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Sticks and Stones: A Case Study in Attempted Electoral Subversion

Ian Klenk

St. John Fisher College, isk06844@sjfc.edu

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Sticks and Stones: A Case Study in Attempted Electoral Subversion

Abstract

On January 6th, 2021, a mob of rioters stormed the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. to disrupt the ceremonial certification of electors and install former President Donald Trump as the winner of the 2020 election; the citadel of democracy was vandalized, the lives of members of Congress were put in immediate danger, and multiple Capitol police officers died from injuries sustained in defending the American republic from her own citizens.

This paper uses this dramatic and unusual event to examine the role of political leaders in fomenting violence to keep or regain power. More specifically, I examine whether the rhetoric deployed by former President Trump during the 2020-2021 Interregnum is causally related to the violence that occurred at the Capitol during the certification of electors.

This case was selected for two major reasons.

First, the role of the former president during the electoral process stood out as extraordinary in modern presidential politics. Indeed, during the Interregnum, former President Trump made history as the first president to not accept the results of the election while making repeated claims of fraud.

Second, while studies of the role of political leaders in instigating violence to retain power often use cases from autocracies and young democracies, largely from the developing world, the attack on the Capitol took place in Western democracy. Identifying whether former President Trump played a role in the seditious acts of that day is both vital in understanding this fateful moment in American history, but also in studying election violence beyond non-democratic and non-Western countries.

The study uses a mixed method approach as it relies on qualitative data drawn from the transcripts of remarks made by former President Trump between November 3rd, 2020 (Election Day) and January 6th, 2021, and on quantitative data derived from the archived tweets sent from the personal account of former President Trump.

The evidence supports the argument that former President Trump directly incited the violence at the Capitol through his rhetoric in the days leading up to and the morning of January 6th. The former president sought to overturn the election by engaging in three strategies: he crafted and convinced his supporters of a false narrative surrounding the 2020 election, he manifested animosity against an enemy (i.e., Democrats and 'fake' Republicans), and he issued a call to action that directly pointed to the impediment of the certification of electors on January 6th. These findings imply that political leaders can play a critical role in democratic stability, regardless of the strength of democratic institutions or the place where violence against these institutions take place.

Cover Page Footnote

I thank Dr. Sebastian Lazardoux for his expertise and assistance throughout all aspects of this study.

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Abstract: On January 6th, 2021, a mob of rioters stormed the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. to disrupt the ceremonial certification of electors and install former President Donald Trump as the winner of the 2020 election; the citadel of democracy was vandalized, the lives of members of Congress were put in immediate danger, and multiple Capitol police officers died from injuries sustained in defending the American republic from her own citizens. This paper uses this dramatic and unusual event to examine the role of political leaders in fomenting violence to keep or regain power. More specifically, I examine whether the rhetoric deployed by former President Trump during the 2020-2021 Interregnum is causally related to the violence that occurred at the Capitol during the certification of electors. This case was selected for two major reasons. First, the role of the former president during the electoral process stood out as extraordinary in modern presidential politics. Indeed, during the Interregnum, former President Trump made history as the first president to not accept the results of the election while making repeated claims of fraud. Second, while studies of the role of political leaders in instigating violence to retain power often use cases from autocracies and young democracies, largely from the developing world, the attack on the Capitol took place in Western democracy. Identifying whether former President Trump played a role in the seditious acts of that day is both vital in understanding this fateful moment in American history, but also in studying election violence beyond non-democratic and non-Western countries. The study uses a mixed method approach as it relies on qualitative data drawn from the transcripts of remarks made by former President Trump between November 3rd, 2020 (Election Day) and January 6th, 2021, and on quantitative data derived from the archived tweets sent from the personal account of former President Trump. The evidence supports the argument that former President Trump directly incited the violence at the Capitol through his rhetoric in the days leading up to and the morning of January 6th. The former president sought to overturn the election by engaging in three strategies: he crafted and convinced his supporters of a false narrative surrounding the 2020 election, he manifested animosity against an enemy (i.e., Democrats and 'fake' Republicans), and he issued a call to action that directly pointed to the impediment of the certification of electors on January 6th. These findings imply that political leaders can play a critical role in democratic stability, regardless of the strength of democratic institutions or the place where violence against these institutions take place.

Introduction

On the morning of January 6th, 2021, throngs of supporters of former President Donald Trump gathered at the White House Ellipse to rally in support of him and to hear his remarks. In his speech, the former president made repeated claims that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him, and explicitly declared that he was the legally elected president; this is the first time

in modern history that a sitting U.S. president did not accept the results of his election. Shortly thereafter, his supporters marched to the Capitol where the ceremonial certification of electors was taking place. What shortly ensued was a series of chaotic and violent clashes between Capitol police and rioters who attempted and eventually gained access to the Capitol complex. These rioters pepper sprayed and beat officers as they searched the halls for members of

Congress to do harm to them. Not even during the Civil War was there such acts of domestic violence intended to disrupt the orderly function of the American democracy as there were on January 6th, 2021.

