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A Narrative Analysis of the January 6th Capitol Riot: Melodramatic Political Discourse

Joel Corte
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A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE JANUARY 6TH CAPITOL HILL RIOT:

MELODRAMATIC POLITICAL DISCOURSE

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

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The riot at the United States Capitol by supporters of Donald Trump shocked the American political system and represented contemporary politics' shift toward more reactionary, populist politics. Attempts to explain the events of January 6th, 2021, have focused on the role of conspiracy theories, white supremacy, toxic masculinity, and the violation of norms. This thesis argues that January 6th can be explained by a case study of narrative and the style of discourse. More specifically, I conducted a qualitative narrative analysis of Trump's election fraud narrative in the 2020 election by completing a close reading of his campaign speeches, remarks, and other public appearances and applying the conventions of melodramatic political discourse. I contend that a narrative, such as the one deployed by Trump in the 2020 election and the lead-up to January 6th, is not the exception but represents a melodramatic and paranoid style of American politics.

DEDICATION

The completion of this essay would not have been possible without the continuous support from my family, friends, and colleagues. My mother, Lorena Aldaz, my sisters, Stephanie and Jackie Corte, and my grandmother, Maria Aldaz, gave me countless hours of advice and encouragement. This project represents their support as much as it does countless work hours.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The riot at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021, remains a highly contested phenomenon politically and academically. Both sides of the political divide still debate participants' motivations, the course of events, and the implications. Democrats see the riot as an attempted coup by a "mob" who believed the lie that their choice for president had been fraudulently kept out of office (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022, pp. x-xi). Republicans, if they acknowledge it at all, choose to minimize the attack, describe those arrested as "political prisoners," or dispute the conduct of those inside the Capitol (Mascaro, 2023). January 6th has fallen into the same polarization and partisanship found in much of the political landscape. Academically, the nature of the riot and what may have caused people to partake in such political violence continue to be popular research topics. A search of existing research provides diverse approaches focusing on race, online platforms, norms, and right-wing terrorism. Yet, January 6th remains far from settled. Understanding January 6th is problematic because it differs from other examples of politically motivated violence in American political history. Despite not being the first instance of violence on Capitol grounds, the events of January 6th are unique given the demographics of those who participated, the aftermath, and the impact it has on American politics (McGreevy, 2021). This thesis argues that focusing on the Capitol riot's basis in narrative and discourse offers a compelling opportunity to study its characteristics and ramifications. A novel approach is needed to build on existing research and provide a compelling explanation of

how the riot happened. Rather than building a theory to answer why the riot occurred and what was the chief motivation for those involved, understanding the forces that may have contributed can offer better implications for predicting and researching future events.

This thesis aims to focus on the interaction between narrative and discourse. Specifically, the narrative in which Trump and his allies falsely claim Democrats rigged the 2020 presidential election to favor Joe Biden. While it is not new to tie Trump's 2020 election claims to the events of January 6th, it is a novel approach to analyze the narrative and connect it to a larger style of discourse, namely melodramatic political discourse. It is this gap in the literature that leads to the following research questions: (1) Does Trump's narrative of fraud in the 2020 election fall into melodramatic political discourse? (2) How might this style of discourse contribute to our understanding of the riot on January 6th? and (3) What implications might January 6th and melodramatic political discourse have for American politics?

Thesis Argument

I argue that Trump's claims of fraud in the outcome of the 2020 presidential election were a factor in the lead-up to the violence at the Capitol, as narratives are often used to rationalize political participation. This narrative plays into a style of discourse that guides larger trends in political beliefs and participation. Elizabeth Anker (2014), in her book, *Orgies of Feeling*, introduced melodramatic political discourse as a genre of politics and a tool used by actors on both sides of the American political divide to manufacture politically-expedient narratives to gain power. In crafting and communicating his election fraud conspiracy, Trump's narrative reflects the elements of a melodramatic discourse. I contend that tying a narrative to a style of discourse that existed previously can explain three underappreciated aspects of January 6th: its intensity, its representativeness of the Republican constituency, and its enduring popularity on the right. The

attempt to better understand these three elements grants this study its explanatory power into a topic as timely and consequential as the January 6th attack on the Capitol.

While an analysis of narrative is not the only approach, its conceptualization of political motivations and movements as influenced by the stories individuals use to make sense of politics offers a solid basis for the argument presented here. Additionally, its ability to connect to a style of political discourse allows this study to answer the question of how events such as January 6th occur and possibly predict future phenomena. This thesis plans to assemble a selection of Trump's remarks, debate transcripts, and campaign rally speeches from before, during, and after the election as data from which to develop and assess my argument. As part of a narrative analysis, I will apply melodramatic political discourse to the stories, rhetoric, and style Trump presents in his speeches. A qualitative approach to January 6th as a case study best utilizes the theory, which I contend can provide a compelling understanding of how the attack on the Capitol came to occur.

Melodramatic political discourse's explanatory power lies in its five conventions presented by Anker (2014): (1) moral economy of good and evil, (2) victims, villains, and heroes, (3) intensified affect, (4) narrative of powerlessness, and (5) anticipation of triumph. These conventions align well with understanding how narratives are constructed and how political actors use them. Additionally, the focus on the melodrama present in American politics, though it might be primarily a literary genre, does possess a basis in past research. By examining melodrama in this approach, the thesis will base itself on past work while maintaining a new application. I will cover these conventions in a later chapter, but combining these five discourse elements is central to the appeal of Trump's narrative. Ultimately, the type of discourse that any narrative might cater to can provide insight into how rhetoric gives way to political action.

Purpose & Importance

The primary purpose of this thesis is to determine the style of Trump's contribution to the election fraud narrative surrounding the 2020 presidential election and how such a style might have influenced the January 6th riot. The secondary purpose is to elaborate on Trump's role in the lead-up and day of the riot primarily as a priming force for those in attendance. Lastly, this thesis aims to contribute to the larger argument that melodramatic political discourse is a style of politics that transcends January 6th to become an approach to predict and diagnose future political violence and unrest cases. I plan to approach this argument by addressing the following objectives: (1) review existing literature to identify knowledge gaps, (2) present a theoretical argument to expand on current research, (3) carry out a case study of Trump's speeches and remarks during the 2020 presidential election and until January 6th, (4) determine whether the data supports or challenges the theoretical argument, and (5) discuss the implications for future research and contemporary American politics. Ultimately, this thesis identifies a gap in the research and applies a different approach to a consequential moment in American politics.

However, this thesis does not argue that melodramatic political discourse is the sole factor in understanding January 6th, nor does it maintain that Trump is solely responsible for the election fraud narrative. As will be covered in the next chapter, plenty of other explanations and approaches exist to answer how such a phenomenon is possible. A combination of several theories likely makes the most complete explanation of the lead-up to the attack on the Capitol. This thesis maintains that focusing on a narrow scope is more valuable and offers a concise perspective that can be tested and replicated. Relatedly, this thesis does acknowledge that the right-wing media ecosystem, other Republican politicians, and Trump's high-level advisors also played a role in the lack of confidence many Republican voters have in the election results. It is

open for discussion whether Trump would have had the same success had it not been for the platform media outlets and his party offered him. That is to say, the influence of network news and social media is worth exploring as they greatly shaped the creation of Trump's persona and political power. Nevertheless, this thesis focuses on Trump because he was and remains the party's leader and, as a result, maintains the most significant influence on the Republican party's messaging.

Another aspect not covered in this thesis, though it could be an interesting topic for future research, is how much of a role liberal media and politicians played, either on purpose or inadvertently, in the narrative before and after January 6th. The nature of melodramatic political discourse contends that where there is a victim or a hero, there is also a villain (Anker, 2014). Melodramatic political discourse is a genre of politics that both sides of the partisan divide use. This could result in political participation driven by reactionary emotions disguised as a sense of duty to the country or party. Relatedly, this thesis will not develop an argument about the morality of what occurred on January 6th, nor will it decide what was in the minds of the majority of Trump supporters present.

A study of this type is vital for what it contributes to current research and its potential implications for American politics. While focusing on the role of narrative and discourse on January 6th is not new, an application of melodrama as a lens presents a novel conceptualization of the actors, rhetoric, and implications involved in the attack while maintaining compatibility with other explanations. This thesis is also timely as elections and election workers are under increasing scrutiny (Zakrzewski, 2022). More so than in other examples of political violence, January 6th remains a critical inflection point in American politics. During the 2022 midterm elections, many candidates centered their campaigns on their stance regarding the legitimacy of

the 2020 presidential election (Blanco et al., 2022). An effort to understand the impact of January 6th may also be positioned to identify the changes to larger political trends in polarization and political violence.

Moreover, polling conducted in July 2022 by NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist indicated that the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol has not significantly affected how Republican voters view the insurrection. The poll shows that 2 in 5 Republican voters see the attack as a form of protest protected by the First Amendment (Axios, 2022). While this does not suggest that January 6th might become a new norm, it does question whether the dynamics of January 6th will remain, which makes any research into the topic important. This thesis identifies the enduring popularity of January 6th as something worth studying and will argue that the theory it presents can explain part of why the work to prevent another January 6th might prove to be a long-term and arduous effort.

The Events of January 6th & the Aftermath

January 6th seems to many as the beginning of a difficult period for American democracy. However, the rationale for the attack on the Capitol originated earlier. For months before the election, then-President Trump used mail-in ballots, "ballot harvesting," and other election policies as evidence for his false election narrative. Trump's campaign argued that these policies, aimed at making voting easier during the pandemic, were helping Democrats influence the election results (Bergengruen & Villa, 2020). Mail-in ballots were the easy target; initial estimates showed a majority of Democrats in a few states preferred avoiding polling locations during the pandemic (Parks, 2020). This is also not the first time Trump questioned the results of an election. Even after winning the election in 2016, Trump claimed that his popular vote loss was due to millions of votes cast illegally for Hilary Clinton (Villeneuve, 2018).

Once the election concluded and Joe Biden was named President-elect, President Trump, his family, his legal team, and his supporters traveled the country disputing the vote totals in Georgia, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Arizona (Cummings et al., 2021). Most of their legal challenges were struck down due to insufficient evidence (Wheeler, 2021). However, the legitimacy of the election fraud claims did not matter, whether it was voting manipulation or other conspiracies, such as Democrats registering dead people to vote. The legal and rhetorical effort to undermine the election results continued after the Department of Homeland Security wrote in a joint statement in November 2020 that the presidential election "was the most secure in American history (CISA, 2020)." Regardless, Trump still made the December 2020 call to Georgia's Secretary of State Brad Raffensberger to explore options for finding additional voters he would need to flip the state. Ultimately, these efforts have since resulted in lawsuits and investigations. Both major voting machine companies, Dominion and Smartmatic[1], felt legal action was warranted after they claimed Trump's legal team defamed them by claiming they rigged the vote totals in favor of Biden (Swenson, 2022). Additionally, Trump, at the time of writing, faces an investigation in Georgia into his call to Secretary of State Raffensperger.

Having exhausted all legal avenues, Trump directed his Vice-President, Mike Pence, to halt the certification of the election and return the Electors to the states (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022, p. 581). Further evidence, released in Trump's indictment for his role on January 6th, revealed a memo in which Trump allies formulated the rationale and plan for the Vice President to halt the certification and allow state legislators to present alternative electors who would overturn the results (Eastman, 2020). After consulting with his lawyers, Pence authored a memo

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[1] Dominion and Smartmatic also took legal action against Fox News for defamation. Dominion has since reached a $787 million settlement with Fox News on April 18, 2023.

explaining why he decided not to follow through with the plan and instead argued that he did not

possess the powers Trump's lawyer, John Eastman, claimed he did. Despite this, Trump delivered

his "Save America" speech to supporters gathered on the Ellipse in which he again urged that "If

Mike Pence does the right thing we win the election (Associated Press & Glantz, 2021)." Pence

would reassert his position in a statement given before he presided over the certification.

Details from the United States House Select Committee on the January 6th Attack on the

United States Capitol revealed that many in the crowd and outside the security perimeter had

weapons of several types, including firearms (Pengelly, 2022). A concern Trump was made

aware of, only to become upset that having the metal detectors was dissuading supporters from

entering and thus making the crowd at the event seem smaller, saying instead his supporters were

"not here to hurt me (Associated Press, 2022)." At the same time, in the joint session of

Congress, many Republicans in the House and Senate were preparing to challenge the results in

several states, namely disputing swing states that Trump would need to overturn the initial

results.

The rally was much like the rallies leading up to January 6th; the purpose was to recount

the complete narrative detailing the conspiracy theory that Democrats, in conjunction with voting

machine companies and election workers, manipulated the election results with all forms of

illegal and fraudulent actions. Several of Trump's closest allies, advisors, and family members

spoke to the crowd before Trump's final speech. Notable speeches came from Alabama

Congressmen Mo Brooks, who said to attendees, "Are you willing to do what it takes to fight for

America? Louder! Will you fight for America (Gattis, 2021)," and from Arizona Congressman

Paul Gosar, who called Joe Biden an "illegitimate usurper (Edmonson & Broadwater, 2021)." At

the time, Rudy Giuliani, one of Trump's lawyers, said of the effort to overturn the election, "So,

let's have trial by combat (Polantz, 2021)." Before Trump began his speech, members of the Proud Boys, an all-male pro-western ethno-nationalist organization, had left the rally at the Ellipse for the Capitol.[2]

After Trump's speech, in which he called them to march to the Capitol, his supporters knocked down perimeter barriers and clashed with Metropolitan and Capitol police defending the entrances. New evidence has revealed that the group of Proud Boys who had departed earlier likely played a principal role in the violence that erupted (BBC, 2021). However, conflicting reporting covered testimony from an FBI informant embedded with the Proud Boys organization suggested that there was no organized effort to carry out an attack on the Capitol (Associated Press, 2023). Unlike in other violent political actions, January 6th not only received live coverage by traditional media outlets, but many inside the Capitol, rioters or not, were live-streaming their activities. The rioters proceeded to break into the Capitol through windows and unattended entrances, intending to disrupt the certification of the election. Both the Senate and House members were evacuated, including then-Vice President Pence.

After hours of law enforcement and the National Guard trying to restore order, the storming of the Congress left five people dead, including a Capitol Hill police officer, and 140 people injured in the ensuing chaos (Healy, 2021; Jackman, 2021). Eventually, both chambers of Congress returned and completed the certification of the election. What initially was a protest called to pressure Republicans into contesting the 2020 U.S. Presidential election results turned into a violent siege of both the Senate and House chambers. As of 2023, the people who entered

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[2] The Proud Boys organization has demonstrated more connection to the Trump campaign and the right-wing media ecosystem than similar organizations. Enrique Tarrio, a leader in the Proud Boys, was also involved with the organization Latinos for Trump. His affiliations and positions granted him more access to campaign events, including a visit to the White House. However, there is no strong evidence that Tarrio was ever specially invited by Trump (Carless, 2020; Bump, 2023).

the Capitol building and rioted are still being arrested as part of the ongoing FBI investigation. More than a thousand people have been arrested in connection to crimes during their participation in the riot at the Capitol (Popli & Zorthian, 2022). The FBI itself is under increasing scrutiny for reports that it, and Homeland Security, failed in taking warnings of potential violence seriously (Jalonick, 2023). Additionally, there are questions about FBI agents and FBI informants who were in the crowd on January 6th (Lybrand & Rabinowitz, 2023; Kunzelman & Whitehurst, 2023). Moreover, the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol has since revealed more information in their report about how much the Trump Administration knew and whether Trump could be held legally responsible for the attack (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022). As of August 2023, Trump was indicted for his role in the January 6th riot. The charges included conspiracy to defraud the government, conspiracy against the right to vote, conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding, and obstruction of an official proceeding.

Thesis Structure

In the following chapter, I will discuss existing approaches that focus on narratives, identify gaps in the research, and present key concepts used in the thesis argument. Next, in the theoretical argument chapter, I will further develop my approach by defining my concepts, linking my argument to the literature, and establishing the rationale for my research design. Afterward, I will elaborate on my qualitative methodology and develop a case study approach to Trump's speeches, interviews, and remarks before, during, and after the 2020 presidential election. After completing the case study, I will assess whether the results favor or challenge my thesis. Finally, I interrogate what the results spell for American politics and conclude what limitations are present for future research to address.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this next section, I will cover the existing literature that serves as the foundation for the topic of this thesis. This literature presents competing explanations of January 6th: (1) presidential and Christian eschatology and (2) radicalization and relative decline. Both approaches bring their unique set of factors that led to the riot at the Capitol, yet also bring a different perspective to similar concepts I cover in my theoretical argument. While a search for research provides a depth of perspectives and approaches related to January 6th, few make explicit the relevance of narrative and discourse. The reason for choosing the theories covered below was based on both research sets using narrative elements as the basis for their approaches to January 6th. Specifically, both methods examine their narratives of American politics, each with victims & villains, moral judgments, and struggles. This thesis aims to present research, identify the gaps, and contribute a new approach in response. Doing so will require defining the concepts used throughout the theoretical argument and analysis of the data. Therefore, this chapter will also cover the concepts of narrative, discourse, and populism.

When reviewing the literature for this thesis, three elements presented themselves as introducing different conceptualizations of characteristics found in melodramatic political discourse that could expand our understanding of January 6th's intensity, representativeness, and enduring popularity. Those three elements are covered in this thesis: eschatology, radicalization, and relative decline. Each of these approaches explain Trump's popularity, the rise of populism, and increasing reactionary politics, which could answer how January 6th occurred. However, as

this section will argue each of the approaches covered only explain one are two of the riot's characteristics. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that a dual understanding of narrative and discourse fill the gaps present in the literature.

Eschatology

Eschatology and melodramatic political discourse share some elements that, if dissected, would provide a better understanding of both phenomena. Jerry L. Walls (2007), in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, defines eschatology as "the study of the final end of things, the ultimate resolution of the entire creation (p. 4)." Eschatology is commonly associated with Christianity. However, there are various forms of it. Christian eschatology is partially apocalyptic, stemming from its end-times narrative of Jesus coming for his followers during a final showdown between good and evil (Stetler, 2014, p. 601). Much like melodramatic political discourse, eschatology can present an audience with a particular narrative lens through which to view politics. Both phenomena offer a sense of finality and a clear distinction between those seen as good and evil. In simpler terms, they provide narrative structure to events that, while not always political, cause feelings of powerlessness. Recent scholarship has made the connection between January 6th, Trump, and his supporters to the elements of eschatology: as a messianic figure and an ultimate confrontation against evil.

