hidden Power of Implicit Collective Memory," *Memory, Mind & Media* 1 (2022): 7,.

[7] James Porter, "Intertextuality and the Discourse Community," *Rhetoric Review* 5, no. 1 (1986): 34-47.

[8] Matthew Houdek and Kendall Phillips, "Public Memory," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias* (2017), https://oxfordre.com/communication/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-181.

[9] Cited in James Wertsch and Henry Roediger, "Collective Memory: Conceptual Foundations and Theoretical Approaches," *Memory* 16, no. 3 (2008): 318–26.

[10] Clifford Young, Sarah Feldman, and Bernard Mendez, "The Link Between Media Consumption and Public Opinion," *Ipsos*, October 18, 2024, https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/link-between-media-consumption-and-public-opinion.

By claiming some public memories are distorted, I am implying that public memory is either true or false. Is this a false dichotomy? Are not all public memories constructed and, therefore, at least somewhat false? James Wertsch and Henry Roedinger write:

> In collective remembering, the past is tied interpretatively to the present, and if necessary part of an account of the past may be deleted or distorted in the service of present needs. ... In a nutshell, one could say that history is willing to change a narrative in order to be loyal to facts, whereas collective remembering is willing to change information (even facts) in order to be loyal to a narrative.[11]

Changing information in the process of collective remembering can create or preserve an ideologically useful narrative that helps to shape communal identity, attitudes, and actions. I will argue that social narratives and collective schemata help explain how and why public memory forms *this* way rather than *that* way, and *how* and *why* some information may be changed or preserved. The resulting public memory then contributes to a new, ever-evolving rhetorical environment, in which social narratives and collective schemata play roles.

Using examples of Trump's 2024 rhetoric about January 6 and the 2020 election, I will argue that social narratives and collective schemata play central roles in forming public memory, which in turn renders group members susceptible to certain rhetoric. Social narratives create a group's collective schemata; that collective schemata then influences what narratives the group will readily accept and internalize as public memories. Narratives that fit the intended audience's pre-existing schemata will be much more likely to capture the audience's attention and imagination and become dominant in their recollection.[12] This is especially true for a pre-existing schema that contains strong emotional content. In short, social narratives and collective schemata comprise a feedback loop that creates public memories with the power to shape people's beliefs, attitudes, and visions of the present and future.

Such shaping is the point. It is why the process of public memory matters and why that process ought to result in the most truthful public memory possible. All public memories may be constructed and partially false, but some distinctive holistic images of the past are more truthful than others. Some shared bodies of knowledge reflect historical facts more accurately than others. Some processes of collective remembering are more reasonable than others. If truth in public memory is a continuum, then we are witnessing in the 2020s an abundance of public memories residing on the extreme "false" end. These false public memories influence people's attitudes, judgments, and decisions. The interplay of social narratives and collective schemata helps us understand why and, perhaps, what to do about it.

The Schemata that Reframed Ashli Babbitt and January 6

In the weeks leading up to the 2024 election, Donald Trump described January 6 as a "day of love," claimed no rioters had firearms, and compared January 6 rioters serving prison time to Japanese-Americans interred during WWII.[13] [14] Incredibly, he won the presidency despite making

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[11] Wertsch, and Roediger, "Collective Memory," 318-26.

[12] Eric Sentell, "Making Memories: Writing and Designing More Memorable Documents," *Technical Communication* 63, no. 2 (2016): 136-53.

[13] Alexandra Hutzler, "Trump's Continuing Effort to Downplay Jan. 6 Violence as 'Day of Love,'" *ABC News*, January 6, 2025, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trumps-continuing-effort-downplay-jan-6-violence-day/story?id=117381861

[14] Tom Dreisbach, "Donald Trump Calls Jan. 6 a 'Day of Love.' Here Are The Facts," *NPR*, October 29, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/10/29/nx-s1-5159868/2024-election-trump-harris-capitol-riot.

statements so divorced from reality, and offensive, that they would have torpedoed previous candidates no matter the state of the economy. These remarks found a receptive audience among conservatives and, evidently, did not hurt his standing with many moderate voters. Liberal and anti-Trump voters pointed to the remarks as further evidence against Trump's fitness for office. The contrasting receptions of the far right and everyone else to the competing narratives of January 6 show the power of collective schemata in shaping how groups remember the past and envision the future.