Understanding how this happened and who is responsible is vital in recognizing the historical context around this event: Guns were drawn on the floor of the House of Representatives, protestors stood in the U.S. Senate chamber and searched futilely for a way to certify former President Trump as winner, and members of the Congress had to be evacuated to shelter from the rioters in fear of their lives. Four people died that afternoon—hundreds more were injured—and thousands of dollars' worth of damage was inflicted on the citadel of democracy. The physical lives of members of the federal government were put in danger, and the potential for the seditious subversion of the American democratic process to install the loser of the 2020 election was significant and real. It was the first time in U.S. history that there was not a willing and peaceful transfer of power from one Administration to the next; two Cabinet Secretaries resigned immediately because of the former president's actions on January 6th, and 7 days later he made history as the only president to be impeached twice. This was an incredibly important moment in America's history as a republic and will have deep implications for future elections at the federal and state level, especially those that may be contested or have close results.

My research question was as follows: *Did claims of election fraud from former President Trump push his supporters to riot against the Capitol on January 6th, 2021?* Thus, my paper aims to analyze how the former president used rhetoric to stir up his supporters to riot on January 6th. Former President Trump has made and continues to make claims that the election was stolen

from him and that he is the legally elected president; the Trump campaign also pursued dozens of lawsuits during the Interregnum claiming election fraud. Given the Department of Homeland Security's declaration that the election ““was the most secure in American history”” (Sanger, 2020) and that the aforementioned lawsuits resulted in “no change in the electoral outcome” (Cummings, 2021), I concluded that these claims of election fraud were categorically false and conducted my research as such.

In this study, I first discuss the existing scholarship on the topic; there is little existing literature on post-election violence in Western nations, mostly because election violence in Western nations seldom occurs. There is much existing literature, however, on the role of misinformation in election interference and the use of violence by incumbents to stay in power. In the second section, I argue that former President Donald Trump had a direct influence on the actions of those that attacked the Capitol on January 6th by employing untruthful rhetoric and manifesting anger within his base of supporters. In the third section, I used a mixed research method used to support my case study. The rhetorical analysis will show exactly how former President Trump's rhetoric led to the events of January 6th. I further analyzed quantitative data based on tweets that compliment this qualitative analysis. The last section concludes my paper and points to the normative implications of my findings.

Literature Review

In a context of an observable democratic backslide around the world, an analysis of the root causes of election violence is critical in understanding the symptoms of such a global phenomenon. Such an analysis is also useful in understanding the context

around the violence on January 6th, which largely attempted to thwart the democratic process. The research conducted intends to examine the role of disinformation in election violence, specifically post-election violence. The research points to many strong arguments (all noncontradictory) about the use of violence by incumbents to stay in power, the many facets of social life that authoritarian leaders exploit to pursue their interests, and the major role that disinformation plays in such efforts. In the course of my research, I have found scant authors that explicitly link the disinformation campaign of then-President Trump to the major violence that occurred in Washington, D.C. after the 2020 presidential election. Thus, this work serves as one of the only tangential examinations of how then-President Trump's false claims of election fraud is directly linked to the post-election violence which materialized at the Capitol on January 6th, 2021.

The use of violence by incumbents to stay in power

Hafner-Burton et al. employ their observations using complex equations to formulate their arguments about incumbents' use of violence. The authors outline that it is generally believed that election violence is employed by incumbents when they believe they are going to lose. However, it is not exactly known whether this is entirely accurate. They may choose to do so due for several reasons, mainly in an attempt to prevent the opposition party from involving themselves in the election or its procedures. Opposition parties are less likely to participate in an election that they know will either be unfair or unfree and instead choose to boycott. These boycotts may be useful long-term as they increase the probability that fairer elections will be held in the next cycle, but in the short-term it dramatically increases

the incumbent's probability of winning. Violence or the possibility thereof in an electoral process (especially before an election) may also prevent voters from turning out. Violence changes voting behavior, especially among the opposition by inducing them to either not vote or vote for the incumbent out of fear of retaliation. Election violence, while potentially increasing the chance of an incumbent staying in power, will undermine the long-term benefits of such actions.

I found the same general argument in Daxecker and Jung (2018); however, the authors use different data sources and methods. Daxecker and Jung use observations from the Electoral Contention and Violence dataset to contend that incumbents are the main perpetrators of electoral violence, mainly but not always employed before elections in an attempt to scare other voters or the opposition. Violence before the election occurs 60% of the time, while post-election violence occurs nearly 29% of the time. Armed conflict seems to be the main factor in whether an election is violent; in fact, the research put out by this article suggests that groups engage in electoral and violent strategies as compliments, not substitutes. Research conducted has shown that election violence occurs under majoritarian rule. Similarly, most violence occurs directly before or after parliamentary elections more so than it does from executive elections.