David Opderbeck (2022) makes such a connection by identifying the influence of Christian eschatology on modern American evangelicals and arguing that such influence serves as the basis of their support of Trump. Trump has been nicknamed the "chosen one" by leaders in the evangelical movement who saw his electoral victory as a turning point in evangelical political power (Duin, 2021). A religious discourse was front and center during the lead-up and

day of January 6th. One group that led with religion in their support of Trump was the "Jericho March." This group believed a combination of prayer, marching, and fasting would lead to divine intervention and overturning the 2020 election (Green, 2021). On January 6th, some of Trump's supporters had "Jesus 2020" flags, wooden crosses, and horns in apparent connection to the biblical story of Jericho (Farley, 2021). Other scholars analyzed the attitudes of the Christian community before and after the riot at the Capitol. Iulian Dinulescu (2021) argues that on closer look, ultra-religiosity and extremist political ideology are revealed in connection to January 6th (p. 78). Specifically, Dinulescu explains, "Religious behavior was directed towards shaping society according to their own visions as they were projected by their own beliefs (p. 89)."

Presidential Eschatology

However, the explicit connection of January 6th with Christian eschatology and Trump's role in this end-times narrative is also of interest to this thesis. According to Bond and Neville-Shepard (2023), Trump's actions leading up to January 6th can be explained by his use of religious language and acceptance of QAnon's beliefs about the end of the world. Furthermore, they argue that Trump took on a messianic role and "weaponized" this discourse; Bond and Neville-Shepard call it presidential eschatology. Unlike in the previous literature, presidential eschatology expands upon Christian eschatology by factoring in the activating nature of narrative and the integral role of Trump as simultaneously a symptom and agent of such discourse.

This research also discusses the role of conspiracy theories as a priming factor that isolates individuals and trains them in distrusting attitudes, particularly toward governing institutions (DiGrazia, 2017). Bond and Neville-Shepard (2023) argue that Trump's ascendence to something akin to a messianic figure for the QAnon community stems from his role as a

supplier of conspiracy theories. Trump is not new to spreading conspiracy theories. During

Obama's presidency, Trump was known for his baseless claims that President Obama may have

been born in Kenya, going as far as to question the legitimacy of Obama's birth certificate. This

theory was known as Birtherism.

In the case of January 6th, Trump crafted the conspiracy theory that the 2020 election had

been stolen from him and that Joe Biden could not have been elected without fraud being

committed. Out of the 62 lawsuits filed to dispute the results of the 2020 presidential election,

only one case regarding a change to the rules around mail-in ballots in Pennsylvania was ruled

favorably (Wheeler, 2021). Furthermore, Trump appointee Attorney General Bill Barr denied the

election fraud narrative, remarking that, "To date, we have not seen fraud on a scale that could

have effected a different outcome in the election (Balsamo, 2022)." Additionally, the authors

make an astute observation about presidential eschatology and conspiracy theories being

narrative tools that activate those already accustomed to reactionary rhetoric (Bond & Neville-

Shepard, 2023, pp. 4-5). Bond and Neville-Shepard (2023) claim that QAnon's theory that

Trump is fighting against pedophilic rings of elite Democrats and Trump's endorsement of such

theories is the central relationship behind what motivated those present on January 6th.

While there is undoubtedly a strong religious element to January 6th, the literature misses

identifying the style of political discourse. The participants of January 6th did not only wave

flags related to their Christian or QAnon identity. What made the riot a compelling topic of study

was how it represented the diversity in the right-wing coalition. Though few, there were also

anti-government militias in the crowd, like the Three Percenters and Proud Boys, that derive

their ideology from a sense of chauvinistic nationalism rather than only Christianity, though it

should be a topic of further research to uncover the connection between the two (ADL, 2015, 2018). In addition, the Department of Justice, on May 4th, 2023, convicted four leaders of the Proud Boys on charges of Seditious Conspiracy, further proving that other elements beyond eschatology were present (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). It is important to mention, that the Enrique Tarrio, one leader of the Proud Boys charged, had previously been an FBI informant for prosecutors investigating cases of drugs, gambling, and human smuggling (Roston, 2021).

While eschatological explanations cover the critical role of religious narratives and Trump's use of conspiracy theories to explain January 6th's Manichean characteristics, a focus on melodramatic political discourse gives a deeper understanding of the interaction between narrative and discourse. Without a discussion of a broad discourse, eschatology misses the forces that draw non-religious narratives and actors to violent political participation. Christianity is also not the only source of conservative ideology that may have played a role. As mentioned above, anti-government and anti-intellectual sentiment also played a role on January 6th. In addition, the messianic figure centrally responsible for activating and sponsoring is not alone. Other sources or agents may also play a role in driving a narrative or catering to certain narratives. For example, media outlets can also be involved in the spread of conspiracy theories (Fox & Gallaher, 2021). What is left out is an acknowledgment that eschatological narratives, of whatever form, are not created or spread in a vacuum. An Eschatological explanation to January 6th could do with a discussion that ties it back to the United States religious narrative past. Ultimately, where eschatology might present a compelling case of why January 6th was as intense as it was, melodramatic political discourse can also explain why it was so representative of the right-wing electorate.

Relative Decline & Radicalization

While not obvious narrative theories of January 6th, stories of relative decline and radicalization play heavily into discussing narratives of powerlessness and victimization. In the literature around January 6th, the forces that led certain people to participate can often devolve into simple explanations of bigotry or ignorance. Such explanations ignore the diverse context around instances of political participation in favor of similarly simple explanations of good and evil. Notably, data collected from convictions of January 6th participants spell out a different story about what kinds of people attended, and it complicates the "basket of deplorables" moniker made famous by Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election. The Chicago Project on Security & Threats examined the arrests made in connection with January 6th and reported, "The insurrectionists closely reflect the US electorate on most socio-economic variables and, hence, come from the mainstream, not just the fringe of society (Pape, 2022, p. 3)." The idea that most of the January 6th attendees did not belong to the most reactionary groups in the right-wing constituent ecosystem suggests that there is more to the feelings of relative decline and radicalization than racial resentment. However, issues of race were undoubtedly present in the riot on January 6th.

Perhaps no other source communicates the feelings of relative decline quite like Arlie Russell Hochschild (2016) in her book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*. In her analysis of the "empathy wall" between liberals and conservatives, Hochschild (2016) presents that the American right feels marginalized and believes a liberal majority is sidelining their contributions and influence. Discussing relative decline is problematic because it is not always a false perception. Hochschild's (2016) literature does present real economic struggles that impact Republican-majority areas of the country. Yet, she also discusses racial and cultural grievances

that are not born out in reality. One notable example is the exaggerated feeling that white Americans are being replaced and marginalized in the name of diversity compared to the genuine collapse of the "Rust Belt" and its economic and social capital.

Joseph Lowndes (2016) discusses this false narrative of the "Silent Majority" and how it served as a political tool to garner support from white Americans during the Civil Rights Era. Lowndes (2016) attributes the "Silent Majority" narrative as the dominant paradigm for conservative politics. However, he argues that it will present a problem for Republicans, who will find it increasingly difficult to build a multi-ethnic constituency. Whether that prediction becomes true has been complicated by Trump's unprecedented electoral gains with Black and Latino men (al-Gharbi, 2020). Ezra Klein (2020) identifies Trump as a "master marketer" who understood how to use the real and manufactured parts of the relative decline narrative into political power (p. 113). Identity-based politics not only exists in the left and liberal political spheres but may also have some resonance in right-wing politics. An intersectional understanding of conservative identities may prove helpful in grasping the relationship between relative decline and radicalism.

The radicalization in the American right stems from this narrative of relative decline. Paul Elliott Johnson (2017) connects the two concepts and discusses the role of Trump in his article on masculine victimhood. Johnson (2017) argues that Trump's demagoguery and focus on relative decline figures "public life as a drama about precarity rather than vulnerability (p. 231)." Essentially, the feelings of relative decline are born out of the vulnerability inherent to democratic public life. Yet, the demagogue transforms vulnerability into feelings of precarity via a discourse of victimization. This victimization becomes radicalization. Similarly, Hardt and

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Negri (2017) argue that this right-wing thought is not about conserving or protecting but restoring a certain set of power relations–it is a reactionary project.

Andrew H. Kydd (2021) presents January 6th as "the result of relative decline on the part of American conservatives and their simultaneous radicalization (p. 3)." Both concepts, Kydd (2021) contends, are engaged in a self-reinforcing cycle that leads to violence. Radicalization heightens the stakes of relative decline, and the stronger the sense a group in power has that their position in the hierarchy of power is being supplanted, the more radicalized they become to protect their status (p. 4). In the eyes of Kydd (2021), conservatives are predisposed to reacting negatively to any change, particularly to changes in the racial makeup of the United States. They often think their conception of American identity is in decline with increases in racial, sexual, and ethnic diversity. Kydd (2021) cites this concern for change as the root of the current "culture wars." For conservatives, the battle over the nation's identity supersedes debates over more material policy.

Kydd (2021) continues by describing "partisan polarization, media polarization, the emergence of social media and associated conspiracy theories, and the formation of right-wing groups (p. 3)," as the drivers of conservative radicalization and mass self-indoctrination. To Kydd (2021), this mass self-indoctrination is similar to the process of nationalism as it creates an entity with a defined identity separate from the rest of the community. The culmination of these four factors of radicalization means conservatives' partisan feelings are heightened, their information streams become limited, their social networks become isolated, and they sense the need to rebuff any attack on their core principles with violence (pp. 7-8). Kydd (2021) also

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demonstrates that this trend in conservativism is not without historical precedence and presents a compelling explanation of January 6th, particularly the instigating factors of the violence.

However, the literature presented above on relative decline and radicalization does offer some opportunities for this thesis to address gaps or propose a different theory. What Kydd (2021) considers key components of mass-self indoctrination are better explained as by-products of melodramatic political discourse, yet he does not mention discourse or narratives in his argument. While radicalization contributes to the intensity and rationale behind the riot at the Capitol, an approach that analyzes narratives can also demonstrate the core elements of such radicalization to locate it as a genre of politics, not just a force of it. In the same vein, Kydd isolates his analysis to conservatism. However, there might be value in understanding January 6th as a phenomenon created by something more to the core of American politics than just partisanship.

A narrative approach would acknowledge the roles that both sides of the political divide play in creating a particular discourse. January 6th and its representativeness, intensity, and enduring popularity are not simply Republicans turning reactionary and embracing the worst in the movement. Nor is it merely about a segment of poor, disaffected white voters being duped into supporting a demagogue, or at least that is not the whole explanation. Instead, January 6th speaks to a politics and society captured by a destructive style of discourse and an even more insidious political-economic rationale that incentivizes it. This thesis uses melodramatic political discourse to not only explain how disaffection contributes to reactionary politics, but more importantly it attempts an answer to explain how the riot on January 6th attracted voters who are not under the same levels of precarity as voters impacted by the globalized economy.

Narratives, Melodramatic Political Discourse, & Populism

Before presenting the approach of this thesis, it is important to define narrative, melodramatic political discourse, and populism, how these terms are used, and how they are interconnected. These terms are foundational elements of my theoretical argument expanding upon the terminology will provide more clarity. Moreover, doing so will cover some of the limitations of the prior literature while retaining important concepts, which are central elements of January 6th. Discourse and narratives have explanatory power over the current polarized, partisan politics that gave rise to the riot. This thesis aims to examine American politics by conducting a case study of January 6th using a narrative analysis of January 6th and Trump's remarks that contributed to the election fraud narrative while also expanding the causal relationships referenced in the literature above, which may provide additional insight into the elements leading up to the events of January 6th.

Discourse represents the "complex relationship between language and society;" it "shapes and is shaped by society (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 159)." Beyond text, language, and rhetoric, discourse provides the medium through which power structures become legitimized and reproduced (Foucault, 1990). Narratives make up a source of discourse by being the principal method through which individuals make sense of the world. They are "the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 11)." A person's identity is also a reflection of narratives by how they choose to tell their life story. Narrative analysis can be useful to "connect micro-events to broader discourses and contexts with the intent of asserting the construction of social experiences through narratives (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 162; van

Dijk, 1993)." Therefore, a narrative analysis to isolate a particular discourse is a compelling approach to explain the events of January 6th.

Melodramatic political discourse is described by Elizabeth Anker (2014) in her book, *Orgies of Feeling*, as one of many, "Genres of political discourses [that] work as a set of interpretive conventions and affective expectations for public political life (p. 20)." Anker (2014) primarily discusses a melodramatic style of discourse in the context of the state because "national political discourse is often what most powerfully legitimates the exercise of political and economic power (p. 20)." A nation-state's foundational story defines its people's characteristics and membership in the *demos* or nation. While monarchies used the divine to justify the rule of a dynasty, modern states rely on carefully crafted national mythologies, or what Ernst Renan called the "spirit" and memories of a nation. Benedict Anderson (2016) makes sense of this national identity as "imagined communities." These myths and the national identities they engender are often used to determine who has a right to political representation and, by extension, who has power (Wertsch, 2021). While not exclusively, states often manipulate these myths for their purposes. For example, Anker (2014) argues, in the case of 9/11, that the regime in power used the tragedy as "the foundational justification for violent and expansive state power (p. 3)."

Narratives are also a topic of study in public policy. In the Narrative Policy Framework, there are three levels of analysis to study narratives (Shanahan et al., 2018). Homo-Narran and Grand Narratives are the two most applicable to understanding why narratives drive political actors. Homo-Narran represents a decision-making model consisting of ten postulates or elements individuals follow when acting politically. The postulates most relevant to individuals'

political motivations are bounded rationality, heuristics, identity-protective conditions, and the primacy of groups and networks (Shanahan et al., 2018, p.181). These ten postulates demonstrate that narratives can help individuals and groups rationalize their political identity, public policy, and participation in political action in political decision-making situations. Shanahan et al. (2018) describe narratives as "the lifeblood of politics (p. 173)."

Political narratives also exist at multiple levels of analysis. Within households, narratives may influence political socialization. In public policy, a narrative can represent a political battle between parties with differing views on the government's role, while at a broader level, narratives impact national identity changes. These narratives are always changing and have tangible consequences. January 6th, as a political issue, is narrated differently by both sides of the partisan debate, and this polarization continues across policy issues. Some popular narratives in contemporary discourse are Wokism, Cancel Culture, and Culture War. Some of these narratives have impacted the prevailing political discourse more than others. Still, all these narrative elements form some part of the larger conservative perspective on American politics.

Wokism, which started as a term used by Black Activists to stay engaged and alert to issues of police brutality, has been used by the American right to describe the encroachment of leftist ideology into every area of American society. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis uses the word frequently to justify the changes in the state's public-school curriculum around teaching "progressive activism" around issues of race (Romano, 2020; Weinberg, 2022). Cancel Culture is another name given to a contested phenomenon of people or groups being the subject of public backlash for speech or action deemed unacceptable by more progressive social norms. For people working on social issues, cancel culture is an important tool for social justice. Still, in the

United States, conservatives see it as another avenue for people who do not adhere to more liberal ideals to be silenced or coerced (Romano, 2020b). Lastly, the culture war is a larger term describing the arena in which opposing political sides fight primarily on social issues, one fighting to push for change and the other maintaining their hold over the dominant beliefs and norms. James Davison Hunter, who wrote a book that popularized the phenomena, notes that the culture war is increasingly used as "the justification for violence (Stanton, 2021)." These elements all reflect the power of narrative on the American political discourse; they mold how issues are discussed and the genre of discourse.

Also present in narratives is strategic importance for political movements. Michael Blain (1994) identifies two constitutive parts of an "effective movement rhetorical discourse": a field of knowledge and ethics (p. 808). A field of knowledge is developing an argument over truth (Blain, 1994). Who decides which problem and injustice receives attention and legitimacy is a struggle. The injustice being argued over may be an entirely justified cause; however, in a narrative context, the outcome is not always a resolution. Instead, the members of different movements might fight for legitimacy and would rather have dominance over their opposition than a compromise.

Moreover, creating a narrative requires certain perspectives, grievances, and people to become the default truth, leading to formal ethics that spell out who the characters are in the narrative (Blain, 1994). In all these examples or conventions of narrative, the style of discourse is impacted and vice versa. Narrative and discourse are tied together where one reflects the other. In the case of this thesis and January 6th, I argue that a narrative analysis of Trump's election narrative will speak to the greater discourse present on January 6th.

Another important element of any narrative and discourse is the actor telling a particular political story. This thesis thus examines Trump's ability to leverage the role of a populist leader to simultaneously build political capital with his base and legitimize his story. Populism is not new in the American political scene, nor can it be distilled into any particular ideology (Frank, 2020). Both on the right and left, populists have used narratives to build popular campaigns against ruling elites. It would also be correct to say that populism is a contested term and exists outside of any party, country, or time. It is important to cover the debate around this term not only to build an understanding of how I will use the term in my theoretical argument but, in particular, to discuss the competing perspectives around Hofstadter's (2008) arguably anti-populist conception of American paranoia in his book, *The Paranoid Style of American Politics*. Where Hofstader is particularly skeptical of populists as inherently reactionary and anti-democratic, other scholars argue that populism should not be understood as the co-opted version we are familiar with that both parties utilize. Thomas Frank (2020), in his book, *The People, No: A Brief History of Anti-Populism*, presents a different conception of populism as "the supreme rhetorical weapon in the arsenal of American politics (p. 253)." Populism can be a democratizing force when a particular political system begins to ossify and entrench political inequality in favor of elites. This thesis argues that Trump utilized populism not to be the hero of the working class but to capitalize on a variety of sentients that make up Americans' discontent and feelings of unfreedom. This utilization of populism by Trump took the form of a populist narrative that I argue can be described as contributing to a pre-existing melodramatic political discourse.

In conclusion, this chapter presented related explanations as a basis from which to add to existing gaps in the understanding of what mechanisms led to the riot at the Capitol. The approaches covered presented compelling arguments for how disaffection with the political

system is present and how it manifests itself. However, the previous section lays out another understanding of how individuals rationalize their political behavior. That is to say, polarization, populism, and reactionary sentiments are the surface of what this thesis argues is a much deeper problem with the narratives in American political discourse. This thesis argues that eschatological beliefs and feelings of relative decline are symptoms of a lineage of melodramatic discourse and the American myths on which they are based. By adopting this view, January 6th ceases to be an isolated incident or a climax in right-wing populism but as the outcome of anti-democratic myths set deep in American history.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL ARGUMENT

The central argument of this thesis focuses on how Trump's election fraud narrative played a role in the violence that occurred on January 6th, namely how the narrative intensified the violence, resonated with a broad group of Republicans, and facilitated the riot's popularity among conservatives. Three elements form the foundation of this theoretical argument. First, the claims that the 2020 election was rigged played a central role as the most important narrative leading up to the riot at the Capitol. Second, Trump embracing the stylistic features of populism granted him legitimacy in the eyes of Republican voters, though in practice, he merely co-opted populism for political gain. Third, the genre of discourse Trump catered to with the election fraud narrative resonates with the conventions of melodramatic political discourse. Combining these three elements separates this thesis' argument from the preceding literature while utilizing ideas from different approaches. It takes from the reactionary emotions of eschatology, properly acknowledges the role of relative decline, and provides a further examination of Trump as a demagogue playing off fears of vulnerability and precarity.