The reframing of Ashli Babbitt, the rioter killed during the riot, is a specific example of collective remembering that created a rhetorical environment in which Trump could make such statements without electoral consequences. Roseann Mandziuk calls it the "transmogrification of Ashli Babbitt," and it is a perfect illustration of the feedback loop of social narratives and collective schemata. Mandziuk's meticulous account of Babbitt's memorialization among the far right captures exactly how existing collective schemata predispose an audience to accept narratives and claims regardless of their veracity, resulting in the creation of a false public memory. Actors ranging from the Proud Boys to Newsmax to Tucker Carlson promoted a narrative that denied well-known facts, and even the widely shared recording and imagery of events. They transformed a violent insurrectionist into a brave, pure-hearted patriot executed by a dangerous government intent on covering up the truth about her death. As Mandziuk explains, the far right re-presented and stylized her shooting first as a disembodied head, and later as an American Revolution-era soldier, to obscure reality and reframe their narrative.

The reframing narrative of Ashli Babbitt found a very receptive audience among the far right and even many more moderate conservatives. Mandziuk summarizes:

> Her martyrdom initially was articulated by extremist communities who created tribute images of Babbitt to be shared online and embellished onto material objects like flags and t-shirts. Next, a wider merchandization and promotion of her martyrdom developed through public memorializations, conservative media features, and statements from Republican politicians.[15]

Members of the far fight not only reframed Babbitt in their narrative. They sold it for profit to an audience eager. No such narrative was promulgated, much less accepted, among more moderate conservatives, independents, or liberals. In fact, members of these groups push back against the far right narrative when they learn of it. This is because these groups lack the collective schemata that would make them more receptive to Babbitt's martyrdom.

If the reader thinks that America's extreme polarization creates separate realities, and thus separate receptions of Babbitt's positive portrayal, then the reader's thoughts illustrate the power of a collective schema. The observation of "two Americas" with their own siloed media, echo chambers, and realities has become borderline banal. "Two Americas" is a collective schema that non-consciously leads one to interpret the different representations of Babbitt's death as an example of America's extreme polarization. The events of January 6 and the death of Ashli Babbitt, however, broke across barriers; no one in America could avoid the early reporting and images of violent rioters. Yet the rar right readily embraced a false portrayal of Babbitt and the January 6 attack as a whole. Less extreme conservative voices, most notably Tucker Carlson, brought the portrayal into the mainstream and legitimized it.[16] By 2023, Trump said in a speech that Ashli

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[16] Mandziuk, "Memory and Martydom," 150-170.
[16] Mandziuk, 150–70.

Babbitt had been shot by a "lunatic" Capitol police officer "for no reason."[17] The public memory simultaneously parroted and reinscribed by these remarks simply does not match the video recording of Babbitt attempting to breach the last door between January 6 rioters and the House of Representatives chamber. Nor does the record of January 6 support Trump's memorializing of the events as "a day of love."

For decades, conservatives across the political spectrum have cultivated various narratives that created the schemata necessary for accepting the transformation of Babbitt and the reframing of the January 6 attack. These narratives include the "liberal media," a "tyrannical government," a victim mentality, and a worship of America's founding fathers. Fox News branded itself for over twenty years as the "fair and balanced" counterweight to the rest of the media, desperately needed so that conservatives would know the information that biased outlets withheld.[18] Far right groups viewed the violence at Ruby Ridge and the Branch Davidian compound as proof that an oppressive government would murder innocent people if they crossed it. The perception *and* fear of a tyrannical government remains potent decades after those events, inspiring people to form armed militias.[19] Conservatives have long claimed that liberal editors and journalists, university professors, and coastal elites ignored, excluded, or mocked both their views and their identities. Lastly, the founding fathers were also victims of a tyrannical government, but they fought back and freed themselves. These persistent narratives created schemata in the minds of conservatives that fundamentally and non-consciously shape their attention, interpretations, and emotions toward new information.

