2021

Donald Trump v. The Electorate: A Twitter Feud for the Ages

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submitted to
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by
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for
Senior Thesis
Fall 2020 - Spring 2021
May 3rd, 2021

Acknowledgments

First, I want to thank Professor Pitney, for not only signing on to be my reader with no prior exposure to my work but for making himself constantly available to support my multiple brainstorming phases, find a deluge of resources, and edit drafts (particularly in the final two weeks before May when my thesis doubled in size). His sheer amount of knowledge was invaluable, and his meticulous and thoughtful suggestions made my writing better at every stage. Had this not been my final year at CMC, I would have jumped at the chance to fill my schedule with more of his classes. I also want to thank Professor Andrew Sinclair, my first Government professor at CMC, who gave me the courage to switch my major and entire career path. His enthusiasm for the subject and willingness to put up with my weekly visits to his office made the world of politics feel accessible in a way it never had before. Professors like him make the difference.

This, and everything else I do, is dedicated to my parents. You have been my biggest, most enthusiastic supporters from day one and have given me every opportunity to learn and grow without judgement. You let me find my way, forge my own path, but always return home if (and when) I stumbled. A paragraph will never be enough to fully encompass what you do for me everyday, but I am forever grateful to be your daughter. I also want to thank my younger brother, Dylan, for finally getting his hair cut after 14 months. He is also mildly entertaining at times and will probably change the world.

Abstract

This thesis began as an exploration into Donald Trump's Twitter use in the final year of his presidency, starting with his first (and at the time, only) impeachment and ending with the November 2020 election. As an incumbent running for re-election, Donald Trump broke from precedent by opting out of the traditional messaging strategy of expanding his base and promoting unity and instead focused on energizing his existing supporters. Throughout his campaign and presidency, his Trumpian-style of rhetoric which perpetuated an "us versus them" mentality resulted in threats and real violence by his supporters.

The role of social media has grown tremendously in the past decade, and has shifted political messaging as a result. While traditional media had a structure to fact-check stories, social media allows for the constant sharing of oversimplified ideas. With Trump's massive Twitter following, he was able to engage in tweet-storms on any given subject, no matter how accurate the content of his messages were. Social media companies frequently rebuffed calls to increase the policing and accountability of Trump's accounts. But in 2020, they were faced with a challenge: a sitting president actively challenged the integrity of a national election. Twitter decided to fact-check his tweets, which helped limit the spread of disinformation. However, these labels were not enough to overcome the circulation of lies that the election was stolen, bolstered by Trump and other Republicans across the country. By comparing the escalation of violence with the online messaging between November 2020 and January 2021, I conclude that Trump's repeated claims that his supporters must "stop the steal" and fight for the country led directly to the kind of violence we witnessed on January 6th.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Social Media in Politics

The growth of social media ushered in a new wave of information gathering. In contrast to the era of broadcast media, where information came through daily newspapers or nightly news shows, users now had a greater choice in when, how, and what to consume as news.[1] Cable television paved the way for partisan channels such as MSNBC and Fox News to cater to a specific audience, feeding their viewers commentary that no longer aimed to be objective.[2] With few restrictions, Facebook allowed different types of groups to form online, including those plotting domestic terrorist attacks. With every new type of social media came an opportunity for political groups and individuals to spread their message in an easily consumable way, sometimes at the expense of a more comprehensive overview of the situation. None managed to take off politically the way Twitter did.

Twitter is a relatively new form of political messaging. Unlike traditional news sources, it allows anyone to post in real time. Before, journalists could exert some amount of control over the stories distributed to the American public. Such gatekeeping ensured a modicum of reliability and fact-checking before stories became available to the general consumer.[3] It also meant that news came at a slower pace, and gatekeepers

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[1] Fontaine, Sam A., and Daniel M. Gomez. "Going Social: A Comparative Analysis of Presidents' Official and Social Media Messages." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2020): 507.
[2] Fontaine and Gomez, "Going Social" 510.
[3] Fontaine and Gomez, "Going Social" 512.

deemed certain stories too insignificant or unverified to publish. With Twitter, nearly

anything can be posted at any hour of the day. Politicians and journalists have harnessed

this power, with reporters posting breaking news before it makes it to print and politicians

using the platform as a direct line of communication with their constituents. Twitter has

become intrinsic in modern journalism, with many journalists describing the platform as

a kind of necessary evil.[4] Although it hosts bad-faith actors and heated arguments, it also

connects journalists with their readers and lets previously marginalized groups have a

sphere of influence.[5]

     This mass marketing of ideas to the general public is a product of 20th century

politics. In the 19th century, presidents did not consider direct communication with the

public a routine part of the job. Both Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson

pioneered the idea that mass rhetoric should be a tool of the office.[6] They had to

communicate with their audience largely in person or by print media, but as technology

developed so did the medium through which a president fulfilled this new duty — to

interact directly with the American people.[7] Franklin Delano Roosevelt utilized broadcast

television, while Clinton used cable and "Web 1.0," the Internet of the 1990s.[8] Web 1.0

became Web 2.0, which allowed not only for access to resources but creation of them by

[4]Ingram, Mathew. "The Yin and Yang of Twitter and Journalism." *Columbia Journalism Review*. Last modified 2019. Accessed November 30, 2020.
https://www.cjr.org/analysis/the-yin-and-yang-of-twitter-and-journalism.php.
[5]Ingram, "The Yin and Yang of Twitter and Journalism."
[6]Tulis, Jeffrey, and Russell Muirhead. *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017.
[7]Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency.*
[8]Harris, William A. *National Archives and Records Administration.* National Archives and Records Administration, July 8, 2020. Last modified July 8, 2020. Accessed April 30, 2021.
https://fdr.blogs.archives.gov/2020/07/28/television-fdr-and-the-1940-presidential-conventions/.

the public. By the time of Obama, Facebook was used nationally and Twitter was in its early stages.

The advent of Twitter coincided with the presidency of Barack Obama, so there is only one pre-Trump data point to analyze when it comes to presidential Twitter. But a few notable aspects of the application lend themselves to the duties of the president: direct communication with their base (the American public), accessible to all citizens (even if they do not consume "traditional" news), and immediate commentary on political figures as well as events that occur.[9]

When presidents assume office, they become the leaders of their party — their policy priorities affect the priorities of every federal official on their side. In an increasingly polarized nation, publicly appealing to all Americans on a platform like Twitter is rarely as effective as desired.[10] But leaders can use it to mobilize a specific base. Even if the claims are sometimes dubious, the speed of Tweets allows a president to rattle through a series of statements designed to energize voters. In addition to the mobilization potential of Twitter, it also hosts many users who do not consume media in traditional ways. The general public has increasingly opted out of using mainstream sources of news, instead choosing to absorb political information through organizations or figures who directly align with their ideology.[11] In the United States, there are currently 68 million users on Twitter, about 8,160,000 of whom use it as their primary news source.[12] Of those 68 million users, most are very polarized when it comes to the

[9]Fontaine and Gomez, "Going Social" 512.
[10]Fontaine and Gomez, "Going Social" 513.
[11]Fontaine and Gomez, "Going Social" 513.
[12]BBC News. "Instagram 'Will Overtake Twitter as a News Source'." *BBC News*. BBC, June 15, 2020. Last modified June 15, 2020. Accessed December 20, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53050959.

accounts they trust and distrust.[13] Republicans view many "reputable" sources such as CNN and the *New York Times* as untrustworthy, and instead elect to follow Fox News and Sean Hannity, while Democrats view those same sources as credible.[14] Presidents can also use Twitter to reach a brand new constituency that previously would have been unaware of their messaging. Twitter reached its peak users in early 2017, right as Donald Trump took office.[15]

Political leaders are constantly engaged in efforts to control the narrative of important events. For presidents, Twitter provides an opportunity to engage directly with criticism, political pundit commentary, and fellow politicians. While Twitter opens up commentary to all, including those that criticize the president, it also gives the president a pathway to respond. Through these conversations comes the opportunity for the public to witness messaging spread directly by the president's team. The president assumes the responsibility of leading the entire public, and Twitter allows them to express a narrative. The influence of social media has only grown in modern presidential times, and Donald Trump is a clear example.

1.2 President Obama introduces Twitter

[13]Mark, Jurkowitz, Amy Mitchell, Elisa Shearer, and Mason Walker. "U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided." *Pew Research Center*. Pew Research Center, January 24, 2020. Last modified January 24, 2020. Accessed December 15, 2020. https://www.journalism.org/2020/01/24/u-s-media-polarization-and-the-2020-election-a-nation-divided/.
[14]Jurkowitz, "U.S. Media Polarization and the 2020 Election: A Nation Divided." *Pew Research Center*.
[15]Tankovska, H. "Twitter: Monthly Active Users Worldwide." *Statista*. Last modified January 27, 2021. Accessed December 20, 2020. https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/.

While Donald Trump is the president most associated with Twitter, Barack

Obama introduced the application to the White House. In fact, President Obama was the

first occupant of the Oval Office to tweet from @POTUS on Twitter, to go live on

Facebook, to answer questions from Americans on YouTube, and to use a filter on

Snapchat.[16] In many ways, he brought the new age of media to the presidency. During his

campaign, he utilized tools such as Facebook and MySpace to connect directly with

voters. It worked, as he won almost 70 percent of the youth vote in 2008.[17] His goal,

according to his administration, was always "to reach Americans and people around the

world on the channels and platforms where they already spend their time."[18] He hired

Chris Hughes, a Facebook co-founder, to assist in the dissemination of materials through

social media, texting, and podcasting.[19] At that time, around half of all Americans used

the internet or text messaging to receive news about the campaign.[20] Three times as many

Americans used the internet to watch political videos as they did in 2004.[21] While

600,000 people followed John McCain on Facebook, 2 million followed Obama. His

112,000 Twitter followers dwarfed McCain's 4,600.[22] His team did not invent any kind of

new technology, but instead found an original way to use social media to support various

wings of their campaign including fundraising, organizing, fighting smear campaigns,

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[16]Schulman, Kori. "The Digital Transition: How the Presidential Transition Works in the Social Media Age." *National Archives and Records Administration.* National Archives and Records Administration, October 31, 2016. Last modified October 31, 2016. Accessed December 20, 2020. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/10/31/digital-transition-how-presidential-transition-works -social-media-age.
[17]Schulman, "The Digital Transition."
[18]Schulman, "The Digital Transition."
[19]Dutta, Soumitra. "Barack Obama and the Facebook Election." *U.S. News & World Report.* U.S. News & World Report, November 19, 2008. Last modified November 19, 2008. Accessed December 30, 2021. https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2008/11/19/barack-obama-and-the-facebook-election.
[20]Dutta, "Barack Obama and the Facebook Election."
[21]Dutta, "Barack Obama and the Facebook Election."
[22]Dutta, "Barack Obama and the Facebook Election."

and mobilizing voters.[23] These contacts carried into his presidency, giving him a leg up

on the transition compared with prior administrations' voter lists and mailing addresses.[24]

Obama set the precedent for the transition of social media power, including the transition

of handles such as @WhiteHouse, @FLOTUS, @PressSec, and @VP, cementing the

official use of social media.[25] He and his team decided that his social media would live

archived and available for download online — all of which were new steps for the

highest office in the nation.[26]

     Aside from the rhetorical differences between the way both presidents used the

platform, President Obama brought the same kind of meticulous screening to Twitter as

he would any official message. Policy and legal experts vetted tweets, and could take

days or weeks to hit the final phase of posting.[27] Historian David Greenberg draws a

parallel from Obama and Trump to Calvin Coolidge and Franklin Roosevelt — although

Coolidge was the first president to have his inaugural address, acceptance address, and

State of the Union broadcast over radio, we remember FDR's fireside chats with speeches

written specifically in colloquial language to be broadcast nationwide.[28] In the same vein,

[23]Carr, David. "How Obama Tapped Into Social Networks' Power." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, November 10, 2008. Last modified November 10, 2008. Accessed November 20, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/business/media/10carr.html.

[24]Carr, "How Obama Tapped Into Social Networks' Power."

[25]Schulman, "The Digital Transition."

[26]Bogost, Ian. "Obama Was Too Good at Social Media." *The Atlantic.* Atlantic Media Company, January 6, 2017. Last modified January 6, 2017. Accessed November 15, 2020. https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/01/did-america-need-a-social-media-president/512405/.

[27]Draper, Robert. "The Man Behind the President's Tweets." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, April 16, 2018. Last modified April 16, 2018. Accessed December 17, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/magazine/dan-scavino-the-secretary-of-offense.html.

[28]Feldman, Brian. "'A Demagogue for the Age of Social Media': A Historian Discusses Trump's Twitter." *Intelligencer*. Intelligencer, January 11, 2017. Last modified January 11, 2017. Accessed December 20, 2020. https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/01/is-trumps-twitter-changing-the-presidency.html.

while Obama will always be the first President to use Twitter, Trump will be remembered as the "Tweeter in Chief."

While Obama brought a more restrained tone to his administration's social media messaging, critics still considered the implications of turning complex ideas into easily broadcasted online soundbites.[29] Social media has always been a double edged sword, making information more easily accessible to a broader audience but also less complex. The public is left vulnerable to everything from false information to data mining by large technology companies, while the president's online reach can greatly shift the national debate.

1.3 Online Partisanship

There was always partisanship in the media, with the far right movement using the new developments to their advantage. Before the 1980s, talk radio had limited, local reach. Shows generally appeared only on their home stations, and distant listeners had to pay tolls to call in. Rush Limbaugh took advantage of satellite transmission and 800-numbers to create a national audience, broadcasting his program five days a week to 600 stations nationwide.[30] In the 1990s, the Drudge Report became a hub for conservative internet users. Fox News was created as a "legitimate" news source seeking to combat mainstream disinformation. Starting in 2018, Parler, a conservative online echo chamber

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[29]Bogost, "Obama Was Too Good at Social Media."
[30]Remnick, David. "DAY OF THE DITTOHEAD." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, February 20, 1994. Last modified February 20, 1994. Accessed December 20, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1994/02/20/day-of-the-dittohead/e5723f05-04d8-4ccb-98c9-8b1ba6c358d2/.

where liberals make up "a minute amount of the population," attempted to counter the more liberal learning Twitter. Until very recently, Twitter was a truly open and broad platform where anyone could post nearly anything. When its CEO tried to curb disinformation, far right users erupted in protest that it was censoring their views. Before Trump, their claims fell flat. They embraced the ideals of online trolling, but could only target lower level figures who might actually respond. Then Trump emerged as a mainstream celebrity who attacked those at the highest level. If he attacked Rosie O'Donnell, for instance, people could posit that there was some amount of legitimacy to his claims since he knew her personally. It opened up a new world where targets were much more likely to respond, and suddenly extremists had a gateway into the mainstream.

While both Republicans and Democrats use Twitter, they largely interact with members of their own party. There are some marked aspects of each group online: more Democrats are active on Twitter, more Republicans distrust traditional news sources, both tend to be intolerant of members of the other party.[31] When exposed to liberal viewpoints on Twitter, Republicans became more conservative and Democrats became more liberal, although to a lesser degree.[32]

[31]Hutson, Matthew, Jeremy B. White, Sam Sutton and Carly Sitrin, and Bill Mahoney and Josh Gerstein. "Why Liberals Aren't as Tolerant as They Think." *POLITICO Magazine.* Last modified May 9, 2017. Accessed January 2, 2021. https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/05/09/why-liberals-arent-as-tolerant-as-they-think-215114.
[32]Bail, Christopher A., Lisa P. Argyle, Taylor W. Brown, John P. Bumpus, Haohan Chen, M. B. Fallin Hunzaker, Jaemin Lee, Marcus Mann, Friedolin Merhout, and Alexander Volfovsky. "Exposure to Opposing Views on Social Media Can Increase Political Polarization." *PNAS.* National Academy of Sciences, September 11, 2018. Last modified September 11, 2018. Accessed January 2, 2021. https://www.pnas.org/content/115/37/9216.

With Trump's perfected ability to stir up negative emotions among his followers, he left little room for rational debate.[33] Although Democrats outnumber Republicans in terms of active users, none of their tweets or principal figures came close to the kind of coverage Donald Trump's tweets received. Many tweets were picked up daily by national news outlets, broadening their reach well beyond what was possible on Twitter. During the third presidential debate in 2016, political bots (accounts not manned by real people) posted significantly more pro-Trump tweets than pro-Clinton ones, furthering Trump's online visibility to his own party.[34]

1.4 Trump's Twitter Takeover

Donald Trump joined Twitter in 2009. He had already dipped his toe in electoral politics, considering a run for president in 1988 (although that was mostly a publicity stunt for book sales).[35] He tried and failed again in 1999 as a member of the Reform Party, receiving around 15,000 votes in, the California primary.[36] The advent of Twitter allowed Trump to broadcast tweet-storms of commentary on politics. Among other

[33]"How Democrats and Republicans Use Twitter." *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy.* Pew Research Center, March 31, 2021. Last modified March 31, 2021. Accessed April 2, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/10/15/differences-in-how-democrats-and-republicans-behave-on-twitter/.

[34]Howard, Philip N., Samuel Woolley, and Ryan Calo. "Algorithms, Bots, and Political Communication in the US 2016 Election: The Challenge of Automated Political Communication for Election Law and Administration." *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 15, no. 2 (2018): 81–93.

[35]Allen, Cooper. "Donald Trump and White House Bids: A Long History of Not Running." *USA Today.* Gannett Satellite Information Network, June 15, 2015. Last modified June 15, 2015. Accessed April 2, 2021. https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2015/06/15/donald-trump-president-campaign/81230050/.

