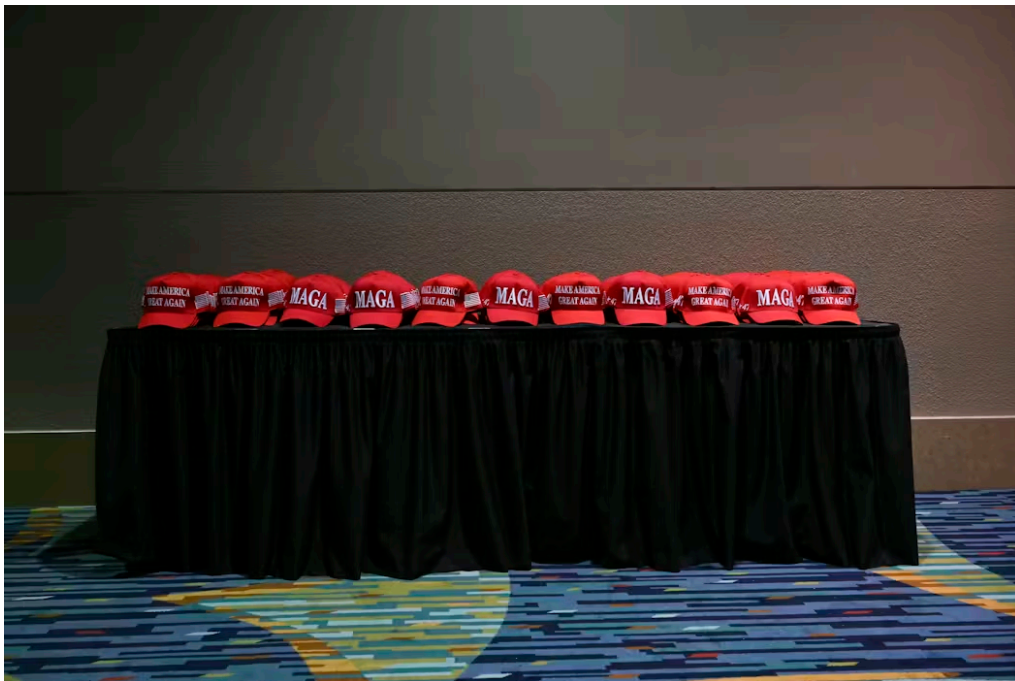


Why MAGA is obsessed with Epstein – and why the files are unlikely to dent loyalty to Trump

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MAGA hats are placed on a table at an election night party in West Palm Beach, Fla., on Nov. 5, 2024.

Ricky Carriot/The Washington Post via Getty Images

With the latest shift by President Donald Trump on releasing the Epstein files held by the U.S. Department of Justice – he’s now for it after being against it after being for it – the MAGA base may finally get to view the documents it’s long wanted to see. On the afternoon of Nov. 18, 2025, the House voted overwhelmingly to seek release of the files, with only one Republican voting against the measure. The Senate later in the day agreed unanimously to pass the measure and send it on to the president for his signature. The Conversation’s politics editor, Naomi Schalit, talked with scholar Alex Hinton, who has studied MAGA for years, about Make America Great Again Republicans’ sustained interest in the case of accused child sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein. Hinton explains how MAGA’s interest in the case fits into what he knows about the group of die-hard Trump supporters.

You are an expert on MAGA. How do you learn what you know about MAGA?

I'm a cultural anthropologist, and what we do is field work. We go where the people we're studying live, act, talk. We observe and sort of hang out and see what happens. We listen and then we unpack themes. We try and understand the meaning systems that undergird whatever group we're studying. And then, of course, there's interviewing.



U.S. Rep. Thomas Massie, a Texas Republican, speaks at a press conference alongside alleged victims of Jeffrey Epstein at the U.S. Capitol on Sept. 3, 2025.

Bryan Dozier/Middle East Images via AFP, Getty Images

It appears that MAGA, Trump's core supporters, are very concerned about various aspects of the Epstein story, including the release of documents that are in the possession of the U.S. government. Are they, in fact, concerned about this?

The answer is yes, but there's also a sort of "no" implicit, too. We need to back up and think, first of all, what is MAGA.

