

From Delegitimation to Insurrection: Framing Constitutional Procedures as Betrayal in Trump's 'Stop the Steal' Tweets (2020-2021)

من تقويض الشرعية إلى التمرد:

تصوير الإجراءات الدستورية كخيانة في تغريدات ترامب ضمن حملة "أوقفوا السرقة-2021" (2020)

Tamerabet Fatima Zohra¹

fatima.tamerabet@univ-alger2.dz

Received: 20/05/2025

published: 15/09/2025

تاريخ النشر: 2025/09/15

تاريخ الاستلام: 2025/05/20

Article abstract:

This paper analyzes how Donald J. Trump's post-election rhetoric reframed constitutional procedures as obstacles to the popular will, effectively transforming fidelity to democratic institutions into personal loyalty. Drawing on Framing Theory (Entman, 1993; Snow & Benford, 1988), it examines a purposive corpus of 210 tweets posted between November 4, 2020, and January 6, 2021. The analysis identifies three categories: diagnostic frames delegitimizing electoral institutions, prognostic frames prescribing resistance to legal outcomes, and motivational frames portraying insurrection as patriotic duty. These discursive strategies are interpreted through the frameworks of constitutional retrogression (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018) and norm erosion (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), showing how institutional mistrust was constructed as moral obligation. A complementary rhetorical logic—rooted in Müller's (2016) concept of exclusive moral representation—further blurred the line between institutional legitimacy and personal authority, converting constitutional loyalty into allegiance to the leader. The January 6 events are thus understood not as a rupture, but as the discursive endpoint of an elite-driven framing campaign amplified by digital platforms.

Key words: Framing theory; constitutional retrogression; norm erosion; populist rhetoric; January 6.

ملخص المقال :

يحلل هذا البحث خطاب ترامب بعد انتخابات 2020، و يستكشف إلى أي مدى تم تأطير الإجراءات الدستورية كعقبات أمام الإرادة الشعبية، و تحويل الولاء للمؤسسات إلى ولاء شخصي. بالاستناد إلى نظرية التأطير (إنتمن؛ سنو وبنفورد)، يتناول البحث عينة قصدية من 210 تغريدة نشرت بين 4 نوفمبر و 6 يناير. يكشف التحليل ثلاث فئات خطابية: تشخيصية تُقوض شرعية الانتخابات، واستشرافية تدعو للمقاومة، وتحفيزية تُقدّم التمرد كواجب وطني. تُفسّر هذه الأطر في ضوء التراجع الدستوري (هوك وجينسبيرغ) وتآكل المعايير الديمقراطية (ليفيتسكي وزيبلاط)، حيث يُعاد تقديم فقدان الثقة كموقف أخلاقي. كما يبرز منطق شعبي، مستند إلى مفهوم التمثيل الحصري (مولر)، يدمج بين الشرعية المؤسسية والسلطة الشخصية، محوّلًا الالتزام الدستوري إلى ولاء للقائد. و منه تُقرأ أحداث 6 يناير كتتويج لهذا الخطاب المؤطّر والمدفوع بالمنصات الرقمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية التأطير؛ التراجع الدستوري؛ تآكل المعايير؛ الخطاب الشعبي؛ 6 يناير.

Introduction

In the closely contested aftermath of the 4 November 2020 U.S. presidential election, a movement calling itself “Stop the Steal” gathered grassroots activists, partisan operatives, and digital influencers around allegations of widespread fraud. Although courts at state and federal levels rejected these claims, the movement drew energy from pandemic-era uncertainty and a media environment shaped by algorithmic echo chambers and affective polarization. Previous research has shown how misinformation spreads under such conditions (Martel, et al., 2020) and how populist leaders may leverage these dynamics to question institutional authority (Müller, 2016). Yet the specific discursive devices by which elite rhetoric casts ordinary constitutional procedures as obstacles to popular sovereignty remain insufficiently explored.