[36]GuideNews, TV. "Here's a Timeline of Every Time Donald Trump Ran for President." *TVGuide.com.* TV Guide, July 28, 2015. Last modified July 28, 2015. Accessed November 15, 2020. https://www.tvguide.com/news/donald-trump-presidential-campaign-timeline/.

falsehoods, he repeatedly pushed the claim that vaccines cause autism (Republicans are now the most vaccine-resistant segment of the population).[37] He also famously propagated the "birther" conspiracy claiming that President Obama was not born in the United States.[38] His obsessive tweeting gained him earned media coverage during his 2016 campaign, allowing his 140-character thoughts to spread. Donald Trump exploited traditional and nontraditional news sources, giving the media enough scandal to justify free coverage. He once said "I use the media the way the media uses me – to attract attention."[39] Donald Trump's presidency created a new way of using political Twitter, as he maintained his candid, informal rhetorical to provide commentary of current events, drop breaking news announcements, and go after his political rivals.

Donald Trump was a media spectacle — he managed to hijack media coverage with just a few taps of his finger. Trump largely based his messaging in emotion and ideology, exploring Twitter as an easy gateway to the public.[40] While he did control the official President's Twitter account, he opted instead to tweet from his personal handle (@realDonaldTrump). Blurring the line between the responsibilities of the President and the general public, the Department of Justice deemed tweets from his personal account "official statements of the President of the United States."[41]

[37]Smith, Daniel. "Trump's Threat to Public Health: by Daniel Smith." *The New York Review of Books.* Last modified July 11, 2020. Accessed November 30, 2020.
https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/02/15/trumps-threat-to-public-health/.
[38]Abramson, Alana. *ABC News.* ABC News Network, September 16, 2016. Last modified September 16, 2016. Accessed August 30, 2020.
https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/donald-trump-perpetuated-birther-movement-years/story?id=42138176.
[39]Fuchs, Christian. *Digital Demagogue Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter.* London: Pluto Press, 2018.
[40]Fuchs, *Digital Demagogue Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter.*
[41]Laird, Lorelei. "DOJ Says Trump's Tweets Are Official Presidential Statements." *ABA Journal.* Last modified November 14, 2017. Accessed September 30, 2020.
https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/government_says_trumps_tweets_are_official_presidential_statements.

His actions forced various social media sites to reconsider their community guidelines, choosing for most of his presidency to keep his posts up even when "normal" users would have been banned for some of the content.[42] Initially, Twitter allowed his tweets to remain up, as Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey said that he believed "it's important that people have conversations around what's happening, especially with our global leaders, that they can push back, that they can speak truth to power, that they can share and show why this particular behavior is not right, and not just."[43] This action drew criticism from those who believed the President should be held to the same if not higher standards than the general public. Twitter took new action to label certain tweets as misinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic and the November 3rd election, as well as limit the sharing of tweets with false claims. This resulted in Trump to once again declaring war on Twitter. [44] They temporarily locked his account during the January 6th insurrection, which led to an indefinite ban on January 8th, 2021.

1.5 Trumpism, Trumpology, Trump-Twitter

Researcher Christian Fuchs has classified Trump's manner of tweeting as exemplifying the "post-truth phenomenon," which focuses more on emotions,

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[42]Johnson, Ted. "Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey Explains Why They Haven't Deleted Donald Trump's Tweets About Joe Scarborough, Says They Are Part of 'Conversations Around What's Happening.'" *Deadline*. Deadline, May 27, 2020. Last modified May 27, 2020. Accessed September 30, 2020. https://deadline.com/2020/05/donald-trump-twitter-jack-dorsey-joe-scarborough-1202944468/.
[43]Johnson, "Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey Explains Why They Haven't Deleted Donald Trump's Tweets About Joe Scarborough, Says They Are Part of 'Conversations Around What's Happening.'"
[44]Gadde, Vijaya. "Additional Steps We're Taking Ahead of the 2020 US Election." *Twitter*. Twitter, October 9, 2020. Last modified October 9, 2020. Accessed September 30, 2020. https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/2020-election-changes.html.

personalities, and high-visibility than on rational arguments and facts.[45] Trump managed

to construct a narrative that polarized his world into friends and enemies, winners and

losers, enemies and friends. Those who sided with him were "great, impressive, nice,

successful, and talented," while those who dared oppose him became "inaccurate, nasty,

not nice, one-sided, overrated, poor, rude, sad, terrible, wrong, and untalented."[46] His

followers viewed him as a symbol of love, hope, and everything going right in America

as he presented himself as the sole combatant of the political elites, Democrats, and any

Republicans who stood in his way.[47] Certain groups were always on the outs, such as

undocumented immigrants, Mexico, China, Muslims, and his critics, while others could

quickly lose his favor, like Mitt Romney or certain Fox News hosts who crossed him.

It took Donald Trump's advisors a while to get on board with his use of social

media. At the beginning of his presidency, some sought to control his use of the platform.

Dan Scavino, Trump's trusted aide, would present him with a series of potential tweets

and allow him to choose. This arrangement did not last long.[48] Aides considered

appealing to Twitter and asking them to build in 15-second windows before a tweet was

published, but all strategies fell by the wayside as allowing Trump to tweet freely proved

mutually beneficial — Trump could enjoy likes and retweets while simultaneously

receiving unprecedented media attention. The mainstream media served as a force

multiplier, vastly extending the reach of his tweets beyond those who were following him

on Twitter. In the first 100 days of his presidency, around half of his total tweets were

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[45]Fuchs, *Digital Demagogue Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter.*
[46]Fuchs, *Digital Demagogue Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter.*
[47]Fuchs, *Digital Demagogue Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter.*
[48]Lippman, Daniel, Eliana Johnson, and Andrew Restuccia. "'Get Scavino in Here': Trump's Twitter Guru Is the Ultimate Insider." *POLITICO*. Last modified May 16, 2019. Accessed November 30, 2020. https://www.politico.com/story/2019/05/16/trump-scavino-1327921.

covered in the news media, such as the New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal.[49] This phenomenon set the precedent for the rest of his presidency, where the media prioritized the issues addressed in his tweets.

Only one person reportedly had access to draft and publish tweets from @realDonaldTrump: Dan Scavino. Scavino once worked as a teenage caddy for Trump and years later made his way onto the Trump campaign with no apparent qualifications except for his undying loyalty.[50] Scavino rose quickly in rank, from small transcription assignments and KFC runs to managing a large portion of Trump's social media. Scavino's own Twitter became a cesspool for conspiracy and baseless attacks, with retweets of claims that Senator Ted Cruz was having an affair. When the news broke that Trump planned to extract troops from Syria, Scavino promoted the popularity of the policy to a room full of skeptical members of Congress, citing "likes" and "retweets" as proof.[51] Steve Bannon once described him as the "comms department of the White House."[52] He survived the aggressive turnover of Trump employees, all while exerting consistent influence over Trump's favorite messaging platform.

With Scavino's help, the days of trying to censor Trump's Twitter account ended. Trump managed to mix in just enough newsworthy announcements that his tweets continued to merit analysis from major news networks — the world learned that he replaced his secretary of Veterans Affairs, that he believed trade wars were good, that he

[49]Xu, Zedan. "The Rise of Twitter in Presidential Communication: An Examination of the Relationship between President Trump's Twitter Feed and the Media Coverage of His First 100 Days." Thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 2018.
[50]Draper, Robert. "The Man Behind the President's Tweets." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, April 16, 2018. Last modified April 16, 2018. Accessed December 30, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/magazine/dan-scavino-the-secretary-of-offense.html.
[51]Lippman, "'Get Scavino in Here': Trump's Twitter Guru Is the Ultimate Insider."
[52]Lippman, "'Get Scavino in Here': Trump's Twitter Guru Is the Ultimate Insider."

planned on suspending DACA, as well as a series of his personal opinions on his own attorneys general, all from the platform. Trump had mastered the short-form version of messaging.

1.6 Social Media Fights Back

Donald Trump did not get away with complete free rein over his Twitter account as President — in addition to being sued over his use of the block button in 2017, Twitter took steps in preparation for the 2020 election to limit the threat of misleading claims coming from the highest office in the nation. Although these steps were meant to limit the spread of disinformation, their decision to fact-check Trump's tweets may have further polarized Democrats and Republicans, causing Republicans to double down on their beliefs and Democrats to embrace the facts laid out by the Twitter algorithm.[53] After Trump lost, continued to tweet, and rallied enough of his supporters to storm the United States Capitol, Twitter permanently banned his account.[54] Facebook took a more passive stance on Trump during his presidency, allowing organizations to spread misinformation through paid advertisements until the 2020 election where they began to limit misleading

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[53]Sherk, Rebecca, and Freedom is Worth Defending. "POV: When Twitter Fact-Checks Trump's Tweets, It Polarizes Americans Even More." *Boston University.* Last modified December 14, 2020. Accessed November 30, 2020.
http://www.bu.edu/articles/2020/pov-when-twitter-fact-checks-trumps-tweets-it-polarizes-americans-even-more/.
[54]Twitter Inc. "Permanent Suspension of @RealDonaldTrump." *Twitter*. Twitter, January 8, 2021. Last modified January 8, 2021. Accessed November 30, 2020.
https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension.html.

posts. They also decided to ban Trump's accounts indefinitely in January, and soon other platforms followed suit.[55]

Donald Trump's Twitter created a unique problem for social media organizations: a sitting president was actively spreading disinformation, largely without regulation. Knowing that a decision either way would face backlash, Twitter announced that it had expanded its civic integrity policy in an attempt to address any misleading claims that attack the integrity of the election or attempt to prematurely declare a winner.[56] Tweets that violated the new policies were labeled, and anyone attempting to retweet a flagged post saw a prompt for credible information on the subject.[57] Flagged tweets from prominent political figures or accounts with over 100,000 followers could not be retweeted without adding some kind of comment.[58] Twitter has multiple programmed machine learning systems designed to catch tweets that violate their terms of service. However, they only flag around 50% of the total tweets that violate their norms.[59] While they also have human content moderators, this means that thousands of inflammatory tweets can go unfiltered.[60] Twitter had been ahead of Facebook, actively banning political ads in October 2019, adding election labels to candidates in December 2019, creating labels for manipulated media in February 2020, and expanding policies to limit the spread

[55]Denham, Hannah. "These Are the Platforms That Have Banned Trump and His Allies." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, January 26, 2021. Last modified January 26, 2021. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/11/trump-banned-social-media/.
[56]Gadde, Vijaya. "Additional Steps We're Taking Ahead of the 2020 US Election."
[57]Gadde, Vijaya. "Additional Steps We're Taking Ahead of the 2020 US Election."
[58]Gadde, Vijaya. "Additional Steps We're Taking Ahead of the 2020 US Election."
[59]Brown, Megan, and Zeve Sanderson. "How Trump Impacts Harmful Twitter Speech: A Case Study in Three Tweets." *Brookings*. Brookings, October 23, 2020. Last modified October 23, 2020. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-trump-impacts-harmful-twitter-speech-a-case-study-in-three-tweets/.
[60]Brown, "How Trump Impacts Harmful Twitter Speech: A Case Study in Three Tweets."

of misinformation leading up to the election.[61] Facebook labeled posts involving the election and redirected readers to reliable sources. It also restricted paid promotion of election claims.[62] Earlier in the year, Facebook's leadership was criticized for limiting or eliminating measures that combated misinformation and hate speech for fear it would harm Facebook's usage numbers or conservative sources.[63]

Social media sites that these platforms are run by private companies that can set their own terms of service — they have no responsibility to ensure complete free usage. Some are more dedicated than others to the goal of limiting disinformation, which is all the more needed when those elected hold potentially harmful views. As more Trump-like candidates are voted into every level of office, social media must find ways to curb the spread of baseless conspiracies.

1.7 Trump's War on Twitter

Trump has a long history of trying to use the law to silence critics. As a private citizen, he made liberal use of defamation suites (and the threat of such suits) to keep critics at bay. As president, he urged lawmakers to "open up the libel laws." While Trump loved Twitter as a messaging platform, he did not feel the same way about its leadership.

[61]Gadde, Vijaya. "Additional Steps We're Taking Ahead of the 2020 US Election."

[62]Brandom, Russell. "Facebook, Twitter Take Steps to Limit the President's False Election Claims." *The Verge*. The Verge, November 4, 2020. Last modified November 4, 2020. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://www.theverge.com/2020/11/4/21548736/twitter-facebook-throttle-trump-tweet-election-theft?scrolla=5eb6d68b7fedc32c19ef33b4.

[63]Roose, Kevin. "Facebook Reverses Postelection Algorithm Changes That Boosted News from Authoritative Sources." *The New York Times.* The New York Times, December 17, 2020. Last modified December 17, 2020. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/16/technology/facebook-reverses-postelection-algorithm-changes-that-boosted-news-from-authoritative-sources.html.

His favorite attack is to call upon Congress to pass legislation to undo Section 230 of the

Communications Decency Act, which effectively allows tech companies to have open

platforms without being held responsible for the content of posts.[64] After Twitter began to

label his tweets about mail-in voting as disinformation, Trump claimed they were

interfering in the election and "stifling FREE SPEECH."[65] But by repealing Section 230,

many platforms would suddenly be subject to lawsuits on behalf of their users, essentially

forcing them to heavily regulate or shut down their entire platform.[66] In essence, Trump

would lose his primary messaging source.

1.8 The Dangers of Trumpian Twitter

At the end of Trump's tenure, he had made 30,573 false claims according to the

Washington Post running tally, averaging around 21 falsehoods per day.[67] When he lost

the election, the overwhelming majority of Republicans believed his claims that it was

stolen.[68] Since Trump's election in 2016, more GOP candidates have emulated his

rhetorical style in person and online. His hold on the Republican party has not gone away,

[64]Holmes, Aaron. "Trump Is Going to War with Social Media Companies like Facebook and Twitter. Here's Everything That's Happened so Far." *Business Insider*. Business Insider, May 29, 2020. Last modified May 29, 2020. Accessed February 30, 2021.
https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-twitter-facebook-social-media-war-executive-order-explainer-timeline-2020-5.
[65]Holmes, "Trump Is Going to War with Social Media Companies like Facebook and Twitter. Here's Everything That's Happened so Far."
[66]Holmes, "Trump Is Going to War with Social Media Companies like Facebook and Twitter. Here's Everything That's Happened so Far."
[67]Rizzo, Salvador, and Glenn Kessler. "Analysis | Trump's False or Misleading Claims Total 30,573 over 4 Years." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, February 10, 2021. Last modified February 10, 2021. Accessed February 30, 2021.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/.
[68]Josh Jordan (@NumbersMuncher), tweet, February 22, 2021,
https://twitter.com/NumbersMuncher/status/1364029946876854272?s=20

as he can provide coveted endorsements to potential candidates regardless of their incumbency status.[69]

In the past year, social media sites have taken extra precautions to limit false claims, violent messages, and conspiracy theories. In President Trump's final months in office, from impeachment through the inauguration of Joe Biden, a series of important events showcased the kind of harm he encouraged through his tweets. Democrats hoped for a sweeping condemnation of Trumpism in the 2020 election, and although they won control in each branch of government, the margins were much narrower than expected. The Trumpian style of using Twitter proved effective for many members, and will likely remain even at the highest levels of politics. Without an active effort by social media sites to limit the spread of intentionally false claims, the world of conspiracies and partisan divide will only grow. It is up to these companies to embrace greater social responsibility, as well as traditional news sources to re-examine the inherent "news-worthiness" of tweets from a political leader like Donald Trump. Every messaging platform needs to take steps to further mitigate the potential harm of Trumpian social media use, which is a very real threat to democracy and could last well after a Trump presidency.

Twitter, along with other social media sites, took the unprecedented step of banning the former president from their platforms as President Biden assumed office. Now, Donald Trump has been largely absent from the daily news cycle, save a few written statements and an appearance at the Conservative Political Action Conference.

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[69] Rakich, Nathaniel, and Meredith Conroy. "Almost Everyone Trump Endorses Wins Their Primary ... But Is He Padding His Record?" *FiveThirtyEight*. FiveThirtyEight, August 26, 2020. Last modified August 26, 2020. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/almost-everyone-trump-endorses-wins-their-primary-but-is-he-padding-his-record/.

Nevertheless, most Republican politicians have signaled their enduring loyalty towards him. While Trump may no longer have a Twitter, members of his party are using their own online platforms to mirror the rhetorical style he brought to the presidency. Trump was in many ways a catalyst to a larger shift in how political figures disseminate their beliefs, rally their base, and spread propaganda. Left unregulated, Trump may not be the last figure to lead to a real, violent uprising among Americans.

Chapter 2: Slow, Constant Escalation

2.1 Introduction

From the day the House of Representatives began the first formal impeachment proceedings against him in 2019 to the day he left office in 2021, Donald Trump tested the limits of the Constitution. Using his signature style of attacking enemies, firing up supporters, and questioning America's legal system, he escalated interparty tensions and forced prominent Republicans to choose between appeasing him or following their constitutional responsibilities. As 2020 unfolded with protests for racial equality and a consequential election amid global pandemic, Donald Trump took to Twitter to lay the groundwork for November 3rd. He delivered a partisan State of the Union in the middle of impeachment trial proceedings, accepted the Republican nomination for President from the White House, and stoked confrontation with Black Lives Matter activists.

Using Twitter as a medium for campaign messaging, Donald Trump decided not to promote unity but instead to deepen partisan divides. This approach marked a stark contrast from other presidential reelection campaigns. While he turned out a record number of supporters on November 3rd, it was not enough to overcome Biden's turnout, which was even greater.

2.2 Impeachment (part one)

"You can't Impeach someone who hasn't done anything wrong!"

-@realDonaldTrump, Nov. 2019

On September 24, 2019, Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced an impeachment inquiry into President Donald Trump for his conduct with respect to Ukraine. On a call, Trump asked with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky to "do us a favor" by investigating former Vice President Biden as well as the debunked theory that Ukraine, not Russia, interfered in the 2016 presidential election.[70] In her announcement, Speaker Pelosi affirmed that "no one is above the law."[71] Trump fired back with a tweet he had used 30 times since taking office: "PRESIDENTIAL HARASSMENT!"

