

NOV. 23, 2020, AT 10:10 AM

The Birther Myth Stuck Around For Years. The Election Fraud Myth Might Too.

By Kaleigh RogersFiled under 2020 Election

TAYFUN COSKUN / ANADOLU AGENCY VIA GETTY IMAGES

A significant number of Americans currently believe the 2020 election was stolen, even though it wasn't. A [Reuters/Ipsos poll last week](#) showed 52 percent of Republicans believe President Trump "rightfully won" the election. But the only "evidence" of election fraud [has been widely debunked](#).

An optimist might think the public will gradually drop this election fraud myth as the Trump campaign's lawsuits [are thrown out](#), recounts and audits are conducted, and, eventually, Joe Biden is sworn in as president. But we've seen Trump try to falsely claim a president is illegitimate before, as he spent years claiming without evidence that President Obama wasn't born in the United States, and thus ineligible to be president. If this recent saga is anything like the birtherism movement, it's not going anywhere.

What divided the electorate in 2020 | FiveThirtyEight Politics Podcast

[ALL VIDEOS](#)[YOUTUBE](#)

“If you’re asking if this is going to go away, I would bet a lot of money that it won’t,” said Adam Berinsky, a political scientist at MIT who is working on a book about political conspiracy theories.

Birtherism [first emerged in 2008](#) during Obama’s primary campaign through the now very quaint medium of chain emails. After securing the nomination, Obama’s campaign [published a copy of his certification of live birth](#) in Hawaii. Many assumed this would put an end to the myth that he wasn’t born in America. Trump was one of the main people who ensured it did not.

[\[Related: How Trump Changed America\]](#)

In 2011, Trump began aggressively beating the birtherism drum, including via [some comments he made at the Conservative Political Action Conference in February](#). Over the next five years, in media appearances, speeches and on Twitter, Trump repeatedly made false claims that Obama was not born in America. This continued even after [Obama released his long-form birth certificate](#) in April 2011, a piece of evidence Trump had demanded.

It wasn’t until Trump’s own campaign for president in 2016 — when his birtherism was thought to be [among the reasons he wasn’t polling well](#) among Black Americans — that Trump [admitted the obvious truth](#): Obama was born in the United States. But

that admission was brief (the statement lasted less than a minute) and included Trump blaming Hillary Clinton for originating the myth, which isn't true.¹

When the birther myth first emerged, there wasn't much in the way of public opinion polling about it. It wasn't until Trump revived the conspiracy theory in 2011 that pollsters started to track how much of the public believed it. And over the years, even as more evidence emerged — such as the long-form birth certificate and [contemporaneous newspaper announcements](#) — proving Obama was born in the U.S., the belief has persisted. As recently as last year, [a YouGov poll found that 34 percent of Americans](#) think it's "probably true" or "definitely true" that Obama was born in Kenya, as the birther myth often claimed. Among self-identified Republicans, that number was 56 percent.

"There were these temporary dips in birther beliefs when major events happened and news coverage was reminding people of that evidence," said Brendan Nyhan, a professor of government at Dartmouth College. "But birther misperceptions typically reverted back to their prior levels after that information shock had dissipated."

Hard evidence of falsehood doesn't sway birthers

Share of respondents who say they believe Obama was born in the United States, or believe he was not born in the United States, 2009-17

Many Americans were wrongly skeptical after Obama was sworn in

DATE	POLLSTER	BORN IN U.S.	NOT BORN IN U.S.
8/17/09	PPP	62%	25%
9/21/09	PPP	59	23
4/12/10	CBS/NYT	58	20
4/25/10	ABC	77	20
6/3/10	CBS News	63	13
7/21/10	CNN/ORC	71	27
11/15/10	Knowledge Networks	55	15
3/13/11	CNN/ORC	72	25
4/5/11	Fox News	67	24
4/10/11	Pew	55	23
4/20/11	CBS/NYT	57	25
4/23/11	Gallup	57	24
4/26/11	YouGov	55	15

Releasing Obama's long-form birth certificate in April 2011 didn't have a lasting effect

DATE	POLLSTER	BORN IN U.S.	NOT BORN IN U.S.
------	----------	--------------	------------------

Many Americans were wrongly skeptical after Obama was sworn in

DATE	POLLSTER	BORN IN U.S.	NOT BORN IN U.S.
5/1/11	CNN/ORC	80%	17%
5/1/11	The Washington Post	86	10
5/3/11	YouGov	67	13
5/8/11	Gallup	65	13
1/31/12	YouGov	59	17
7/2/12	YouGov	55	20
9/11/12	AP/GfK	49	39
9/17/12	YouGov	59	21
9/8/15	CNN/ORC	75	13
1/17/16	Morning Consult	48	34
5/9/16	PPP	57	30

Neither did Trump admitting Obama was born in the U.S. in September 2016

DATE	POLLSTER	BORN IN U.S.	NOT BORN IN U.S.
9/19/16	YouGov	61%	22%
9/24/16	Selzer	75	11
3/5/17	Morning Consult	57	26

Numbers do not add up to 100 percent because respondents could indicate they were undecided on the matter.

In April 2011, for example, [a YouGov poll found that 55 percent of Americans](#) believed Obama was born in the U.S. That was before Obama released his birth certificate. After he released it, the same pollster found that number had climbed to 67 percent. But a year and a half later, [the number had dipped again](#), down to 59 percent.

“If you look at the percentage of people who reject the rumor, it doesn’t really move at all. All of the movement is in and out of this ‘not sure’ category,” said Berinsky.

There are a number of reasons why the birther myth remains so tenacious even in the face of hard evidence, according to Tali Sharot, a cognitive neuroscientist at University College London who studies how emotions influence people’s beliefs. Sharot said myths are shored up by how much a person is motivated to believe them, and how well that belief sits with their current worldview.

[\[Related: What Trump’s Refusal To Concede Says About American Democracy\]](#)

“Most beliefs we have are in fact true. We believe the sun rises in the morning. We believe that winter is cold and that if we walk forward we move forward,” Sharot said.

“If I come and tell you the sun won’t rise in the morning, you don’t believe me and you would be right. It doesn’t make sense to change your belief every time there’s a piece of evidence that counters it. How can you operate in a world where your beliefs are changing every second?”

With birtherism, many Americans didn’t want Obama to be president, so the belief that he was ineligible was a convenient narrative and they were motivated to accept it. It was also **bolstered by racism** against the first Black president. But Sharot said the election fraud myth is likely going to be even more persistent because it’s more personal, and based on many pieces of disinformation that are harder to discredit. There’s no single document — à la the long-form birth certificate — that can definitively say the election was free and fair.

Trump supporters are highly motivated to believe there was election fraud, because they want their candidate to have won. Add in that Trump and the GOP establishment continue to spread their fraudulent narrative, and it’s understandable that so many Americans think something is wrong. But even as more information is revealed and it becomes apparent that no widespread election fraud has occurred, it’s likely those beliefs will linger for years to come.

“I think the current situation is going to be much, much worse than birtherism in terms of people believing it, and believing it for the long run,” Sharot said.

Additional reporting by Mary Radcliffe

‘I buy that COVID was a factor in polls underestimating’ GOP: Nate Silver



[ALL VIDEOS](#)[YOUTUBE](#)

Footnotes

1. Clinton supporters [may have circulated the chain emails](#) in 2008, but the campaign and Clinton herself never peddled in the rumors.