I think of it as what we call in anthropology a nativist movement, a foregrounding of the people in the land. And this is where you get America First discourse. It's also xenophobic, meaning that there's a fear of outsiders, invaders coming in. It's populist, so it's something that's sort of for the people.

Tucker Carlson interviewed Marjorie Taylor Greene, and he said, “I’m going to go over the five pillars of MAGA.” Those were America First, this is absolutely central. Borders was the second. You’ve got to secure the borders. The third was globalist antipathy, or a recognition that globalization has failed. Another one was free speech, and another one he mentioned was no more foreign wars. And I would add into that an emphasis on “we the people” versus elites.

Each of those is interwoven with a key dynamic to MAGA, which is conspiracy theory. And those conspiracy theories are usually anti-elite, going back to we the people.

If you look at Epstein, he’s where many of the conspiracy theories converge: Stop the Steal, The Big Lie, lawfare, deep state, replacement theory. Epstein kind of hits all of these, that there’s this elite cabal that’s orchestrating things that ultimately are against the interests of we the people, with a sort of antisemitic strain to this. And in particular, if we go back to Pizzagate in 2016, this conspiracy theory that there were these Democratic elitists who were, you know, demonic forces who were sex trafficking, and lo and behold, here’s Epstein doing precisely that.

There’s kind of a bucket of these things, and Epstein is more in it than not in it?

He’s all over it. He’s been there, you know, from the beginning, because he’s elite and they believe he’s doing sex trafficking. And then there’s a suspicion of the deep state, of the government, and this means cover-ups. What was MAGA promised? Trump said, we’re going to give you the goods, right? Kash Patel, Pam Bondi, everyone said we’re going to tell you this stuff. And it sure smacks of a cover-up, if you just look at it.

But the bottom line is there’s a realization among many people in MAGA that you’ve got to stay with Trump. It’s too much to say there is no MAGA without Trump. There’s certainly no Trumpism without Trump, but MAGA without Trump would be like the tea party. It’ll just sort of fade away without Trump.

People in MAGA are supporting Trump more than more mainstream Republicans on this. So I don’t think there’s going to be a break over this, but it certainly adds strain. And you can see in the current moment that Trump is under some strain.



President Donald Trump and U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a longtime supporter, have split over the Epstein files release.

Elijah Nouvelage/AFP Getty Images

The break that we are seeing is Trump breaking with one of his leading MAGA supporters, Marjorie Taylor Greene, not the MAGA supporter breaking with Trump.

With Greene, sometimes it's like a yo-yo in a relationship with Trump. You fall apart, you have tension, and then you sort of get back. Elon Musk was a little bit like that. You have this breakup, and now she's sort of backtracking like Elon Musk did. I don't think what is happening is indicative of a larger fracturing that's going to take place with MAGA.

It seems that Trump did his about-face on releasing the documents so that MAGA doesn't have to break with him.

It's absolutely true. He's incredible at taking any story and turning it in his direction. He's sort of like a chess player, unless he blurts something out. He's a couple of moves ahead of wherever, whatever's running, and so in a way we're always behind, and he knows where we are. It's incredible that he's able to do this.

There's one other thing about MAGA. I think of it as "don't cross the boss." It's this sort of overzealous love of Trump that has to be expressed, and literally no one ever crosses the boss in these contexts. You toe the line, and if you go against the line, you know what happened to Marjorie Taylor Greene, there's the threat Trump is going to disown you. You're going to get primaried.

Trump has probably made a brilliant strategic move, which is suddenly to say, “I’m all for releasing it. It’s actually the Democrats who are these evil elites, and now we’re going to investigate Bill Clinton and all these other Democrats.” He takes over the narrative, he knows how to do it, and it’s intentional. Whoever says Trump is not charismatic, he doesn’t make sense – Trump is highly charismatic. He can move a crowd. He knows what he’s doing. Never underestimate him.

Does MAGA care about girls who were sexually abused?

There is concern, you know, especially among the devout Christians in MAGA, for whom sex trafficking is a huge issue.

I think if you look at sort of notions of Christian morality, it also goes to notions of sort of innocence, being afflicted by demonic forces. And it’s an attack on we the people by those elites; it’s a violation of rights. I mean, who isn’t horrified by the idea of sex trafficking? But again, especially in the Christian circles, this is a huge issue.

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