There is not extensive precedent when it comes to presidential impeachment, as it had only occurred three times prior to Donald Trump. But there are certain ways that

[70]"Report." *U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.* https://intelligence.house.gov/report/.

[71]Fandos, Nicholas. "Nancy Pelosi Announces Formal Impeachment Inquiry of Trump." *The New York Times.* The New York Times, September 24, 2019. Last modified September 24, 2019. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/24/us/politics/democrats-impeachment-trump.html.

presidents tend to deal with scandals. Before his impeachment inquiry, Trump had already faced scandals that might have ended the careers of other politicians. He also lacked the staff and interest to engage in a coordinated communications strategy. Lanny Davis, a former Clinton lawyer, gives a piece of advice to presidents when they are directly involved in a scandal: "tell it early, tell it all, tell it yourself."[72] Trump took the opposite tactic. He propagated baseless conspiracy theories, dismissed the inquiry as a "witch hunt" and attacked any member of Congress who spoke out against him, regardless of party.

There are elements of the two most recent impeachments that set a general outline for how the president is expected to behave. Impeachment is, at its core, an act of Congressional oversight. The president is not involved as he can be with legislation. Members of Congress are loyal to their constituents, particularly those who voted for them. As soon as their constituents lose confidence in the president, so do they. While Richard Nixon initially resisted calls for resignation, once his approval plunged, he lost Congressional support among his own party. In contrast, Bill Clinton was acquitted with a 60% approval rating. The content of their impeachments were different, but both attempted to control the overall narrative by engaging with the press, their own party leaders, and the American people. Trump used his own messaging strategy through staging offhanded interactions with the press, getting some surrogates to defend him on air, and tweeting extensively. He was acquitted after a deeply partisan trial, with approval ratings in the high 40s.[73] Nevertheless, his approval ratings among Republicans was at

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[72]Heith, Diane J. "Rhetorical Leadership During Impeachment." *The End of the Rhetorical Presidency?* (2020): 108–135.

[73]Relman, Eliza. "Trump Just Earned His Highest Approval Rating Ever after Months of Impeachment Scandal That Will Almost Certainly End in His Acquittal." *Business Insider.* Business Insider, February 4,

94%.[74] While 70% of them believed his behavior was "probably or definitely" unethical and 63% believing his actions were "probably or definitely" illegal, only 12% agreed that he should be removed.[75] This attitude stayed fairly consistent along with his approval ratings — the day-to-day actions did not matter so much as the person in office. With a Republican majority in the Senate and Republican support nationwide, Trump's sporadic conspiracy tweeting did not hurt him. He simply needed to convince his base that he did nothing wrong, which they already seemed to believe. Trump's focus on discrediting Democrats and their witnesses energized his supporters, and successfully retained almost all of their support.[76]

On the first day of opening arguments in the Senate trial, Trump tweeted and retweeted 142 separate times, setting a new record.[77] His tweets created controversy, as he shared an image of a truck with "TRUMP 2020: PUSHING SNOWFLAKES ASIDE" written across it. "Snowflakes" was a common term for Trump to use to describe liberals, originating from the protests that occurred after his election.[78] After Obama's successful 2008 campaign, the gap in discourse style between the two parties widened.[79] The right

2020. Last modified February 4, 2020. Accessed February 5, 2021.
https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-just-earned-his-highest-approval-rating-ever-amid-impeachment-2020-2.

[74]Relman, "Trump Just Earned His Highest Approval Rating Ever after Months of Impeachment Scandal That Will Almost Certainly End in His Acquittal."

[75]Heith, "Rhetorical Leadership During Impeachment" 132.

[76]Heith, "Rhetorical Leadership During Impeachment" 122.

[77]His all time record would come in June 2020 during the Black Lives Matter protests.;
Perrett, Connor. "Trump Broke His All-Time Tweeting Record amid Nationwide Protests, Sending More Tweets in a Single Day than He Did during His Impeachment Trial." *Insider*. Insider, June 6, 2020. Last modified June 6, 2020. Accessed February 30, 2021.
https://www.insider.com/trump-breaks-record-most-tweets-in-a-single-day-2020-6.

[78]McIntosh, J. (2020). *Crybabies and Snowflakes*. In J. McIntosh & N. Mendoza-Denton (Eds.), Language in the Trump Era: Scandals and Emergencies (pp. 74-88). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108887410.005

[79]McIntosh, *Crybabies and Snowflakes*.

used "non-PC" language to attack liberals, and use of terms like "liberal snowflakes" and "liberal crybabies" spiked around Trump's inauguration.

The term "snowflake" taps into a deeper sentiment felt among the right. Similarly to military bootcamps, it equates sensitivity and empathy with weakness and immaturity.[80] It blocks any room for actual political discourse, as it paints all opinions of Trump detractors as invalid and unworthy of attention. By sharing an image of a truck pushing "snowflakes" aside, Trump positioned himself once again as the sole combatant of a liberal army, energizing his supporters in opposition to the left in general, not one specific policy dispute. This, coupled with comparisons between the image and the murder of Heather Heyer during the white supremacist "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottseville two years prior, created a charged environment for the impeachment trial.[81] In addition to attacking those that opposed him, Trump frequently tweeted allusions to fictional conspiracies that were readily embraced by those following his post-truth tweeting style.

Amid a very real impeachment inquiry into his conduct, the president concentrated on deflecting responsibility. In addition to classifying his call with the Ukrainian president as "perfect," he shared a doctored image of Barack Obama using binoculars to spy on Trump Tower. This false claim began early in his presidency, and Trump repeated it for years. It did not matter that Trump's Justice Department failed to find any evidence of foul play, Trump had been spreading this lie since early 2017.[82] Attacking Obama gave both him and his supporters a cause to rally behind.

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[80]McIntosh, *Crybabies and Snowflakes.*
[81]A neo-Nazi ran over Heather Heyer with his car.
[82]Kiely, Eugene. "Revisiting Trump's Wiretap Tweets." *FactCheck.org.* Last modified September 22, 2017. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://www.factcheck.org/2017/09/revisiting-trumps-wiretap-tweets/.

By perpetuating the "hoax" theme from the point that his campaign allegedly colluded with Russia in 2016 to his impeachment over the Ukraine call, Trump delegitimized the entire process to his supporters. He also placed pressure on Republican lawmakers: if they failed to agree with him or publicly voiced their opposition, he blasted them in tweetstorms. Truth came second to emotion as he spread lies about the proceedings, claiming (over Twitter) that "The Democrat House would not give us lawyers, or not one witness, but now demand that the Republican Senate produce the witnesses that the House never sought, or even asked for? They had their chance, but pretended to rush. Most unfair & corrupt hearing in Congressional history!"[83] His lawyer repeated the claims of lack of due process, writing a letter to Democratic House leaders stating that they had "designed and implemented your inquiry in a manner that violates fundamental fairness and constitutionally mandated due process."[84] These claims were quickly debunked by constitutional scholars, but the use of a lawyer to perpetuate Trump's falsehoods gave the appearance of adding new weight to his Twitter attacks. Real professionals backed up Trump's claims, adding a level of purported authenticity for his supporters that was not previously there.

As Republicans answered questions on impeachment, almost all of them pivoted to Trump's talking points: Democrats were using impeachment as a political tactic and Ukraine interfered in the 2016 campaign alongside Russia to attack the Trump campaign. The narrative that Trump created in 280-character tweets became Republican messaging:

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[83]Donald Trump, tweet, January 23, 2020.
[84]Greenberg, Jon. "PolitiFact - Trump Lawyer Claims Lack of Due Process in House Impeachment. 3 Reasons the Law Doesn't Back Him Up." @*Politifact.* Last modified October 10, 2019. Accessed February 30, 2021.
https://www.politifact.com/article/2019/oct/10/trump-lawyer-claims-lack-due-process-house-impeach/.

Trump's conspiracies were fact and anyone who did not accept them was working with the Democratic elite to ruin his presidency. Devin Nunes, Rick Scott, and Jim Jordan led the efforts in support of Trump, earning them shout-outs on his Twitter:

- "A great new book just out, 'The Plot Against the President. The True Story Of How Congressman Devin Nunez Uncovered the Biggest Political Scandal In U.S. History.' Shows very bad and corrupt people on the other side. Check it out!"[85]
- "Thank you to Rick Scott. This Impeachment Hoax is an outrage!"[86]
- "Rep. Jim Jordan Delivers Knockout Blow to Schiff's Reputation https://t.co/tVBdWMrAjn"[87]

Trump also blasted the Senate proceedings, tweeting, "Many believe that by the Senate giving credence to a trial based on the no evidence, no crime, read the transcripts, 'no pressure' Impeachment Hoax, rather than an outright dismissal, it gives the partisan Democrat Witch Hunt credibility that it otherwise does not have. I agree!"[88] This tweet is emblematic of his overall style: he only had true allegiance to himself and those that supported him, not his political party. Here, he not only criticized the members of his own party for entertaining an impeachment trial, but also showed a general disdain for the political process. This demand contradicted members like Mitch McConnell who, in following precedent, allowed House managers to present their case against Donald Trump to the Senate. McConnell and Senate Republicans did not accede to Trump's goal

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[85]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, November 10, 2019.
[86]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, January 14, 2020.
[87]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, January 26, 2020.
[88]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, January 12, 2020.

of outright dismissal. At this point, it was clear that Trump would be acquitted by the Republican senators, but acquittal was not enough for Trump. This highlighted a much larger problem: not only could truth pale to rhetoric and emotion, but also to the structure of government. While the Constitution does not require the Senate to try an impeached president, constitutional scholars agree that they have a "duty" to take up the House's claims that a president is unfit to hold office.[89] The Constitution also gives that body the "sole power" to try an impeached president. In exerting pressure and influence over members of the Senate to sidestep this duty, Trump attempted to breach the separation of powers.

2.3 State of the Union

"It was a great and triumphant evening for our Country. Thank you for all of the nice remarks and wonderful reviews of my State of the Union Speech. It was my great honor to have done it!" -@RealDonaldTrump, Feb 5, 2020

As the Senate prepared to vote on whether to remove Donald Trump from office, he delivered the State of the Union, echoing the 1998 SOTU that Bill Clinton gave right after the Lewinsky story broke and his 1999 SOTU during the Senate trial. The speech was an opportunity to showcase accomplishments (as his campaign said, "promises made, promises kept") but also reassure swing voters of his dedication to the office.

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[89]Bauer, Bob. "Can the Senate Decline to Try an Impeachment Case?" *Lawfare*. Last modified October 31, 2019. Accessed February 30, 2021.
https://www.lawfareblog.com/can-senate-decline-try-impeachment-case.

Contrasting his usual rhetorical style with an uplifting yet restrained State of the Union could increase his support among key demographics, and provide a preview of a classic election strategy to expand his existing base.[90]

The text of the speech essentially followed that structure, save his characteristic attacks on socialism, abortion, and Medicare for All. At the time, Bernie Sanders was a leading candidate for president and Biden seemed to be heading for a humiliating defeat in the primaries. Trump invoked "socialism" as a scare tactic in the campaign, especially among Cubans and Venezuelans in Florida who had firsthand experience with repressive socialist regimes. This was to be expected. The interactions outside of the speech were what many critiqued as unnecessarily, overtly partisan. Trump set the tone for the night by rebuffing Speaker Pelosi's handshake after handing her a copy of the speech (at the end of the speech, she famously ripped it up on camera). A Gallup poll conducted at the time showed an 84-point-gap between Democrats' and Republicans' approval of the president.[91] While Republicans chanted "four more years," some Democratic members of Congress, including Tim Ryan and Bill Pascrell, walked out. Rep. Ryan tweeted: "I've had enough. It's like watching professional wrestling. It's all fake."[92] Throughout the speech, Trump peppered in moments of spectacles and made-for-tv gimmicks that truly showcased his strengths as a television host rather than a president. From presenting conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh with a Presidential Medal of Freedom to

[90]Galston, William A. "State of the Union: A Preview of Trump's Reelection Strategy." *Brookings*. Brookings, February 5, 2020. Last modified February 5, 2020. Accessed March 30, 2021. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/02/05/state-of-the-union-a-preview-of-trumps-reelection-strategy/.
[91]Jones, Jeffrey M. "Trump Job Approval at Personal Best 49%." *Gallup.com.* Gallup, March 23, 2021. Last modified March 23, 2021. Accessed April 21, 2021. https://news.gallup.com/poll/284156/trump-job-approval-personal-best.aspx.
[92]Tim Ryan (@RepTimRyan), tweet, February 4, 2020, https://twitter.com/RepTimRyan/status/1224889867798224896

reuniting a sergeant with his wife and daughter, he ensured that entertainment dominated the night.

Trump touted an economic success record, called on Republicans by name to send him bills, and pledged to never give "illegal aliens" free health care.[93] Overall, Trump delivered the kind of speech analysts said he needed. But once Trump finished with the formal remarks, he immediately switched back to Twitter. Instead of using the same tactic of ignoring the impeachment and Democrats and focusing on his successes, he set his sights on Nancy Pelosi. He retweeted a number of anti-Pelosi tweets from Republican members of Congress as well as conservative news outlets such as the New York Post, alternating between attacking her for tearing up his speech and impeachment. Notably, the official @WhiteHouse Twitter account published an original tweet condemning Pelosi: "Speaker Pelosi just ripped up: One of our last surviving Tuskegee Airmen. The survival of a child born at 21 weeks. The mourning families of Rocky Jones and Kayla Mueller. A service member's reunion with his family. That's her legacy." on February 5th.[94] Trump's attacks against the Speaker took place solely online after a heated exchange in October 2019, where he tweeted a photo of her along with the caption "Nervous Nancy's unhinged meltdown!" which she proceeded to turn into her Twitter cover photo.[95]

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[93]Associated Press. "The Full Text of Trump's 2020 State of the Union." *PBS*. Public Broadcasting Service, February 6, 2020. Last modified February 6, 2020. Accessed December 30, 2020.
https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/read-the-full-text-of-trumps-2020-state-of-the-union.
[94]White House, @WhiteHouse45, tweet, Feb 4 2020,
https://twitter.com/whitehouse/status/1224902083209502721?lang=en
[95]LeBlanc, Paul. "Trump Tweeted a Photo Attacking Nancy Pelosi. She Made It Her Twitter Cover Photo. - CNN Politics." *CNN*. Cable News Network, October 17, 2019. Last modified October 17, 2019. Accessed January 30, 2021.
https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/16/politics/nancy-pelosi-trump-twitter-cover-photo/index.html.

Trump's delivery of the State of the Union illustrated his attitude towards messaging. He could read prepared remarks that tempered his rhetoric, but always returned to Twitter to speak to his followers unrestrained. In 2017, almost half of Republicans, two thirds of independents, and 90 percent of Democrats disapproved of his Twitter use, but these numbers never kept him off the application for long. Formalities like the State of the Union were never the primary focus of his personal messaging, even though political analysts regarded it as one of the most successful demonstrations of a typical campaign strategy.

2.4 COVID-19

"So, the Coronavirus, which started in China and spread to various countries throughout the world, but very slowly in the U.S. because President Trump closed our border, and ended flights, VERY EARLY, is now being blamed, by the Do Nothing Democrats, to be the fault of 'Trump.'" -@RealDonaldTrump, Feb 28, 2020

In the midst of election season, a pandemic ravaged the world. For some presidents facing low approval ratings, a crisis can provide them with an opportunity to unite the country and gain bipartisan support. Presidential historian Julian Zelizer asserted that "The number one thing a president can do in a moment like this is try to calm the nation."[96] During the initial phases of the virus, Trump assured Americans there

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[96]Superville, Darlene. "Presidential Crisis Management: How Trump's Handling of Coronavirus Compares with Other U.S. Presidents." *Fortune*. Fortune, March 23, 2020. Last modified March 23, 2020. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://fortune.com/2020/03/23/presidential-crisis-management-trump-coronavirus/.

was nothing to worry about. On January 24th, he tweeted in support of the Chinese government: "China has been working very hard to contain the Coronavirus. The United States greatly appreciates their efforts and transparency. It will all work out well. In particular, on behalf of the American People, I want to thank President Xi!"

Trump quickly changed course as the pandemic became an American reality. He resorted back to his classic messaging style: blame others and praise himself. China became his scapegoat, as he dubbed COVID-19 the "Chinese Virus" in multiple speeches and briefings while assuring the American public that everything was under control. He reinstated daily press briefings, placing himself front and center. On February 24th, Trump tweeted: "The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA. We are in contact with everyone and all relevant countries. CDC & World Health have been working hard and very smart. Stock Market starting to look very good to me!" Journalist Bob Woodward later released tapes showing that Trump knew much more about the severity and mechanisms for infection than he originally let on. Trump shared with Woodward that the virus "goes through the air" and is "more deadly" than the flu months before he acknowledged either of those facts publicly.[97] This comment marked a stark contrast from his outward messaging during a time when the country looked to the president for information and comfort.