“Big man” politics isn't the only factor in post-election violence.

De Smedt (2009) employs anecdotal evidence to promote their arguments on post-election violence. Kenya was used as a case study by this author to discuss tribalism and authoritarianism. The author brought up John Lonsdale's 'political tribalism,' how the leader exploits ethnic quarrels over scant

resources and incites violence through setting groups against one another. In this political climate, violence becomes commonplace, and leaders frequently hop around parties to identify with ethnic groups. The authors noted that elections in which violence occurs sees remarkable political tension in the leadup to the election. In the article, the violence in Kenya is informed by more than just one authoritarian. Indeed, there was resentment of the ethnic class that was ruling over the Luo that contributed to violence.

Focusing on Kenya, de Smedt (2009) and Pfeiffer (2018) use anthropological data to analyze the structural violence in the country. The authors point to colonialism which developed social problems like fights over land, ethnicity, and territory. Politicians took advantage of these fault lines within communities in order to stay in power. The authors specifically target the “social machinery of the oppression,” otherwise known as the sophisticated way in which social status and historical progression exacts harm on members of a particular society. In the same way, former President Trump actively sought to use the partisan divisions present within the United States—heightened by the fervor of the election—

end of sentence?

Along with de Smedt (2009), Pérez-Curiel et al. (2021) use the responses of a Pew Research poll to qualify then-President Trump’s role in polarizing the election and feeding off of political tribalism. President Trump repeatedly denied the legitimacy of the election where he lost the race and, in so doing, incited a large part of the public to believe the electoral process in 2020 was fraudulent. Here, the authors are stating how disinformation was employed by President Trump and the campaign in order to delegitimize the election. The article mentions how majorities for both parties

agree on President Trump’s culpability for the January 6th attack on the Capitol. Thus, the tactics used by authoritarian leaders globally are observed as strikingly similar to that used by then-President Trump in the wake of his electoral defeat to President Biden.

Disinformation plays a key role in election integrity.

Through a comparative qualitative/quantitative approach, Pérez-Curiel et al. (2021) maintain that a portion of the electorate was already seemingly disenchanted with President Trump since he was characterized as engaging in an active policy of disinformation. The authors observe that former President Trump’s discourse is marked by a narrative based on disinformation. The authors link President Trump’s culpability and responsibility to the violence at the Capitol building on January 6th.

Leithauser (2020) makes a similar argument to this but uses quotes from elected officials as their source. The authors write that the Senate Intelligence Committee’s report on Russian interference acknowledges the disinformation campaign committed by Russian intelligence operatives. The article also details how representatives were attempting to stave off further conversations about the accusations about then-candidate Biden because it was a factor in the larger disinformation apparatus employed by the Russian operatives. To protect the integrity of the election and future elections, elected officials were asking that this baseless accusation be ignored by those actively espousing it, namely then-President Trump.

Pedrizza (2021) makes a similar point to Pérez-Curiel et al. (2021) insofar as discussing how candidates and social media are the two main drivers of disinformation.

They also discuss how, in the election, former President Trump reinforced his profile by knowingly spreading false information to benefit his election efforts. This culminated in two scenarios: the first where former President Trump and his subordinates generated false claims of electoral fraud, and second where a contingent of supporters of former President Trump attacked the Capitol. They address, as Leithauser (2020) does, the use of disinformation to polarize political arguments.

Similar arguments are made in Nisbet et al. (2021) to both Pedriza (2021) and Pérez-Curiel et al. (2021), as the authors utilized an online survey to lay out how, as a general principle, the electorate in a democracy will become unsatisfied if they learn the results have been manipulated in any manner. This has lasting effects on a citizen's commitment to the democratic process and may lead to further political polarization, illegitimacy of the victorious candidate, less voter turnout at elections, and/or a greater weight being had on outcomes and not processes. The pervasiveness of misleading information creates angst among citizens which is sometimes driven by dramatized reporting from news outlets. Conversely, (Presumed) notes that while the presence of disinformation pushes citizens away from watching politics, greater attention from the electorate actually pushes those citizens away from politics.

Conclusion

Some aspects of these sources that are missing are sources from Global North nations. While this is primarily due to the fact that election violence rarely if ever occurs in the Global North nations, it is worth noting that there are few if any sources about violence or prevention thereof in North America or Western Europe. Also,

it was difficult to find sources which characterized opposing viewpoints, indicating a general agreement on the role that disinformation plays in election violence. In Daxecker and Jung (2018), there were few real-world examples drawn upon to characterize its findings. Similarly, the authors explain how election violence occurs mostly under majoritarian systems yet does not delve into the potential causes of this, leaving the reader to speculate if this is a mere correlation instead of a causation. The lack of information about domestic political violence in Western and Global North nations supports the creation of this analysis.