Therefore, the influencers of the Right could find a receptive audience for a non-factual portrayal of Ashli Babbitt. They could construct for their audience a collective memory that served and perpetuated their ideology. The far right's "distinctive holistic image" of Ashli Babbitt and January 6 was forever altered by the narrative that aligned with their existing schemata, not the narrative that described reality most accurately. The false narrative resonated emotionally with those schemata, simultaneously reinforcing their own emotional content. A schema's crucial role emerges even more clearly when we consider that groups with different collective schemata are not receptive — or are hostile — to the far right's public memory of Babbitt and January 6.

The Schemata of Election Denial

The "Big Lie" of a stolen 2020 presidential election was remarkably effective among conservative voters. CNN conducted the same poll in January, April, and August of 2021; January, July, and October of 2022; and May and July of 2023. The results consistently show that a large majority of registered Republicans and Republican-leaning independents believe that "Biden did not legitimately win enough votes to win the presidency." The highest percentage, 71%, was polled on January 9-14, 2021, after months of Big Lie propaganda and shortly after the Capitol attack. The percentage in July 2023 was 69%. Interestingly, the survey also asked those who believed Trump won the 2020 election whether they based their view on "solid evidence" or if it was "suspicion

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[17] Josh Marcus, "Trump Claims Capitol Rioter Was Shot by a 'Lunatic' for 'No Reason,'" *The Independent*, January 8, 2023, https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-ashli-babbitt-january-6-b2258224.html .

[18] Eric Sentell, 2013. "Changing the Channel: Analyzing the Rhetoric of the Fox News Effect," *Relevant Rhetoric* 4 (2013): 1-18, http://relevantrhetoric.com/Changingthechannel.pdf.

[19] Jason Wilson, "Ruby Ridge, 1992: The Day the American Militia Movement Was Born," *The Guardian*, August 26, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/26/ruby-ridge-1992-modern-american-militia-charlottesville.

only." In January 9-14, 2021, 75% of the respondents who said Biden did not legitimately win claimed to base their belief on "solid evidence." That proportion declined steadily to a low of 52% in March 8-12, 2023, before bouncing back to 56% in July 1-31, 2023.[20] These percentages are consistent with other polls conducted by the conservative American Enterprise Institute.[21] In sum, about seven out of ten Republican voters in July 2023 believed Trump won in 2020, and almost half of those seven voters acknowledged they had no supporting evidence for the belief.

In his June 2024 debate with Joe Biden, Donald Trump said he would accept the results of the election "if it's a fair and legal and good election." Then he pushed at least twelve distinct false claims about election security throughout August and September 2024, including saying at the debate with Kamala Harris, "These people are trying to get them to vote," with "them" referring to illegal immigrants.[22] The conservative Election Integrity Network, a group "dedicated to securing the legality of every American vote," held regular WebEx meetings throughout 2024 with hundreds of participants, sometimes including elected officials, to discuss non-citizen voting and how to combat it. Conservative influencers on YouTube and social media fixated on the possibility of non-citizens voting illegally and swaying the election for Harris.[23] All of this rhetoric distills the false claims about the 2020 election, not to mention the "Great Replacement Theory" popular on the far right and mainstreamed by Tucker Carlson. As far back as 1964, James Hofstader described such rhetoric as "the paranoid style" of politics.[24] Then, the Right feared "a network of Communist agents" throughout "the whole apparatus of education, religion, the press, and the mass media." Now, the internal threat comes from "woke" radical socialists, Marxists, and communists, a.k.a. Democrats.[25] The through line is belief in a wide-spread conspiracy of elites against "real Americans."

The paranoid rhetoric of election insecurity found a receptive audience. In an NPR poll published October 3, 2024, 85% of Republicans were "concerned" or "very concerned" about voter fraud in the November election, compared to only 33% of Democrats. Local election officials, including Republicans, have been struggling since 2020 to reassure voters, yet the majority of Republicans have not believed them.[26] Their collective memory of the 2020 election includes massive fraud by Democrats, so why would they trust a hapless election official who cannot see the truth that they see? As Hofstader argued, those engaged in the paranoid style seek evidence of

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[20] "CNN Poll on Biden, Economy, and Elections," *CNN/SSRS*, August 3, 2023, https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23895856/cnn-poll-on-biden-economy-and-elections.pdf.