In addition to downplaying the threat of the virus, Trump's constant attacks on China had direct consequences for Asian Americans. Historically, when blame for disease spread has been placed on a specific subgroup of the population, xenophobia and

[97]Forgey, Quint, and Matthew Choi. "'This Is Deadly Stuff': Tapes Show Trump Acknowledging Virus Threat in February." *POLITICO*. POLITICO, September 10, 2020. Last modified September 10, 2020. Accessed February 30, 2021.
https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/09/trump-coronavirus-deadly-downplayed-risk-410796.

violence against that population has increased.[98] Jewish populations were accused of

poisoning wells across Europe during the "Black Plague," Irish Catholic immigrants were

blamed for the spread of cholera, and residents of Chinatown in San Francisco were

blamed and sequestered for outbreaks of smallpox.[99] Since the beginning of his

presidency, Trump had confronted China through tariffs and trade policy.[100] In March

2020, two-thirds of surveyed Americans had an unfavorable view of China with

Republicans holding a more negative view than Democrats by 10 points.[101] The amount

of online harassment targeted towards Asian Americans on sites such as Twitter and

4chan also increased dramatically during the pandemic.[102] In March 2020, the FBI

warned that Asian Americans might experience more hate crimes "based on their

assumption that a portion of the U.S. public will associate COVID‑19 with China and

Asian American populations"[103] The share of Americans who called China an "enemy"

increased for Republicans after Trump's campaign released an email saying "America is

under attack — not just by an invisible virus, but by the Chinese."[104] Although Trump

spent the first few weeks of January praising China and Xi Jinping, the consistency was

[98]Shoichet, Catherine E. "What Historians Hear When Trump Calls Coronavirus 'Chinese' and 'Foreign'." *CNN*. Cable News Network, March 17, 2020. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/12/us/disease-outbreaks-xenophobia-history/index.html.
[99]Shoichet, "What Historians Hear When Trump Calls Coronavirus 'Chinese' and 'Foreign'."
[100]Wike, Richard, Janell Fetterolf, and Mara Mordecai. "U.S. Image Plummets Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project.* Pew Research Center, December 10, 2020. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummets-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/.
[101]Wike, "U.S. Image Plummets Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly."
[102]Li, Yao, and Harvey L. Nicholson. "When 'Model Minorities' Become 'Yellow Peril'-Othering and the Racialization of Asian Americans in the COVID‑19 Pandemic." *Wiley Online Library.* John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, January 16, 2021. Last modified January 16, 2021. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/soc4.12849.
[103]Li, "When 'Model Minorities' Become 'Yellow Peril'-Othering and the Racialization of Asian Americans in the COVID‑19 Pandemic."
[104]Kumar, Anita. "Trump Can't Decide Whether to Blame China for the Coronavirus." *POLITICO*. POLITICO, March 26, 2020. Last modified March 26, 2020. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/26/trump-china-coronavirus-148806.

never the point — it was another effort to target a scapegoat for a growing problem in America.

By labeling Covid-19 the "chinese virus," Trump encouraged xenophobia and anti-asian sentiment to spread. After Trump first tweeted the worlds "Chinese Virus" in March 9th, tweets over the next two weeks containing the hashtag "#chinesevirus" contained significantly more anti-asian sentiment than those with the hashtag "covid19."[105] In 2015, the World Health Organization reminded the public that "Disease names really do matter. . . . We've seen certain disease names provoke a backlash against members of particular religious or ethnic communities." The WHO cautioned against using Trump's terms, reminding the public that " this is not a 'Wuhan Virus,' 'Chinese Virus' or 'Asian Virus.'"[106] Trump's twitter account has widespread impact on the populace, and in opposing the scientific community and blaming a specific subgroup for the spread of the disease, he gave his supporters an enemy. The sheer reach and impact of his Twitter allowed hashtags like "chinesevirus" to spread even further, exacerbating the anti-asian bias felt by his supporters.

Below is the evolution of tweets from @RealDonaldTrump about COVID-19:

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[105]Hswen, Yulin, Xiang Xu, Anna Hing, Jared B. Hawkins, John S. Brownstein, and Gilbert C. Gee. "Association of '#covid19' Versus '#Chinesevirus' With Anti-Asian Sentiments on Twitter: March 9–23, 2020." *American Journal of Public Health* 111, no. 5 (April 7, 2021): 956–964.
[106]Hswen, "Association of '#covid19' Versus '#Chinesevirus' With Anti-Asian Sentiments on Twitter: March 9–23, 2020."

- Feb. 24: "The Coronavirus is very much under control in the USA. We are in contact with everyone and all relevant countries. CDC & World Health have been working hard and very smart. Stock Market starting to look very good to me!"

- March 9: "So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!"

- May 3: "Intelligence has just reported to me that I was correct, and that they did NOT bring up the CoronaVirus subject matter until late into January, just prior to my banning China from the U.S. Also, they only spoke of the Virus in a very non-threatening, or matter of fact, manner… "

- May 11: "Coronavirus numbers are looking MUCH better, going down almost everywhere. Big progress being made!"

- May 25: "Great reviews on our handling of Covid 19, sometimes referred to as the China Virus. Ventilators, Testing, Medical Supply Distribution, we made a lot of Governors look very good – And got no credit for so doing. Most importantly, we helped a lot of great people!"

- July 20: "We are United in our effort to defeat the Invisible China Virus, and many people say that it is Patriotic to wear a face mask when you can't socially distance. There is nobody more Patriotic than me, your favorite President!"

- July 21: "You will never hear this on the Fake News concerning the China Virus, but by comparison to most other countries, who are suffering greatly, we are

doing very well – and we have done things that few other countries could have

done!"

- Aug. 3: "With the exception of New York & a few other locations, we've done

    MUCH better than most other Countries in dealing with the China Virus. Many of

    these countries are now having a major second wave. The Fake News is working

    overtime to make the USA (& me) look as bad as possible!"

His use of Twitter during COVID-19 followed the style he had employed for every other

aspect of his campaign and presidency, which made no attempt to take responsibility for

bad news while celebrating himself and his accomplishments. He politicized COVID-19,

ensuring that the political party of an individual was the biggest predictor of mask

wearing.[107] He pitted his supporters against lawmakers who were trying to enact safety

measures in their communities, encouraging them to "LIBERATE" their states.[108] He

spread treatment conspiracy theories. The National Center for Disease Preparedness at

Columbia estimated that over 100,000 lives could have been saved with quicker policy

interventions and government cooperation.[109]

Trump also promoted dubious cures. From the beginning of March to the end of

April, he tweeted 11 times about treatment theories that had not yet been approved by the

[107]"Who Does (or Doesn't) Wear a Mask? Partisanship Explains COVID-19 Responses." *University of Chicago News.* Last modified October 21, 2020. Accessed January 20, 2021. https://news.uchicago.edu/story/who-does-or-doesnt-wear-mask-partisanship-explains-response-covid-19.
[108]Rupar, Aaron. "Trump's Dangerous 'LIBERATE' Tweets Represent the Views of a Small Minority." *Vox.* Vox, April 17, 2020. Accessed November 30, 2020. https://www.vox.com/2020/4/17/21225134/trump-liberate-tweets-minnesota-virginia-michigan-coronavirus-fox-news.
[109]Irwin Redlener, et al., "130,000 – 210,000 AVOIDABLE COVID-19 DEATHS –AND COUNTING – IN THE U.S.", National Center for Disaster Preparedness, Earth Institute, Columbia University

FDA.[110] These tweets received 300% more interactions than his usual average.[111] The

unproven theories were also given airtime on conservative news networks such as Fox

News.[112] As a result, purchases of these medications increased, with hydrochloroquine's

sales increasing by 200% on Amazon in the following months.[113] These purchases may

have even caused a shortage of the drug for those who needed it, including lupus

patients.[114] Many were left with a limited supply in March and April and were forced to

split their doses or stop taking it altogether.[115]

On March 21, 2020, a man died from attempting to self medicate with

chloroquine (different than hydroxychloroquine but the timing was not coincidental) after

testing positive for COVID-19. That weekend, Trump tweeted that the drug had "a real

chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine."[116] The FDA

rushed an approval of the drug in early March but later walked back their claims, stating

that it "showed no benefit for decreasing the likelihood of death or speeding recovery."[117]

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[110]Niburski, Kacper, and Oskar Niburski. "Impact of Trump's Promotion of Unproven COVID-19 Treatments on Social Media and Subsequent Internet Trends: Observational Study." *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 22, no. 11 (2020).

[111]Niburski, "Impact of Trump's Promotion of Unproven COVID-19 Treatments on Social Media and Subsequent Internet Trends: Observational Study."

[112]Niburski, "Impact of Trump's Promotion of Unproven COVID-19 Treatments on Social Media and Subsequent Internet Trends: Observational Study."

[113]Niburski, "Impact of Trump's Promotion of Unproven COVID-19 Treatments on Social Media and Subsequent Internet Trends: Observational Study."

[114]"Trump-Touted Hydroxychloroquine in Short Supply for Lupus Patients." *Medical Xpress* - Medical Research Advances and Health News. Medical Xpress, June 2, 2020. Accessed November 25, 2020. https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-06-trump-touted-hydroxychloroquine-short-lupus-patients.html.

[115]"Trump-Touted Hydroxychloroquine in Short Supply for Lupus Patients."

[116]Neuman, Scott. "Trump-Touted Hydroxychloroquine in Short Supply for Lupus Patients." *U.S. News & World Report.* U.S. News & World Report, March 24, 2020. Accessed March 30, 2021. https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2020-06-02/trump-touted-hydroxychloroquine-in-short-supply-for-lupus-patients. ; Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, March 23, 2020.

[117]Center for Drug Evaluation and Research. "FDA Cautions Use of Hydroxychloroquine/Chloroquine for COVID-19." *U.S. Food and Drug Administration.* FDA, July 1, 2020. Last modified July 1, 2020. Accessed January 5, 2021. https://www.fda.gov/drugs/drug-safety-and-availability/fda-cautions-against-use-hydroxychloroquine-or-chloroquine-covid-19-outside-hospital-setting-or.

Trump's messaging also prompted the creators of Lysol to issue a statement discouraging consumption after he questioned the effectiveness of injecting the cleaning product into infected patients.[118]

The Trump administration contributed to actual American deaths. His health policies, or lack thereof, caused the United States to suffer disproportionately compared to other G7 countries such as Canada and the European Union.[119] He made fun of Joe Biden at a presidential debate for the size of his mask, effectively equating wearing a mask to weakness. He encouraged his supporters to protest science-based restrictions in their states. He blamed China while the country saw an influx of anti-Asian American sentiment. He did not fulfill the normal role of a leader during a crisis. Instead of being a calm, comforting figurehead, he placed himself and his partisanship at the center of the pandemic, politicizing it in a way no other developed country experienced. It came with real consequences, as America's reputation on the global stage reached a record low.[120]

2.5 Black Lives Matter Protests

"These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won't let that happen...when the looting starts, the shooting starts." - @RealDonaldTrump, May 29, 2020.

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[118]"Improper Use of Disinfectants." *Improper Use of Disinfectants | Reckitt.com.* April 24, 2020. Accessed January 20, 2021. https://www.rb.com/media/news/2020/april/improper-use-of-disinfectants/.
[119]Woolhandler, Steffie, David Himmelstein, and Sameer Ahmed. "Public Policy and Health in the Trump Era." *The Lancet* (February 20, 2021): 705–753.
[120]Wike, Richard, Janell Fetterolf, and Mara Mordecai. "U.S. Image Plummets Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly." *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project.* Pew Research Center, December 10, 2020. Accessed March 30, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummets-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/.

In 1991, in the midst of George Bush's presidency, a video showing police

officers beating Rodney King made its way through major news outlets. At the time,

President Bush called the brutality "outrageous," claiming that "law enforcement officials

cannot place themselves above the law that they are sworn to defend."[121] After the

officers were acquitted, riots spread throughout Los Angeles. Bush called it the "brutality

of a mob," deeming the protestors un-American and attempting to spread a message of

unity.[122] Almost a decade later, Bill Clinton faced a series of similar situations. In

response to a publicized acquittal of officers who shot 23-year-old Amadou Diallo,

Clinton acknowledged that "most people in America of all races believe that if it had

been a young white man in an all-white neighborhood, it probably wouldn't have

happened."[123]

Technological innovation coincided with Barack Obama's presidential tenure,

introducing the ability to record videos on a phone. In 2014, bystanders caught Eric

Garner's death on camera and shared it far and wide, spurring a movement to protest

racial profiling and misconduct by law enforcement. One month later, an officer shot

Michael Brown. On Garner, Obama called for unity while addressing racial tensions: "It

is incumbent upon all of us, as Americans, regardless of race, region, faith, that we

recognize this is an American problem, and not just a black problem or a brown problem

[121]Rosenthal, Andrew. "Bush Calls Police Beating 'Sickening'." *The New York Times.* The New York Times, March 22, 1991. Accessed January 7, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/22/us/bush-calls-police-beating-sickening.html.
[122]"Reaction to Los Angeles Police Trial." *C-SPAN.* Last modified May 1, 1992. Accessed January 4, 2021. https://www.c-span.org/video/?25847-1%2Freaction-los-angeles-police-trial.
[123]"Race a Factor In Diallo Case, Clinton Says." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, March 5, 2000. Accessed February 5, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2000/03/05/race-a-factor-in-diallo-case-clinton-says/46ace434-6a04-4f0e-a269-e356dd725a5c/.

or a Native American problem. This is an American problem." [124] On Brown, he prompted

police departments to reflect the communities they serve, to increase training, and to

work with their communities to reduce crime.[125] In July 2016, in response to two more

police killings, he took to Facebook first to express his disdain for the events and call out

racial disparities by name.[126] Later that day he released a statement, concluding by

saying:

> "To be concerned about these issues is not political correctness. It's just being an
> American, and wanting to live up to our best and highest ideals. And it's to
> recognize the reality that we've got some tough history and we haven't gotten
> through all of that history yet. And we don't expect that in my lifetime, maybe
> not in my children's lifetime, that all the vestiges of that past will have been
> cured, will have been solved, but we can do better. People of goodwill can do
> better."[127]

[124]Somanader, Tanya. "President Obama Delivers a Statement on the Grand Jury Decision in the Death of Eric Garner." *National Archives and Records Administration.* National Archives and Records Administration, December 3, 2014. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/12/03/president-obama-delivers-statement-grand-jury-decision-death-eric-garner.
[125]Holst, Lindsay. "President Obama Delivers a Statement on the Ferguson Grand Jury's Decision." *National Archives and Records Administration*. National Archives and Records Administration, November 24, 2014. Accessed February 5, 2021. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/11/24/president-obama-delivers-statement-ferguson-grand-jurys-decision.
[126]POTUS44. *Facebook*, July 7, 2016. Accessed February 4, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/potus44/posts/507884336068078.
[127]Obama, Barack. "Statement by the President." *National Archives and Records Administration.* National Archives and Records Administration, July 7, 2016. Last modified July 7, 2016. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/07/statement-president.

Donald Trump declined to comment on a number of police killings in the

beginning of his presidency after painting himself as the "pro-police" candidate and

receiving overwhelming support from law enforcement during his 2016 campaign.[128] But

after millions mobilized to protest the death of George Floyd in May, he shared his

thoughts on Twitter. He initially tweeting his condolences at the "very sad and tragic

death in Minnesota of George Floyd,"[129] and appeared at a press conference alongside

Attorney General William Barr to express that "that was a very, very bad thing that I saw.

I saw it last night and I didn't like it."[130] The next day, as protesters took to the streets,

Trump took to Twitter to threaten "the very weak Radical Left Mayor, Jacob Frey" of

Minneapolis with the National Guard, call the protesters "THUGS," and famously claim

"when the looting starts, the shooting starts."[131] This phrase carried historical weight —

after Miami police Chief Walter Headley, well-known for his previous statements against

African Americans, said the same thing during a hearing on crime in 1967, it was thought

to have intensified the race riots.[132] Trump claimed he was unaware of the history,

tweeting on May 29th:

"Looting leads to shooting, and that's why a man was shot and killed in

Minneapolis on Wednesday night - or look at what just happened in Louisville

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[128]Astor, Maggie, and Zach Montague. "Past Presidents Faced Police Brutality and Protests. They Handled It Differently." *The New York Times.* The New York Times, May 30, 2020. Last modified May 30, 2020. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/30/us/politics/george-floyd-trump-obama-bush-clinton.html.

[129]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, May 27, 2020

[130]Astor, "Past Presidents Faced Police Brutality and Protests. They Handled It Differently."

[131]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, May 29, 2020

[132]Sprunt, Barbara. "The History Behind 'When The Looting Starts, The Shooting Starts'." *NPR.* NPR, May 29, 2020. Last modified May 29, 2020. Accessed February 7, 2021. https://www.npr.org/2020/05/29/864818368/the-history-behind-when-the-looting-starts-the-shooting-starts.

with 7 people shot. I don't want this to happen, and that's what the expression put

out last night means. It was spoken as a fact, not as a statement. It's very simple,

nobody should have any problem with this other than the haters, and those

looking to cause trouble on social media. Honor the memory of George Floyd!"

As big cities saw a spike in violent crime, Trump capitalized on the unrest by associating

all protestors with violent uprising. His message of punishment and division coupled with

the assertion that his words were not a "statement" but "fact" and that those that

disagreed were "haters" played into the rhetorical claims of his entire presidency.

Former Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush released their own

statements. While condemning violence and looting, Bush made a call for unity, writing

"America's greatest challenge has long been to unite people of very different

backgrounds into a single nation of justice and opportunity. The doctrine and habits of

racial superiority, which once nearly split our country, still threaten our Union."[133] Obama

said that "the waves of protests across the country represent a genuine and legitimate

frustration over a decades-long failure to reform police practices and the broader criminal

justice system in the United States. The overwhelming majority of participants have been

peaceful, courageous, responsible, and inspiring."[134] Both men drew upon a collective

unity, encouraged cooperation and understanding, and pointed to the legitimate anger,

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[133]King, Lauren. *ABC News.* ABC News Network, June 2, 2020. Last modified June 2, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021.
https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/george-bush-releases-rare-public-statement-george-floyd/story?id=71034387.
[134]Obama, Barack. "How to Make This Moment the Turning Point for Real Change." *Medium.* Medium, July 30, 2020. Last modified July 30, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021.
https://barackobama.medium.com/how-to-make-this-moment-the-turning-point-for-real-change-9fa209806067.

hurt, and frustration of the Black community. Contrasted with these messages that appealed to police and activists alike were Trump's flurry of Twitter threats that earned him a reprimand from Twitter.