The "Stop the Steal" Narrative

The phrase "Stop the Steal" is generally understood to represent Trump, his allies, and his supporters' efforts to impede the election of Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election because fraud committed by the Democratic party influenced the results. "Stop the Steal" took the form of several rallies preceding the election until the events of January 6th, and it involved several

Republican candidates, organizations, and figureheads (Homans & Peterson, 2022). This thesis

uses "Stop the Steal" to denote the narrative surrounding these efforts. Specifically, the story is

that Democrats intentionally committed fraud through many avenues to directly prevent Trump

from winning his second term as president. The House Select Committee to Investigate the

January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol alleges in their report that Trump illegally

participated in a "multi-part conspiracy" to overturn the election and the "Stop the Steal"

narrative was such a part of that effort (Jalonick, 2022). The charges brought against Trump in

August 2023 suggest that his remarks might be used against him for his role on January 6th. I

argue that "Stop the Steal" is the principal narrative of January 6th.

However, as the literature review suggests, the election fraud story was far from the only

narrative present at the riot. The diversity of groups and voters that participated suggests many

distinct motivations and narratives. Groups such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers likely had

a different understanding of their presence than the supporters of QAnon, and those two groups

likely do not mirror the motivations of the common Trump supporter. A qualitative study of

defendants conducted by Harvard's Shorenstein Center looked through federal court documents

to measure the different reasons participants cited for participating on January 6th. Their findings

demonstrate the top motivations to be "Trump" at 20.62%, "2020 Election Rigged" at 20.62%,

"Revolution / Civil War / Secession" at 7.91%, "Pursuit of 'Historical' Significance" at 7.43%,

and Peaceful Protest at 6.95% (Donovan et al., 2022, p. 9). The results suggest two important

elements that support my argument. First, an analysis of January 6th cannot avoid discussing the

impact of Trump. He played a significant priming force in the lead-up to the attack on the Capitol

and still holds great sway with his supporters. Even as of this writing, Trump has been indicted in

two separate cases involving his participation in the effort to change the election results in

Georgia and for his role on January 6th. Yet, his poll numbers remain strong in the 2024 Republican primary (Swan et al., 2023). Second, the data points to the 2020 election fraud conspiracy as a principal motivation, which suggests that it was much more of a motivating narrative than others. Therefore, I view analyzing Trump's contributions to the election narrative as the best source for answering what elements gave rise to January 6th and how they might continue to impact American politics.

The Role of Trump in Uniting American Conservatism

Despite the debate about whether Trump motivated the American right-wing electorate and is responsible for stoking polarization, a study of the narrative preceding the attack on the Capitol is incomplete without examining Trump's role. Trump's public remarks pre- and post-election will serve as a narrative analysis for a case study of January 6th. As stated above, Trump is often thought of as the figurehead of the right-wing populist movement, and his speeches provide a valuable portrait of right-wing rhetoric, narratives, and discourse. Those arrested for breaking into the Capitol believed they acted on Trump's behalf (Donovan et al., 2022). This analysis argues that Trump capitalized on pre-existing disdain for American elites, a symptom of a melodramatic discourse, and trafficked in right-wing political conspiracies. Specifically, in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election, Trump escalated the use of demagogic rhetoric and anti-immigrant sentiment, which demonstrated several similarities to the conventions of melodramatic discourse.

However, for his January 6th election integrity conspiracy, Trump went from being an agent that used common Republican narratives to utilizing the strategy to claim the presidency was stolen from him. In doing so, Trump added to the mounting rhetoric and narratives that underlie many of the myths in modern American conservatism, such as the conspiracy that a

cabal of liberal elites continue to undermine the power of American conservatives. Drawing from the literature on relative decline and radicalization, Paul Elliott Johnson (2017) highlights "demagoguery's tendency to figure public life as a drama about precarity rather than vulnerability (p. 231)." This distinction between precarity and vulnerability presents a different point of view on the role of feeling powerless. Johnson describes vulnerability as the natural reality of living in a democratic society. In other words, having power vested in a broad *demos* means that an individual may never experience complete stability concerning their political life. Precarity, as a tool of demagoguery, convinces a target audience through rhetoric that having one's political power challenged amounts to a direct existential threat to one's well-being (Johnson, 2017). In other words, a liberal democracy where people deemed not fitting a white, masculine characterization can exercise political power or attain representation presents itself as a visceral state of precarity.

Johnson further argues that the rhetoric takes on a decidedly masculine and feminine distinction in the case of Trump's demagogic style. For example, Johnson looks to the characterization of the leader as a "masculine protector" and to the nation as a "feminine" actor (Johnson, 2017, p. 237). Anker (2014) also alludes to a similar distinction in her discussion of the gendered elements of melodrama, namely, the nation being something akin to a damsel in distress. Also, Johnson contends Trump's disdain for accepting an electoral defeat or having one's politics challenged is to experience a feminine loss of power (p. 240). Johnson looks to Trump's campaign comments about Mexican rapists and preferring soldiers who aren't captured to demonstrate how Trump uses images of sexual violence upon the nation and of weak men unable to fulfill their service to the country for political gain. This focus on Trump's rhetoric

suggests that he is not so much the origin of the familiar right-wing tropes, but he does use it to the fullest as part of his populist appeal.

Also present in the body of research is a distinct type of narrative useful in understanding how political leaders can mobilize their supporters for violence. Clement et al. (2017) introduce the "hero-protector" narrative as a vehicle for "manufacturing emotional consent for the use of force (p. 991)." Like melodramatic political discourse, the "hero-protector" narrative leverages emotions of anger and compassion for the innocent stemming from a previous injustice at the hands of evil villains to justify acts of defense and redemption (Clement et al., 2017, p. 991). At the core of the "hero-protector" narrative are two dichotomies: (1) the split between an "innocent victim" and a "perverse aggressor," and (2) a dichotomy between a "coward" and the "hero-protector." Clement et al. (2017) understand the interaction of these two dichotomies as being first the "denial of the aggressor's moral integrity" and the necessity of the "hero-protector" to set things right after the "coward's" inaction. Beyond adding a "coward" character to the typical narrative structure, the difference between this type of narrative and a melodramatic one is that the coward introduces a second instance of unjust aggression. The existence of a "coward," who is represented as an elite who lacks the will to protect the innocents, suggests that the "hero-protector" by stepping in to fight for the innocent is interrupting a series of injustices, not just one isolated injury. Adding a second dichotomy or storyline deepens the narrative's melodrama by cementing it in history. That is to say, a historical record of aggression toward a victim heightens the feelings of victimization and the need for eventual redemption. In the context of the 2020 election fraud narrative, those that fit within the "coward" characterization are Republicans who dispute or are unwilling to aid the "Stop the Steal" narrative and the halting of

the election certification on January 6th. Vice President Mike Pence comes to mind as an actor who would fall into this new "coward" archetype in Trump's "hero-protector" narrative.

Moreover, there is a body of research within the study of populism that focuses on the singular importance of a leader in shaping and driving a movement. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) differentiate the different strategies of populism; first, populist leaders claim to be of the pure people; for example, Chavismo and Peronismo have taken on a life of their own despite the leaders dying. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) define this type of personalistic leadership as "an individual who, largely independent of an existing party organization, campaigns and gathers support on the basis of his personal appeal (p. 42)." Second, social movements are also forms of populist mobilization that place constant pressure on the status quo. Social movements are characterized as "informal networks (or "networks of networks") characterized by a continuous engagement of individuals and political groups that have a clear adversary and seek to promote collective action in the pursuit of a common objective (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 46)."

Political parties are crucial for populists to achieve electoral success. As Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) argue, political parties "aggregate interest, create policy proposals, and train personnel to run for elected office (pp. 50-51)." There is no blueprint for the perfect populist leader, yet each social grievance has a type of leader because of their ability to personalize the issues. Populist leaders can be described as charismatic strongmen, the vox populi, women, entrepreneurs, ethnic leaders, and the inside-outsider (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 62-76). Some of the descriptions fit Trump's personality and the self-created image of a successful businessman is often used to form a connection to a forgotten demographic by not needing to be beholden to elites. Populist leaders can assume the mantle of ordinary people in various ways,

depending on their chosen variation. It's also possible for a leader to embody multiple populist archetypes to enhance their appeal and convey their message effectively.

Of the above categories, Trump strongly plays into the charismatic strongman, entrepreneur, and outsider. The strongman archetype is marked by the ability to co-opt anti-elite sentiments and anti-intellectual rhetoric to form a bond with his followers around a cult of personality devoid of any evident ideology. The image of an entrepreneur can strongly influence people interested in making changes in their lives. According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), the construction of the elite and the people is not socioeconomic; it is a moral distinction that allows a successful business figure to claim to be the people's voice. Yet, they can still pass off as political outsiders that will "drain the swamp" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 70-71). Lastly, the most successful populists can straddle the line between outsider and insider. There is a case to be made in favor of this argument, considering that the movement reflected three conventions common to populist movements: the general will, the idea of a genuine American people, and the villainous elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Ultimately, Trump became a figure that most of the right-wing constituency in U.S. politics could see as their representative.

Since the inception of his campaign, Trump has, whether intended or not, styled his rhetoric with the core facets of populism described above: the people, the general will, and the elite. His methods did not deviate much from the demagoguery recounted by Paul Elliott Johnson. He started his 2015 campaign by locating his message in vulnerability. The country's vulnerability extended to all aspects of foreign and domestic policy; in effect, the U.S. ceased to be great. In his announcement for the presidency in 2015, the U.S. was being outplayed by China, being overrun by dangerous immigrants, weakened by poor leadership, and undermined by a deviation from its original ideals. For example, in said speech, he stated, "Our country is in

serious trouble. We don't have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don't have them," and "Sadly, the American dream is dead (Trump, 2015)." Establishing this bleak picture of the U.S. is intentional and the first step in a seemingly populist project. It leans into the narrative that the nation is injured and needs rescuing, which I mentioned above could be a gendered idea. The injury is also unjust because a country with moral character and virtue, such as the U.S., should always stand firm. Who, then, is to blame? Who are the actual victims of such injustice? Lastly, who should lead the country back to its preeminence?

The answers to the questions above reveal how the people, their general will, and elites are defined in Trump's faux-populist project and, to the argument of this thesis, what role Trump played in the riot at the Capitol. The "people" for Trump are those left unemployed by free trade, marginalized by progressive social changes, and the generally forgotten and silent majority. A Pew Research Center analysis of the 2016 electorate found Trump's electorate to be primarily white, elderly, and non-college-educated. These demographic categories are, by and large, amenable to his campaign message (Bradley, 2018). Trump spoke to such voters in two ways: voicing their concerns and disparaging the identities he felt such voters might harbor animosity toward. First, he set his policy priorities to match the electorate he wanted to target. For example, in 2015, Trump's campaign website listed his priorities as "a Free Market, the importance of a strong family, a culture of Life, a strong military and our country's sacred obligation to take care of our veterans and their families (Donald Trump For President, 2015)." Trump spoke of these issues as the most important and most dismissed in his rhetoric.

In the same announcement speech, Trump remarked, "I watch the speeches of these people, and they say the sun will rise, the moon will set, all sorts of wonderful things will happen. And people are saying, "What's going on? I just want a job. Just get me a job. I don't

need the rhetoric. I want a job (Trump, 2015)." In Trump's messaging, these voters' concerns are being dismissed by the current leadership, namely Obama, for the interests of other voters. Here, Trump styles his rhetoric to attack the identities that he believes his voters see as incongruent with the national identity. Beyond his messaging on immigrants, he also caters to evangelical voters with his position on LGBTQ+ rights. Trump selected Mike Pence, known for his strong Christian values in public office, as his running mate, and in an interview in June 2015, Trump affirmed his support for traditional marriage. Combining these two facets demonstrates how Trump locates his voters and defines the populist conception of the "people." While there is nothing inherently wrong or novel about a politician manufacturing a campaign that privileges the base they are trying to target, populism's strategy is to elevate such voters' identities as more important than those of other voters in the electorate. This elevation occurs by type-casting the selected voters as the only representation of national identity and, by extension, the people most unjustly affected by the country's vulnerable state.

On the other hand, Trump also defines the elite and how they are responsible for the country and his voter's ill fortunes. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) discuss how elites are established in populist movements to create a moral divide based on elites' power, interests, and ethnic differences with the "ordinary people." In several instances, Trump has drawn the distinction between his voters and himself with the ruling elite, more commonly understood as "the Deep State," a network of media, government, and business elite working to undermine America's conservative movements. A qualitative analysis of speeches Trump gave in 2016 found that among the groups Trump referenced, he framed immigrants and wealthy donors with the most negative references (Lamont et al., 2017). In the populist conception of the elites, those with political and economic power, which conveniently excludes the populist leader, will serve

the actors' interests outside the "national interest" to keep their position in the power hierarchy. Trump often claimed that Democrats supported open borders and mass immigration to expand their electoral appeal, knowing that immigrants would hurt the American working class. As for any ethnic distinction Trump may have used to malign elites, the evidence is less certain. The same qualitative study of Trump's speeches found that he often referred to Black and Hispanic voters positively to undermine the Democratic party's support in those demographics (Lamont et al., 2017). However, Trump has also challenged Obama's nationality, questioned the impartiality of a judge presiding over a case concerning his border wall because the judge was "Mexican," and said four Democrat lawmakers should return to "the crime-infested places from which they came." A populist message can often not only argue the elites are unjustly maintaining their power and harbor interests contrary to those of the American people, but they can also not be American at all, which has often meant not being "white."

The last core concept of populism that forms part of his populist style is his rhetoric around the "general will." Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) discuss "general will" in the context of Rousseau's idea that a political community can come together and decide on the issue of legislation such that the common interest is represented. Still, they also highlight the populist distinction, in which leaders must bring the "people" together and be attentive enough to manifest their will. It is easy to see how Trump might conceive of the "general will" as his voters' political, social, and economic interests. However, Trump also constructs a personality to go with his rhetoric. To the earlier point about Trump fitting the insider/outsider archetype of a successful businessman, his campaign website's "About" section covers his business successes at length. Yet, in his campaign rhetoric, Trump claims that it is precisely his success that grants him legitimacy because only someone with the right intentions would put aside their business to work

representing the American public. Moreover, Trump claimed his success would shield him from influence, saying, "I'm called by all of the special interests and by the— the donors and by the lobbyists— and they have zero chance at convincing me, zero (Trump, 2015)." I argue that it is the combination of his populist rhetoric and "insider/outsider" persona that granted him the legitimacy to not only bring his voters to Washington, D.C. but also to play an essential role in uniting disparate parts of the Republican electorate to challenge the results of the 2020 election. In other words, by the time he started claiming the Democrats stole the election out from under him, he had already strategically primed his audience through populist strategy and demagogic charisma.

Conventions of Melodramatic Political Discourse

In this next section, I will detail how the narrative created by Trump used the conventions of melodramatic political discourse. A narrative using the melodramatic style usually begins with a confrontation or conflict called injury. The injury or injustice in the case of January 6th was the loss of the election, but evidence from the House Select Committee investigating the riot showed that Trump began to set the foundation for the election fraud story before the election. Trump and his administration laid the groundwork for the narrative they intended to use if they lost the election. They characterized any efforts by Democrats to amend voting laws during the pandemic as a plot to manipulate the election despite Republican secretaries of state also wanting to increase turnout (Riccardi, 2020). It is evident from the rhetoric leading to the election that Republicans saw efforts to make voting easier as disingenuous, given that Democrats could not be trusted to have the country's best interest in mind. The melodramatic political discourse can make any policy issue devolve into fighting over grievances, but elections, with their competitive nature, can make a loss seem like an unjust injury.

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When the election results were finalized, Trump and his allies were quick to deny them and attempted to declare victory (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022, pp. 201-204). In the following days, Trump and his advisors exhausted every avenue to prove the election was stolen, including fabricating theories that foreign actors manipulated the voting machines (Swenson, 2022). Trump and the media favorable to his point of view pushed the narrative that Joe Biden could not have won and that his vote tally must have included undocumented immigrants, deceased voters, or outright vote switching (Duda, 2022). Trump's supporters could not reconcile the electoral loss with Trump's aura of invincibility and, more importantly, could not accept that they were not part of the silent majority that represented the people's true will (Longwell, 2022).

Moral Economy of Good and Evil

Anker (2014) begins her discussion of the five conventions of melodramatic political discourse with a divided moral economy of good and evil that "shapes depictions of political events and national identity." First, what is deemed evil is used to define what is good. Melodramatic political discourse characterizes evil as having existed before the creation of a virtuous group or ideology. The group deemed as evil granted the victims their virtue by enacting an unjust injury upon them. This shields those deemed as victims from any responsibility for previous actions that may have caused a reaction from those deemed evil. Most carefully manicured narratives from the state begin with identifying and describing a villain to manufacture an identity as the opposite of good. However, they will also lend the identity of the quality of always being virtuous independent of the villain's actions. This is important because the state wants those defined as the proper nation to believe their moral value is long established (Grosby, 2005). The moral economy created by the loss of the presidential election in 2020 does not only correspond with a melodramatic political genre. A right-wing moral economy has three

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unique characteristics relevant to the narrative presented at the Capitol on January 6th. Hardt &
Negri (2017) discuss three compelling characteristics when describing right-wing social
movements: they imitate movements of liberation, seek to preserve a precious order, and are
centered on authority and identity. Each of these characteristics is found in the January 6th
narrative and is central to how morals are assigned to the victims, heroes, and villains. First,
Hardt & Negri (2017) argue right-wing social movements co-opt the elements of a liberation
movement to be about redeeming an identity, much like how a victim must redeem themselves in
Anker's (2014) description of heroes. Moreover, liberation is also inverted when right-wing
movements seek to return to a previous conception of national identity (Hardt & Negri, 2017).
This irony is needed to manufacture a moral economy.

Many right-wing movements see themselves as a marginalized group oppressed by a
foreign enemy despite being historically the dominant group. They base their sense of virtue on
this history. Next comes the second characteristic of right-wing social movements that is
reflected in their type of melodramatic narratives. According to Hardt and Negri (2017), right-
wing movements will feint being conservative, but in actuality, they are reactionary. It is not
about preserving or defending a particular set of beliefs but a concerted effort to return to a
privileged power hierarchy (Hardt & Negri, 2017). This is akin to the state's use of narrative to
expand its power and redefine national identity; however, where the state might not need to
return to a previous order, non-state political actors have such aims. Of course, what is meant by
privilege is an order where a particular identity is in a position of authority. That authority is
often centered on one person who represents the national identity. For example, some non-state
actors that see the return to a previous order as ensuring their position of authority are the
organizations that form the Alt-Right. There is a group known as the Groypers, led by a white

nationalist named Nick Fuentes. In 2022, President Trump had dinner with him at Mara Lago (McGraw, 2022). This group advocates for a return to a society dominated by white, Christian men (A.D.L., 2020). Although this thesis will not spend much time analyzing Trump's role as a leader, he represents a shift in what was once considered presidential. From the announcement of his presidential run in 2015, in which he derided Mexican immigrants as "rapists," to his performance in the Republican Presidential Primary debates, where he attacked his opponents' looks, Trump upended traditional practice concerning rhetoric (Arnsdorf et al., 2023). His supporters identify with his brand of politics, as is evident by the number of cases of political violence in which Trump was mentioned (Levine, 2020). However, demagoguery and nationalist ideology are not new. The United States has a long history of fearing immigration, communism, and racial equality (Lee, 2021). Trump harnessed a pre-existing desire by a particular demographic. Identity is the most crucial element of how a right-wing narrative develops.