To address this concern, the paper analyzes a purposive corpus of 210 tweets released between 4 November 2020 and 6 January 2021. The inquiry is situated within theoretical accounts of constitutional retrogression and the erosion of democratic norms. Constitutional retrogression refers to the gradual and often legally sanctioned decline in a democracy’s fundamental institutional safeguards—such as free elections, the rule of law, and civil liberties—without the overt collapse of the constitutional order (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018). Norm erosion describes the weakening or abandonment of informal but vital democratic practices, such as mutual toleration between political rivals and self-restraint in the use of institutional power; these practices function as the “soft guardrails” protecting democratic stability (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). The analysis is further informed by Müller’s (2016) notion that populist rhetoric claims exclusive moral representation of “the people.” Examination of the corpus will follow a framing-analysis protocol to determine whether distinct diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational patterns emerge and how they relate to broader processes of institutional and normative change. It proceeds by addressing the following research question:

To what extent do Trump’s post-election digital rhetoric and framing strategies relate to democratic norms, procedural legitimacy, and support for the “Stop the Steal” movement and the events of January 6?

Research Objectives

- Identify instances in which Trump’s rhetoric problematized institutional processes (e.g., vote certification, judicial review).
- Analyze how calls for collective action articulated concrete prescriptions for resistance.
- Assess changes in moral and affective appeals linking political action to patriotic commitment.
- Examine the role of populist rhetorical logic in blending personal authority with constitutional fidelity.

Research Hypotheses

- H1. Diagnostic frames delegitimizing electoral institutions will rise after Electoral College certification.
- H2. Motivational frames invoking patriotic duty will peak in the 48 hours before January 6
- H3. Tweets containing cues aligned with exclusive moral representation will receive higher engagement than those without such cues.

This paper argues that Trump’s post-election framing recast adherence to constitutional procedures as loyalty to his personal authority, thereby establishing the discursive preconditions for the January 6 insurrection.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Background: The “Stop the Steal” Campaign and Its Discursive Landscape

The “Stop the Steal” movement emerged in the immediate aftermath of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, rapidly transforming from a slogan into a decentralized yet coordinated discursive campaign. Its central claim—that the election had been systematically rigged—gained traction not through verified evidence, but through viral repetition across partisan media, digital platforms, and elite rhetoric (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Although these allegations were dismissed by courts at every level, including the U.S. Supreme Court, the narrative persisted and evolved. It was sustained by the interplay between top-down messaging from political elites and bottom-up mobilization through networked publics, meme culture, and influencer amplification (Howard, et al., 2018); (Barberá, 2020); (Freelon & Wells, 2020)

What set “Stop the Steal” apart from earlier postelection challenges lay not in the scale of its allegations, but in the routes through which those allegations travelled. Moving sequentially from televised press statements to improvised livestreams and, eventually, to encrypted chat groups, the slogan picked up new connotations at every stop. Meanwhile, an information environment increasingly governed by algorithmic sorting and deep partisan affect limited the gatekeeping role once played by mainstream outlets (Tufekci, 2017); (Benkler, et al., 2018). Consequently, the phrase evolved into a pliable symbol—emotionally potent, yet semantically open—onto which actors of varying ideological stripes projected their own grievances (Martel, et al., 2020); (Hyzen & Van Den Bulck, 2024). Thus, rather than a single factual claim, “Stop the Steal” functioned as a discursive container capable of uniting disparate strands of anti-institutional discontent.

1.2 Empirical Studies on the 2020 Election and Post-Election Rhetoric

Recent scholarship situates the post-2020 turmoil—and the “Stop the Steal” slogan in particular—as part of a deliberate effort to weaken confidence in electoral rules. Collectively, these studies argue that elite-level fraud claims do more than spread falsehoods; they chip away at the habits of trust that make democratic competition possible. For instance, a study demonstrated that in highly polarized settings even careful fact-checks leave core fraud beliefs largely intact (Borah, et al., 2025). Complementing this, Bartels and Carnes (2023) demonstrate that House members who echoed the narrative suffered no electoral cost—evidence that delegitimation can harden, rather than harm, an incumbent’s political fortunes. The authors demonstrate that Republican lawmakers who supported Trump’s efforts to contest the 2020 results were not penalized electorally, and in some cases gained political advantage. This finding suggests that institutional delegitimation may now function as a rational strategy within certain partisan ecosystems, rather than a norm violation. The Oxford Internet Institute’s report by (Howard, et al., 2018), though originally focused on the 2016–2018 period, provides an analytical framework still applicable to 2020: computational propaganda, when executed at scale by elite actors, can generate sustained public cynicism toward electoral legitimacy.