This would not be the first time Trump glorified violence to his followers — in all four years of his presidency, his supporters have used his words as justification for racially charged acts of violence. In 2015, two brothers in Boston beat a homeless man and said in custody that "Trump was right. All of these illegals need to be deported."[135] In 2016, a white man threatened his Black neighbors with a knife and told the police that "Donald Trump will fix them."[136] Later that year, a man threatened to burn down his Muslim neighbors' house after Trump touted the Muslim ban and the man became concerned.[137] In 2019, a mass shooter killed 23 people while following an anti-immigrant manifesto that closely resembled Trump's own comments against immigrants.[138] And in the midst of a call for racial justice, Trump defended Kyle Rittenhouse who shot three people at a Black Lives Matter protest.[139]

Trump followed a clear pattern of failing to initially condemn during his campaign and later in his presidency, and then eventually walking his claims back. In response to the Boston brothers, Trump said "I will say, the people that are following me are very passionate. They love this country. They want this country to be great again. But

[135]Cineas, Fabiola. "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant." *Vox*. Vox, October 9, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. https://www.vox.com/21506029/trump-violence-tweets-racist-hate-speech.
[136]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."
[137]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."
[138]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."
[139]Fritze, John, Kevin Johnson, and David Jackson. "Trump Defends Kyle Rittenhouse on Eve of Visit to Kenosha." *USA Today*. Gannett Satellite Information Network, September 1, 2020. Accessed April 20, 2021.
https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/08/31/trump-defends-kenosha-shooter-kyle-rittenhouse-arguing-self-defense/3451006001/.

they are very passionate. I will say that." He later clarified over Twitter that "Boston incident is terrible. We need energy and passion, but we must treat each other with respect. I would never condone violence." But this did not stop him from repeatedly encouraging or celebrating violence during his campaign rallies. Below is a timeline of statements he made while campaigning in 2015 and 2016:

- August 11, 2015 (in response to Black Lives Matter protesters taking the stage at a Bernie Sanders rally): "That will never happen with me. I don't know if I'll do the fighting myself or if other people will."[140]
- October 23, 2015 (in response to immigration protesters): "See, the first group, I was nice. 'Oh, take your time.' The second group, I was pretty nice. The third group, I'll be a little more violent."[141]
- November 22, 2015 (to Fox News, in response to the previous day's violence): "Maybe he should have been roughed up, because it was absolutely disgusting what he was doing."[142]

[In December 2015, the Trump campaign attempted to discourage this kind of violence with a pre-recorded message played at the beginning of rallies encouraging attendees to "not touch or harm the protester." Attendees often laughed the warning off.[143]]

[140]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."
[141]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."
[142]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."
[143]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."

- January 23, 2016: "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters."[144]

- February 1, 2016: "If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them, would you? Seriously. Just knock the hell out of them. I promise you, I will pay for the legal fees. I promise. There won't be so much of them because the courts agree with us."[145]

- February 23, 2016 (in response to a protestor): "I'd like to punch him in the face...we're not allowed to punch back anymore. I love the old days. You know what they used to do to guys like that when they were in a place like this? They'd be carried out on a stretcher, folks."[146]

- February 23, 2016 (at the same rally): "They said to me, 'What do you think of waterboarding?' I said I think it's great, but we don't go far enough. It's true. We don't go far enough. We don't go far enough."

- February 27, 2016: "You see, in the good old days, law enforcement acted a lot quicker than this. A lot quicker. In the good old days, they'd rip him out of that seat so fast — but today, everybody's politically correct."[147]

- March 11, 2016 (in response to one of his supporters punching a protestor): "I thought it was very, very appropriate...that's what we need a little bit more of."[148]

[144]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."
[145]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."
[146]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."
[147]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."
[148]Cineas, "Donald Trump Is the Accelerant."

Counties where Trump held rallies from 2015-2016 saw a 226% increase in incidents motivated by hate, proving that Trump's pro-white, inflammatory rhetoric led to very real consequences.[149] Organizations classified as hate groups also continued to rise since 2016.[150] This trend of encouraging violence continued into his presidency, as he encouraged the police and his supporters to "deal" with those who opposed him. His lukewarm attempts to provide sympathy for George Floyd paled in comparison to the ways he encouraged and continued to radicalize his base. With a few phrases, he could classify anyone as an enemy. Though his words often started with a tweet, the actions taken by some of his supporters were very real.

2.6 Attempted Kidnapping

"I love Michigan, one of the reasons we are doing such a GREAT job for them during this horrible Pandemic. Yet your Governor, Gretchen "Half" Whitmer is way in over her head, she doesn't have a clue. Likes blaming everyone for her own ineptitude! #MAGA"

- @RealDonaldTrump, March 27, 2020

In mid-April, in response to strict shutdowns in Democratic-led states such as Virginia and Michigan, he tweeted calls to "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!" and "LIBERATE VIRGINIA, and save your great 2nd Amendment. It is under siege!" while critiquing

[149]Branton, Regina, and Ayal Feinberg. "Analysis | Counties That Hosted a 2016 Trump Rally Saw a 226 Percent Increase in Hate Crimes." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, August 6, 2019. Last modified August 6, 2019. Accessed January 4, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/22/trumps-rhetoric-does-inspire-more-hate-crimes/?nore direct=on#click=https://t.co/bYXsN60xzH.
[150]Branton, "Analysis | Counties That Hosted a 2016 Trump Rally Saw a 226 Percent Increase in Hate Crimes."

each state's governor.[151] In late April, armed demonstrators entered the Michigan

statehouse to protest the extended stay-at-home orders. In October, the FBI discovered a

plot to overthrow the government and kidnap Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer,

which they directly traced to the attempted kidnappers' discontent with the coronavirus

restrictions.[152] The kidnappers allegedly discussed the need to "murder tyrants" and

"take" sitting governors during the pandemic.[153]

After Trump tweets an attack, threats and toxicity levels from the general public

increase.[154] In the case of Governor Whitmer specifically, threatening tweets increased in

quantity twice directly after Trump released a Twitter thread that claimed she had done a

terrible job and failed to thank him for foiling her kidnapping plot. The attacks also

focused on her gender after Trump called her "that woman from Michigan." She was the

only female governor who instituted strict lockdown measures and the one most

frequently singled out by Trump and his supporters.[155] The kidnappers used gender-based

slurs while talking about her and classified the mask requirements as unmanly.[156] The

Anti-Defamation League released a report showing that misogyny often connects many

white supremacists who possess a "deep-seated loathing of women."[157] Trump's attacks

[151]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), string of tweets, April 17, 2020

[152]Snell, Robert, and Melissa Nann Burke. "Plans to Kidnap Whitmer, Overthrow Government Spoiled, Officials Say." *The Detroit News.* The Detroit News, October 9, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2020/10/08/feds-thwart-militia-plot-kidnap-michigan-gov-gretchen-whitmer/5922301002/.

[153]Snell, "Plans to Kidnap Whitmer, Overthrow Government Spoiled, Officials Say."

[154]Brown "How Trump Impacts Harmful Twitter Speech: A Case Study in Three Tweets."

[155]Krook, Mona Lena. "'That Woman From Michigan': Gretchen Whitmer and Violence Against Women in Politics." Gender Policy Report. Last modified October 23, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. https://genderpolicyreport.umn.edu/that-woman-from-michigan-gretchen-whitmer-and-violence-against-women-in-politics/.

[156]Krook, "'That Woman From Michigan': Gretchen Whitmer and Violence Against Women in Politics."

[157]Anti Defamation League. "When Women Are the Enemy: The Intersection of Misogyny and White Supremacy." *Anti-Defamation League.* Last modified 2018. https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/when-women-are-the-enemy-the-intersection-of-misogyny-and-white-supremacy.

on the only female governor combined with his encouragement of his followers to rally against lockdown measures clearly resulted in the kidnapping plot.

2.7: Election ~~day~~ week

"We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the Election. We will never let them do it.

Votes cannot be cast after the Polls are closed!"

- @RealDonaldTrump, November 4, 2020

In the weeks leading up to the election, prominent social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook took measures to limit the spread of disinformation. By November 12, 2020, Twitter had labeled over 300,000 tweets for content that was disputed and/or misleading.[158] Trump took issue with their labels, tweeting "Twitter is going wild with their flags, trying hard to suppress even the truth. Just shows how dangerous they are, purposely stifling free speech. Very dangerous for our Country. Does Congress know that this is how Communism starts? Cancel Culture at its worst."[159]

Trump had sowed the seeds of misinformation well before that, preemptively claiming voter fraud as millions of Americans prepared to cast their ballots in 2016. When asked during the third presidential debate if he would accept the results of a Clinton victory, he stated unequivocally, "I will keep you in suspense."[160] After losing the

[158]Gadde, Vijaya. "Additional Steps We're Taking Ahead of the 2020 US Election."
[159]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, December 24, 2020
[160]Healy, Patrick, and Jonathan Martin. "Donald Trump Won't Say If He'll Accept Result of Election." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, October 20, 2016. Accessed January 7, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/20/us/politics/presidential-debate.html.

popular vote, he tweeted: "In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I

won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally" and

"Serious voter fraud in Virginia, New Hampshire and California - so why isn't the media

reporting on this? Serious bias - big problem!"[161] During the 2018 midterms, he tweeted

"Law Enforcement has been strongly notified to watch closely for any ILLEGAL

VOTING which may take place in Tuesday's Election (or Early Voting)."[162] As

COVID-19 precautions increased before November 3rd leading to unprecedented rates of

early voting, Trump took to Twitter to warn his supporters. With Democrats largely

voting early and Republicans voting in person, Trump found a new justification for

charges of fraud — in many states, particularly those that begin counting early votes after

the polls closed on election day, his lead quickly and decisively slipped away when early

vote totals were added. Between November 3rd and December 16th, he tweeted 729

times — 70% about the election, and only 2% about the Covid-19 pandemic that had

taken over 300,000 lives.[163] Most of his tweets falsely claimed that he won the election,

that there were "massive dumps of votes" in the middle of the night, that votes were

counted in foreign countries, that dead people were voting, and that his campaign's poll

watchers were banned from watching the vote count.[164]

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[161]McCausland, Phil. "With No Evidence, Trump Claims 'Millions' Voted Illegally." *NBCNews.com.* NBCUniversal News Group, February 8, 2017. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/tweet-flurry-president-elect-donald-trump-calls-recount-efforts-sad-n688761.
[162]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, November 5, 2018.
[163]Gilson, Dave. "Trump Has Sent 729 Tweets since the Election. Not a Single One Was about the COVID Death Toll." *Mother Jones.* Last modified December 17, 2020. Accessed February 8, 2021. https://www.motherjones.com/coronavirus-updates/2020/12/trump-tweets-coronavirus-deaths-election/.
[164]Woodward, Calvin. "AP FACT CHECK: Trump's Flailing Effort Resting on Mendacity." *AP NEWS.* Associated Press, November 21, 2020. Accessed April 8, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-ap-fact-check-joe-biden-donald-trump-technology-16e2f349873efcef5c69e749b677d85c.

In the weeks after his electoral college defeat, Trump began to turn on his former allies. As he divided the country into friends and enemies, he quickly attacked Republicans who spoke out against him or acknowledged Joe Biden's win. Reverting back to insults, he called Governor Brian Kemp a "disaster," Lieutenant Governor Geoff Duncan a "puppet," Fox News "unwatchable," Senator John Thune a "RINO" (Republican in Name Only), among many others.[165] In the meantime, he celebrated Sens. Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley for leading the charge to examine the results. On January 4th, as members of Congress prepared to certify the election results, Trump tweeted: "The 'Surrender Caucus' within the Republican Party will go down in infamy as weak and ineffective 'guardians' of our Nation, who were willing to accept the certification of fraudulent presidential numbers!"[166] His claims of fraud galvanized thousands of his supporters to fly to Washington, D.C. to "stop the steal."

2.8 Conclusion

Donald Trump frequently used his Twitter to weaponize his supporters against a group who opposed him. While violent responses to his rhetoric have always existed, as evidenced by the increase in crimes motivated by hate after his 2015 and 2016 rallies, the final year of his presidency pushed this unrest into the spotlight. By painting Democrats and the liberal ideology as "snowflakes," weak, and not worthy of conversation, he set up an environment for his supporters to take action. Trump's twitter strategy did not change in the lead up to November 3rd — he continued to focus squarely on energizing his base

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[165]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, November 28, 2020
[166]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, January 4, 2021

instead of promoting unity. His State of the Union was the closest outward messaging he communicated to the kind of tone expected from an incumbent president running for reelection, but it was marred by his subsequent Twitter attacks on Nancy Pelosi and impeachment.

As tensions rose during the Covid-19 crisis, Black Lives Matter protests, and 2020 presidential election, Trump's antagonistic tweets translated into concrete consequences. His misrepresentation of Covid-19 as the "Chinese Virus" led to an increase in anti-asian sentiment, his tweets to "liberate" states with Democratic governors coincided with a kidnapping plan, and his demonizing of everyone who opposed his impeachment highlighted his true loyalties to himself over any one political party. This set up a dangerous precedent, as his supporters remained loyal to him as an idol-like leadership figure. With the sheer reach of his social media, he created a tangible threat to the United States government.

Chapter 3: The Beginning of the End

3.1 Introduction

Since his campaign for the presidency began, Trump has promoted conspiracies and failed to condemn violence. When Trump made a pointed attack against someone, online harassment to that person increased drastically.[167] His supporters took his verbal attacks as a cue that they should follow his lead. With Twitter, he was able to reach millions at a time, with his message amplified in mainstream and far-right news outlets and social media platforms. When his supporters became violent, he repeatedly failed to condemn their actions, instead labeling them as "passionate." After years of concentrating on a mantra of friends versus enemies and attacking anyone who disagreed with him, his most die-hard supporters did not have true allegiance to any political party, and were more than ready to take action against his detractors.

Other Republican politicians and public figures legitimized his efforts by challenging the election results, appearing at rallies, and tweeting out support of the cause. They garnered hundreds of thousands of responses online, and their message spread throughout mainstream and far-right platforms. On January 6th, thousands of Trump supporters took to D.C. to challenge the election. They engaged in a violent march, broke into the Capitol, and called for the death of prominent politicians such as

[167]Garofalo, Michael. "Trump's Frightening Internet Trolls: Online Harassment Has Become a Disturbing Tool for Many of His Supporters." *Salon*. Salon.com, March 14, 2016. Last modified March 14, 2016. Accessed April 2, 2021.
https://www.salon.com/2016/03/14/the_donalds_frightening_internet_trolls_online_harassment_has_become_a_disturbing_tool_of_many_trump_supporters/.

Mike Pence and Nancy Pelosi. Trump encouraged the march, remained silent during the violence, and finally issued a half-hearted call for supporters to go home (while also asserting his personal affection for all of them). Then, every prominent social media platform banned him from their services. Trump was impeached for a second time for his actions, although in his post-Twitter reality he could do little to comment on the affair.

3.2 Stop the Steal

"If we have corrupt elections, we have no country!"

-@RealDonaldTrump, December 26th, 2020

In early April 2020, Trump stepped up his tweets about voter fraud. He claimed that the United States must "GET RID OF BALLOT HARVESTING, IT IS RAMPANT WITH FRAUD. THE USA MUST HAVE VOTER I.D., THE ONLY WAY TO GET AN HONEST COUNT!" He tweeted 70 more times about the election being rigged or the potential for fraud to spread before November 3rd.[168] He generally targeted mail-in voting, sowing the seeds of doubt that the election would be conducted fairly during the pandemic. While there was no evidence of widespread fraud in the 2020 election (with one US agency calling it the most secure election in history), Trump and his supporters propagated theories of thrown out ballots, dead people voting, faulty electronic voting

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[168]Spring, Marianna. "'Stop the Steal': The Deep Roots of Trump's 'Voter Fraud' Strategy." *BBC News.* BBC, November 23, 2020. Last modified November 23, 2020. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-55009950.

systems, banned poll watchers, and even victory.[169] In the week following the election,

Trump tweeted 300 attacks on election integrity.[170] He did attempt to take a legal route,

but his many lawsuits were rejected by 86 different judges, including some that he had

appointed.[171] While he was allowed to request a recount in close states such as Wisconsin

and Georgia, it did not shift the outcome. But outside of the institutional checks on the

election, Trump used his online platform to encourage his supporters to take action as

members of Congress were preparing for an official count of electoral votes.

To challenge the election, Trump called back to a 2016 saying deployed by Roger

Stone: "Stop the Steal." Stone created this phrase in preparation for a Republican primary

nomination challenge and later a Hillary Clinton victory.[172] Stop the Steal 2020 began in

September, two months before the election. On September 7th, One America News

correspondent Jack Posobiec tweeted "#StopTheSteal 2020 is coming…" (this tweet and

all other mentions of Stop the Steal have since been deleted.[173] On the same day, fringe

conservative activist Ali Alexander broadcasted on Periscope that he planned to create a

Trump supporter database to dispatch wherever their "physical presence is needed" to

[169]"Joint Statement from Elections Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council & the Election Infrastructure Sector Coordinating Executive Committees." *Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency CISA.* Last modified November 12, 2020. Accessed April 10, 2021. https://www.cisa.gov/news/2020/11/12/joint-statement-elections-infrastructure-government-coordinating-council-election.

[170]Qiu, Linda. "Trump Has Amplified Voting Falsehoods in over 300 Tweets since Election Night." *The New York Times.* The New York Times, November 16, 2020. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/16/technology/trump-has-amplified-voting-falsehoods-in-over-300-tweets-since-election-night.html.