[21] Daniel Cox, 2021. "After the Ballots Are Counted: Conspiracies, Political Violence, and American Exceptionalism," *The Survey Center on American Life*, February 11, 2021,https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/after-the-ballots-are-counted-conspiracies-political-violence-and-american-exceptionalism/.

[22] Marshall Cohen and Daniel Dale, "Fact Check: 12 election Lies Trump Is Using to Set the Stage to Dispute a Potential 2024 Defeat," *CNN*, September 30, 2024, https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/30/politics/fact-check-trump-election-lies-2024/index.html

[23] Brandy Zadrony, 2024, Oct. 24. "'Big lie' 2.0: How Trump's false claims about noncitizens voting lay the groundwork to undermine the election," *NBC News*, October 24, 2024, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/trump-election-results-2024-noncitizens-voting-big-lie-rcna175552

[24] Richard Hofstader, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," *Harper's Magazine*, November 1964, https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/

[25] Ali Swenson,"Retread Scare: Trump and Other Republicans Evoke Another Era by Calling Democrats 'Communists,'" *PBS News*, June 19, 2023, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/retread-scare-trump-and-other-republicans-evoke-another-era-by-calling-democrats-communists.

[26] Miles Parker, "Driven by Republicans, Most Americans Are Concerned About Fraud in the 2024 Election," *NPR*, October 3, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/10/03/nx-s1-5130284/election-concerns-voter-fraud-trump-harris-poll.

"betrayal from on high" and believe that they can perceive the conspiracy "before it is fully obvious."[27] The schemata of "liberal media," "corrupt elites," and cheating Democrats (each cultivated over decades, and especially in 2016 and 2020) inoculate many Republicans from information about the robust safeguards already in place to prevent voter fraud.

If I may be intentionally circular, Trump and his loyalists succeeded in crafting a narrative of election fraud that created a schema among the target audience that made them receptive to an ongoing narrative of election fraud. Chagrined at losing the popular vote, Trump tweeted in 2016 that he would have won the popular vote if "millions of people" had not voted illegally for Hillary Clinton.[28] The subsequent, highly publicized investigation into Russian election interference reinforced the collective schema of a vulnerable, insecure election system. By warning of dodgy ballots and Democratic rigging for months in 2020, Trump solidified in his audience's mind a schema for U.S. elections that includes major cheating by the Democratic Party. His narrative was aided by the pre-existing schemata of "liberal media," "corrupt government," conservative victimhood, and conspiratorial Democrats. The narrative's success in solidifying a schema of a stolen election enabled further narratives of likely election fraud in 2024. Each of these schemata contains very strong negative emotions, including fear and outrage, that increases the audience's investment in them and the strength of the memory. The audience's collective schemata serve as the lynchpin for narratives that make collective memories.

The schemata of "victimhood" and "conspiratorial Democrats" warrant further discussion because they valorize conflict over compromise. As Paul Johnson argues, Trump encourages conservatives to "imagine themselves as victims of a political tragedy centered around the displacement of 'real America' from the political center by a feminized political establishment." His initial appeal for many people rested on his "outsider" image, an "identification with audiences who imagine themselves as voiceless" and even subjugated. The rational action, then, is to "Take America Back," to regain power and eliminate "*felt* precarity."[29] The historian Kristen Kobes du Mez makes a similar argument in *Jesus and John Wayne*, her account of how American Evangelicals committed to patriarchal authority and militant masculinity.[30] White Evangelicals did not vote for Trump *in spite* of their values, Du Mez says, but *because* of them. Moreover, the stakes are apocalyptic. The paranoid style imagines its enemy to be "totally evil and totally unappeasable."[31] Trump marries the paranoid style with the rhetoric of polarization; he describes Democrats as "radical socialists" who "hate America," and he alone can defeat the internal threat and save his audience. In his 2016 RNC speech, for instance, Trump described a "moment of crisis" threatening

[27] Hofstader, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/.