Thesis Statement

I argue that the rhetoric used by former President Donald Trump had a direct influence on the actions of those that attacked the Capitol on January 6th. The misinformation about a “stolen” election with implications of a conspiracy against the United States, which was spread for weeks by the former president, directly motivated the reaction of his supporters in taking the action that they thought was necessary: violence. The rhetoric employed by former President Trump served to create a false narrative about the 2020 election. The former president then uses this narrative to foment anger and resentment amongst his supporters and directed that anger at Democrats and “fake” Republicans as criminals behind this massive conspiracy. Finally, the former president issued a call to action, noting that the future of the country was at risk if he was not certified as the legitimate winner of the election.

Research Design

This work is a case study, as it is focusing on one series of events: the role that former President Trump's rhetoric had on the

violence at the Capitol on January 6th, 2021. The existing literature does not have a case study on the January 6th riots, nor does the existing literature examine the role of former President Trump in this event. While arguments have been made that pre-election violence is utilized by incumbents to stay in power, there has been little documentation of post-election violence and its impacts on electoral results. Similarly, there is no significant existing literature on election violence in North America. One drawback of my single case study is a lack of generalizability. Specifically, if I were to make the case more broadly about the influence of rhetoric in post-election violence, it would be difficult for me to make the same argument for other actors because the rhetoric may be of the same nature but using different words or used in a different context. Another argument that could be made is that there is heightened campaign rhetoric in every election season, and that just because the language was inflammatory does not equate to incurring violence; a lack of examples in Global North nations could bolster this argument.

My main concepts are election fraud and post-election violence. A definition that I have set on for election fraud is as follows: Election fraud is conduct intended to corrupt the exercise or process by which ballots are obtained, marked, or tabulated; the process by which election results are canvassed and certified; or the process by which voters are registered. I have settled on this definition due in large part to the definitions currently present in the existing literature on election fraud; I have included the words “exercise or” to account for the fact that the lack of safety or implicit intimidation of voters qualifies as election fraud. I have settled on this definition because it is the most holistic definition while still being precise. I also appreciate this definition because it accounts for the potential for a crime being

committed at any stage of the voting process, from obtainment to certification. This definition is widely accepted since aspects of this definition appear in other scholarly discussions of election fraud. This definition also fits incredibly well within my research question because it allows me to be able to point to the exact claims that were made by the Trump campaign as they relate to what the definition of election fraud is. The contents of my definition are also measurable.

Post-election violence is defined as actual or material threat of physical harm to oneself or others promulgated by an election result. The first part of this definition comes from a scholarly article on Kenyan post-election violence. I crafted the second part as a way of enhancing the definition and to clarify its role in my paper. I also added the word “material” to qualify the term threat to maintain that simply making a threat is not a form of post-election violence, but those that are substantial in nature are an example of such violence. This definition of violence is widely accepted, and my addition makes the definition more precise within the context of this paper.

The contents of my definition are also measurable. My definition of election fraud is valid on its face and in its content because it is a precise definition and one that encompasses the range of potential variations of election fraud. My definition looks right; no important features of election fraud are left out of this definition. My definition is also reliable, since it is corroborated by multiple sources as having overlapping characteristics. My definition of post-election violence is valid on its face and in its content because it effectively measures my concept and is comprehensive enough to where it does not leave out important features about violence regarding election violence. My definition is also

reliable, since it is an accurate measure of what I am trying to look for: mass violence spurred by election results.

A possible source for data would be a database displaying whether Trump supporters who entered the Capitol had displayed support for the campaign's claims of election fraud. I would most likely find this in the legal pleadings of those that have been charged with crimes related to the events of January 6th, although this would not account for all the individuals who entered the Capitol building unlawfully that afternoon. Another source of data could be the transcripts of the speeches delivered by then-President Trump. This would be useful in ascertaining if any language was implicitly driving his supporters to riot against the Capitol.

The data I use is the rhetoric from President Trump. I have derived my data from various transcripts of speeches and public remarks that the former President made within the time frame I selected. I also used tweets sent or "re-tweeted" by the former president in the time under examination. I collected my data myself, reviewing statements which the topic was specifically about the Election results and the former president's fight to overturn the results. Since they are the verbatim transcripts, there is little data missing. If I was confused about a particular line of dialogue, I attempted to find video or audio of the remarks. My research is confined to remarks made by the former President in the Interregnum, or the period of transition between presidential administrations. Specifically, I focused on statements made between November 3rd, 2020 (Election Day) and January 6th, 2021; therefore, the timeline is 64 days. Analyzing statements before this period would not be relevant for this case study as the intention of such remarks were not necessarily meant to overturn the results, primarily because

there were no results yet. However, the former president's rhetoric doubting the validity of the 2020 election did not start on Election Day, and an examination of his statements before then would serve to contextualize his actions during the Interregnum and display how his preemptive attempt to cast doubt on the election results indicate the artificiality of such claims.