[171]McEvoy, Jemima. "These Are The Voter Fraud Claims Trump Tried (And Failed) To Overturn The Election With." *Forbes.* Forbes Magazine, December 17, 2020. Accessed February 20, 2021. https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemimamcevoy/2020/12/17/these-are-the-voter-fraud-claims-trump-tried-and-failed-to-overturn-the-election-with/?sh=d51e5ce58c5a.

[172]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection." *Just Security.* Last modified April 14, 2021. Accessed April 20, 2021. https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/?source=techstories.org.

[173]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."

solidify a Stop the Steal infrastructure.[174] At the same time, Donald Trump Facebook fan

pages with millions of followers began to post messages with "Stop the Steal" in them.

At press conferences, Trump again refused to state if he would accept the results of the

election, saying "You know that I've been complaining very strongly about the ballots,

and the ballots are a disaster."[175]

While Trump was actively undermining election integrity, his supporters

cultivated a violent online presence encouraged by his statements. Both QAnon and the

Proud Boys white supremacist group took his lukewarm condemnation and dismissal as

endorsements of their groups, and gained followers.[176] Members of the Oath Keepers, an

anti-government far-right extremist group discussed the need to "Choose a side and fight,

looking down the sights of a rifle at our fellow Americans" in a chatroom.[177] Their leader

told Alex Jones, a conservative radio host, that they planned to station themselves across

the country at polling stations and "do what we have to do" to follow directives from

President Donald Trump.[178] Another group called "AMERICAN CIVIL WAR 2.0"

claimed that "Leftists have already fired the first shots" and "when the Right eventually

hits back, the bloodshed will be Biblical."[179] Around that time, Trump tweeted "I LOVE

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[174]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[175]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[176]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[177]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[178]Johnson, Timothy. "Militia Leader Stewart Rhodes Says That His Group Will Be at Polling Locations and Is Ready to Kill Democrats." *Media Matters for America.* Last modified October 28, 2020. Accessed February 27, 2021.
https://www.mediamatters.org/infowars/militia-leader-stewart-rhodes-says-his-group-will-be-polling-locations-and-ready-kill.
[179]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."

TEXAS" along with a video of his supporters surrounding a Biden campaign bus that led

Biden's team to cancel an event in fear of public safety.[180]

In preparation for the election, "Stop the Steal" spread through Twitter and into

the mainstream media. A Facebook group entitled "Stop the Steal" gained 300,000

followers between November 4th and 5th, and while Facebook quickly took it down, it

had generated almost half a million interactions through comments, shares, and reactions

and dozens of new groups with the same goal had emerged.[181] Many far-right

commentators push the message on their own platforms, including newly-elected

Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene and American Conservative Union Chairman

Matt Schlapp.[182] Pro-Trump Facebook groups created petitions and the Stop the Steal

website gathered contact information for future organizing while armed protests took

place outside election departments.[183]

Between September 1, 2020 and February 2, 2021, over 8,200 online news

articles contained the words "Stop the Steal" or "#StopTheSteal."[184] Combined, they

amassed over 70,000,000 engagements across platforms like YouTube, Facebook,

Twitter, Pinterest, and Reddit.[185] YouTube videos alone with "Stop the Steal" were

viewed over 21,000,000 times.[186] In the weeks following the election, encouraged by

[180]Beckett, Lois. "Biden Campaign Says Trump Supporters Tried to Force Bus off Highway." *The Guardian.* Guardian News and Media, November 1, 2020. Accessed February 4, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/oct/31/biden-harris-bus-texas-trump-supporters-highway.
[181]Sardarizadeh, Shayan and, and Jessica Lussenhop. "The 65 Days That Led to Chaos at the Capitol." *BBC News.* BBC, January 10, 2021. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55592332.
[182] Marjorie Taylor Greene (@mtgreenee), tweet, November 4, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20201104155847/https:/twitter.com/mtgreenee/status/1324018211021594626; https://archive.is/0idf4
[183]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[184]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[185]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[186]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."

instructions to take action, Trump's supporters began to organize for a Stop the Steal rally in Washington, D.C. Coinciding with the certification of Biden's victory came the spread of the "Million MAGA March" with support from the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers. Alex Jones's show Infowars used Parler to promote multiple caravans travelling to D.C. from around the country, and the Oath Keepers prepared to station armed members around D.C. "in case they attempt to remove the president [Trump] illegally."[187] They asserted that they were ready for Trump to call them to action.[188]

Donald Trump responded positively to the news of the march, tweeting "Wow! Thousands of people forming in Washington (D.C.) for Stop the Steal. Didn't know about this, but I'll be seeing them! #MAGA."[189] On the day of the march, Trump made an appearance in his motorcade. Later, the Proud Boys and various Trump supporters engaged in violence, including one stabbing, in downtown D.C. Instead of immediately condemning the violence, Trump turned against Antifa, tweeting: "Antifa SCUM ran for the hills today when they tried attacking the people at the Trump Rally, because those people aggressively fought back. Antifa waited until tonight, when 99% were gone, to attack innocent #MAGA People. DC Police, get going — do your job and don't hold back!!!"[190] In reality, the Department of Homeland security found that white extremists were the biggest lethal threat in America while Antifa did not even rank in the domestic threat assessment.[191]

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[187]Johnson, "Militia Leader Stewart Rhodes Says That His Group Will Be at Polling Locations and Is Ready to Kill Democrats."
[188]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
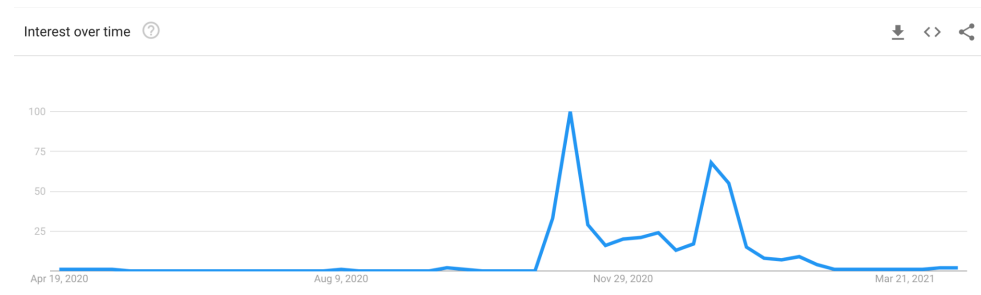[189]Donald Trump (@RealDonaldTrump), tweet, December 12, 2020
[190]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[191]Homeland Threat Assessment. Last modified October 2020. Accessed April 10, 2021.
https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/2020_10_06_homeland-threat-assessment.pdf.

This tweet exemplified the danger in Trump's rhetoric, which comes when he gives any group a direct command: *stop* the steal, *don't* hold back. As armed, radicalized groups such as the Oath Keepers already indicated that they were following Trump's signals, statements such as this one create an immediate danger for violence. His tweets, picked up by news outlets, other political commentators, and his millions of followers, contained instructions: "Don't hold back" against Antifa, the group Trump repeatedly equated with his detractors. "Stop the steal" by marching on state capitols and eventually in D.C. Many of the groups that appeared at Stop the Steal rallies had already been classified as dangerous domestic terrorist groups by the FBI. Online mentions of "Stop the Steal" peaked on November 5th during vote counting, again on November 14th during the first Million MAGA March, on November 21st when protestors marched in Georgia, on December 12th during the second Million MAGA March in D.C., and finally in the days immediately before the January 6th insurrection.[192]

"Stop the steal" trends according to Google trends search. Two clear peaks from November 8-14 and Jan 3-9.

Trump was not the only one encouraging violence to a national audience. Many of his surrogates who appeared on conservative outlets such as Newsmax asserted that violence was the answer to the election result, including his campaign lawyer Joe

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[192]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."

diGenova who said that Chris Krebs, the former director of the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency that Trump fired over Twitter, "should be drawn and quartered. He should be taken out at dawn and shot" (diGenova later apologized).[193] Lin Wood, a member of Trump's legal team, wrote on Parler that "Our country is headed to civil war...President Trump must follow the precedent of Abraham Lincoln and declare martial law."[194] Former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn tweeted an ad that called on Trump to "suspend the Constitution" and declare martial law so the military could hold a new election.[195] A Stop the Steal organizer tweeted that he was "willing to give [his] life for this fight" which the Arizona GOP retweeted, adding "He is. Are you?"[196] Asserting that the election certification would be a battle and clearly rallying their Republican supporters, major players in the Republican party seemed to encourage preventing a Biden presidency by any means necessary.

The weeks of protests before the electoral count underscored the larger theme of Trump's ideology: anyone who disagreed with him, regardless of party or constitutional precedent, was a traitor to the cause. He frequently invoked the idea of treason as a charge against his detractors, using it against Obama, Biden, James Comey, and "election fraud." After refusing to back Trump's claims of fraud in Georgia, Brian Kemp and other Republican state leaders were sent death threats.[197] Protestors showed up at Georgia

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[193]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[194]Patriot Takes (@patriottakes), tweet, December 1, 2020
https://twitter.com/patriottakes/status/1333811302939037696?s=20
[195]Sheth, Sonam. "Trump's Former National Security Advisor Shared a Message Asking the President to Suspend the Constitution, Impose Martial Law, and Hold a New Election." *Business Insider.* Business Insider, December 2, 2020. Last modified December 2, 2020. Accessed April 2, 2021. https://www.businessinsider.com/michael-flynn-shares-message-trump-martial-law-2020-12.
[196]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[197]Sardarizadeh, "The 65 Days That Led to Chaos at the Capitol."

Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson's house, yelling that she was a villain and a threat to democracy and that the protestors were not going away.[198] Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs received messages that she was being watched.[199] Groypers, a far-right movement aimed at targeting Republicans who are too moderate, said at a D.C. rally that they "are going to destroy the GOP."[200] At the same rally, MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell said that "the Republicans out there that were cowards, now's your chance. We're not going anywhere and you better stand up."[201] Later, crowds from the protest took to the streets to vandalize churches, burn Black Lives Matter posters, and engage in brawls. Those targeted spoke out, asking Trump to denounce the violence. Gabriel Sterling, a Georgia election official, warned that "someone's going to get hurt, someone's going to get shot, someone's going to get killed, and it's not right."[202]

Leaders of far-right fringe groups who marched on D.C. now had space in the mainstream political discourse, and called on Trump to invoke a series of acts they believed would give him the power to redo the election and maintain the office of the presidency. Trump conducted a strategy meeting with public figures such as Michael Flynn and Sidney Powell, two lawyers who prepared voter fraud cases for President Trump and who QAnon viewers as their saviors, in mid December. In the meeting, Flynn called on Trump to impose martial law and redo the election. After that meeting, QAnon followers turned their focus to January 6th, which they believed would be the day Trump would order the arrest of the "deep state cabal" and send them all to Guantanamo Bay

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[198]Sardarizadeh, "The 65 Days That Led to Chaos at the Capitol."
[199]Sardarizadeh, "The 65 Days That Led to Chaos at the Capitol."
[200]Sardarizadeh, "The 65 Days That Led to Chaos at the Capitol."
[201]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[202]Sardarizadeh, "The 65 Days That Led to Chaos at the Capitol."

military prison as a consequence for rigging the election.[203] While QAnon had promoted a series of false claims before and during the Trump presidency, this one manifested itself into real organization as far-right groups began to create "patriot caravans" designed to transport supporters to D.C. on January 6th.[204] OAN released a since-deleted video, stating that "supporters of President Trump are continuing to fight for four more years, storming the nation's capital to participate in dueling rallies."[205] Lin Wood tweeted out a need to collect "2nd Amendment supplies" in preparation for a fight.[206] The Three Percenters, an anti-government militia group, released a statement saying, "We stand ready and are standing by to answer the call from our President should the need arise that We The People are needed to take back our country from the pure evil that is conspiring to steal our country away from the American people. We are ready to enter into battle with General Flynn leading the charge. We will not act unless we are told to."[207] Meanwhile, Ron Watkins, former administrator for 8chan, tweeted at Trump to "Cross the Rubicon" as a comparison to Julius Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon River to stage a coup and become the sovereign.[208] Kelli Ward, the chair of the Arizona GOP, shares the hashtag #CrosstheRubicon, which was used over 30,000 times before January 6th.[209]

[203]Sardarizadeh, "The 65 Days That Led to Chaos at the Capitol."
[204]Sardarizadeh, "The 65 Days That Led to Chaos at the Capitol."
[205]"Exclusive: Stop the Steal Organizers Discuss Reelection Efforts." *One America News Network.* Last modified December 14, 2020. Accessed January 30, 2021. https://web.archive.org/web/20201215003134/https://www.oann.com/exclusive-stop-the-steal-organizers-discuss-reelection-efforts/.
[206]Krump, James. "Trump Election Lawyer Calls on His Supporters to Stock up on '2nd Amendment Supplies'." *The Independent.* Independent Digital News and Media, December 15, 2020. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/donald-trump-lawyer-lin-wood-second-amendment-georgia-b1774253.html.
[207]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[208]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[209]Sardarizadeh, "The 65 Days That Led to Chaos at the Capitol."

Trump engaged on December 19th, with a call for supporters to attend the "big

protest in DC on January 6th" asserting that it "will be wild!"[210] Woman for America

First, a pro-Trump group with a large online following, created a website titled

TrumpMarch.com and assured the president that the "calvary is coming!" (the typo of

"calvary" instead of the word "cavalry" would become a point in the second

impeachment trial, where Trump's lawyers would argue that by retweeting this, Trump

intentionally invoked religious imagery instead of calls for war).[211] On December 21st,

the Stop the Steal group sent an email to their supporters encouraging them to donate to

cover January 6th expenses for "security, audio/video personal, signage, secure lodging,

and other related expenses for an undertaking of this magnitude."[212] At the same time,

newly-elected Rep. Madison Cawthorn told Turning Point Conference attendees to "call

your congressman and feel free — you can lightly threaten them. Say: 'If you don't

support election integrity, I'm coming after you. Madison Cawthorn's coming after you.

Everybody's coming after you.'"[213]

Other far-right groups openly circulated instructions for joining the caravans,

published maps of their routes, and shared videos that called on supporters to travel to

D.C. on January 6th in protest. The website WildProtest.com collected registrations and

listed speakers, including Reps. Mo Brooks, Marjorie Taylor Green, Lauren Boebert, and

Paul Gosar.[214] On December 27th, Trump tweeted about the protest again, encouraging

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[210]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[211]Lambe, Jerry. "Trump Lawyer: The 'Calvary Is Coming' Tweet Referred to a 'Public Display of Christ's Crucifixion,' Not a 'Cavalry'." *Law & Crime.* Law & Crime, February 12, 2021. Accessed March 30, 2021. https://lawandcrime.com/impeachment/trump-lawyer-the-calvary-is-coming-tweet-referred-to-a-public-display-of-christs-crucifixion-not-a-cavalry/.
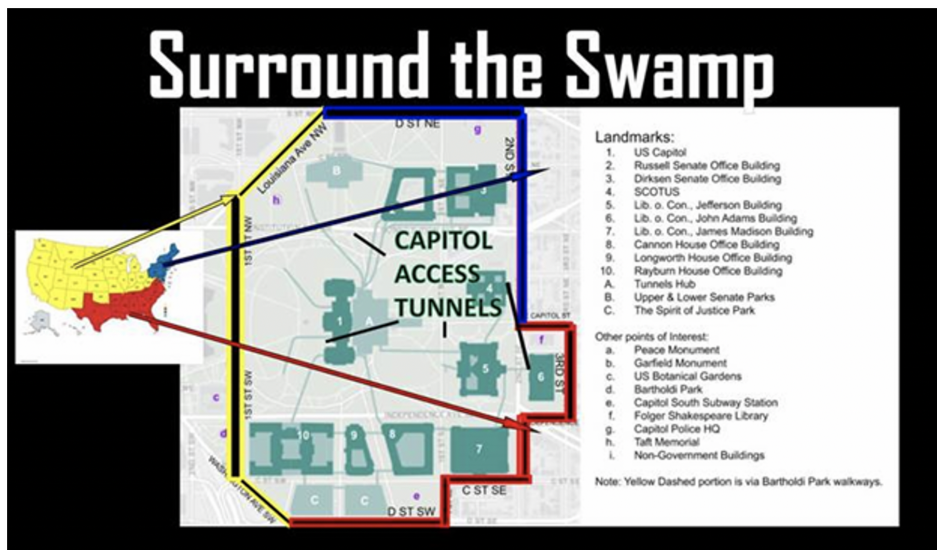[212]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[213]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[214]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."

supporters to attend and assuring them that there would be "information to follow!"

Many groups organizing the protests took this as a green light, blasting out email with the

subject line "TRUMP JUST TWEETED JAN 6TH EVENT! AGAIN!" and linking to

WildProtest.com for a complete list of details.[215] The email also included a map of the

Capitol.

There were no attempts to keep the January 6th protest a secret, as details were

spread across all social media platforms and Trump himself tweeted repeatedly to

encourage attendance. Rep. Gosar retweeted Trump's "JANUARY SIXTH, SEE YOU IN

DC!" tweet, adding that he was ready to "fight back against the leftists who've have

engaged in sedition to run a Technology Coup."[217] Lawyer Lin Wood decided to tweet

that Vice President Mike Pence "will be in jail awaiting trial for treason. He will face

execution by firing squad."[218] White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows tweeted that

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[215]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[216]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[217]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[218]Kilander, Gustaf. "Trump Election Lawyer Lin Wood Calls for Pence to Be 'Executed by Firing Squad'." *The Independent.* Independent Digital News and Media, January 2, 2021. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/trump-pence-wood-firing-squad-b1781554 .html.