[28] Arnie Seipel, "Trump Makes Unfounded Claim That 'millions' Voted Illegally for Clinton," *NPR*, November 27, 2016, https://www.npr.org/2016/11/27/503506026/trump-makes-unfounded-claim-that-millions-voted-illegally-for-clinton.

[29] Paul Eilliott Johnson, "The Art of Masculine Victimhood: Donald Trump's Demagoguery," *Women's Studies in Communication*, 40, no. 3 (2017): 229-250.

[30] Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York:Liveright Press, 2020).

[31] Hofstader, . "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/.

"our way of life" and claimed, "I alone can fix it."[32] After being arraigned on 37 criminal charges in 2023, Trump reiterated his salvific potential: "I am the only one that can save our nation."[33]

In contrast, Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents view the 2020 election as secure and legitimate. They do not possess the collective schemata that made conservatives receptive to Trump's initial claims of election fraud. Therefore, they did not develop and add the "rigged election" schema and subsequently form a false collective memory. One could argue that Democrats have a political motivation for remembering Biden's election as legitimate, but it is also true that Democrats generally trust the mainstream media, do not claim victimization by the media and government writ large, and do not oppose "elites" on principle. The "wokest" progressives critique oppressive power structures, language, and imagery, but their framing focuses more on "the shared vulnerability characteristic of public life," to borrow Paul Johnson's phrase, than the precarity of late capitalism.[34] Bernie Sanders may be the closest liberal analog to Trump (he portrays himself as an outsider), yet his rhetoric emphasizes structural inequities rather than returning a particular group to its "rightful" power over other groups. Therefore, most liberals lack the collective schemata that would predispose them to a narrative of a rigged election involving massive voter fraud. Any narrative aimed at convincing Democrats of a rigged election would have to focus instead on the role of gerrymandering, as it is a widespread (and arguably valid) concern among the Left.

What Can Be Done?

The audience's collective schemata determine which narratives capture its attention and become dominant in its recollection, resulting in a collective memory that then contributes to receptivity or resistance to future narratives. Thus, different groups exposed to the same information may develop very different collective memories, as shown by the differing receptions of the Big Lie and the reframing of January 6 and Ashli Babbitt, respectively.

Once formed, schemata prove to be durable and powerful. Schemata are difficult to change partly because people do not even realize they have them, much less how they affect what they notice, how they interpret information, and how they feel about it. A schema may also contain strong emotions that raise the stakes of altering it. We easily integrate information that fits within an existing schema, but we tend to resist contrary information as though it attacks our very identities. Consider the CNN polls showing Republican voters' persistent belief in the Big Lie despite its widespread and repeated debunking by local election officials, including Republicans. For another example, Trump and his allies politicized the Covid vaccine, and then Trump himself was booed at his own rallies for telling attendees to get vaccinated.[35] [36] Schemata determine which narratives tend to consolidate into individual and collective memory, and collective memory affects what groups support and oppose.

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[32] Eric Sentell, "The Art of Polarizing *Ethos*: An Analysis of Donald Trump's Campaign Rhetoric," *Relevant Rhetoric,* 8 (2017): 1-21, http://relevantrhetoric.com/TheArtofPolarizingEthos.pdf

[33] "Trump Tells Supporters 'I am the only one who can save this nation' After Arraignment," *Forbes Breaking News*, June 14, 2023, video, 0:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n1lrAqnaegM&t=8s.

[34] Johnson, "The Art of Masculine Victimhood," 229-250.

[35] Dan Merica, "Trump met with boos after revealing he received Covid-19 booster," *CNN*, December 21, 2021, https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/20/politics/donald-trump-booster-shot-boos/index.html.

[36] Allan Smith, "Trump booed at Alabama rally after telling supporters to get vaccinated," *NBC News*, August 22, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-booed-alabama-rally-after-telling-supporters-get-vaccinated-n1277404.