Former President Trump and his campaign repeatedly made claims in the courts and to state legislatures that the election was rigged and fraudulent. That he purposefully germinated hope in his supporters that the results of the election could and would eventually be overturned is remarkably important, namely since the former President's rhetoric in the face of such legal defeats characterizes what he felt needed to be done to overturn the results. Since all legal options were exhausted by January 6th, his claims that the election must be 'taken back' take a pointed importance in recognizing the purpose of his rhetoric on that day and in the weeks leading up to the certification vote. My results would have a different meaning if I chose an alternative time frame. For example, the rhetoric surrounding "fighting" for a cause means something different in the context of voting, versus in the context of when an election is over, and the only plausible course of action is physical violence.

To be self-critical, I could have looked at the other election violence of leaders such as Ukraine, which would have made my comparative analysis a little stronger. I could have also examined the rhetoric and actions of other individuals in the Trump campaign or in the political sphere, but this would have entailed more contextualization that would be better completed in a larger analysis.

Qualitative Rhetorical Analysis

On January 13, 2021, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to impeach President Donald Trump a second time for inciting violent and seditious acts that occurred at the Capitol on January 6th, 2021. With this vote, the House agreed that the rhetoric employed by the former president was directly causal to the violent events at the Capitol. In his rhetoric between Election Day and January 6th, former President Trump employed three strategies about the 2020 election which led to the events at the Capitol: He created a false narrative about the election and sought to convince his supporters of it, he manifested anger and resentment against a perceived enemy to justify his electoral loss, and he issued a call to action.

He created a false narrative around the 2020 Election and convinced his supporters of it.

Former President Trump created a false set of circumstances surrounding the 2020 presidential election, and actively sought to convince his supporters of these mistruths. After declaring victory on November 3rd, former President Trump continued to declare that he was leading, even though not all the votes were counted; the former president indicated while talking about his electoral lead in key states that “[votes for Trump] are getting whittled down” (see appendix for all sources of transcripts of former President Donald Trump). This language implies that votes for him were being taken away and implies that it was the Board of Elections and not the voters themselves who were responsible for his loss of the states in question. The former president further sought to cast doubt on the 2020 election by claiming “If you count the legal votes, I easily win. If you count the illegal votes, they can try to steal

the election from us” (appendix). Here, the former president was clearly implying that the actions of others (namely Democrats) were the reason for his perceived loss. He also begins to generate the idea that there was a crime committed against him, thereby framing the argument that he is the real winner of the election. Former President Trump further contributed to this claim of a stolen election by stating that election fraud was engineered on a massive scale and by a particular political party. Without citing evidence, the former president claimed in a speech from the White House that “While it has long been understood that the Democrat political machine engages in voter fraud from Detroit to Philadelphia, to Milwaukee, Atlanta, so many other places. What changed this year was the Democrat party’s relentless push to print and mail out tens of millions of ballots” (see appendix). Here, the former president is making unfounded and generalized claims about voter fraud while making specific claims to convince his supporters that a crime was committed. While not explicitly naming individuals, the former president took advantage of the hyper-partisanship present in the aftermath of a national election to generate support for his claims. Former President Trump made claims of fraud in the 2020 election and stated that thousands of votes were erroneously cast. Using these false claims, the former president created a scenario to justify his loss to President Biden and purposefully spread these claims to convince his supporters to buy-in to it.

He manifested anger and resentment, directing it against Democrats and “fake” Republicans.

To encourage and stir up his base, former President Trump manifested anger and resentment about these claims of election fraud and directed this emotion against

Democrats and even some elected Republican officials. From the White House, former President Trump declared that “Dramatically eroding the integrity of our elections was the Democrats number one priority for a simple reason, they wanted to steal the 2020 presidential election” (see appendix). In blaming his election loss on the illegal meddling of “the Democrats,” former President Trump spotlighted the ‘other,’ or the villain that he could point to as the reason for his loss. The former president also victimized himself and his supports by continuing to use the word “stolen;” he continues with this theme by stating “They want to take not me, but us down. Then we can never let them do that.” In doing so, the former president wanted to generate anger from his base by claiming that his opponents cheated and committed a crime; in this line, he also brings his supporters into the scenario by stating that they were hurt by these crimes. He is implying through his rhetoric that his supporters—indeed, the American people—were victims of a massive crime. The former president signaled this desire for anger at a rally in Georgia when he stated “You’re angry because so many votes were stolen. It was taken away” (see appendix). In this moment, former President Trump is actively manifesting anger out of the crowd; he is telling his supporters how they should feel because of a slight that he argues was against himself and them. The former president also took aim at Republican elected officials: Vice President Michael Pence and Georgian Secretary of State Bradford Raffensperger were singled out by former President Trump as too weak to stand up for him. This resentment is directly seen in the actions and chants that occurred during the riot: rioters constructed a makeshift gallows and were found chanting “Hang

Mike Pence” (Poniewozik, 2021), presumably for his actions in certifying Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election. Similarly, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (the highest-ranking Democrat on Capitol Hill at the time) also experienced vandalism when her office was ransacked, and her lectern was stolen (Poniewozik, 2021). The former president framed this resentment to blame other actors for stealing his victory.