"it's time to fight back."[219] A post on Parler with instructions for rally attendees to send the group information on the location of "BLM and Antifa buses" so they can send the Proud Boys to "get them before they go out to the streets" received hundreds of thousands of views.[220] Trump retweeted another graphic with January 6th protest information. Rep. Cawthorne tweeted that it's "time to conquer our fears and retake our republic." Sen. Ted Cruz, speaking at another Stop the Steal rally said that "we will defend liberty." TheDonald.win, a pro-Trump messaging board, posted about storming congressional offices, stopping the steal, and executing the "stealers."[221] In the lead up to January 6th, 50 percent of their top posts contained calls for violence.[222]

The sheer amount of information available prior to January 6th highlights two things: the protestors were incited and encouraged by Donald Trump's response to the election, and they were not hiding their intentions. Multiple groups with hundreds of thousands of followers clearly expressed violent intentions towards Trump's detractors, which in the case of January 6th included sitting members of Congress as well as the Vice President. They were encouraged by Trump's refusal to accept the election results and promotion of the January 6th rally, which became legitimized by the presence of elected officials. On January 5th, Trump tweeted and posted to Facebook what could only be considered a warning: "I hope the Democrats, and even more importantly, the weak and ineffective RINO section of the Republican Party, are looking at the thousands of people

[219]Mark Meadows (@MarkMeadows), tweet, January 2, 2021, https://archive.is/2Mrqm
[220]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."
[221]Suebsaeng, Asawin, and Will Sommer. "Trump Plans to Fight the Election Even After 'Stop the Steal' Rally Ends." *The Daily Beast.* The Daily Beast Company, January 2, 2021. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-plans-to-fight-the-election-even-after-stop-the-steal-rally-ends.
[222]Lytvynenko, Jane. "The Rioters Who Took Over The Capitol Have Been Planning Online In The Open For Weeks." *BuzzFeed News.* BuzzFeed News, January 8, 2021. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/janelytvynenko/trump-rioters-planned-online.

pouring into D.C. They won't stand for a landslide election victory to be stolen."[223] He

mentioned the Twitter handles of Sens. Mitch McConnell, John Cornyn, and John Thune

in the tweet, giving supporters specific targets.

The volume of unrest felt online by Trump's supporters was exacerbated by his

repeated encouragement of the protests in the wake of the clear threats of violence. Police

braced for January 6th after election officials, politicians, and staffers warned about the

potential for confrontation at Trump's urging. Protestors clearly viewed their march on

D.C. as the beginning of a war they were prepared to fight on Trump's behalf. While

Trump did not actively promote calls for violence, he did nothing to discourage it even

after members of both parties implored him to denounce violent groups. After four years

of dividing the country into friends and enemies while sidestepping calls to reject white

supremacy, it is not surprising that his supporters felt empowered to travel to D.C. and

create civil unrest. At every stage of planning, Trump continued to tweet out his support

to his millions of followers who were actively promoting violence on both mainstream

and far-right online platforms. His tweets and Facebook posts calling his supporters to

action clearly resulted in a very real, legitimate threat to American democracy.

3.3 Coup in the Capitol — will be wild!

"Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!"

-@RealDonaldTrump, December 19th, 2020

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[223]Davies, Emily, and Marissa Lang. "Trump Supporters Pour into Washington to Begin Demonstrating against Election." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, January 6, 2021. Accessed March 20, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/01/05/dc-protest-trump-supporters-election/.

On January 6, 2020, Congress met to open and count the electoral votes. Sens. Marsha Blackburn, Mike Braun, Ted Cruz, Steve Daines, Ron Johnson, John Kennedy, and James Lankford, with Sens.-elect Bill Hagerty, Cynthia Lummis, Roger Marshall and Tommy Tuberville, announced that they would challenge the results for Arizona, Georgia, and Nevada, which would prompt two hours of debate per state. Early that morning, Donald Trump tweeted encouragement to Mike Pence to overturn the election: "States want to correct their votes, which they now know were based on irregularities and fraud, plus corrupt process never received legislative approval. All Mike Pence has to do is send them back to the States, AND WE WIN. Do it Mike, this is a time for extreme courage!"

The "Save America" rally, originally organized by supporters, boasted a list of speakers including members of Congress and Trump himself. Rep. Mo Brooks asked the crowd, "Are you willing to do what it takes to fight for America? Louder! Will you fight for America?"[224] Rep. Paul Gosar tweeted, "Biden should concede. I want his concession on my desk tomorrow morning. Don't make me come over there."[225] Rudy Giuliani asked for a "trial by combat" to figure out which side was right.[226] At noon, Trump spoke to the crowd for an hour. He delivered an unequivocal call to action, saying, "it is up to Congress to confront this egregious assault on our democracy. And after this, we're going to walk down, and I'll be there with you, we're going to walk down, we're going to walk

[224]Edmondson, Catie, and Luke Broadwater. "Before Capitol Riot, Republican Lawmakers Fanned the Flames." *The New York Times.* The New York Times, January 12, 2021. Accessed March 30, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/11/us/politics/republicans-capitol-riot.html.
[225]Edmondson, "Before Capitol Riot, Republican Lawmakers Fanned the Flames."
[226]"#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection."

down. Anyone you want, but I think right here, we're going to walk down to the Capitol, and we're going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women, and we're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them. Because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong."[227] He also encouraged them to "fight like hell." Later, the mob did exactly that. They stormed the Capitol, with some calling for Mike Pence to be hanged and Nancy Pelosi to be shot.

Not very well hidden in Trump's months of election conspiracy promotions was a more dangerous force at play — he repeatedly and successfully suggested that supporters take up arms against a cause. He had already used Twitter to encourage his supporters when threatening others. In response to a protest against Democrats in the State Capitol of Virginia, he sent: "The Democrat Party in the Great Commonwealth of Virginia are working hard to take away your 2nd Amendment rights." His "LIBERATE [state]" tweets encouraged supporters to fight back against Covid-19 lockdowns and he celebrated a video of Texans surrounding a Biden campaign bus with their trucks, tweeting "I LOVE TEXAS" and "These patriots did nothing wrong," in response to an FBI investigation.

His string of "stop the steal" tweets weaponized claims of election fraud and gave his supporters a tangible command: do whatever they could to stop Democrats from unfairly stealing the election. He started priming supporters months in advance with claims of potential widespread voter fraud due to the increase in mail-in voting during the pandemic, which gave him the ammunition needed to challenge the eventual results. By

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[227]Byman, Daniel L. "How Hateful Rhetoric Connects to Real-World Violence." *Brookings*. Brookings, April 9, 2021. Accessed April 15, 2021.
https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/09/how-hateful-rhetoric-connects-to-real-world-violence/.

naming specific members he falsely claimed were in control of the outcome, he provided

targets to his supporters, now energized by the idea of a stolen election.

As Mike Pence released a statement saying he would not intervene in Congress's

electoral count, Trump's supporters, on his command, marched to the Capitol and began

to overtake security. Although Trump reportedly knew about the threat against the Vice

President and saw the mob had entered the building, he still tweeted the attack: [228] Later,

protestors were heard shouting "Hang Mike Pence" and calling him a traitor.[229]

The mostly-maskless mob broke doors and shattered windows to enter, forcing

members of Congress to evacuate the floor. At the same time, pipe bombs were found at

the headquarters of the Democratic and Republican National Committees just blocks

from the Capitol. The mob forced its way farther inside, confronting and at times

violently attacking the outnumbered Capitol police. Ten minutes after his attack on

Pence, Trump tweeted: "Please support our Capitol Police and Law Enforcement. They

are truly on the side of our Country. Stay peaceful!" An hour later, a Trump supporter

was shot while trying to enter the Speaker's Lobby. Trump tweeted: "I am asking for

everyone at the U.S. Capitol to remain peaceful. No violence! Remember, WE are the

Party of Law & Order – respect the Law and our great men and women in Blue. Thank

you!" White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany tweeted that the National Guard

was on its way.

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[228]Dawsey, Josh, and Rosalind Helderman. "Mounting Evidence Suggests Trump Knew of Danger to Pence When He Attacked Him as Lacking 'Courage' amid Capitol Siege." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, February 12, 2021. Last modified February 12, 2021. Accessed March 30, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-tweet-pence-capitol/2021/02/11/cc7d9f7e-6c7f-11eb-9f80-3d7646ce1bc0_story.html.
[229]Dawsey, "Mounting Evidence Suggests Trump Knew of Danger to Pence When He Attacked Him as Lacking 'Courage' amid Capitol Siege."

The armed mob breached the entrance, searching for members of Congress and the Vice President, while Trump remained silent. While the mob entered official offices, stole computers and important documents, and threatened members of the press, similar protests appeared around the country. Armed Trump supporters gathered in front of the Arkansas and Oregon State Capitols.[230] Arizona protestors cracked the windows of the Arizona Capitol, demanding that Republican Governor Doug Ducey come outside.[231] Those protestors also set up a makeshift guillotine.[232] In Washington state, the gates to Governor Jay Inslee's home were overrun by Trump supporters as they chanted "stop the steal" outside his front door.[233] The Georgia, Utah, and New Mexico State Capitols were all evacuated.[234] In Los Angeles and Sacramento, conflict broke out between Trump supporters, counterprotestors, and the police.[235] Protests also occurred in Michigan, Minnesota, Colorado, Texas, and Idaho.[236]

Three hours later, as members of Congress hid in their offices and protestors trashed the Capitol, Trump released a video from the White House telling them to "go home," while also saying "we love you. You're very special."[237] After the Capitol was secured, Trump tweeted "These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long," also adding "Go home with

[230]Shin, Youjin, and Shelly Tan. "How One of America's Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, January 9, 2021. Last modified January 9, 2021. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/interactive/2021/capitol-insurrection-visual-timeline/.
[231]Shin, "How One of America's Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol."
[232]Shin, "How One of America's Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol."
[233]Shin, "How One of America's Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol."
[234]Shin, "How One of America's Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol."
[235]Shin, "How One of America's Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol."
[236]Shin, "How One of America's Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol."
[237]Shin, "How One of America's Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol."

love & in peace. Remember this day forever!"[238] An hour later, Facebook and Twitter

removed his content and shut down his account for 12 hours.[239] Twitter warned that

continuous tweeting about election conspiracies could result in a permanent

suspension.[240]

The next day, Trump released a video calling for a "smooth, orderly, seamless

transition of power."[241] He followed up with a tweet that he would not be attending

Biden's inauguration. Twitter proceeded to permanently suspend his account. When

asked by a reporter if he took any responsibility for the insurrection, he issued one of his

only public statements on the matter after being banned from his choice social media

sites. Refusing to take responsibility, Trump said "if you read my speech, and many

people have done it, it's been analyzed, and people thought that what I said was totally

appropriate."[242]

3.4 Social Media Fights Back

"To all of those who have asked, I will not be going to the Inauguration on January

20th."

- @RealDonaldTrump's final tweet, January 8, 2021

[238]Shin, "How One of America's Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol."
[239]Dwoskin, Elizabeth, and Tony Romm. "Twitter, Facebook Lock Trump's Accounts amid D.C. Riots." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, January 7, 2021. Accessed March 30, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/06/trump-tweet-violence/.
[240]Dwoskin, "Twitter, Facebook Lock Trump's Accounts amid D.C. Riots."
[241]Shin, "How One of America's Ugliest Days Unraveled inside and Outside the Capitol."
[242]Rupar, Aaron. "Trump Rewrites History, Calls Pre-Riot Speech 'Totally Appropriate.'" *Vox*. Vox, January 12, 2021. Last modified January 12, 2021. Accessed March 30, 2021. https://www.vox.com/2021/1/12/22226988/trump-riot-speech-nancy-pelosi-chuck-schumer.

For almost the entirety of Trump's presidency, mainstream social media platforms rebuffed calls for banning or censoring the president's accounts. Although he frequently posted controversial or inaccurate statements, retweeted fringe conspiracy accounts, and attacked foreign and domestic political rivals, Twitter defended their decision to leave his tweets up even though they sometimes violated their terms of service. They claimed that it was in the "public interest" to allow elected and government officials to tweet unfiltered, and that the public deserved to know and be able to discuss statements and actions by their government.[243] In some cases, they put a warning before the tweet to inform the viewer that it may violate a rule. In a 2017 statement, they said that they weighed the potential risk or harm with the public-interest value of the tweet. However, they asserted that they would likely remove a tweet that "includes a declarative call to action that could harm a specific individual or group."[244] While they took steps before the election to mitigate Trump's claims of fraud, they failed to censor tweets that promoted violence sent by him, other Republicans, and his supporters. Twitter's algorithms are not perfect, and they often miss almost half of all tweets that violate their norms.[245]

An internal Facebook report that leaked to Buzzfeed News detailed their failure to recognize the various "Stop the Steal" groups before January 6th. Facebook faced years of backlash for providing little to no regulation of Trump's false claims, with CEO Mark

[243]"Rules and Policies." *Twitter*. Twitter, 2021. Last modified 2021. Accessed March 30, 2021. https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies.

[244]"Rules and Policies." Twitter.

[245]Melendez, Steven. "Twitter Automatically Flags More than Half of All Tweets That Violate Its Rules." *Fast Company*. Fast Company, July 17, 2020. Last modified July 17, 2020. Accessed March 30, 2021. https://www.fastcompany.com/90528941/twitter-automatically-flags-more-than-half-of-all-tweets-that-violate-its-rules.

Zuckerberg telling Fox News that "I just believe strongly that Facebook shouldn't be the arbiter of truth of everything that people say online."[246] Their report highlighted the growing levels of hate present in these groups, how quickly their reach increased in the weeks prior to the insurrection, and how direct coordination between the groups could be observed by Facebook administrators.[247] Facebook's self-described pitfalls included:

- Failing to notice the potential harm in the broader network because of the focus on individual policy violations.

- Lacking existing tools or protocols for handling growing movements.

- Lacking policy around a movement that is coordinated through grassroots means but is also inherently harmful.

After news of the report leaked, Facebook revoked viewing access from some of its employees. Their awareness and complacency before and during the insurrection shown in this report contradict the statements made by Mark Zuckerberg at a hearing in front of the House of Representatives in March 2021 where he said Facebook "made our services inhospitable to those who might do harm."[248]

After January 6th, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Reddit, and Twitch banned all Trump-affiliated accounts and pages. Amazon Web Services and

[246]Conger, Kate, and Mike Isaac. "Defying Trump, Twitter Doubles Down on Labeling Tweets." *The New York Times.* The New York Times, May 28, 2020. Accessed February 30, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/technology/trump-twitter-fact-check.html.
[247]Mac, Ryan. "Facebook Stopped Employees From Reading An Internal Report About Its Role In The Insurrection. You Can Read It Here." *BuzzFeed News.* BuzzFeed News, April 29, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ryanmac/full-facebook-stop-the-steal-internal-report.
[248]Silverman, Craig. "Popular Android Apps From A Major Chinese Developer Were Caught Committing Ad Fraud." *BuzzFeed News.* BuzzFeed News, April 30, 2019. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/google-play-store-ad-fraud-du-group-baidu.

LiquidWeb kicked far-right platforms such as Parler and Oath Keepers from their servers, Google and Apple removed Parler from their app stores, and Shopify banned all Trump merchandise.[249] All social media platforms were slightly buffered in their decision to ban the former president because he would soon be a private citizen, no longer a person of specific interest to the American people. However, their decisions did not come without repercussions. After Twitter banned Trump and his affiliates for the potential to incite additional violence, their stock dropped by 6 percent.[250] Both Twitter and Facebook employees received security and death threats, and all were told to brace for potential protests outside their headquarters.[251] Parler sued Amazon for acting unlawfully, and Amazon shares fell slightly in the wake of the lawsuit.[252] Specifically, Parler's lawsuit stated that shutting down Parler's account, "will kill Parler's business — at the very time it is set to skyrocket."[253] Beyond banning key players in the Capitol riot, Twitter also purged over 70,000 ordinary accounts affiliated with QAnon, which caused high-profile conservatives to lose large amounts of followers.[254] It also signaled a growing commitment to regulate hate and violent speech on their platform, effectively issuing a warning to all users who had not yet been banned that they must ensure their content does not violate any norms.

[249]Denham, Hannah. "These Are the Platforms That Have Banned Trump and His Allies." *The Washington Post. WP Company,* January 26, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/11/trump-banned-social-media/.
[250]Dwoskin, Elizabeth, and Tony Romm. "Twitter Purged More than 70,000 Accounts Affiliated with QAnon Following Capitol Riot." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, January 12, 2021. Last modified January 12, 2021. Accessed April 2, 2021.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/11/trump-twitter-ban/.
[251]Dwoskin, "Twitter Purged More than 70,000 Accounts Affiliated with QAnon Following Capitol Riot."
[252]Dwoskin, "Twitter Purged More than 70,000 Accounts Affiliated with QAnon Following Capitol Riot."
[253]Dwoskin, "Twitter Purged More than 70,000 Accounts Affiliated with QAnon Following Capitol Riot."
[254]Dwoskin, "Twitter Purged More than 70,000 Accounts Affiliated with QAnon Following Capitol Riot."

There are consequences for shifting users off of mainstream social media

platforms. In the wake of Trump's bans, applications that continued to host far-right users

saw a spike in downloads. Messaging apps like Telegram and Signal jumped on the list of

most downloaded apps from 110th to fifth and 750th to first, respectively.[255] MeWe, a

far-right social platform that previously did not even crack the top 1000 list, rose to

twelfth.[256] Monitoring less-centralized platforms is difficult, and there is little to no

information on who has jurisdiction over them. The same conversations that occurred in

public-facing channels like Twitter shifted to secure, encrypted servers, making it much

more difficult for law enforcement to track potential violence.[257] While mainstream

applications such as Telegram and Signal both have terms of service that prohibit illegal

activity to take place on their platforms, it is unclear how effective their policing will be.