Therefore, it is crucial to communicate effectively to an audience during its schema formation stage. Creating or influencing an audience's schema for a new topic will fundamentally impact all subsequent communication to that audience about the topic. Trump and his allies created the schema of "rigged elections" for most Republicans, and any effort to persuade them of the security of U.S. elections must face the false public memory of Democratic cheating. Members of the far right created a schema for Ashli Babbitt as a pure, brave, patriotic woman murdered by her government, and then Tucker Carlson laundered that schema into more mainstream conservatism. Any rhetoric about Babbitt aimed at the Right will by necessity start from the transmogrified version of her. Political activists on both sides (but arguably more so on the Right) intuitively understand the importance of establishing schemata, and so they debate whether to remove Confederate monuments, whether to teach "patriotic" or inclusive history, and the representation or erasure of LGBTQ+ people.

In some cases, rhetoric should seek to create a brand-new schema for the topic at hand. This is essentially what the far right did with Ashli Babbitt and, generalizing from her, the other January 6 "hostages." The images of the attack on the Capitol created a schema of violent rioters, but conservative influencers managed to construct a more durable counter-schema by inventing a new version of Babbitt that better aligned with pre-existing schemata among the Right. Mail-in ballots were wholly uncontroversial until Trump's narratives created a new schema of "massive cheating" through them, which aligned with conservatives' existing schema of Democrats as a threat. As these examples show, building a new schema can avoid the intellectual and emotional hurdles of critiquing an existing schema, as well as take advantage of people's natural tendency to form new schemata to integrate new information into long-term memory and cognition.

Is it ever possible to create a new schema for any audience, regarding any topic? Are we ever "blank slates" when we encounter information or rhetoric? Practically from birth, we absorb details and cues from our environments; we always engage new information with some previous context in the background. But like magicians, rhetoricians can redirect attention. Consider the 85% of Republicans concerned about non-citizen voting after the 2024 Trump campaign repeatedly described it as a frequent occurrence. The media and others fact-checked the claim, pointing out the extreme rarity of non-citizens attempting to vote and the safeguards built into U.S. electoral systems to catch the very scarce attempts. Such an approach crashes against the schemata of a "rigged" 2020 election, untrustworthy Democrats, a biased media, and a victim mentality. Instead, the counterargument might offer an alternative schema to consider: the Electoral College gives less-populated states greater representation, more than erasing any advantage Democrats might gain from non-citizen voters in more populated, Democratic-leaning states. Activating and elaborating on the Electoral College schema could persuade Republicans that the problem, while it might (theoretically) exist, does not affect the outcome of elections. That belief, of course, is the goal of fact-checking the specious claim; it is simply achieved more effectively, arguably, through redirecting to a novel schema. I would argue, too, that this belief represents and reinforces a more truthful public memory, which in turn cools existing societal tensions.

Post-2024, another alternative schema is possible. If any non-citizens voted, a healthy percentage of them must have voted for Donald Trump. Just as concerns about a fraudulent election disappeared when Trump's victory became clear, suggesting Republican voting among non-citizens would likely assuage Republicans' concerns about non-citizen voters. The accuracy of their civics knowledge might not improve, but their collective remembering of election security might shift away from the current anti-immigrant position. This hypothetical approach ought to be espe-

cially effective in light of exit polls reporting major shifts of Latinos toward Trump and the Republican party.[37] Those concerned about the "Othering" of non-white Americans and exacerbating political polarization could have more rhetorical and strategic success by activating a new, different schema than hammering at the existing ones. Again, the public memory of Republicans could be flawed, but still more truthful. They may continue believing that non-citizens vote without committing to villainizing non-white residents.

The collective memory of a group does not only influence its prevailing attitude but also what actions it supports or opposes. The false public memory of January 6 as a legitimate political protest that got carried away will diminish the collective will for holding the rioters and their political goaders accountable. The false public memory of a stolen election will reduce trust in future elections and heighten existing animosities among members of America's two major political parties. Perhaps all collective memories contain some constructions, and thus some falsehoods, but if truth in public memory is a continuum, then some public memories are certainly more truthful than others. Influencing schema creation and redirecting to new schemata may be the only way to help an audience become more receptive to narratives that contribute to a more truthful public memory, and a more informed society.

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[37] Gladys Gerbaud, Chase Harrison, and Khalea Robertson, "How Latinos Voted in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election," *Americas Society/Council for the Americas*, November 6, 2024, https://www.as-coa.org/articles/how-latinos-voted-2024-us-presidential-election.