Hardt and Negri (2017) argue that "The central point is that the unity of the people is always characteristic of the (real or imagined-sometimes primordial) past social order that right-wing movements seek to defend against alien reclaim, and to redeem (p. 50)." For example, it is arguable from the quantity of white nationalist, neo-Nazi, and Confederate memorabilia present at some of the most extreme right-wing demonstrations that the identity chosen to be redeemed was that of white, Christian, and straight men. As Hardt and Negri (2017) explain, integral to such identity is property, access to property rights, and a right to identity itself. Those two aspects go hand in hand when a narrative is fabricated that bestows certain groups with virtue and ownership over the country's political power because of the mythology that the country is part of a clearly defined civilization. Right-wing movements often anchor their legitimacy in references to the founding of the United States and the original English colonies. The Three

Percenters are one such group that compares their members to the 3% of American colonists that fought the British in the American Revolutionary War; this claim of 3% has not been supported with evidence (SPLC, n.d.) Groups like the Three Percenters also tie their enemies to history, in their case, the tyrannical British Crown and, in contemporary America, the Federal Government. Here, the moral economy is set in the past, present, and future.

Victims, Villains, and Heroes

Once a moral economy that characterizes good and evil is established, a melodramatic political discourse will assign roles to political actors in the narrative. Victims, heroes, and villains will be defined. Anker (2014), in her description of the second convention of political melodrama, makes a connection between the victim and the hero (pp. 33-34). The victim is the injured party, yet they are also the hero capable of redemption and victory over the villain. The victim's virtue and the hero's strength stem solely from a designation of moral value. However, only certain types of injury or suffering can grant a particular actor the label of victim or hero. Only injustices perpetrated by those seen as villains can be considered legitimate sources of harm. Any other source of pain the victim may feel that cannot be categorized by something foreign or un-American is suppressed or written off as unimportant. Villains are whatever identity or ideology the state deems as alien and incongruent with its definition of national identity and values (Johnson, 2017, p. 236). In the case of the U.S., the villains have often been communism, terrorism, and Islamic extremism (Kydd, 2021, pp. 5-6). The designation of villains is based on a moral judgment that such ideologies or phenomena are at odds with and present threats to self-ascribed "American" values of freedom, capitalism, and liberty.

According to Anker's (2014) concept of the "moral economy," roles are based on attributing positive virtues to victims-turned-heroes and negative traits to villains. The

conspiracy of a stolen election in 2020, which was the motivating factor for those at the Capitol, depicts a significant injury with a villain and victim. Fortunately, the contest for the presidency is straightforward regarding building a narrative. It is a contest over power between two constituencies and, in effect, two diverse identities. In this next section, I will describe the three roles assigned in melodramatic political narratives: victims, villains, and heroes.

In this case, the victims are Donald Trump, his voters, and, by extension of their identity, the country. Former president Trump has a dedicated group of supporters that resembles a cult of personality; however, the identity he represents has a much more significant impact. As discussed previously, I argue that those who raided the Capitol saw themselves as a majority under attack by a rising "woke" left and those they had captured in the government. For example, the same 2022 paper by Harvard's Shorenstein Center found that "many defendants went so far as to describe their actions at the Capitol Building as a desperate, last-ditch effort to "save" the United States from foreign invaders, communism, the "deep state," or some other imagined threat (pp. 3-4)." Conservatism turns to reactionary politics when they sense a threat to their identity's privileged position in the power hierarchy (Hardt & Negri, 2017). I argue that while there may be truth to the idea that the country is diversifying and turning into something many conservatives might not recognize, the narrative of victimization sets the stage for increasing conflicts and melodrama in politics. I also contend that the election of Trump in 2016 was proof, to the self-ascribed victims, that the country was returning to its virtues. This points to Anker's (2014) description of the moral economy of good and evil. That characterized as good and under attack is primordial and the true legacy of the nation.

Those rioting in the Capitol were under the belief that their actions were for the good of the country and that they were given orders from the former president. During his trial, one rioter

said he admitted, "If the president is giving you almost an order to do something, I felt obligated to do that (Associated Press, 2022)." They were seeking redemption by overturning what they were convinced was a corrupt power grab. Their actions were legitimized by their membership in the national identity and their feelings of victimization. Donald Trump and his supporters believed that they represented most of the country that needed to act if their power came under threat. Despite the reality that they were overturning a democratic election in a violent insurrection, they believed their actions to be commensurate with the attack on their view of the United States and, by extension, their rights. This melodramatic transition from victims to heroes is only observed through narrative analysis. Too much emphasis on Trump as a populist figure obscures the role of identity and feelings of victimization.

The villains at the center of right-wing narratives are not new and are repeated in the discourse around January 6th. In *The Paranoid Style of American Politics*, Hofstadter (2008) discussed the advent of right-wing villains, from a Masonic conspiracy to the infiltration of the U.S. government by Communists. In his writing, Hofstadter identifies three critical components of right-wing thinking that shed light on the creation of an antagonist in the story of January 6th. First, in right-wing thought, it is believed that a sustained conspiracy exists to undermine free-market capitalism. Second, the highest levels of government are being infiltrated by Communists looking to disrupt American interests. Lastly, this same cabal of "Deep State" Communists have captured the media, press, and education to attack true American virtues and those who hold them. Many of the villains Hofstadter highlights in his discussion of right-wing conspiracies form the basis for villainy in the narrative surrounding January 6th.

This thesis argues that the label "villain" has expanded broadly to include many identities encompassed into one conspiratorial force. Not only are villains Communists, but they are also

professors, bureaucrats, government agencies, corporations, and anyone else who contradicts the right-wing narrative. For example, election workers have been under attack after the election results, including death threats against them and their families. The villains Hofstadter (2008) mentioned have moved well past just foreign Communist infiltration to animosity toward anyone contradicting the right-wing political mythology. Specific to January 6th, however, the villains were the Democratic politicians, election workers, and traitorous Republicans who were directing or abetting an illegitimate power grab and undermining the political will of the "true" American majority. Additional villains were added to the list during and after the attack on the Capitol, including Capitol police and anyone who aided the Congressional Committee investigation. Even families were split, with some turning in family members who participated in the attack (Yang, 2022). In many instances, January 6th became the dividing line between those who saw it as an insurrection and those who viewed it as a protest to protect democracy. The groundwork has existed for decades concerning the types of identities singled out as villains, but the label of villain has been expanded and deepened to exaggerate further the threat and immorality of other Americans seen as incongruent with the identity of the victims/heroes.

Intensified Affect

The third convention of melodramatic political discourse is an intensified affect. This intensified affect describes over-the-top acts and emotional language. Anker (2014) focuses on the heightened affect created in melodramatic political discourse because it catalyzes an identification with the power needed for the victim to fight against injustice. In other words, melodrama creates a situation where the state can label itself the victim and, through such victimization, get a pass to express its power. For Anker, melodrama in the U.S. is the distinct cultivation of a bond around violence rather than civic or national identification. A melodramatic

political discourse deals with the intensified expression of emotions stemming from a sense of victimization and real suffering. Anker (2014) argues that individuals will buy into the state's expansion of its powers because the state will "harness melodrama's genre conventions and affective investments for their fantasies (p. 149)." Fantasies related to the restoration of freedom.

Anker uses Nietzsche's concept of "orgies of feeling" to explain how exaggerated feelings of victimization are used to distract from persistent yet obscure sources of suffering. More importantly, by transmuting an unknown feeling of powerlessness into a sense of victimization, the manufactured source of the pain is then identified, and it becomes the impetus for individuals to liberate themselves (Anker, 2014). An application of the "orgies of feeling" concept would argue that the attack on the Capitol and those who participated demonstrate a form of intensified affect stemming from an inability to understand the feeling of powerlessness of an increasingly neoliberal order. The consequences of neoliberalism, such as austerity, have created a political and economic reality that, for many, stands in contrast with the mythology of rugged individualism and the American dream, which is crucial to the foundation of American national identity.

The Narrative Form of Powerlessness

At the source of the victimization is a feeling of powerlessness against a foreign power (or villain) that stands in direct contrast to the virtue of the victimized. Common enemies chosen in U.S. melodramatic political discourse are communism, immigrants, and the "woke left." This stage of suffering and powerlessness is vital in the victims' transformation into heroes. Anker (2014) argues that this powerlessness will "chart a course of action that will restore the power of the virtuous (p. 36)." This feeling of powerlessness is entirely manufactured and can be seen in the narratives used to express an injury or injustice. The state or non-state actors that often look

to use melodramatic political discourse are not the weak victims they pretend to be. Still, the identification and legitimacy they receive through a performative affect grant them the justification needed to impose their power on a villain that is often a marginalized group incongruent with the national identity (Anker, 2014, pp. 21-22). Anker (2014) focuses on the promises of the individual neoliberal archetype and argues that internalized feelings of personal failure to live up to the self-reliant character cause great suffering. Then, as mentioned above, the feeling of powerlessness is attributed to a new source, a foreign villain. It is much more amenable to generate a sense of victimization than it is to examine the true origins of "unfreedom" critically. The failures of the neoliberal individual, so intertwined with American mythology, are much more difficult to diagnose as the source stripping away agency, so the true source must be the globalists, communism, and social justice warriors. Trump expressed as much when he gave the speech to supporters before the attack, saying, "The fake news and the big tech, big tech, is now coming into their own. We beat them four years ago, we surprised them. We took him by surprise and this year they rigged an election, they rigged it like they have never rigged an election before (Trump 2020)." What followed was an "orgy of feeling" that displaced pre-existing powerlessness and fueled anticipation of triumph.

Anticipation of Triumph

The last of the five conventions is the anticipation of a victory by the victim-hero that has transcended the injury and suffering caused by the foreign villain. Anker (2014) maintains that melodrama promises a final victory to the victim-turned-hero and the restoration of freedom. Freedom, being a "national norm" and a "founding fantasy," is co-opted by melodrama and ascribed to individuals that fit the national identity. As a result, Anker (2014) explains that labeling freedom as the ultimate prize of the redeemed heroes means that they are not held

accountable for the consequences of their fight against the villain but are characterized as virtuous. This portrayal of the hero and their struggle for freedom is reminiscent of the American mythology of the individual fighting against a government for their freedom. Or, in the case of January 6th, a group of true patriots fighting against a corrupt government stealing an election and infringing upon their liberties. The United States House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol implicated such groups as the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys in the attack on the Capitol (Amiri & Associated Press, 2021). When a narrative is set as a struggle for freedom, the moral economy becomes simplified and ignores any other source of injury that the victim may feel but that does not fit a villain's profile. Any happy story with a victim turned hero and a villain must promise victory. Nothing short of a complete redemption would make any sense after the establishment of a moral economy that is so totalizing. The hero is only good and virtuous, and the villain can only be destructive and threatening.

Hofstadter (2008) notes that this "final act of victory over the evil source" is not new. The right-wing constituencies of the 20th century also guaranteed triumph in the battle against world communism. Anker (2014) ties this expectation of victory to melodramatic American myths of manifest destiny, exceptionalism, and individualism (p. 99). These central themes of American politics have long been the rationale by which the state has justified its expansions of power against its foreign enemies. These same themes granted a sense of inevitability to the ultimate redeeming victory over the domestic enemies: Communism, Democrats, and the Deep State. Those who participated in the January 6th riot had the belief that they would be able to, at the least, hold up the certification of the election and allow Vice President Pence to carry out his "patriotic" duty and decertify the election, which he understood to be illegal and impossible

(Donovan et al., 2022). While there may have been many Trump supporters who did not believe the election results could be overturned, a large group understood January 6th to be a day of reckoning. The popular QAnon theory specified events such as "the storm" and "the great awakening" as turning points in which Trump would complete his task of saving the country and the greater American public would awaken (Wong, 2021). January 6th was shaping up to be the moment in which the actual "patriots" would come to the aid of their president and retake the government before the Democrats could complete their plan to "illegally" seize the government (Roose, 2021).

Each of the previous conventions of melodramatic political discourse is centered around the state and its use of narratives to strengthen its power and redefine the national identity while ignoring other social ills, such as inequality and structural racism. However, the constant use of melodrama as a predominant style of American politics has damaged national politics. As is seen in Hofstadter's (2008) writing, politics in the U.S. has long been composed of paranoia and has resulted in an environment conducive to the politics on display during the attack on the Capitol. Anti-government militias (Three Percenters), Western Chauvinist groups (Proud Boys), and Christian nationalists (Groypers) are a few political actors who have become increasingly populist and have catered to the most extreme forms of reactionary politics. This thesis examines whether the use of melodrama to manipulate the national narrative, define American national identity, and accumulate political power has ceased being a project of the state but an endeavor by individuals and interest groups themselves.

The approaches to January 6th included above represent the perspectives among researchers; however, explanations coming from the media are even more numerous but focus on common themes, such as Trump's role, the weakening of institutions, and growing right-wing

extremism. Of course, both sources' explanations could all play a role in understanding the attack on the Capitol. I chose to use melodrama because there is a case to be made that it has served as a tactic from the state and as a tool for non-state to express their interests and to impose their ideals onto American political consciousness. As previously explained, melodrama, as a genre of politics, has been central to creating national foundational myths. Every nation needs a focal point in the form of a tragedy and villain to grant itself the moral legitimacy to expand its control over individuals' lives. I argue that the state's repeated use of this strategy has made its conventions worthwhile to political parties and populists. Non-state actors can also reshape national identity without being in power, and the individuals who make up the nation use storylines (melodramatic or not) to make sense of the continuous amount of political information. A successful national myth or moral story can serve as a crutch and as an all-encompassing explanation of actual or perceived suffering. This type of narrative very much drove January 6th. Despite Trump giving it life, the election conspiracies descend from past conjured grievances, so much so that January 6th has begun to take on a value separate from Trump, the person, and to a progressing right-wing identity. This perspective is not found in other approaches to January 6th. Narrative and rhetoric might be part of other explanations but in isolation and are often removed from history. This thesis expands on the field of study by arguing that focusing on melodrama as a genre grants January 6th a genealogy in American politics.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

This section will fully describe the research strategy and methodology this thesis intends

to utilize, including the philosophical foundations. I will discuss the temporal period and data

collection to ensure operationalization and validity. As noted above, this thesis examines the

following research questions: (1) Does Trump's narrative of fraud in the 2020 election fall into

melodramatic political discourse (2) How might this style of discourse contribute to our

understanding of the riot on January 6th (3) What implications might January 6th and

melodramatic political discourse have for American politics?

Research Philosophy & Type

This thesis employs a social constructivist philosophical approach, which contends that

people and their communities socially constitute social phenomena. The meaning of these social

phenomena is also formed subjectively as individuals interact with objects and other people.

Creswell (2018) describes meaning as "not simply imprinted on individuals but formed through

interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms

that operate in individuals' lives (p. 26)." Researchers following social constructivism investigate

these social interactions within the appropriate cultural and historical context to determine the

significance of a particular social phenomenon. As a result, researchers must also consider their

identities and acknowledge the impact of their backgrounds on the analysis. This philosophical

approach is compatible with the aims of this study because special attention is paid to social

interaction and meaning-creation, which are embedded in discourse and narrative. In other words, a narrative analysis falls under social constructivism because it understands "that people's lived stories capture the complexities and nuanced understanding of their significant experiences (Ntinda, 2018, pp. 1-2)." This thesis argues that the riot at the Capitol was a highly social event that will benefit from a data analysis that does not apply a positivist philosophy to it but allows the language and rhetoric around it to speak for itself.

As for the type of research, a deductive approach will be used to analyze the narrative leading up to January 6th. When used in a qualitative application, a deductive approach starts with "the theoretical propositions that are derived from a review of the literature and applies these to the collection and analysis of data (Pearse, 2019, p. 64)." This differs from an inductive approach that begins with observations and data that are then analyzed to draw observations or theories. A deductive approach will best suit this study because it aligns with its purpose, which is to "operationalize on the basis of previous knowledge" and "theory testing" (Elo & Kyngas, 2008, p. 109). The previous knowledge being operationalized is the analysis of Trump's contributions to the "Stop the Steal" narrative, and the theory being tested is melodramatic political discourse. Secondly, using a deductive approach is appropriate because of its usefulness when conducting a case study, which this study sets out to do on January 6th (Pearse, 2019, p. 264). The next section provides additional details regarding the choice to approach January 6th as a case study.

Research Strategy

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, January 6th is a contested event and requires isolated attention to fully attempt an answer as to how it occurred. Crowe et al. (2011) explain that a case study "is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a

complex issue in its real-life context (p. 1)." The decision to examine the attack on the Capitol as a case study reflects its usefulness as a research strategy for the granular analysis of a particular event. Specifically, by utilizing a deductive narrative analysis for a case study, this thesis will not look to code individual parts of the narrative data but to make inferences from the data as a whole (Becker et al., 2005). This study does not analyze the participating rioters' content, symbols, or language. Instead, it is an isolated view of January 6th by way of a specific identification of a narrative, its contributor, and the style it relied upon. I am tracing the lineage of the violence present on January 6th, as a case of political violence, to a story of election fraud.

Furthermore, a case study aligns well with the choice of social constructivist philosophy, as it emphasizes placing an event and its socially constructed meaning in cultural and historical contexts. Utilizing a social constructivist lens with a case study approach opens the possibility of approaching an event such as January 6th not as an isolated incident but as a byproduct of a much larger political phenomenon of socially constructed discourse that helps create meaning for those who participated. This thesis explores the narrative Trump participated in creating and infers that such a narrative played a role in how the actors present at the riot made sense of their actions. The thesis argues that this is best achieved by not analyzing the narrative data gathered from Trump with a bottom-up approach that looks for themes but instead with a strict criterion derived from present theories of political-meaning construction, allowing this study to be replicable.

Data Collection Method & Temporal Period

The data collected for this thesis came from President Trump's interviews, public addresses, remarks, convention speeches, news conferences, and debates. These pieces of data were sourced from the non-profit, non-partisan American Presidency Project database hosted by

the University of California, Santa Barbara. This database archives items related to the presidency of the United States going back to the administration of George Washington, totaling 156,148 records at the time of accessing the database. For specificity, this thesis not only sorted for the categories of database entries listed above but also narrowed down the search with the following key phrases: fraud, stolen, rigged, steal, rig, fraudulent. This search netted 86 records. The keywords were chosen to single out instances where Trump began priming the narrative that the 2020 presidential election was illegitimate.