He issued a call to action.

After former President Trump developed the false narrative about the 2020 election and gathered buy-in from his supporters, he issued a call to action while leaving significant room in his rhetoric for his supporters to interpret the use of violence. The former president clearly indicated the perceived slight against him stating “This election was rigged. Everybody knows it. I don’t mind if I lose an election, but I want to lose an election fair and square. What I don’t want to do is have it stolen from the American people. That’s what we’re fighting for. We have no choice to be doing that” (see appendix). By stating that there is no choice but to fight, the former president claimed that there was no alternative except for his remainder in power, and that the cause was dire and needed to be fought for to protect the American people. The former president continues this thought by stating that, “In fact, there is still plenty of time to certify the correct winner of the election and that’s what we’re fighting to do” (see appendix). Indeed, the former president is explicitly stating that the resolution to this grave injustice to the American people is the certification of the “correct” president. This remark was made on December 2nd, so in this instance the former president was setting up the importance of the certification of electors on January 6th.

The context surrounding these next comments are especially important since former President Trump made them at the rally on the morning of January 6th, immediately before his supporters stormed the Capitol. At this point in the Interregnum, all the former president's legal actions had failed to invalidate enough votes or flip any state to get his electoral count to 270. At that morning rally, the president issued a stirring call to action stating "And we fight. We fight like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore" (see appendix). Here, the former president is calling his supporters to fight for the future of the nation and instilling in them a false conviction of duty to preserve their country. He continues this fighting rhetoric by stating "Because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong" (see appendix). Here, the former president is implying that the country has been taken over by an adversary (in this case, the Democrats) and needs restoration. Further, the use of masculine and dire words to describe the action that needs to be taken is a clear indicator of what the former president desired; while he does not explicitly state that there should be violence, he comes remarkably close to it. The former president calls for his supporters to fight and take back what's theirs, and yet there was no election for them to vote in, nor was there any legal action his supporters could have contributed to at that moment. Additionally, rioters that have since faced charges from their actions on January 6th have clearly expressed that they felt they were doing the bidding of former President Trump, stating in their pleas that their violent actions were in compliance with "the president's instructions" and that they had "answered the call of my president" (Feuer, 2021).

¹ The full list of keywords can be found in the second appendix

Former President Trump called on his supporters to march and fight for the future of the nation, and directly implied the use of violence by using such language in a dire call to action.

Quantitative Analysis

In conducting my quantitative research, I utilized the Trump Twitter Archive and collected and coded the former president's tweets using keywords and categorizing them by the three different strategies discussed in the qualitative analysis (creating a false narrative surrounding the election, anger against Democrats and fake Republicans, and calls to action). For the purposes of this research, any tweets that had the descriptive keywords¹ within them but did not pertain to the election per se were excluded from the database.

As such, my data includes a total of 531 tweets. When tweets were ambiguous in that they expressed multiple strategies, I coded these tweets based on the primary intent of the tweet. For example, if the former president sent a tweet that created a false narrative and blamed Democrats, I coded that tweet a 2 because the tweet is used to blame Democrats specifically. I made this coding for two reasons: first, Twitter is a platform that is constraining in terms of messaging, and therefore one can assume that the tweet has one primary message. Moreover, former President Trump has been known for his remarkably blunt rhetorical style, which implies the expression of very direct and simple messaging.

The shifting of percentages of codes as the developments of the Interregnum continued indicates how the former president's strategy to remain in power aligns with his

narrative style on Twitter. Looking at the tweets in their entirety, the main tactic employed by the former president was promoting a false narrative surrounding the election; this was supported by the two other

strategies of generating animosity and creating a call to action which were both especially prevalent in the weeks leading up to January 6th (see Table 1).

