THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

Way out. In 2016, political debate has become unhinged from reality. And it won't stop on Election Day

By Charlotte Alter and Michael Scherer

ALLAN THIEL LIKES TO STAY INFORMED. THAT'S how he knows that President Barack Obama is a foreign-born Muslim who cheated his way into the presidency in order to promote a globalist "utopia." A retired factory worker and born-again Christian, he waits on the floor of the Greenville, N.C., convention center for Donald Trump to take the stage, holding up his phone so others can see the latest headline he had just read: "Obama Announces Plans for a Third Term Presidential Run."

The story is not true. But right now, in this moment, Thiel believes it, just as he believes that climate change is a hoax, that Islam is being promoted in American schools and that the government has been bought out by drug cartels. He says that "people aren't being taught history anymore" and "they've dumbed everybody down." As the campaign soundtrack roars and the energy builds, he offers a version of American history that cannot be found in the historical record. "Our country has never had any problems for the last 200 years," he says, shaking his head. "We've never had a problem with guns or racism until the last eight years."

To simply grade the accuracy of Thiel's statements misses the point, because Thiel's beliefs do matter. They show up in double digits in national polls and belong to a reality shared by many Trump supporters TIME interviewed in North Carolina over a few days in September. Here you find deep frustration with the state of the nation, the direction of the economy, the consequence of global trade and the prospect of a President Hillary Clinton. But in dozens of interviews, voters also made arguments built on claims unsupported by facts, often peddling debunked conspiracy theory as plausible truth.

"I never once in history have seen white people riot," says Adam Watkins, a white Trump supporter chatting in nearby Wilmington, N.C., the day of the rally. As it happens, Wilmington was the site of one of the nation's most famous race riots, when hundreds of whites overthrew the elected government in 1898, killed more than a dozen black residents