However, careful attention was placed on selecting keywords that would not narrow the data set too much or would bias the data analysis. For example, this thesis did not look for instances Trump discussed wanting to overturn the election, only the times when he claimed the election was stolen. These results were then narrowed down to 42 entries. The database entries were further filtered out because they fit one or more of the following criteria: (1) remarks were not given as part of the 2020 campaign for President but in completion of some non-related presidential duty; (2) contained little to no mention of the election or the effort to rig the results. Many of those entries filtered out appeared in the initial search because they had, at the bare minimum, one mention of one of the keywords listed above, or when the keywords are mentioned, they are done so in a context not tied to the election.

Given that this study is a deductive narrative analysis, the selection of data is best limited to the narrative being studied; therefore, database entries that deal with issues not related to the election, the attempt to steal the election, or given in the absence of an audience are not as relevant to the research questions being answered. From those 42 database records, further attention was paid to the types of entries. The vast majority of the entries were rallies, though not all the rallies were the same. The most common was the "Make America Great Again" rallies,

but other themes included "Great American Comeback," "Fighting for the American Worker," "Latinos for Trump," and "Black Voices for Trump." Coverage of these campaign stops suggests that many of Trump's rallies, going back to before the 2020 election, were similar in content, given the short turnaround time between them, with some even occurring on the same day (Katz, 2019). Therefore, this thesis has selected a representative number of each type of rally to ensure a complete picture of Trump's remarks. The remaining entries used fell into one of the following categories: press conferences, non-rally remarks (such as convention speeches), interviews, and debates. After using the criteria described above, the total data entries used in the analysis came to 19 of 42.

The temporal period includes database records collected between April 7, 2020, and January 6, 2021. These dates are not arbitrary but reflect two crucial moments in developing the "Stop the Steal" narrative. April 7, 2020, marks the date when Trump began raising doubts about the legitimacy of the election results (Inskeep, 2021). In tracing the linage of the "Big Lie," another name given to election fraud conspiracy, the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the Capitol first reference the April 7 remarks, in which he claimed:

> "Mail ballots are a very dangerous thing for this country, because they're cheaters. They go and collect them. They're fraudulent in many cases. . . . These mailed ballots come in. The mailed ballots are corrupt, in my opinion. And they collect them, and they get people to go in and sign them. And then they—they're forgeries in many cases. It's a horrible thing. (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022, p. 201)."

The selection of this start date was also to ensure that the data collected captured both Presidential Debates and the Republican National Committee's nomination of Trump as the Republican presidential candidate. And, of course, January 6th, 2021, was chosen because it is the date of the riot at the Capitol but also marks the peak of Trump's election fraud narratives. The decision to capture only until, during, and shortly after the attack on the Capitol is to ensure that the data gathered is a true reflection of Trump's rhetoric, absent any effort on his part to walk back his messaging.

This is not to say that Trump did not employ rhetoric to raise doubts about the election process before the time horizon I described above. When still in power, the Trump administration created a commission to find potential voter fraud in the 2016 presidential election; of course, no evidence was found, but this commission indicates Trump's readiness to sow doubts in the democratic process (Villeneuve, 2018). However, I argue that the most important element for applying melodramatic political discourse is the moment the injury is inflicted on the victims. Analyzing his pre-election remarks is useful to set the stage before Trump's election loss, which is the injury in the 2020 election fraud narrative. The claims about mail-in ballot fraud do not become as much of an injustice if Trump ended up winning, but after his loss, the feelings of victimization Trump uses in his rhetoric become real. For the research questions to be answered, focusing more on the period between Trump's loss and the riot is important.

Despite the multiple mediums through which Trump communicated with his supporters, this thesis looks to his spoken remarks because they simultaneously reached a large group of supporters and possess the best narrative creation potential. First, many, if not all, the database entries covered in this thesis were televised. There is evidence that correlates a precipitous drop in TV viewership of CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News with Trump's departure from office, with

Fox News experiencing a 37% drop (Gilbert & Nicolaou, 2021). When Trump does appear on a televised medium, he shows his sustained draw; in a CNN town hall in May 2023, he drew an audience of more than 3.3 million (Fischer, 2023).

Second, a review of the literature for data collection in narrative analysis specifies the "story" as the primary data source (Murray, 2018; Earthy & Cronin, 2008). Thus, depending on what form they take, stories possess more or less of the common elements that grant them narrative power: settings, characters, plot, and moral judgments (Shanahan et al., 2018, p. 176). The data used in this thesis have those elements partially because campaign messages have to appeal to voters' nature as *homo narrans*, or the model that suggests people make decisions and cognitive processes based on how they interpret stories (Shanahan et al., 2018, pp. 180-181). Moreover, other traditional sources of narrative analyses, such as interviews, allow the data source more freedom to chain complete storylines together. Ultimately, the choice of data is simply the most compatible with this study's approach and aims.

However, not acknowledging Trump's other forms of communicating with his supporters would be to miss a large part of January 6th. Twitter.com (now known as X.com) is another form of communication Trump used to propel himself to the presidency. Trump's Twitter account was even "permanently suspended" after participating in the January 6th riot; at the time, he had 88.7 million followers (Fung, 2021). Though Twitter was central to how Trump communicated with his base, the technical aspects of Tweets, such as a word limit, restrict their usefulness. Tweets often don't possess all the elements needed for compelling narrative analysis. However, I am not saying that a study of Trump's social media could not present some findings related to the impact of his rhetoric. This thesis even uses his Tweets in previous chapters to present Trump's role on January 6th; however, the following chapter, in looking to apply the conventions of

melodramatic political discourse, requires more long-from data sets. Moreover, good studies use thematic or content analysis to connect Trump's social media presence to the events of January 6th (Lee et al., 2022). One study even used the Narrative Policy Framework covered in the Literature Review chapter to examine the impact of Trump's speech, yet even that study used them in a content analysis rather than a narrative analysis (Merry, 2022).

Data Analysis

This thesis will operationalize the analysis of Trump's rhetorical and narrative contributions to the "Stop the Steal" story. As I discussed in my literature review, "Narrative is one of the most broadly employed ways of systematizing human experience. As humans, we experience our worlds and live by telling stories (Souto-Manning, 2014, p. 162)." The decision to analyze Trump's narrative rather than the discourse reflects a narrative approach's complimentary design for the research questions set out in this thesis. First, when used within a case study, narrative analysis has a more specific explanatory potential than a discourse analysis. Souto-Manning (2014) explains that, "Narrative analysis can thus be used to connect microevents to broader discourses and contexts with the intent of asserting the construction of social experiences through narratives (p. 162; van Dijk, 1993)." The ability to center on a point in time without losing the connection to broader discourses means that I can examine Trump's remarks but still infer that his narrative draws on larger melodramatic discourse. A narrative analysis will be operationalized using the following steps: (1) Select a discourse; (2) Locate and prepare data sources; (3) Explore the background of each text; (4) Identify overarching narrative themes; (5) Analyze the external relations in the texts; (6) Analyze the internal relations of the texts; (7) Interpret the data using the conventions of melodramatic discourse (Mullet, 2018, p. 122).

External & Internal Validity

Despite not being a quantitative study, external & internal validity remain centrally important in any piece of research. Validity and replicability ensure that any study can be used reliably in future research and as a legitimate perspective on the subject being studied. Specifically, validity looks at how well a piece of research studies what it sets out to cover, and reliability examines how well the research can be reproduced. As such, this thesis addresses any threats to both reliability and validity. This section will focus on the decisions made during research design, data collection, and data interpretation to ensure internal and external validity.

My research position in this thesis is to provide another understanding of how January 6th occurred, which I see as having potential implications for the future and lessons for the present. Like many other researchers, I view the motivations and actions present on January 6th as a clear and present challenge to future democratic transitions of power. As a result, two assumptions made in this paper, which I support with literature, are the central importance of Trump in the priming for January 6th and the power of narratives to shape political participation. These two assumptions are also present in the thesis argument that Donald Trump's "Stop the Steal" narrative is the most salient narrative on January 6th and contributes to a melodramatic political style. Moreover, these assumptions could have impacted the selection of the sources making up the literature review and, thus, how the data is interpreted. However, sufficient effort was made to ensure that any decision taken during this study had an adequate justification.

My initial focus when developing my argument was addressing the threats to internal validity, which determines whether the argument and research design answer the research questions. First, in the study's design, I aimed to provide a contextual understanding of January 6th that avoided generalizing about the identity of those present, their motivations, and the

morality of their actions. Relatedly, in the presentation of my literature review, I acknowledged the broadness of the related research and the narrow focus of this study to contribute a singular perspective. The literature review was done to triangulate the argument presented in this study and to cement it in past literature. Furthermore, I took care not to make any definitive claims about Trump being the sole actor responsible or melodramatic political discourse being the only explanation to understand how January 6th occurred. Lastly, when detailing the research plan in the methodology chapter, I addressed potential research bias when conducting a qualitative analysis and triangulated my data selection by including different types of Trump's public addresses, diverse audiences, and other formats. The combination of data used in this thesis was an effort to balance using data that best presented the narrative while not biasing the analysis toward one answer.

From the point of ensuring external validity, data collection and interpretation are a central concern for the replicability of this study. The data included and excluded largely depended on the research strategy. Given this thesis's focus on a specific narrative, it was necessary to have data with certain characteristics that made it possible to isolate narrative elements. Furthermore, choosing a case study aided in avoiding broad causal relationships and ensured that sufficient representative data was gathered to understand the full context of the riot on January 6th. For this reason, this thesis included President Trump's interviews, public addresses, remarks, convention speeches, news conferences, and debates. However, this was not done without criteria to rule out less valuable data. As was mentioned in the data collection section above, special attention was placed on the database keywords and selection criteria to balance operationalization and the explanatory potential of the data. The keywords chosen are

sufficiently broad such that they narrowed down the data selection without predetermining any of the elements of the argument.

In other words, I knew how combining keywords could change the database entries gathered, such as using keywords that reflected the elements of my theoretical argument. Doing so could have resulted in oversampling the rhetoric relevant to my argument. Therefore, I omitted any keywords that could reflect the melodramatic political discourse I was testing for, instead settling on keywords that would surface Trump's election integrity narrative. The purpose was to set as strict parameters as possible to isolate the election fraud narrative to be then able to assess whether it was melodramatic in style adequately. To ensure accuracy, database sources that were not used were nonetheless reviewed to ensure they did not contain data pertinent to the research question. Furthermore, an effort was made to operationalize analyzing the data so that the process could be replicated. By conceptualizing Elizabeth Anker's (2014) five conventions of melodramatic political discourse, I approached the sources with much more of a plan. I could code the data as I read by using the five conventions. Ultimately, I also acknowledge the impact that my identity as the researcher could have and worked to ensure the interpretation of the data stuck to the concepts I explored using past research.

CHAPTER V

DATA ANALYSIS

As discussed above, five elements of melodramatic political discourse will be examined in this analysis (Anker, 2014). The first convention is a moral economy that frames events, people, and groups of actors into a strict binary of good and evil. The power of this convention is in its simplicity and how it offers a false sense of clarity to the target audience. Second is a characterization of victims, villains, and heroes that is crucial to the narrative element of the discourse. From these character types, the actor or actors manufacturing a particular narrative can manifest feelings of victimhood, scapegoating, and yearning for redemption. Next, an intensified affect is fundamental in the appeal of such a melodramatic narrative to the pathos, or emotions, of its intended audience. Emotional intensity, drama, and hyperbole are some of the tools used to create an intensified affect, or an instance in which the audience of a particular discourse acts out in overtly emotional ways. Fourth, a narrative of powerlessness builds on the preceding three conventions to narrate situations of injustice and power imbalances. This narrative is used not only to elicit a sense of oppression but also to mobilize against the institutions or individuals suspected of being responsible. Lastly, the culmination of these conventions in melodramatic political discourse is anticipating a moment of triumph when victims redeem themselves and defeat their oppressors.

Before applying the five conventions of melodramatic political discourse, each entry in the data set will be placed in the context of the larger election. In other words, attention will be

paid to the surrounding circumstances in which the remarks and speeches were given. The

analysis will also mention the audience and purpose of each data set. Narratives do not exist in

isolation, and recognizing the environment around them will lead to a better understanding of the

meaning and impact. The following analysis will also be organized between pre-election, post-

election remarks, and January 6th remarks. Pre-election remarks cover the campaign and the

increasingly negative rhetoric toward the election, the post-election remarks will cover the

increasing intensity around the conspiracy that the election was decided fraudulently, and the

January 6th remarks will cover the final appeal of Trump to his supporters and the aftermath.

Pre-election Remarks

July 30, 2020 - The President's News Conference

After his comments on April 7, 2020, seen as the beginning of the election fraud

narrative, Trump revisited the topic of mail-in ballots contributing to potential fraud in the 2020

presidential election in a press conference in front of reporters on July 30, 2020. Reporters were

questioning Trump about whether he would want to see the election delayed and the intention of

his Tweets earlier in the day. His Tweet stated:

> "Mail-in voting is already proving to be a catastrophic disaster.
>
> Even testing areas are way off. The Dems talk of foreign influence
>
> in voting, but they know that Mail-In Voting is an easy way for
>
> foreign countries to enter the race. Even beyond that, there's no
>
> accurate count (Tucker & Cassidy, 2020)!"

Furthermore, Trump cited a Washington Journal article titled, "New York's Mail-in Disaster,"

which discussed issues with mail-in ballots during a Democratic party primary, as justification

for delaying the election in response to his claim that continuing with mail-in ballots would be a "disaster." For example, Trump remarked, "I want to have the result of the election. I don't want to be waiting around for weeks and months. And literally, potentially—if you really did it right—years, because you'll never know (Trump, 2020a)." From the start of Trump's story, the focus was not solely on counting all valid votes but on declaring a winner as quickly as possible. This strategy is understandable since mail-in ballots, which Democrats typically cast, can take several days to be accounted for.

Trump continued, "I'd love to see voter ID, but this is the opposite of voter ID. The Democrats love it; the Republicans hate it. We all agree that absentee voting is good. Mail-in ballots will lead to the greatest fraud (Trump, 2020a)." This is a prime example of creating a moral dichotomy between Republicans and Democrats. Democrats are for an election exposed to fraud, while Republicans want a secure election with more requirements to combat fraud. This characterization of Democrats solidifies them as villains in the election integrity narrative and plays into Trump's populist style by labeling Democrats as also wanting to subvert the people's general will. Relatedly, Trump linked the issue of election fraud to the investigations into foreign interference in the 2016 election by saying:

> "But they talk 'Russia, Russia, Russia.' They talk China. They talk
>
> all of these countries. They say they get involved in our elections.
>
> This is easy. You can forge ballots. This is much easier for foreign
>
> countries (Trump 2020a)."

As he did in the Tweet above, Trump claimed that the real threat to the election is how ballots are distributed in the US. He is building, or priming, his later argument that by supporting mail-in

votes, Democrats have opened the election to fraud, though he stops short of saying they will definitively orchestrate the rigging of the election.

Trump further remarked, "And no, do I want to see a date change? No. But I don't want to see a crooked election. This election will be the most rigged election in history if that happens (Trump, 2020a)." Anker (2014), in her discussion of narratives of powerlessness, understands hyperbolic assessments of injustice, such as the one above, as a strategy to persuade the victims that they need to seek power out of powerlessness (p. 36). When asked about the effect of his tweet and casting doubt on the election, Trump said:

> "Well, it's had an interesting impact. I didn't know it was going to
>
> be the impact it had. What people are now looking at is: Am I
>
> right? But not me. Are all these stories right about the fact that
>
> these elections will be fraudulent, they'll be fixed, they'll be
>
> rigged? And everyone is looking at it, and a lot of people are
>
> saying, "You know, that probably will happen (Trump 2020a)."

This quote perfectly exemplifies his priming of the election fraud narrative he employs after his loss in the election. As Kydd (2021) discusses, Trump turns the vulnerability of potentially losing an election in a democracy to precarity and injustice. Despite his equivocation on the impact of his comments, Trump understands that even questioning the integrity of the election will cause his supporters to believe it is rigged. Trump sows doubt to reap the anger later should he eventually lose. Ultimately, this priming effect and the rhetorical style used by Trump is the basis by which this thesis argues that a narrative analysis of Trump speeches is what allows for an answer to how January 6th occurred.

August 3, 2020 - The President's News Conference

During this press conference, Trump again discussed mail-in ballots after being asked whether the unprecedented push for mail-in ballots merited executive action. Trump returned to the examples of mail-in ballots not being capable of being used in elections by citing primaries in which results have been delayed, going as far as to say that those primaries should be repeated. For instance, Trump remarked, "Nobody knows what's happening with the ballots and the lost ballots and the fraudulent ballots, I guess. I think you'd probably have to take the Carolyn Maloney race and run it over again (Trump, 2020b)." He continued by claiming that in Nevada, election officials approved changes "in the darkness of night without people, without having any meetings of the public, without having anything" that would not require a verification of signature (Trump, 2020b). This claim was found to be incorrect, with the Secretary of State's office confirming that signatures are verified on every ballot (Rieder, 2020). Trump maligned mail-in ballots at every turn by suggesting there were double mailings of ballots, including fraudulent votes, and that results would be delayed by several weeks. He claimed that the Postal Service cannot count the votes because of old equipment, poor management, and lack of funding.

Trump problematized and polarized mail-in ballots by listing their shortcomings and by suggesting Republicans are the only ones willing to address the issue. Trump singles out Nevada by saying, "The Governor of Nevada came out with this massive plan, out of nowhere, to take millions of ballots and send them all over the place. You'll never know who won that State (Trump, 2020b)." He later contrasted Nevada with Florida, "Again, absentee is great. It works. Like in Florida, they'll do absentee. It really works. But universal mail-in ballots is going to be a great embarrassment to our country (Trump, 2020b)." What is most notable about this quote is that he calls mail-in ballots not only an avenue for fraud but an "embarrassment" to the country.

This description closely tracks Anker's (2014) conception of how an injury to the nation is often the prime justification for violence within melodramatic political discourse. However, where Anker understands national injury as a justification for expanding state power, Trump claiming mail-in ballots are an embarrassment to the country is more of a rationale for restricting the type of voting and any efforts to overturn the election should Trump lose the election given it was fundamentally fraudulent. Trump concluded by saying that he has a right to consider an executive order on the issues of mail-in ballots but does not say whether he intends to follow through.