Table 1- Number of Trump tweets for each strategy during the Interregnum period

<u>Strategy</u>	<u>Number of tweets</u>	<u>Percentage of total tweets</u>
<u>Election Fraud</u>	367	69.12%
<u>Culpability for Fraud</u>	142	26.74%
<u>Call to Action</u>	22	4.14%

The smallest strategy category is of the former president making a call to action. Though the former president only crafted and sent 22 tweets which were calls to action, I surmised that given the timeframe with which the tweets were deployed, the former president did not need to make a large amount of instigating or directory remarks to incite his supports to accomplish a goal. Indeed, given the prevalence of comments that directed animosity towards Democrats and “fake” Republicans in the latter portions of the Interregnum, along with the failure of the Trump campaign litigation and recount efforts, there was little if any other recourse the former president’s supporters could have taken except violence on January 6th. The former president set the stage for the January 6th attack; he did this so well that he did not need to employ very many calls to action for his supporters to take action such as what the nation viewed on January 6th. In other words, if one were to think of the former president’s rhetoric as setting up a fire, he efficiently and overwhelmingly set up the tinder and doused the kindling in flammable oil. In such a

scenario, one does not need very many matches to ignite an inferno.

The frequency of retweets vs the frequency of tweets indicate that the former president was in control of the narrative that he was creating. Retweets account for 160 out of 531 tweets, or 30.13% of the research data. Of all the retweets, 121 out of 160 retweets, or 75.63%, were coded as 1’s, with 32 out of 160 retweets, or 20% as 2’s and 7 out of 160 retweets, or 4.38% coded as 3’s. These percentages are closely aligned with the general percentages of the entire research universe, indicating that the former president did not utilize retweets to promote any singular rhetorical strategy.

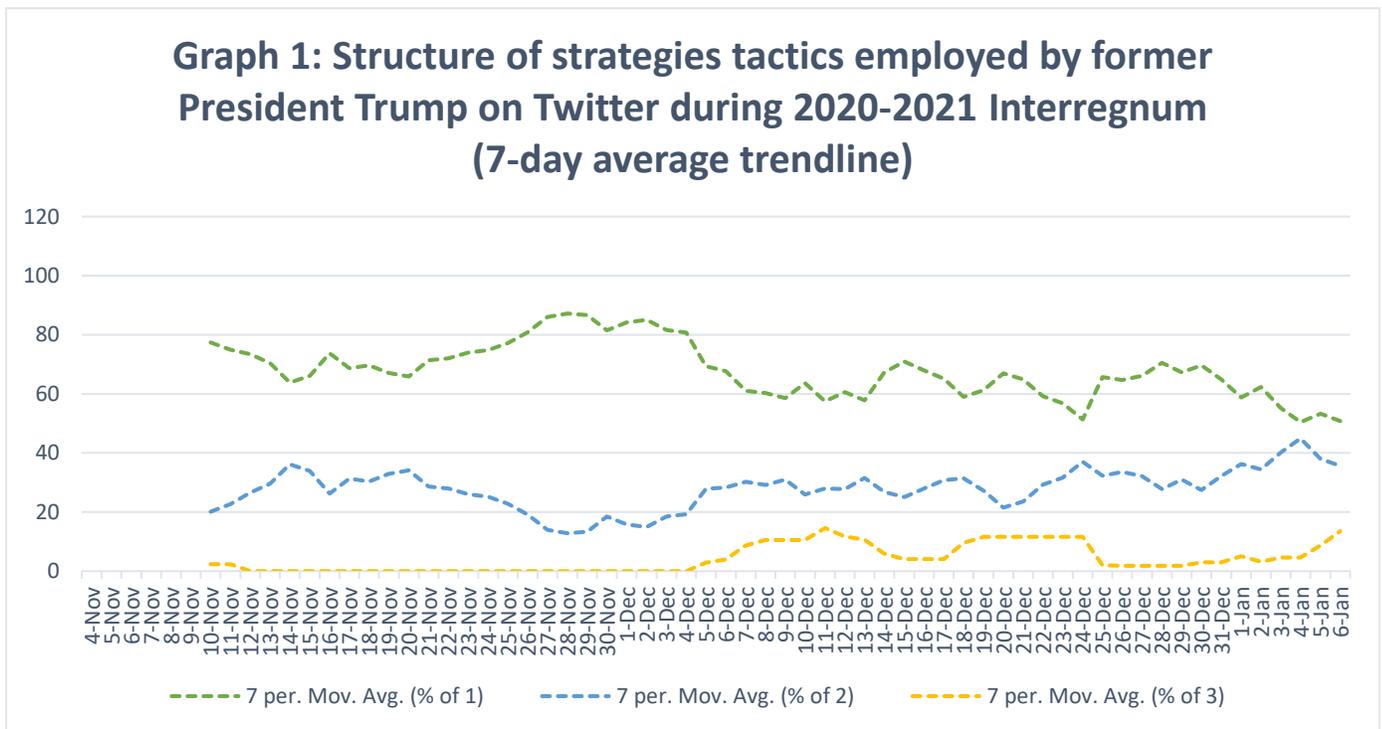
The average interactions and dates of tweets shed significant light on their influence. The average number of retweets stayed roughly the same across the three strategies, with 1’s averaging 40,278 retweets, 2’s averaging 43,504 retweets, and 3’s averaging 40,545 retweets. Similarly, the average number of likes reached by the tweets do not seem to differ dramatically across the four themes: 1’s had an average of 144,545 likes, 2’s had

an average of 166,028 likes, and 3’s had an average of 158,580 likes. The average dates of the corresponding codes indicate the shifting narrative employed by the former president. The average date for 1’s is November 12th, 2020, which is a little over a week after the election; the average date for 2’s is December 3rd, 2020; the average date for 3’s is December 21st, 2020. These average statistics are consistent with the rhetoric employed by former president Trump as his rhetorical strategies shifted throughout the Interregnum (See Graph 1).

