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Opinion • George Santos

Serial liar George Santos is the politician Americans deserve

Moira Donegan



The congressman's many lies are the product of a political system that incentivizes dishonesty and punishes sincerity



'Perhaps Santos's real sin is not in lying, but in telling the wrong lies.' Photograph: Will Oliver/EPA

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It's hard to keep track of what, exactly, the newly elected Republican congressman [George Santos](#) has said about his own life. His story changes and contradicts itself; his lies seem indiscriminate, and largely ad hoc. He says he worked at Citigroup and Goldman Sachs, which he didn't. He said he graduated from Baruch College – he didn't do that, either. Some of his fabrications are so trivial and specific that it's impossible to ascribe a nefarious motive to them.

What could Santos possibly have to gain, for instance, by claiming, as he apparently did to a local Republican party leader, to have been a [college volleyball champion](#)? Others are transparently self-serving, his attempts to cover them up so brazen as to be frankly hilarious. On the campaign trail, running in the heavily Jewish third district of New York, on suburban Long Island, Santos claimed that he was “a member of the Jewish community”, and descended from Ukrainian refugees. When this turned out to be untrue, he later tried to claim that he merely meant that he was “Jew-*is/b*”. It was like a line from *Seinfeld*; punning, implausible, shameless. At times like this, it's hard to take Santos's dishonesty seriously. It seems less like an affront to the dignity of the democratic process and more like some kind of durational satire, a piece of performance art.

But if you take his fictional biography as a whole, it's clear that Santos was appealing to particular American longings. He was quite savvily inventing a character who would assuage the anxieties and comfort the vanities of the affluent, Republican-leaning voters in his district. On the campaign trail, Santos presented himself as the embodiment of 20th century-style American upward mobility. He claimed to be the son of Brazilian immigrants, who grew up in “abject poverty” and attended public schools before ascending to become a blue-chip financial trader and wealthy philanthropist. It's a dream that no doubt many still want to believe in. But it should have been a red flag. Anyone who assesses America with clear eyes knows that Goldman Sachs traders don't come, as Santos says he did, from basement apartments in Jackson Heights, Queens. They come from Dalton, Choate and Exeter.

He professed the identities that have been most easily demonized in the Republican imagination: he was supposed to be Jewish, a member of the group targeted by conspiratorial QAnon theories; he was supposed to be gay, a member of the group increasingly smeared on the right as pedophiles; he was supposed to be a Latino immigrant, a member of the group associated with dark fantasies in the white mind about demographic change and crime. But at the same time, he was a Republican, a defender of these bigotries; his membership in the very groups his party worked against seemed to absolve his voters of complicity even as they indulged their bias. The identities were not

meant to be investments in the pluralism of our country, but moral shields, flimsy cover behind which attacks on those very groups could be launched.

And of course, there were the remarkable historical coincidences, the tendency of Santos to claim his own life intersected with moments of crisis for the American conscience. He said that his grandparents – the supposedly Jewish ones – had been Holocaust survivors. He said that his mom had died in 9/11. He said that he had lost four employees at the Pulse massacre, the event where a gunman opened fire at an Orlando gay club. It seems that he used this proximity to tragedy to some effect in his fundraising; among the several investigations into Santos, there is now one related to campaign expenditures, and the curious way that money seemed to disappear from his account in amounts just beneath the federal reporting threshold where a receipt would be required. Santos, in this telling, had an uncanny, Forrest Gump-like biographical connection to these momentous historical moments, his own life changing at just the same moments that challenged the identity of the nation. It's not hard to see why this fiction appealed to Santos, and why it appealed to his voters. It made him into an avatar of America itself.

Maybe he is. Because with his boldness and deception, his shamelessness and alleged comfort with financial malfeasance, Santos, with all his lies, seems to reveal an uncomfortable truth about American politics, emphasizing what the politics writer John Ganz called "[the reign of crime](#)". Politicians, after all, lie all the time, and the Republican party in particular seems to have rapidly mainstreamed the use of fabulism, fraud and cheap scams that manipulate and extort the government, the public and the ruling elite. Are Santos's lies, after all, any more far-fetched than Trump's claims that the 2020 election was stolen from him via a vast, undetected conspiracy? Are his lies about where he worked and went to school any more nefarious than the claim that Covid vaccines kill people, or that drag queens are scheming to molest children at public libraries? Perhaps Santos's real sin is not in lying, but in telling the wrong lies. He didn't regurgitate the same fabrications as the rest of his fellow Republicans – the ones about marginalized others. Instead, he merely lied about himself. And crucially, he lied about the one thing that seems to really matter to Republican leadership: he claimed to be a member of the monied elite, when he wasn't.

Santos's fellow New York Republicans are trying to distance themselves from the congressman, calling on him to resign in the hopes that it will help their own re-election chances. "He needs help," [said Jennifer DeSena](#), a local Republican official from Long Island. "This is not a normal person." And indeed it's hard not to suspect that there might be something wrong with the man, aside from the moral turpitude – a delusional tendency or break with reality that precipitated all these fictions. But it would be a mistake to think that George Santos's pathologies are his alone. His lies are the product

of a political system that incentivizes dishonesty, punishes sincerity and is rife with opportunities for petty crooks. In that sense, Santos is the politician that we deserve.

- *Moirá Donegan is a Guardian US columnist*

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