August 13, 2020 - The President's News Conference

In this set of remarks, at another press conference, Trump received more pushback about whether more funding should be allocated to ensure mail-in ballots are counted quickly and accurately for those voters who see voting in person as too dangerous during the Covid-19 pandemic. Trump agreed funding is necessary but again argued that mail-in ballots would still lead to fraud, regardless of the money spent. When pressed about no evidence of fraud in elections decided by mail-in ballots, Trump responded, "Of course, there is. The whole thing is a mess. In fact, Carolyn Maloney's opponent is—he's gone crazed. He said they took the election away from him, and he may be right. I think they should redo that election (Trump, 2020c)." When pressed again about whether the $3.5 billion that the Post Office requested to handle mail-in ballots would be a solution for voters' health concerns, Trump seemed similarly unconvinced, saying, "Well, they're going to have to feel safe, and they will be safe, and we will make sure that they're safe. And we're not going to have to spend $3½ billion dollars to do it (Trump 2020c)." Trump later continued, "So the Post Office and the $3½ billion dollars for the votes themselves, which sounds like a lot of money they're looking for—$3½ billion dollars. Think of

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that: $3½ billion to have mail-in ballots. Again, absentee, good; universal mail-in, very bad (Trump, 2020c)."

Later, Trump was asked what he planned to do to ensure the election was free and fair. In his answer, he returns to his disapproval of universal mail-in ballots, claiming that they allow foreign actors to "…grab those ballots or print forgeries of those ballots, and they would go out, and they would have a field day (Trump, 2020c)." Trump claims that not enough attention is paid to this potential vulnerability; instead, the focus is on how Russia or China influenced the 2016 election. Trump then remarked that:

> "Now, if you remember, President Obama was informed about
> Russia by the FBI in September. The election was in November.
> President Obama decided to do absolutely nothing about it. People
> don't mention that very much anymore. That's a lost fact. But he
> was informed very powerfully that they're going to do—and
> President Obama did nothing. We have done a lot, and we've really
> shored it up (Trump, 2020c)."

This quote again demonstrates a moral dichotomy that Trump relied on when discussing how differently Democrats and Republicans ensure free and fair elections. In Trump's pre-election narrative, Republicans are vigilant for foreign interference and potential fraud in mail-in ballots. At the same time, Democrats want to expand universal mail-in ballots and ignore foreign interference if it is not helpful to them. By establishing the distinction between Democrats and Republicans in past events, such as Obama allegedly ignoring Russia's attempt to interfere in the 2016 presidential election, Trump can prime his voters in the future to more easily buy into the characterization that Democrats are repeated bad actors when it comes to elections. Anker (2014)

speaks to this strategy when she discusses how the actors deemed villains in a melodramatic discourse are characterized as primordially evil, making Democrats appear as always having been against free and fair elections.

Additionally, going back to the literature around the "hero-protector" narrative, Clement et al. (2017) discuss a dichotomy between the "coward" and the "hero-protector," in which the "coward" serves as a foil for the "hero-protectors" masculine and honorable traits in defense of the innocent. Trump also displays features of this dichotomy in how he discusses the difference between his and Obama's leadership in addressing foreign interference. Trump also returns to the populist strategy of highlighting the incompetence of his opponents to protect the nation's interest against foreign actors as a way of delegitimizing them but also to mark them at odds with the general will of the people who represent the nation.

August 17, 2020 - Remarks at a "Make America Great Again" Rally in Mankato, Minnesota

This set of remarks, given in Mankato, Minnesota, is another instance of Trump incorporating election integrity into his narrative. By fostering skepticism about upcoming election results, Trump continued to prime his supporters to question election results should he lose the election. Trump began his remarks by stating, "We're going to take back the White House and we're going to have an election that's all about the survival, our nation (Trump, 2020d)." Trump continued, "Joe Biden is the puppet of left-wing extremists, trying to erase our borders, eliminate our police, indoctrinate our children, vilify our heroes, take away our energy (Trump, 2020d)." He also added that left-wing extremists want to, "Destroy our second amendment, attack the right to life and replace American freedom with left-wing fascism (Trump, 2020d)." By framing the election with such high stakes, he communicated that only his

electoral success can ensure the survival of the nation, which tracks with the discussion of Trump's demagogic and populist style.

From this discourse, we can infer that Trump's rhetorical style relies on raising the stakes and strengthening the victimization felt by his supporters at the hands of the "evil" left wing. He is securitizing elements of his supporters' public and private lives that he knows resonate with their belief in a mythology of an authoritarian government coming for their rights. Also indicative of a narrative of powerlessness is Trump's claim that they need to "Make America Great Again" by taking back the White House and the country. Furthermore, Trump's central motivating message to his supporters as to why they should keep him in office is, "You will deliver a historic victory for our values, our citizens and our treasured way of life (Trump, 2020d)." This quote closely tracks the convention of melodramatic discourse that promises an ultimate victory. Also, present in this and the previous selection about securing the nation's survival is a dual characterization of his supporters as the victims of the "woke" left, but simultaneously as capable of being heroes that could deliver a "historic victory."

The rest of the speech continues in an elevated negative tone as he discusses other grievances at the hands of mainstream media, China, and the Democratic party. Trump gave this speech during the middle of the pandemic, which had erased much of the economic growth of his previous years as president. Trump spent part of this speech remarking that the "China virus" led to the slowdown in the economy. He wants his supporters to blame China for the pandemic and not for how his administration handled the public health emergency. He even uses the pandemic as a justification for why his supporters should be wary of a Biden presidency, an administration that "wants to lock all Americans in their basement for months on end which would inflict permanent irreversible harm on our nation's children, families, health and economy (Trump,

2020d)." In this quote, Trump demonstrates how adept he is at capitalizing on conspiracy theories and polarized politics related to public policy issues. This ability to leverage conspiracy theories tracks closely with Anker's description of melodramatic narratives presenting external threats as overwhelmingly powerful. Additionally, as was covered in the theoretical argument chapter, demagogic populist leaders not only motivate a fear of vulnerability but do so by also misrepresenting elites in power as being captured by foreign enemies.

Continuing with his narrative regarding the integrity of the election, Trump mentions possible fraud in the election in the context of rigged polls and mail-in ballots. Discussing a CNN poll with Biden leading by 10 points, Trump remarked, "First of all, the first poll was rigged and wrong. It was a rigged poll, just like they want to try and rig the election with all these mail-in ballots. Let's send out 62 million ballots (Trump, 2020d)." This is one of the first references Trump makes regarding the number of mail-in ballots. Still, it continues the narrative that Democrats want to control the election results and that they will use mail-in ballots to diminish Trump's support. In the aftermath of the election results, Trump supporters seized on this narrative and were convinced that fraudulent mail-in ballots swung the election overnight in Biden's direction. Interestingly, Trump does mention that Hillary Clinton once said she would not acknowledge the results of Trump's victory. While Hillary Clinton did consider questioning the election results (Gross, 2017), Trump's denial of the results presented a clear and present effort to impede institutions from certifying the election. In a state of melodramatic political discourse, whether Clinton actually attempted to raise intense doubt about the 2016 election does not matter. Merely a possibility is enough for one side of the partisan divide to use it as incitement in their reactionary narrative.

August 24, 2020 - Remarks to the Republican National Committee in Charlotte, North Carolina

The next remarks come from Trump's address to the National Republican Committee in Charlotte, North Carolina. Trump received the party's nomination to be their candidate for the 2020 Presidential election. While the speech is noticeably more scripted than the remarks he gave above, they do mark an important time during the election. From the start, Trump set the tone for the rest of the remarks:

> "Because we caught them doing some really bad things in 2016. Let's see what happens. We caught them doing some really bad things. We have to be very careful because they're trying it again with this whole 80 million mail-in ballots that they're working on, sending them out to people that didn't ask for them, they didn't ask, they just get them and it's not fair and it's not right and it's not gonna be possible to tabulate, in my opinion. It's just my opinion. We have to be very, very careful, and you have to watch (Trump, 2020e)."

Trump's quote encapsulates many of the conventions of melodramatic political discourse. He presents the election as being rife with Democrats attempting to manipulate the results of the election. He also calls on his supporters to remain vigilant, from which we can infer he would like his supporters to watch ballot drop-off locations, which some supporters did during the election (Wingett Sanchez, 2022).

In Trump's pre-election narrative, the election seems like a final battle in which his supporters must fight to ensure that a looming threat, characterized by Democrats and Joe Biden, does not cause irrevocable damage to their country. He goes on to say:

> "Our country is counting on it. This is the biggest, this is it. Our
> country can go in a horrible, horrible direction or in an even
> greater direction, and before the plague came in from China, that's
> where we were going. We were going in a direction like we had
> never seen (Trump, 2020e)."

The rest of the speech continued much like other remarks. Trump hit a list of his accomplishments, derided the weaknesses of Democrats, and continued to exaggerate the stakes of the election. And yet, Trump makes sure to end a typical set of campaign remarks with, "Don't let them take it away from you. Don't let them take it away (Trump, 2020e)."

August 27, 2020 - Address Accepting the Republican Presidential Nomination

In his speech accepting his party's nomination, Trump begins by making the case that the continuation of his presidency is akin to past administrations in United States history, from Abraham Lincoln to Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. Trump firmly sets his acceptance in American mythology. He remarked, "We understand that America is not a land cloaked in darkness. America is the torch that enlightens the entire world," and, "Our country's blessed by God and has a special purpose in this world (Trump, 2020f)." Trump understands that the power of a particular narrative and discourse is its ability to draw its legitimacy from connections to enduring American national myths. I contend that his reference to common American national stories is not just to add legitimacy to his presidency and the conservative image of the United

States but also to act as a foil to Democrats' conception of the United States. When used in melodramatic political discourse, competing narratives become reactionary and dangerous, rather than contributing to democratic traditions. Trump expresses as much when he said: "At no time before have voters faced a clearer choice between the parties, two visions, two philosophies or two agendas. This election will decide whether we save the American dream or whether we allow a socialist agenda to demolish our cherished destiny (Trump, 2020f)." Trump spends the rest of the speech detailing the contrasting of these two choices, one as a defending the "American way of life (Trump, 2020f)." The other he describes as "our nation and the entire planet has been struck by a new and powerful invisible enemy (Trump, 2020f)."

The intensified affect, division of the moral economy of good and evil, and characterization of victims and villains could not be more present. What is novel about this set of remarks is not Trump setting the stakes of the election as the survival of the nation, but what is so representative of the conventions of melodramatic political discourse is the essentializing Democrats and the issues facing the United States cleanly into a Manichean distinction. For example, more so than in previous remarks, he attempts to separate Democrats from the lineage of American values by tying himself so close to presidencies as foundational to the American myths as Lincoln and Jefferson. Democrats are no longer the opposition party but an un-American threat that has infiltrated government. This dichotomy not only identifies a distinction between good and evil but also the distinction between the heroes and the villains.

September 12, 2020 - Remarks at a "Make America Great Again" Rally in Minden, Nevada

Speaking to a crowd in Minden, Nevada, Trump continued campaigning and making his case to supporters. Many of these remarks are similar to those he articulated at the Minnesota rally a month earlier; what was notable about this speech was his extended discussion of

potential fraud in the election at the hands of specific public servants. Trump began by claiming that the Democratic Governor, Steve Sisolak, is unfairly influencing the elections in Nevada. Trump claimed Governor Sisolak tried to prevent venues in Nevada from hosting his rally. He said, "And now he's in charge of, he's in charge of the election and the millions of ballots. So, if I'm up, like, millions of votes, he can rig the election, he can rig the election (Trump, 2020g)." Again, this aligns with a melodramatic style in which characters in discourse are maligned and assigned evil intentions (Anker, 2014). Trump portrayed Democrats as villains in his election integrity narrative, with "mail-in ballots" as their instrument to rig the election. Like other speeches, Trump combined a list of grievances with Democrats, mainstream media, and China to portray them as a unified front in his narrative of powerlessness. Populist leaders often connect elites to foreign adversaries as evidence of their corruption and disconnection from the general will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Trump makes several claims that Democrats and Biden will surrender to China. For example, he remarked, "And we'll start by saying, we're gonna start by saying that the Democrats are trying to rig this election because it's the only way they're gonna win. The only way they're gonna win is to rig it. Biden's surrendered your jobs to China (Trump, 2020g)." Despite the veracity of his claims being suspect, political narratives do not need to be factual. Their power comes from the emotional affect and priming they can elicit from a crowd (Schmitt, 2018, p. 489).

Throughout this speech, Trump also characterizes himself as a hero fighting for the country and his supporters. He makes the case that, despite Democrats coming after him with investigations, he remains their fighter, "Never forget that they're coming after me because I am fighting for you, and it's true." In this case, Trump uses the style of a populist leader. This analysis argues that Trump labels himself as the people's voice and an outsider. His claim to

legitimacy comes from a crafted image as a resolute opposition to the "Deep State." He also makes use of simultaneously claiming to be the victim of Democrats' unjustified political retribution, yet he is also the only one who can fight and win. He can be their hero "…returning power to you, the American people (Trump, 2020g)."

September 13, 2020 - Remarks at a "Latinos for Trump" Roundtable in Las Vegas, Nevada

Unlike previous addresses, these remarks are directed to a specific, important constituency in Nevada. Trump spoke to a roundtable of his Latino supporters and made the case that he, and not Biden, should represent their interests. As previously covered, Trump has negatively commented on immigration from Mexico and Central America. Yet, here, he discussed the "administration's unwavering devotion to our nation's incredible Latino and Hispanic American communities" and how Hispanic Americans "embody the American dream" because of their "shared values of faith and family, hard work and patriotism (Trump, 2020h)." This set of remarks is helpful because of the different audience from a typical Trump rally, despite being a campaign strategy to weaken Democrat's support base in the state. The change in audience could highlight elements of Trump's rhetoric that can contribute to our understanding of how Trump caters to melodramatic political discourse.

Trump began by examining Latinos' policy priorities and how Joe Biden has been "… betraying the Hispanic American community … for 47 years." Specifically, Biden has betrayed Latinos by "... sending their jobs to China, raising taxes on their family and small businesses, making their communities less safe, attacking their values, and trapping their children [in] failing government schools (Trump, 2020h)." In the rest of the remarks, Trump took questions from his supporters, most of whom are business owners concerned with the state's COVID-19 restrictions and regulations. The audience is mainly supportive of Trump and largely conservative-leaning.

The election is an opportunity for Nevada's conservative Latinos to regain power from the Democratic party. Trump raised the stakes by telling these voters that should Joe Biden win, the issues they are concerned over will worsen. For example, Trump remarked: (1) "They are going to hurt Social Security, we're gonna save it, and we're gonna keep it;" (2) "And by the way, every city that's in trouble, every state. You look, Democrats, liberal Democrats. They've run them into the ground, every city. The Republican cities are doing well, great actually;" (3) and "Joe Biden will eliminate religious liberty (Trump, 2020h)."

These quotes demonstrate how Trump transforms the vulnerability in a democracy where elections matter into precarity (Kydd, 2021). These voters are upset with the party in power in their state, but Trump primes his supporters to believe that shared political power is always an attack on their most immediate safety and rights. This escalation of the political stakes is how Trump securitizes the election, which is how he transforms everyday politics into something that needs to be secured. For Trump, the next election cannot be conceived as a process of popular sovereignty but a competition that, if lost, will bring insecurity and loss of power. When he does discuss the election, he then decries its vulnerability and likelihood of being rigged. For instance, Trump said:

> "…We have a number of states where we have some very shaky Democrats and the only way they're gonna win is with rigged ballots. And if you look at the history of these ballots over the last two or three years, you'll see some horrible things where there's been tremendous cheating and the press knows that, but they don't wanna report it because they're fake news (Trump, 2020h)."

His narrative around the integrity of the election cannot be separated from how he frames the issues implicated in the election results. How Trump co-opts the sense of precarity in a vulnerable economic and political moment is also how he intensifies the feeling of melodrama and victimization, a state that only he can save his supporters from.

September 19, 2020 - Remarks at a "Great American Comeback" Rally in Fayetteville, North Carolina

This set of remarks is much like the other rallies, but there is an emphasis on a "comeback" rather than "Making America Great Again." Both acknowledge that an America that should exist no longer exists; however, a "comeback" figures more of a competition than an action. A "comeback" means that there is an entity to overcome towards the final goal of the restoration of America. In the remarks, Trump ran through the policy issues most important to his constituency while adding his rhetoric to elicit the intensified affect Anker (2014) describes in her five conventions of melodramatic political discourse. Such rhetoric as, "I'm with America. Biden is with China. If Biden wins, China wins. If we win, America wins," and "Joe Biden is weak. He's supported, he's supported every globalist sellout of North Carolina (Trump, 2020i)." Also, "We wanna win. We gotta win. We wanna save our country from the radical left, the radical left crazies (Trump, 2020i)." These remarks again represent Trump's demagogic style, which is repeated across policy arenas.

Even in the one mention of the election's integrity, Trump said, "Get out and vote. And watch to make sure they're not cheating, which they will be (Trump, 2020i)." This quote is again indicative of Trump's rhetoric securitizing the election. By almost guaranteeing that there will be fraud and asking supporters to keep watch, Trump makes the election about the vulnerability of losing to the precarity around the idea of losing. No longer is it about accepting the possibility

that the electorate might choose a different path for the country; now, it is about rationalizing a potential loss because of certain fraud. It is a solution that stems from insecurity, seeking a problem that, when applied to an election, harms democracy. During the 2020 election, Trump supporters did keep watch of ballot boxes set up for mail-in ballots, and in some cases, they were sources of intimidation for voters (Wingett Sanchez, 2022).

While most of these quotes maintain elements of melodramatic discourse as they are intended to create a sense of victimization of his supporters and describe the villainy of Democrats and Joe Biden, Trump concluded his speech with far more melodramatic rhetoric. As he wrapped up his remarks at the rally, Trump again staged the election as much more than about individual policy battles but above the very definition of the American identity, and to lose the election means being excluded from that definition. For instance, he made the following statements:

> (1) "We will stop the radical indoctrination of our students and
> restore patriot education to our schools, patriotic education.
> We will teach our children to love our country, honor our
> history, and always respect our great American flag
> (Trump, 2020i)."
> (2) "This is the most important election we've ever had.
> Remember it. We're gonna be a socialist country. We're
> going to be a communist country. These people are
> further—they're much further left than socialism. These
> people are sick (Trump, 2020i)."

(3) "We stand on the shoulders of American heroes who
crossed the oceans, blazed the trails, settled the continent,
tamed the wilderness, dug out the Panama Canal, laid down
the railroads, raised up the skyscrapers, won two World
Wars, defeated fascism and communism—[cheers and
applause]—and made America the single greatest nation in
the history of the world. And you haven't seen anything
yet—[cheers and applause]—haven't seen anything
(Trump, 2020i)."

(4) "Proud citizens like you helped build this country, and
together, we are taking back our country. We are returning
power to you, the American people. With your help, with
your devotion, and your drive, we are going to keep on
working, we are going to keep on fighting, and we are
going to keep on winning, winning, winning (Trump,
2020i)."

These quotes all place American identity on the ballot for Trump's supporters. To lose the
election is to fail in the fight against left-wing, communist indoctrination of children, fail as
citizens to take back the country, and fail as descendants of past American heroes.