3.5 Impeachment (part 2)

[silence]

On January 11th, members of the House of Representatives introduced an article

of impeachment against Donald Trump for his role in encouraging the insurrectionists.

On the 12th, the House passed a resolution calling on Mike Pence to invoke the 25th

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[255]Hanlon, Liam, Jud Welle, and Scott Nawrocki. "January 6 and Beyond: Understanding the New Social Media Landscape." *Lexology.* Last modified March 24, 2021. Accessed April 2, 2021. https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=faaa6f9d-017a-4c56-9acd-ba9a5ed2a479.

[256]Hanlon, "January 6 and Beyond: Understanding the New Social Media Landscape."

[257]Nakashima, Ellen, and Gerrit De Vynck. "Far-Right Groups Move Online Conversations from Social Media to Chat Apps - and out of View of Law Enforcement." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, January 18, 2021. Last modified January 18, 2021. Accessed April 2, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/15/parler-telegram-chat-apps/.

amendment to strip Trump of his presidential powers, but Pence refused. On January

13th, the House passed the article of impeachment, and Trump became the only president

to be impeached twice. After Biden's inauguration, the article of impeachment went to

the Senate, where all but six Republican senators attempted to dismiss the trial as

unconstitutional because Trump had left office. Their motion failed, and after three days

of oral arguments and senator questions, the Senate once again acquitted Donald Trump.

There were a few key differences between Trump's first and second

impeachments. During the first one he provided a constant running commentary on

Twitter, he had been banned from the platform and unable to share his thoughts or

conspiracies. Second, both sides used social media as evidence. Unlike other

impeachment trials, there were no whistleblowers detailing events that occurred out of

the public eye. The lead-up to the insurrection and the other events of January 6th took

place in front of all Americans. Many of the protestors used their phones to document the

day on various social media platforms, which only added to the case against the

president.

During the presentation of evidence, the House impeachment managers

showcased the string of threats and calls to action Trump tweeted in the weeks before the

insurrection as evidence that he incited the violence that followed. As he spoke to his

supporters during the rally, mentions of a civil war intensified by four times on far-right

social media platforms such as Parler.[258] Deputy Director of the NYU Stern Center for

[258]Bajak, Aleszu, Jessica Guynn, and Mitchell Thorson. "When Trump Started His Speech before the Capitol Riot, Talk on Parler Turned to Civil War." *USA Today.* Gannett Satellite Information Network, February 1, 2021. Last modified February 1, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/2021/02/01/civil-war-during-trumps-pre-riot-speech-parler-talk-grew-darker/4297165001/.

Business and Human Rights, Paul Barrett, who studies social media, told *USA Today* that

"In those crucial moments, it appears that for many Parler users – including some who

marched to the Capitol and participated in the rampage – vague hostility hardened into a

call for violent action. Trump helped transform an angry protest into a mob whose

insurrection left five people dead."[259] While Trump never specifically mentioned the term

"civil war" in his speech, he called the crowd "American patriots," said that the House

Republicans expected to vote against the Electoral College certification were "warriors"

and spoke on the need to "fight" for America.[260]

House managers also drew a clear line between Trump's specific mention of Mike

Pence and the threats that followed. He tweeted three times about Mike Pence on January

6th:

- If Vice President @Mike_Pence comes through for us, we will win the
  Presidency. Many States want to decertify the mistake they made in
  certifying incorrect & even fraudulent numbers in a process NOT
  approved by their State Legislatures (which it must be). Mike can send it
  back! (1:00 AM ET)

- States want to correct their votes, which they now know were based on
  irregularities and fraud, plus corrupt process never received legislative
  approval. All Mike Pence has to do is send them back to the States, AND
  WE WIN. Do it Mike, this is a time for extreme courage! (8:17 AM ET)

- Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to
  protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify

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[259]Bajak, "When Trump Started His Speech before the Capitol Riot, Talk on Parler Turned to Civil War."
[260]Bajak, "When Trump Started His Speech before the Capitol Riot, Talk on Parler Turned to Civil War."

a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they

were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth! (2:24 PM ET)

Rep. Joaquin Castro showed clips of the mob searching for Pence, with many chanting

that he deserved to be hanged. They also built a model gallows, used for hanging

prisoners, outside the Capitol.[261] Trump's assertion that Mike Pence was in control of the

electoral result was by no means the first falsehood he had peddled, but by ignoring the

fact that this request was effectively impossible, he put his Vice President directly at risk.

Rep. David Cicilline said, "The undisputed facts confirm that not only must President

Trump have been aware of the vice president's danger, but he still sent out a tweet

attacking him, further inciting the very mob that was in just a few feet of him inside of

this very building." After establishing that the rioters' primary loyalty was to Trump over

the truth or any political party, anyone publicly called out by the president was in

immediate danger.

Since Trump had so intently focused on traitorous "RINOs" whenever a

Republican official acted contrary to what he wanted, the rioters targeted high profile

Republicans that would not challenge the election results. In addition to calling for the

hanging of Mike Pence, they searched for Sens. McConnell and Romney who, in their

eyes, had betrayed the president and the American people. The day before the riot, Trump

supporters on their way to D.C. heckled Sen. Romney in the Salt Lake City airport,

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[261]"See All the Evidence Presented in Trump's Impeachment Trial." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, February 13, 2021. Last modified February 13, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/interactive/2021/evidence-trump-second-impeachment/.

calling him a traitor and demanding his resignation.[262] As the sole Republican to vote to

convict Trump on an article of impeachment in 2019, Trump supporters viewed Sen.

Romney as one of the worst. While his policies and voting often aligned with Trump, he

vocally criticized the president, did not support him in 2020, and called efforts to

overturn the election an "egregious ploy" that "dangerously threatens our Democratic

Republic."[263] That, coupled with Trump's repeated attacks, was enough for supporters

who listened to the president's rhetoric over his political ideology to demonize Sen.

Romney. The impeachment managers showed a video from the day of the riot where

Capitol police escorted Romney away from the direction of the mob. Had they came into

contact with him, they likely would have severely harmed or even killed him.

While the Senate did not reach the two thirds majority it needed to convict Donald

Trump and issue a follow up vote to bar him from holding future office, it did receive

seven Republican votes and ended as the most bipartisan impeachment in history. A

majority of senators asserted on the record that Trump did something wrong, and even

some that did not vote to convict him voiced their concern over his actions. Most

sidestepped the question of wrongdoing to claim the trial was unconstitutional, refusing

to evaluate the facts. With the close of his second impeachment, Democrats formed a

9/11-style commission to gather accounts of the day, and the FBI continued to round up

rioters. Ironically, while social media played a key role in the organization of the protest,

it also brought the insurrectionists down. Many had used Facebook, Twitter, Parler, and

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[262]Peiser, Jaclyn. "Trump Supporters Heckle Romney, Chanting 'Traitor' on Flight to D.C." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, January 7, 2021. Last modified January 7, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/01/06/romney-airport-flight-heckled-trump/.
[263]Romney, Mitt. "Romney Statement On Certification of Presidential Election Results." Last modified January 3, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.romney.senate.gov/romney-statement-certification-presidential-election-results.

even dating apps to boast about their visit to the Capitol, giving law enforcement all the

evidence they needed to carry out over 300 arrests.[264]

3.6 Conclusion

No one expected Donald Trump to accept electoral defeat graciously. For years,

he had painted America and its allies in terms of those who agreed with him and those

that did not. He had no allegiance to any specific political party, and had no qualms

attacking Republicans when they spoke up, however half-heartedly, against him or his

policies. From the moment he lost the popular vote in 2016, he began to spread lies about

election results. Come 2020, he spent months sowing the groundwork, online and at

rallies, for an eventual electoral challenge. His supporters promoted his message through

social media, and his hundreds of tweets were not only seen by his millions of followers

but those who watched cable television and read newspapers. With the history of violence

demonstrated by his supporters during his 2016 campaign and presidency coupled with

his abrasive and divisive rhetoric, the events of January 6th were almost inevitable. In

addition, Donald Trump's role in inciting the insurrection is undeniable, as evidenced by

his string of tweets and speeches encouraging the events.

Donald Trump's supporters took their cues from his messaging. Throughout the

final year of his presidency, he repeatedly demonized those who opposed him while

offering tepid condemnations of his most extreme supporters, such as the white

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[264]Hymes, Claire. "What We Know about the 'Unprecedented' U.S. Capitol Riot Arrests." *CBS News.* CBS Interactive, April 29, 2021. Last modified April 29, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/capitol-riot-arrests-2021-04-29/.

supremacist Proud Boys, which they took as approval of their mission. In a break from re-election precedent, he focused not on unifying the country but instead on laying the groundwork for an electoral challenge in November. As his supporters clung to the idea of bad-faith Democrats rigging the election against the president, they engaged in protests and intimidation tactics. After he lost, they took to the internet to follow Trump's orders to stop the steal and fight for their country. Massive amounts of online organizing took place largely unregulated on mainstream platforms like Twitter and Facebook, as well as far-right applications like Parler. The potential protests became legitimized by the presence of Trump and other Republican members of Congress. Trump tweeted nothing but support to those wishing to organize, as well as those protesting at state capitals, and his supporters did not receive any kind of warning against violence until hours into the insurrection. Even after he was banned from Twitter, they still attempted to parse messages out of his speeches, searching for further instructions during the Biden presidency.[265]

Social media allowed Trump's messages to spread far and wide. Not only did it provide a hub for his supporters to organize the January 6th riot, but it also contributed to the radicalization of Americans. Sites such as YouTube and Facebook use algorithms to show users content related to their interests.[266] Facebook's investigation in 2018 showed

[265]Stanley-Becker, Isaac. "With Trump Banned from Twitter, His Supporters Are Parsing Speeches for Clues about What's Next." *The Washington Post.* WP Company, January 14, 2021. Last modified January 14, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/with-trump-banned-from-twitter-his-supporters-are-parsing-speeches-for-clues-about-whats-next/2021/01/14/985e06dc-5534-11eb-a08b-f1381ef3d207_story.html.
[266]Crist, Ry. "Facebook, Twitter, YouTube Algorithms Could Be Radicalizing People, Congressional Democrats Say." *CNET.* CNET, January 22, 2021. Last modified January 22, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.cnet.com/news/facebook-twitter-youtube-algorithms-could-be-radicalizing-people-congressional-democrats-say/.

its recommendation engine caused division and polarization among users, with 64 percent of people who joined extremist groups doing so only after the group was recommended to them by the Facebook algorithm.[267] Its internal investigation after the insurrection proved that there was coordination and organization on its platform that their content administrators failed to catch.[268] Social media users overwhelmingly interact with others of their same ideology online, further fanning the partisan divide. Without the filter that traditional news media had for fact-checking stories released to the public, fake news can spread unregulated. Small, concentrated attempts can make a small difference, such as Twitter flagging premature content about election results, but these are few and far between.

Trump is no longer on Twitter, but that does not mean the danger of his presidency is over. As the country has become more polarized, with partisan tensions at an all-time high, the potential for violence remains. An internal study conducted by the House Appropriations Committee found that "In the first four months of 2021, there has been a 64.62 percent increase in threats to Members compared to the same period in 2020. And from 2017 to 2020, there has been a 118.66 percent increase in total threats and directions of interests, with the overwhelming majority of suspects residing outside of the [National Capital Region]."[269] The Justice Department found that Trump's perpetuation of the lie that the election was stolen from him could continue to incite

[267]Statt, Nick. "Facebook Reportedly Ignored Its Own Research Showing Algorithms Divided Users." *The Verge.* The Verge, May 26, 2020. Last modified May 26, 2020. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/26/21270659/facebook-division-news-feed-algorithms.
[268]Silverman, Craig. "Popular Android Apps From A Major Chinese Developer Were Caught Committing Ad Fraud." *BuzzFeed News.* BuzzFeed News, April 30, 2019. Last modified April 30, 2019. Accessed April 30, 2021.
https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/google-play-store-ad-fraud-du-group-baidu.
[269]Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch and Committee on Appropriations. *Testimony of Yogananda D. Pittman, Acting Chief of Police*, 2021.

violence among his followers.[270] Seventy-six percent of Republicans still believe there

was "widespread fraud" in the 2020 election.[271] Seventy-five percent of Trump voters do

not consider Biden the legitimate winner.[272] Many far-right news outlets, such as

Newsmax and One America News, still air supportive pieces on these false claims.

Consequently, both news outlets have risen in ranks for the most-trusted networks among

conservatives while Fox News has fallen almost 20%.[273]

Polarization is on the ruse, with certain measures of hatred against the opposing

political party surpassing animosity felt between different races or religions.[274] There are

discriminatory attitudes against hiring a member of the opposing party for a job, as well

as having their child marry someone with opposing political views.[275] Over 50% of

Republicans and over 40% of Democrats view the opposing party as their enemy, but

while ideological polarization increases, it is the non-policy oriented debates that could

cause the most harm.[276]

One of the dangers of Trump and Trumpism as a whole was the inclination of his

supporters to view him as an idol-like figure, not bound by any policy positions or

[270]Polantz, Katelyn, and Marshall Cohen. "Trump Supporters Could Be Incited to Future Violence by His Continued Promotion of 2020 Election Lies, DOJ and Judges Say." *CNN*. Cable News Network, April 24, 2021. Last modified April 24, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/24/politics/trump-capitol-rioters-future-threat/index.html?utm_term=link&utm_content=2021-04-24T17%3A15%3A08&utm_source=twCNN&utm_medium=social.
[271]Cillizza, Chris. "Analysis: Three-Quarters of Republicans Believe a Lie about the 2020 Election." *CNN*. Cable News Network, February 4, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/04/politics/2020-election-donald-trump-voter-fraud/index.html.
[272]"CBS News Poll – April 21-24, 2021." CBS News. CBS News, April 24, 2021. Last modified April 24, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pv_2HXp1J11BuQneMXzwc31AmfmIqKx9/view.
[273]Stelter, Brian. "Biden Is President, but Trump's Election Lies Are Still Being Amplified by His Media Allies." *CNN*. Cable News Network, February 22, 2021. Last modified February 22, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/21/media/donald-trump-media-allies-reliable-sources/index.html.
[274]Cohn, Nate. "Why Political Sectarianism Is a Growing Threat to American Democracy." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, April 19, 2021. Last modified April 19, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/us/democracy-gop-democrats-sectarianism.html.
[275]Cohn, "Why Political Sectarianism Is a Growing Threat to American Democracy."
[276]Cohn, "Why Political Sectarianism Is a Growing Threat to American Democracy."

ideological consistency. Through his divisive "us versus them" rhetoric, perpetuated on a

platform like Twitter that only allows for condensed messaging, he created an atmosphere

where supporters almost worshipped the president for his way of being over his political

promises. One of the insurrectionists charged for the riot had posted images of Trump

with the phrase "my idol" under it.[277] This meant that regardless of the content or actions

as the leader of the country, he had his followers' undying support. Through Twitter, he

could praise those who subscribed to his beliefs and demonize all who opposed him,

which was picked up and spread by his die-hard fans. While Trump has since left the

platform, this new attitude has not. Instead of the previous political disputes over issues

such as abortion and gun control, media sites have perpetuated conflicts surrounding

pop-culture issues like Dr. Seuss, because outrage over "cancel culture" excites the base

in a way policy-oriented debate does not. In March, Republicans had heard more about

Dr. Seuss than the Covid-19 relief package.[278]

   After receiving a record number of votes by any Republican presidential

candidate in 2020, Trump is still a major player in the Republican Party. Most

Republicans would support his nomination in 2024 over any other candidate.[279] His

endorsement also carries weight. With no allegiance to the established Republican party,

he will support any candidate that subscribes to his ideals, incumbent or not. This means

[277]Lambe, Jeffrey. "Self-Described 'King of Las Vegas' Stormed the Capitol, Then Went Home. Days Before His Arrest, He Called Trump His 'Idol.'." *Law & Crime*. Law & Crime, January 29, 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://lawandcrime.com/u-s-capitol-siege/self-described-king-of-las-vegas-stormed-the-capitol-then-went-home-days-before-his-arrest-he-called-trump-his-idol/.

[278]"National Tracking Poll #210332 March 06-08,2021." Last modified 2021. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://assets.morningconsult.com/wp-uploads/2021/03/10070433/210332_crosstabs_POLITICO_RVs_v1.pdf.

[279]Choi, Matthew. "Poll: Majority of Republicans Would Support Trump in 2024." *POLITICO*. POLITICO, November 24, 2020. Last modified November 24, 2020. Accessed April 30, 2021. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/24/poll-republicans-support-trump-2024-439757.

his rhetoric style has grown stronger, with new Republican members such as Marjorie Taylor-Greene and Lauren Boehbert openly promoting the same conspiracies and messaging tactics.

Trump's social media ban still has an effect. As a private citizen, his messaging does not have nearly the same spread as before, as it is mainly concentrated in speeches at conservative events or written statements and does not have the kind of free-media pickup he enjoyed as a candidate or as president. He has floated the idea of creating his own social media platform, but it would have far less reach than a mainstream site like Twitter. But while Trump is off of Twitter, the dangers he left remain. Social media lends itself to polarization based on the nature of its content, the algorithms, and the ability to spread a message throughout the country. January 6th was indisputable evidence of that. With tensions between parties at an all-time high, political discourse centered around inflammatory rhetoric receives more attention than policy content. With Trump supporters still poised to incite future violence, the role of social media cannot be overstated. Congressional Democrats are attempting to hold these companies accountable through hearings and policy recommendations, which is a necessity in the current political climate. The question of future danger is no longer a hypothetical — we saw the very real implications of allowing Trump-like discourse to flourish online. Now, it is up to legislatures, private companies, and Americans everywhere to ensure that misinformation is properly combatted, for the sake of our democracy.

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