The information available through this quantitative analysis confirms the themes that are present in the spoken rhetoric employed by former President Trump during the Interregnum. The former president began by overwhelming the political dialogue with claims of election fraud. The former president supplemented these claims by

fomenting animosity towards the “criminals” who engaged in the purported election fraud. These claims continued in earnest until the time of the state certification of electors and the handing-down of multiple legal failures to the Trump campaign; after this string of losses, a call for action began to emerge from the former president’s Twitter feed. This was followed by a doubling-down of claims of Democrat and “fake” Republican culpability. In the first week of January 2021 as the former president’s options to stay in power dwindled, the calls to action became more frequent. These calls to action, backed up by animus generated towards specific elected officials and bolstered by the belief that the election was stolen, incited the former president’s supporters into attacking the Capitol on January 6th in order to prevent the certification of electors.

Graph 1: Structure of strategies tactics employed by former President Trump on Twitter during 2020-2021 Interregnum (7-day average trendline)



Conclusion

This study addresses how the rhetoric espoused by former President Trump in the aftermath of his electoral defeat to President Joe Biden directly influenced his supporters to riot against the Capitol. The rhetoric clearly points to an intent by the former president to direct anger about the election results at Democrats, and to induce his supporters to do anything they could to reverse the outcome. While this case study was important in understanding the causes of the events of January 6th, it has important implications for elections in the future. Understanding who was responsible for this pivotal event in U.S. history is important in how our politics grows from it. It will be intriguing to observe over the next decade how the Republican Party—and its elected leaders in particular—address this situation, whether they continue with such inflammatory rhetoric or step away from it. This is just one case of rhetoric and one example in a Global North nation; there may be other cases to examine, especially in Europe both in contemporary times and throughout history. While my study is novel in that it looks at a different case of post-election violence outside of the traditional cases in the Global South, recent examples of post-election violence (notably in Eastern Europe) may be useful additional cases to investigate and broaden the scope of this analysis. Former President Trump still carries significant influence within the Republican Party, so his rhetoric about the

2020 election and his responsibility for the violence at the Capitol still carry meaning in today's political culture; former President Trump has made clear that his endorsements of candidates for the federal legislature are contingent of their vocal belief in his false claims of the 2020 election. Further, the events of January 6th have challenged how some Americans view the strength of our democracy, and many still believe in the false claims that the former President made, even lawmakers who have used this conspiracy as justification for partisan alterations to voting apparatuses of multiple states. The events of this day were more than just vandalism afflicted to a building, but truly hampered the democratic system via lies meant to subvert the will of the people for political gain and have set back our journey towards a more perfect union. The surreptitious campaign to diminish and whitewash the events of January 6th is already underway, and it remains to be seen how or if those responsible for inciting such seditious violence—including the former president himself—will be held accountable. Nevertheless, it is worth observing that the legitimate winner of the 2020 election was certified on January 6th and sworn in on January 20th. The broken windows have been replaced, the battered offices have been repaired, and the elected officials that evacuated the floor of the House reconvened just as swiftly to fulfill their constitutional duty to the American people; our republic, though tempest-tossed, remains resilient.

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Appendix

Section 1.1

Sources of Transcripts of former President Donald Trump

Remarks from the White House Press Briefing Room. November 5th, 2020:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_Donald_Trump_presidency_\(2020_Q4%E2%80%93January_2021\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_the_Donald_Trump_presidency_(2020_Q4%E2%80%93January_2021))

Remarks from the White House. Dec. 2nd, 2020: <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-speech-on-election-fraud-claims-transcript-december-2>

Speech at a campaign rally in Georgia. December 5th, 2020:

<https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-georgia-rally-transcript-before-senate-runoff-elections-december-5>

Speech from the White House Ellipse. January 6th, 2021: <https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-donald-trump-capitol-siege-media-e79eb5164613d6718e9f4502eb471f27>

Section 1.2

Keywords:

Pence | election | fake | rigged | stolen | steal | taken | fraud | vp | Vice | Biden | mail | Democrat | Republican | Georgia | Raffensperger | stop | RINO | Jan | Fulton | swing | Supreme |