**September 21, 2020 - Remarks at a "Fighting for the American Worker" Rally in Vandalia,
Ohio**

The next set of results was similar to the "Great American Comeback" rally held only
two days before Trump's stop in Vandalia, Ohio. However, here, Trump discussed in more detail

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his claim that "fake ballots," which, given his previous remarks, are assumed to be mail-in ballots, will change the election's results in the Democrats' favor. He began by calling the election a "mess," which he claims to be in the interest of Democrats because these "fake" ballots, Trump declared, are not being sent to Republican areas. It is noticeable that Trump does not accept the idea of a fair and unbiased election. He believes that Democrats are working together to manipulate the outcome. A free and fair election does not clearly distinguish between good and evil but only determines the winner and loser. As Anker (2014) discusses, victims and villains are discursive elements, and the style of discourse grants Trump's election narrative the emotional appeal to which his supporters are drawn. For example, he says of the election:

> "This is a real affront to our democracy. This is a horrible thing
> that's going on. And the Democrats know it and, you know, they
> say, "Well, he's not for our great heritage. He is fighting our vote."
> No, I'm not fighting our vote. You have ballots that you go out and
> you can get, you could request, as you know, you can request them
> and that's fine. But if you're not requesting them, when you get
> millions of ballots, 80 million, they say, all over the United States,
> where the hell are they going? Who's sending them? Who is
> getting them? Who's sending them back? What's happening with
> the transportation? Who's guarding the lockboxes? They know it's
> a fraud waiting to happen (Trump, 2020j)."

Despite the election not yet occurring and the ballots not yet counted, Trump maintains that a fraudulent election is being carried out. This is, in part, priming his audience for a change in the narrative if he were to lose, an attempt to put pressure on states using mail-in ballots, and a get-

out-the-vote message to his supporters. Yet, Trump's messaging around mail-in ballots also indicates the "current aggression" Clement et al. (2017) describe, in which a current situation is characterized as an immoral injury of a victim that necessitates future action. In this case, using "fraudulent" mail-in ballots is the beginning of Trump's manufactured moral outrage that escalates when he loses the election.

September 25, 2020 - Remarks at a "Black Voices for Trump" Rally in Atlanta, Georgia

This next series of remarks is also in front of a new audience. It is a "Black Voices for Trump" rally for Black voters in Atlanta, Georgia. Like the roundtable of Hispanic supporters, Trump courted a predominantly Democratic constituency hoping to draw votes away from Biden in an important swing state, despite past rhetoric that would make appealing to the Black community difficult. Also interesting about this set of remarks is that Trump later cast doubt about the vote totals coming out of Fulton County, where Atlanta is located. He is currently charged by Fulton County for his efforts to reverse Georgia's election results.

Also, like the roundtable with Hispanic supporters, this rally's message is similar: Democrats have taken you for granted and have not delivered, but Trump will deliver for the Black community. Trump said the same line in these remarks as he did with his Hispanic supporters: "I did more for the Black community in 47 months ... I saw they used that line, so I don't wanna ruin it by saying it a second time. It was in the video, but I will say it again. Than Joe Biden did in 47 years (Trump, 2020k)." In these remarks, Trump again can identify the source of insecurity felt by his supporters and craft a narrative that his opponents cause their current struggles. For instance, Trump stated:

"Racial justice begins with Joe Biden's retirement from public life.
[cheers and applause] So today I'm urging Black Americans to
walk away from the corrupt, hateful, divisive, and very extreme,
and they are going crazy, Democrat party. On no issue has the
Democrat party more totally failed the Black community than
public safety (Trump, 2020k)."

Trump can describe a sense of precarity, assign characterizations of victims, villains, and heroes, and offer a simple solution to end the insecurity. This use of dramatic conventions of discourse is helpful as it allows new identities to form out of injustice and a dichotomous moral divide. Trump sets the stage for Black voters to see Democrats as the source of their insecurity only to make an effort to redefine the constituency as naturally conservative. For instance, Trump remarked, "At no time before has there been a clearer choice between two parties, two visions, two philosophies, two agendas for the future. Now, you know that. There's never been a difference like this. Our opponents want our children to grow up in a socialist nation (Trump, 2020k)." Moreover, he offered a new conception of Black identity here:

"This glorious country is the shared heritage of all Americans. In
every generation, Black patriots poured out their blood, sweat,
heart, and soul to defend American liberty and to realize our
founding promise that we are all made equal by the hand of
almighty God. [cheers and applause] African American leaders
lifted up the conscience of our nation to end slavery and
segregation and secure your civil rights (Trump, 2020k)."

Here, Trump is basing his strategic narrative on local myths, as described by Schmitt (2018), by referencing "Black heroes like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, and Thurgood Marshall" as being in the linage of Trump's conception of African American identity. In other words, these leaders of the Black community would not support police reform, Black Lives Matter, or Democrats' left-wing policies. Trump buttresses his melodramatic style with overtures to local foundational myths to legitimize his reconceptualization of the American identity and moral economy.

September 29, 2020 - Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio

Fox News anchor Chris Wallace moderated the first of two presidential debates. Unlike the preceding data sources, a debate presents the opportunity to have the candidates, Donald Trump and Joe Biden, speak with more structure that could unveil differences in rhetoric. Most of the debate revolved around responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and other policy issues. This was also the debate where then-President Trump answered Chris Wallace's question about condemning white supremacists and militia groups. At first, Trump said, "Sure, I'm willing to do that," and continued, "I would say almost everything I see is from the left-wing not from the right wing (Trump, 2020l)." After delaying denouncing a group, Trump responded, "You want to call them? What do you want to call them? Give me a name, give me a name, go ahead who would you like me to condemn (Trump, 2020l)." Biden then entered the conversation and suggested Trump condemn the Proud Boys. Trump then gave his well-known answer, "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by. But I'll tell you what, I'll tell you what: somebody's got to do something about Antifa and the left because this is not a right-wing problem this is a left-wing. This is a left-wing problem (Trump, 2020l)." Members of the Proud Boys did not see this as a

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denouncement but instead as a message of encouragement (Frenkel & Karni, 2020). Despite Trump later condemning the Proud Boys in a separate statement, he has in the past struggled to denounce similar groups, including in the aftermath of a 2017 white supremacist protest that turned deadly. Then, Trump responded that "very fine people" were on both sides (Associated Press, 2020). This is the danger of a black-and-white distinction of national identity and moral legitimacy. The Proud Boys, who were an instigating force on January 6th, are a significant group in the conservative constituency with 72 active chapters in 2021, an increase after January 6th (SPLC, 2022, p. 18). As a part of Trump's coalition, the Proud Boys do see themselves as victims-turned-heroes and are willing to engage in violence in defense of their beliefs.

The debate then turns to the topic of election integrity toward the end. Chris Wallace asked both candidates to share their confidence that the election would be fair. Trump began his answer by again claiming that he was a target of a coup shortly after taking office and later argued that mail-in ballots are a "disaster." He continued by accusing Democrats of trying to rig the election by sending unsolicited ballots and references instances in which he believes Trump ballots are being discarded in Democratic Party-led states. Trump described his concern by saying, "There's fraud. They found 'em in creeks. They found some, with the name Trump, just happened to have the name Trump, just the other day in a wastepaper basket. They're being sent all over the place (Trump, 2020l)." This is also the point at which he mentions postal service workers specifically, claiming some have been selling ballots. He continued, "Did you see what's going on? Take a look at West Virginia, mailman selling the ballots. They're being sold. They're being dumped in rivers. This is a horrible thing for our country (Trump, 2020l)."

Trump is setting the groundwork for his post-election efforts to have results overturned by establishing a sense of injustice, naming who is responsible, and describing how if he loses, the election was stolen. He continued with the following demand of his supporters:

> "I'm urging my supporters to go into the polls and watch very
>
> carefully, because that's what has to happen. I am urging them to
>
> do it. As you know, today there was a big problem. In Philadelphia,
>
> they went in to watch. They're called poll watchers, a very safe,
>
> very nice thing. They were thrown out. They weren't allowed to
>
> watch. You know why? Because bad things happen in Philadelphia.
>
> Bad things. And I am urging, I am urging my people. I hope it's
>
> going to be a fair election (Trump, 2020l)."

This is yet another quote that aligns with the tenants of melodramatic political discourse. The implication that "bad things" are going to happen during the election raises the stakes and intensity, which Trump uses strengthens his call to action.

October 09, 2020 - Interview with Rush Limbaugh on the EIB Network

Following is a transcribed interview of Trump with known conservative radio show host Rush Limbaugh. This interview demonstrated parts of the thesis argument not yet seen in the previous pieces of data in two compelling ways. First, the interview highlighted more of Trump's personality and populist style by being in a different environment. This is the first set of remarks in which he responded to questions from one supporter as opposed to a traditional rally or interview with reporters. This more informal setting highlights Trump's personality in that he is more conversational and with less structure. When talking about the border wall, Trump claimed

it was "one of the biggest projects, government projects ever (Trump, 2020m)." When talking

about how negative his press coverage is, Trump said, "They said that the one that got worse

than me was Abraham Lincoln. I said, "I disagree." There are many more examples of Trump's

populist personality throughout the interview, much more than in rallies. This personality

suggests that Trump is the only leader representing the people, and the primary target of the

country's adversaries.

Second, a close reading of the transcribed interview demonstrated that, while Trump is

the central actor in the "Stop the Steal" narrative, other political actors, such as Rush Limbaugh,

can play a crucial part in advancing a narrative. At several points throughout the interview, Rush

would tie the "Stop the Steal" narrative to elements of American national mythology. For

example, when discussing Trump being attacked by his opponents, Rush said:

> "He's hated and reviled for loving America, for believing that
>
> America is good. His opponents think America's racist, sexist,
>
> bigoted, homophobic. Hell, we may as well still be a slave state as
>
> far as they're concerned. It's outrageous how they've poisoned the
>
> minds of our young people and got our young people hating their
>
> own country."

This quote exemplifies Trump's cult of personality, which is the state in which an individual

achieves an idealized and heroic image. A cult of personality requires effort from both the person

being idolized and the audience doing the idolizing (Bond & Neville-Shepard, 2021). Past

reporting and research have explored Trump's cult-like hold on QAnon members (Carrier, 2021;

Rothschild, 2021). The cult of personality surrounding Trump is a critical factor in understanding

the events of January 6th. Without a hero in the story, the narrative would lack impact. For many

people, Trump is that hero, and they view him as faultless. Many people regard him as a symbol of America itself, and any attacks directed towards him are perceived as attacks on the nation.

Post-Election Remarks

The following analysis examines Trump's remarks after his election loss in the presidential election on Tuesday, November 3, 2020. The final tally in the Electoral College had Biden surpassing the needed 270 votes with 306 votes, leaving Trump with 232. While the margin seems large, Trump was close to securing the presidency if only a few swing states had gone his way (Swasey & Jin, 2020). The small margins played into Trump's concern over the legitimacy of the election results. Specifically, the impact mail-in ballots were having only election seemed to convince Trump and his supporters further that their concern was now an injustice. Even before the last of the votes were counted and the media called the election, Trump claimed the results were already illegitimate, despite members of his team telling him otherwise (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022, pp. 202-203).

November 05, 2020 - Remarks on the Presidential Election

In his first remarks since election day and claiming victory, Trump discussed his team's efforts to "protect the integrity of our very important 2020 election (Trump, 2020n)." These efforts took the form of contesting the election results in several states and, in some cases, attempting to stop the count of mail-in ballots (Kilgore, 2022). He identified several sources of fraud mail-in votes, "phony polls," and a lack of observers in polling locations. Trump deemed the system as "corrupt" and, by extension, the people in the system. This marks the first time polling locations and poll workers fell into the dichotomy of the good vs. evil divide that Anker (2014) describes as the force that organizes a narrative by defining who the characters are

(victims, villains, and heroes) and the moral reasoning behind the characterization. In the swing states where Trump deemed the election was stolen, poll workers fell into that dichotomy by being judged as having conspired in the fraud. Election workers in Ohio and Georgia have been the targets of harassment, intimidation, and threats since the 2020 election (Carr Smyth, 2023).

According to Trump's remarks, Democrats in these polling locations were keeping Republican observers outside while they counted fraudulent ballots. The list of villains is increasing to encompass more than just Joe Biden and Democrats, but also poll workers. Anker (2014) describes melodramatic political discourse as a way to tie the public to an injury sustained by the state to legitimize the state expanding its power to seek redemption. In discussing his loss of the election, Trump makes it also an injustice against his supporters and the country. He remarked that only legal votes need to be counted, "So that's the way this country is going to win. That's the way the United States will win (Trump, 2020n)." That quote implies that the Americans who did not vote for Trump either did so fraudulently or cannot be considered when deciding the United States' political representation. Trump continued, "We're hearing stories that are horror stories—absolute horror stories (Trump, 2020n)." These quotes raise the rhetorical intensity of Trump's narrative that the election was stolen.

December 02, 2020 - Remarks on the Presidential Election

In these remarks, Trump continued the "Stop the Steal" narrative and argued that Democrats and those behind them corrupted the electoral system by way of manipulating polling to suppress his support, flooding the electorate with unsolicited mail-in ballots, and keeping the ballot counting process behind closed doors. Trump remarked, "They had it covered. And perhaps they did, very sadly for our country. It was all very, very strange. Within days after the election, we witnessed an orchestrated effort to anoint a winner, even while many key states were

still being counted (Trump, 2020o)." Democrats' actions, according to Trump, had cost him a legitimate victory and disenfranchised his 74 million voters. Trump stated that it is necessary to fight back against the Democrats, protect the electoral process, and uphold the Constitution. The purpose of the December 2, 2020, remarks was to "detail some of the shocking irregularities, abuses, and fraud that have been revealed in recent weeks (Trump, 2020o)." Trump proceeded to speak on alleged irregularities in each swing state he needed to win. While many of these later statements are not new compared to earlier remarks, Trump continued to highlight the injustice at the heart of the election integrity narrative:

> "Dramatically eroding the integrity of our elections was the
>
> Democrat's number one priority for a simple reason. They wanted
>
> to steal the 2020 presidential election. All of the Democrat efforts
>
> to expand mail-in balloting laid the groundwork for the systematic
>
> and pervasive fraud that occurred in this election (Trump, 2020o)."

Trump makes clear that Democrats are responsible for the deep corruption he claims is plaguing the electoral system. By so clearly personifying Democrats as the victims, the complex nature of the electoral system, which admittedly does have some issues, is simplified into a story of bad actors having injured those Americans casting legal votes.

This is reminiscent of a standard Republican narrative that Democrats support illegal immigration to increase their share of electoral power (Jacobs & Sebenius, 2018). In this way, Trump's election narrative builds on other melodramatic discourse, such as immigration and deep state corruption. Furthermore, the frequent use of intensely emotional rhetoric used to describe the election and Democrats serves two purposes according to melodramatic political discourse. Anker (2014) conceptualizes intensified affect as the use of rhetoric to identify

suffering situations and draw anger toward those causing the suffering. This thesis looks to instances where Trump references the injustices endured by his voters at the hands of Democrats as moments in which he traffics in intensely emotional rhetoric. First, the increasingly emotive language around the election being stolen solidifies the available justification for his supporters to feel victimized and cheated. Second, Trump's rhetoric to characterize Democrats as he does makes them appear as primordial villains to America. When used to label political actors as villains, melodramatic political discourse aims to convince the audience that the division in the moral economy of good and evil is longstanding and that villains have always existed. By recognizing himself and his supporters as victims, Trump acknowledges that they did not deserve the harm inflicted upon them and that the perpetrator acted against an innocent party. I would categorize this set of remarks as setting the groundwork for Trump and his supporters to justify the need to halt the election certification and ensure elections can no longer be manipulated.

December 05, 2020 - Remarks at a Campaign Rally Prior to the Georgia State Senate Election Runoff in Valdosta, Georgia

The following two remarks are before the Georgia Senate race runoff election. Despite being on the stage to help members of his party, Trump used most of his speech to continue his narrative that the election was stolen. He relied on the same stories of manipulated votes and "late-night dumps" of mail-in ballots. Even when he occasionally mentioned then Senators Loeffler and Purdue, he called on the crowd not to allow the Georgia runoff also to be stolen by the Democrats, as they did with the presidential election. He put the election into a heightened context by saying that the polls will "decide whether your children will grow up in a socialist country or whether they will grow up in a free country (Trump, 2020p)." Not only does this fear of socialism allude directly to a trope common to American political discourse, but it also

deepens the narrative of powerlessness described by Anker (2014) as a convention of melodramatic political discourse. It raises the stakes to allow the election results to stand.

The following is a set of two paragraphs from Trump's speech in Valdosta, Georgia, which is also found in his speech in Dalton, Georgia. In this section of his remarks, Trump's rhetoric makes two essential connections to the theoretical argument. First, he heightens the rhetoric by using more visceral words and phrases; and second, he makes the conflict over the election seem like one central to the country's future and based in the country's past struggles:

> "From Atlanta to Augusta, from Savannah to Columbus and from Athens to right here, right here, this is a nice place. It's a nice place, Valdosta. We inherit the legacy of generations of American patriots who gave their blood, sweat, and tears to defend our country and our freedom. We stand on the shoulders of American heroes who crossed the oceans, settled the continent, tamed the wilderness, laid down the railroads, raised up the great skyscrapers, won two World Wars, defeated fascism and communism, and made America into the single greatest nation in the history of the world. And if they get in, and add me into the group, if you don't mind, we will be greater than ever before without question. [applause] The best is yet to come.
>
> Proud citizens like you helped build this country, and together we are taking back our country. Our fight to drain the Washington swamp and reclaim America's destiny has just begun. We will not

bend. We will not break. We will not yield. We will never give in.

We will never give up, and we will never back down. We will

never, ever surrender —[applause]—because we are Americans

and our hearts bleed red, white, and blue (Trump, 2020p)."

When analyzing the rhetoric of this rally, it is important to know that the purpose of the previous

remarks was to update the press and his supporters regarding his campaign's effort to overturn

the election results and provide their "evidence" of voter fraud. The context of being at a rally

might explain the reason the transcript read more emotionally and actively. From saying that

Democrats support a "communistic form of government" to the introduction of the crowd

chanting, "Stop the steal! Stop the steal! Stop the steal! Stop the steal!"

January 04, 2021 - Remarks at a Campaign Rally Prior to the Georgia State Senate
Election Runoff in Dalton, Georgia

Again, Trump's subsequent remarks are at another rally for Senators Loeffler and Perdue

and the runoff elections. By this point, Trump's legal team had started exhausting its legal

avenues (Feuer & Montague, 2020). Trump had just had a phone conversation with Georgia

Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, in which he asked Raffensperger to find him over 11,000

votes (Gardner & Firozi, 2021). The runoff for which he held the rally was scheduled for the

following day. There was concern among Republicans that the incumbents would lose and

further lend credibility to Joe Biden's victory in the state a few months earlier (McGraw et al.,

2021). As a result, the tone and discourse of this rally's remarks grew more heightened and

emotional and reflected melodramatic political discourse conventions. For instance, Trump told

his supporters, "The fate of our country is at stake. It's in your hands. You must deliver a Republican victory so big that the Democrats can't steal it or cheat it away (Trump, 2021a)."

Throughout the speech, Trump presented his typical "Stop the Steal" narrative, continued his characterization of Democrats as villains in his story, and tied it back to elements of the culture war between Democrats and Republicans. First, Trump recited the same injustice at the core of the "Stop the Steal" narrative, "But when you win in a landslide, and they steal it, and it's rigged, it's not acceptable. Not acceptable (Trump, 2021a)." Second, he set the stakes of the election for his voters and named the villains in his story: "If these two don't win, and if we don't take the presidency, you have a country that would be run by Schumer, Pelosi, and Biden. [booing] The people of Georgia will be at the mercy of the left wing, socialist, communist, Marxists (Trump, 2021a)." Third, he resurfaced the moral dichotomy underlying the 2020 election myth that people like the Democrats, "Never-Trump" Republicans, and anyone who rejects his narrative must "hate our country, and they despise Georgia values. And I think a lot of you despise them (Trump, 2021a)." He ended his speech with a message for Mike Pence, hoping that he "comes through for us" and, "if he doesn't come through, I won't like him quite as much (Trump, 2021a)."

January 6th Remarks

January 06, 2021 - Remarks to Supporters Prior to the Storming of the United States Capitol

The next set of remarks is the most well-known in the Trump era. This speech was given at the "Save America" rally a few hours before the attack on the Capitol. Much is known about the context in which the speech was given due to the Congressional Committee's Final Report.

For example, the report describes in detail the effect of Trump's December 19, 2020, tweet in which he writes, "Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, it will be wild (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022, p. 499)!". The plan to storm the Capitol had been set in the minds of many of the most reactionary groups in the "Stop the Steal" coalition. The report describes the weeks leading up to the January 6th speech in which Pro-Trump organizations, social media groups, and right-wing influencers all mobilized to prepare their segments of the right-wing base to be ready for a storming of the Capitol (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022, pp. 502-503). They were convinced that victory was imminent because they understood Trump promoting the rally as a call to action to physically "Stop the Steal (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022, pp. 512-514)." The stage was set for Anker's (2014) final convention of melodramatic political discourse, the expectation of triumph over the villains and the redemption of their victims.

Once at the Capitol, the signs of escalation were unmistakable. The Trump administration knew that members of the crowd were armed and refused to enter the crowd waiting in front of the stage so as not to have their weapons confiscated before they intended to use them at the Capitol (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022, p. 69). Meanwhile, Trump also knew that, after trying every legal avenue to challenge the election, his only hope was to have Vice President Mike Pence challenge the results of the election, which Pence argued was not in the powers granted to the office of the Vice President (Glantz, 2021). The January 6th remarks were not the first time Trump mentioned Pence having the capacity to decertify the electors and return them to the states. He mentioned it in the previous comments on January 4th and said he would be disappointed in Pence if he didn't. Despite Trump knowing before taking the stage that Pence would not challenge the electoral college count, he continued to call on Pence to be courageous and decertify the election (Restuccia & Hughes, 2022).

Again, I will highlight two paragraphs toward the end of his remarks. In the preceding parts of these remarks, Trump emphasized the same talking points as he had in each of the remarks after the election. Still, in this speech, Trump continued to describe the election loss as a national injury and, by extension, an injury to his supporters. He said:

> "We are the greatest country on earth, and we are headed
>
> and were headed in the right direction. You know the wall
>
> is built; we are doing record numbers at the wall. Now they
>
> want to take down the wall. Let's let everyone flow in.
>
> Let's let everybody flow in. We did a great job on the wall.
>
> Remember the wall; they said it could never be done, one
>
> of the largest infrastructure projects we have ever had in
>
> this country, and it has had a tremendous impact and we got
>
> rid of catch and release, we got rid of all of the stuff that we
>
> had to live with. But now the caravans they think Biden is
>
> getting in the caravans are forming again. They want to
>
> come in again and rip off our country, can't let it happen.
>
> As this enormous crowd shows, we have truth and justice
>
> on our side. We have a deep and enduring love for America
>
> in our hearts. We love our country. We have overwhelming
>
> pride in this great country. We have it deep in our souls.
>
> Together we are determined to defend and preserve
>
> government of the people, by the people, and
>
> for the people (Trump, 2021b)."

In the first paragraph, Trump began with a reference to the American exceptionalism myth and then claimed the size of the crowd means "...we have truth and justice on our side." Both of these references are attempts to solidify him and his supporters as morally good and simultaneously create a morally evil group. Anker (2014) centers her exploration of melodramatic discourse around national identity because, when tied to a moral division of good and evil, it is often used to justify the actions of those claiming their national identity against those who aren't in the name of defending the country. Thus, when Trump says, "Together we are determined to defend and preserve government of the people, by the people, and for the people (Trump, 2021b)," it is essential to question what he means by the people. This characterization of specific identities as "true" Americans is also reminiscent of how populist leaders use the "people" and their "general will" to justify their opposing of the "elites" as being a fundamental disagreement over who has a legitimate claim to the nation and the power it wields.

January 06, 2021 - Videotaped Remarks During the Insurrection at the United States Capitol

By 2:12 p.m. on January 6th, while the Chambers of Congress were split into their joint sessions, the rioters were in control of both chambers, forcing the evacuation of Vice President Pence and Democrat House leaders, Nancy Pelosi, Steny Hoyer, and James Clyburn (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022, pp. 664-665). By 2:44 p.m., Ashli Babbitt, one of those who died in the riot, was shot by Capitol Police trying to break through a door to the Speaker's lobby (H.R. Rep. No. 117-663, 2022, p. 665). It was not until 6:00 p.m. that Trump released a video to Twitter asking his supporters to go home. In Tweets earlier in the day, Trump blamed the Vice President for not having the courage to halt the certification of the election and later asked his supporters to remain peaceful. The transcript of the released video strikes a similar paradox. He began by

victimizing his supporters, acknowledging that, "I know your pain. I know you're hurt. We had an election that was stolen from us;" however, he also asked his supporters to go home, saying, "We have to have law and order. We have to respect our great people in law and order (Trump, 2021c)." This contradiction between Trump's acknowledging that the riot was warranted and the need for law and order symbolizes a lack of accountability. Melodramatic political discourse privileges those characterized as heroes pursuing redemption regardless of who gets injured (Anker, 2014, p. 37). Trump continued, "We love you. You're very special. You've seen what happens. You see the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil (Trump, 2021c)." His rhetoric here makes it possible to infer that Trump did not want to disavow his supporters completely. Ultimately, many of his supporters did not find the victory they sought and the triumph over evil that a melodramatic narrative promises. This, however, does not end the melodramatic political discourse surrounding January 6th. The event merely transforms into vignettes helpful to each party's narrative that the opposition is an existential threat to the country.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Despite the contested nature of January 6th and the broad analysis of what occurred, this thesis attempted to lay out a different perspective that used narrative analysis to make a larger discussion of the type of discourse surrounding the lead-up to and day of the riot. Additionally, this thesis explores how January 6th might have happened without falling into the partisanship or "culture war" rhetoric that plagues much of the discussion surrounding it. Like many other contemporary political phenomena, January 6th has fallen squarely in the center of the war between opposing political coalitions, loosely defined as conservative and liberal, to determine the values, beliefs, and practices of the United States. However, this difficulty in approaching the topic spurred the problem this thesis wrestles with and the questions it answers. This chapter will revisit the thesis's argument and findings and discuss its limitations and implications for American politics.

The difficulty in approaching January 6th might also be the answer to forming a compelling theory to identify the factors of its occurrence. In other words, January 6th is an inherently narrative-heavy topic. At the core of the demands of many of those present at the Capitol on January 6th was a belief in a story that they had been cheated somehow. Since then, both sides of the aisle have crafted entire storylines around why the riot happened, who is responsible, and who are the real victims. Thus, a compelling explanation for the phenomenon would also draw on the narrative leading up to January 6th that drew Republicans to the Ellipse

and the National Mall in Washington, D.C. However, only presenting the "Stop the Steal" conspiracy as the principal factor for the attack on the Capitol would not have enough explanatory power, nor would it have been a novel approach. A style of discourse is needed to explain the elements of January 6th that I feel are left out of present research: intensity, enduring popularity, and representativeness. The style of discourse chosen as the basis for my theoretical argument was Elizabeth Anker's (2014) conception of a melodramatic political discourse.

This study aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) Does Trump's narrative of fraud in the 2020 election fall into melodramatic political discourse? (2) How might this style of discourse contribute to our understanding of the riot on January 6th and (3)What implications might January 6th and melodramatic political discourse have for American politics? This approach argues that the "Stop the Steal" narrative was the most consequential on January 6th and analyzes how Trump contributed. This thesis organized its argument into three elements. Firstly, this thesis contends that January 6th is a narrative phenomenon more than one of only radicalization or socioeconomic decline. Secondly, this thesis applies the stylistic elements of melodramatic political discourse to the election fraud narrative to answer how January 6th became as intense, enduringly popular, and representative as it was and continues to be. Lastly, the thesis makes the point that, in viewing January 6th as a narrative case study and a contribution to a style of discourse, the forces that led to its creation continue to operate and, if ignored, can be entrenched. This chapter will examine this last element.

I have chosen to analyze the events of January 6th as a case study in political discourse. This approach can shed light on three crucial aspects of the situation: its intensity, representativeness, and continuing popularity. While other analyses of January 6th touch on all three factors, few provide an explanation that connects them to a particular type of discourse.

This thesis utilized a case study approach to analyze the narrative of Trump's remarks before and after the 2020 election and until January 6th. This contrasts with the media's coverage of January 6th, which revolved mainly around footage of Trump's supporters entering the Capitol and monitoring online message boards and social media. Utilizing such mediums for analysis can potentially bias all Trump supporters as having similar intentions as those of the most reactionary anti-government militias, such as the Proud Boys and Three Percenters. James Jasper (2021) warns of "the mob trope" that reduces protests and protesters to unruly, violent crowds. Jasper (2021) argues that in some respects, January 6th undid much of the work for journalists and politicians to not revert to old ideas of the dangers of political protest that disregard the academic work done to understand "how" these crowds form rather than "why."

An analysis of narrative to make inferences around the type of discourse, when limited to Trump, retains the explanatory power of previous research designs but with a perspective that attempts to rise above purely partisan explanations or explanations of populism weakening democracy. It is essential to mention that melodramatic political discourse does not present itself in one ideology of American politics. Instead, it describes an ecosystem of reactionary political narratives from both sides of the political aisle. Each party is capable of relying on politically expedient rhetorical tropes such as those reflected in Elizabeth Anker's (2014) five conventions of melodramatic political discourse: (1) moral economy of good and evil, (2) victims, villains, and heroes, (3) intensified affect, (4) narrative of powerlessness, and (5) anticipation of triumph.

This thesis argues that Trump's remarks, debate performances, and interviews are melodramatic in style. This style privileges the over-the-top emotional expression of political dissatisfaction in response to feelings of "unfreedom" (Anker, 2014, p. 15). I contend that the analysis of the data above supports such an argument. Trump's familiarity with the culture wars,

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long-standing conservative myths, and his populist style imbued his participation in the "Stop the Steal" narrative with all five elements of melodramatic political discourse. These elements provide evidence to infer that the discourse style did play some role in ratcheting up the intensity of the attack on the Capitol. The rhetoric Trump used was not representative of most political campaigns for president. The narrative presented by Trump regarding the election involves claims of theft, disenfranchisement, and an assault on American values. Trump's populist style, combined with a broad application of a moral economy and Manichean characterizations of victims and villains, meant that the "Stop the Steal" narrative captured the diversity of the Republican constituency. Lastly, Trump, by consistently claiming Democrats are out to destroy American conservative values, made the events of January 6th and the issue of election integrity more about a fight to preserve the existence of Republican identity. Thus, January 6th was transmuted from a politically misguided and reactionary act of violence into a battle for the preservation of conservative ideological preeminence in American political life, much like how January 6th for neoliberal Democrats is about the lurking threat of regressive, anti-democratic conservatism at the hands of Trump's demagoguery.

Implications for American Politics

Importantly, rather than portraying January 6th as an example of a thwarted coup led by an easily influenced, white working-class mob with insidious political intentions, an examination of a single narrative and the larger discourse it is styled after presents the possibility that January 6th might be a reflection of a genre of American politics. A partisan or ideological portrayal of January 6th can further fuel the style of discourse that may be responsible for the event. This type of politics is not exclusive to any particular group or actor. Instead, the elements needed for January 6th to occur may be tied to the characteristics of American national mythology that

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many on both sides of the ideological divide might avoid discussing. Myths of rugged individualism, American exceptionalism, and revolutions against tyrannical authority resonate with the narrative and discourse leading up to January 6th. As discussed above, for a narrative to be successful, it has to resonate with local political myths (Schmitt, 2018). Furthermore, in Hofstadter's case (2008), paranoia, or melodrama, has always been a heuristic for the American electorate to view and understand politics. If there is one implication that can be drawn out of this application of the melodramatic political discourse to a singular event as unprecedented as January 6th, it is that a combination of forces is making American politics more dramatic and reactionary.

Trump and the rise of right-wing populism in Europe are apparent symptoms of a more significant issue in Western politics. Failure to identify the source might make the symptoms a persistent problem in their own right. Elizabeth Anker (2014) identifies the source as "unfreedom," or the state in which individuals feel wholly exposed by the political economy of the recent neoliberal era. Increasing poverty, inequality, and austerity have made the promise of personal prosperity ring hollow for many. Hochuli et al. (2021) argue that Western liberal democracy, as the "end of history," is crumbling under its weight, and anti-politics has taken its place. Melodramatic political discourse and the exaggerated political participation it engenders embody such anti-politics. These exaggerated expressions of emotion and the anti-politics behind them are "a counterintuitive attempt to ameliorate confusing feelings of powerlessness by imposing intense affect of victimization - including terror, pain, sorrow, helplessness, and shock - upon the self (Anker, 2014, p. 15)." Anker (2014) suggests that people cope with their growing powerlessness by seeking other ways to feel powerless, believing they can eventually overcome

it. In other words, the focus on the culture war comes at the cost of discussing rising wealth inequality, the epidemic of mental health issues, and the impacts of American foreign policy.

This phenomenon also trades one power imbalance for another. Those privileged enough not to feel the precarity of economic insecurity can often be the same people who profit from those partaking in these misguided expressions of political frustration, and both groups are abdicating their responsibilities as participants in an open democracy. They are what Amanda Ripley (2021) calls "conflict entrepreneurs." These actors engage in "high conflict," which is how Ripley (2021) conceives of the type of conflict that, like melodramatic political discourse, divides people into a good versus evil dichotomy. There is little use in pinning the rise of reactionary politics on one constituency when what they are reacting to might be just as anti-democratic. When both parties participate in reactionary, melodramatic political discourse, they participate in a race to the bottom, and the most marginalized stand to suffer the consequences. Mistaking the symptoms as the cause of democracy's recent decline is to guarantee that the forces behind them are allowed to continue until democracy becomes severely, and perhaps irrevocably, weakened.

Limitations

Like every study on a topic as consequential and contested as January 6th, there are limitations in its methods, theoretical argument, and analyses. First, the limitations of this thesis' methods' come from its qualitative narrative analysis approach. Some limitations presented by qualitative research are primarily about achieving a standard of rigor regarding the volume of data used and mitigating subjectivity. This thesis did not utilize computer-assisted data collection and analysis software, opting instead for a manual approach. This constrained the amount of data used, something more available in quantitative studies. However, this thesis makes up for this

limitation by adding more specificity to the research aims so more targeted data can be used and still provide valuable results. Furthermore, this study argues that people continually construct meaning and interpret the world around them. Despite this, the thesis addresses internal and external validity issues by attempting to limit unsupported subjective claims. Considering these limitations to qualitative studies, the approach of this research and the results it found still provide a compelling perspective on January 6th.

Second, this study possesses limitations to its theoretical argument. By their very nature, theories are limited by the need for future research and testing; however, this thesis' focus on narrative presents further limitations to its argument. Narratives are challenging to work with because their data sets do not come as easily packaged as quantitative data; they do not have clear-cut beginnings, ends, or consistency over time. Moreover, narratives can overlap or run parallel with others, so many narratives can be present at any event. However, those limitations are the qualities that make narratives even more important to study because they are reflections of the complexity of social phenomena. This thesis addresses this issue by limiting the scope of the research by focusing on one event, one narrative, one source, and one type of data. In other words, this thesis mitigates the ambiguity of narrative analysis through a combination of guidelines in conceptualizing the theoretical argument and research design.

Finally, the application of melodramatic political discourse in the data analysis chapter also presents some limitations. First, the research on melodramatic political discourse and its application is less developed than other, more traditional frameworks. Still, that limitation is also core to this study's contribution and importance. This thesis examines melodramatic political discourse by analyzing its parts and building on existing research. While melodramatic political discourse is unique in its utilization of a genre popular in art for political study, its core

conventions can be found in existing research. Second, the operationalization of melodramatic political discourse can also change from one study to the next. This thesis opted for a strict criterion that allows for replicability and comparison. Ultimately, these three areas of limitations justify future research to continue addressing the gaps in understanding the riot on January 6th.

Gaps for Future Research

Having completed this study, it is now essential to present the research gaps. The chief opportunity for future research is replicating this study with a different data source. Given that melodramatic political discourse is being used as a deductive theory to explain the forces behind January 6th, more research application of the theory is needed to test its promise as a tool to predict future violent political phenomena. For example, a content analysis of online message boards, such as 4Chan or 8Chan, using the conventions of the melodramatic political style, could help pinpoint more accurately which rhetoric was more successful. This study does not judge the impact of isolated pieces of rhetoric that had the most influence over individuals participating in the riot. Relatedly, a study of more traditional forms of right-wing media, such as TV programming and talk radio, could present novel interpretations of the conventions of melodrama. The nature of narratives, discourse, and rhetoric is that it is difficult to pinpoint one source, style, or medium.

A second avenue open to future research is expanding upon this study's theoretical foundations, namely that of a more critical narrative analysis. There is an opportunity for the implications of January 6th, the style of discourse, and motivations to be connected to the foundational myths of the United States, such as individualism, American exceptionalism, and the American dream. Narratives and the discourse they contribute to do not appear but are sourced from local political myths (Schmitt, 2018). Future research into narrative and discourse

should examine how events such as January 6th might continue to occur when the myths that once defined American national identity no longer fit contemporary socioeconomic conditions and social progress. Ultimately, research of this type on this topic, and with an eye to critical analysis, could present itself more valuable in a prescriptive sense and offer a basis by which internal threats to democracy are predicted and prevented.

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