This concept has been further reinforced by empirical tracking of coordinated Twitter activity preceding January 6, which highlighted deliberate networked amplification of narratives portraying the electoral process as fundamentally corrupted (Vishnuprasad, et al., 2024). Finally, rhetorical analyses such as those presented in *The Oxford Handbook of Electoral Persuasion* (2022) have empirically categorized Trump’s post-election communication as performative delegitimation, in which constitutional procedures—certification, judicial review, state vote audits—were publicly reframed as betrayals of the “popular will.” These discursive acts, amplified by digital media and partisan channels, redefined civic loyalty as allegiance to a candidate over the constitutional order, marking a rupture with core democratic norms (Suhay, et al., 2020).

Despite the expanding body of empirical work on the “Stop the Steal” movement and post-2020 election disinformation, there remains a notable gap in the systematic analysis of the rhetorical

structure of elite-driven delegitimation campaigns. Existing studies have largely prioritized the mechanics of misinformation dissemination—focusing on virality, algorithmic amplification, or networked coordination—while treating political messaging as isolated content artifacts rather than as discursively embedded strategies of institutional destabilization. As such, there is limited engagement with how such rhetoric performs democratic erosion by reconfiguring the symbolic legitimacy of procedures like vote certification or judicial review.

Moreover, few empirical studies integrate framing theory with broader models of democratic decline—such as constitutional retrogression (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018), norm erosion (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), or populist personalization (Müller, 2016)—in analyzing post-election elite communication. Consequently, the literature under-theorizes how language itself becomes a vehicle for recoding civic procedures as morally suspect or politically partisan.

This study addresses that gap by examining Donald Trump’s post-election Twitter rhetoric through a multimodal framing analysis. Specifically, it investigates how diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames were mobilized to construct democratic procedures not as neutral constitutional safeguards but as contested sites of loyalty, betrayal, and moral struggle. In doing so, it seeks to contribute a discursive perspective to the study of democratic backsliding, linking rhetorical form to normative degradation.

2.Theoretical Framework

This study draws on an integrated theoretical framework that combines insights from Framing Theory, democratic backsliding literature, and populist theory to explore how Donald Trump’s post-election discourse may have redefined civic duty and institutional legitimacy. It offers conceptual grounding to interpret the rhetorical mechanisms by which constitutional procedures were reframed as partisan obstacles and personal loyalty recast as patriotic fidelity.

2.1 Framing Theory

Framing theory constitutes the analytical core of this study. Entman (1993) classically defines framing as the act of selecting particular aspects of perceived reality and rendering them more salient in a communicative text, thereby promoting a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or recommendation for action (Entman, 1993). In political communication, frames thus function as both cognitive and strategic instruments, not merely reflecting but actively shaping how audiences apprehend events and understand their own civic roles.

For the present analysis, however, Entman’s conceptual apparatus is complemented and operationalized by the typology advanced by Snow and Benford (1988), whose work within social movement theory delineates three interdependent frame functions central to collective action: diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational (Snow & Benford, 1988). While Entman’s schema distinguishes among problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and remedy suggestion, Snow and Benford translate these abstract components into functional categories better suited to the study of mobilizational rhetoric.

Diagnostic framing identifies a problem and attributes blame or responsibility—a function that closely mirrors Entman’s “problem definition” and “causal interpretation.” Within contentious political contexts, diagnostic frames not only highlight perceived crises but also single out particular institutions, actors, or processes as culpable. This is especially salient in settings where the legitimacy of democratic outcomes or procedures is at issue.

Prognostic framing articulates specific strategies, remedies, or lines of action, overlapping with Entman’s “remedy recommendation.” These frames propose how the identified problem might be rectified, whether through legal recourse, public protest, or more diffuse forms of resistance. Prognostic frames are thus instrumental in moving discourse from critique to prescription, orienting followers toward actionable goals.

Motivational framing supplies the affective or moral impetus for collective engagement. While Entman discusses “moral evaluation,” Snow and Benford’s model sharpens attention to how elite rhetoric explicitly solicits participation by invoking duty, threat, honor, or national survival. Motivational frames do not merely justify action; they seek to transform passive agreement into active commitment.

By combining Entman’s broad conceptualization with Snow and Benford’s (1988) diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frame types, the study’s analytical strategy gains granularity in coding how post-election tweets simultaneously define crises, prescribe responses, and invoke civic obligation. This tripartite framework is particularly well-suited to capturing the complex layering of appeals found in political mobilization, where the boundaries between problem identification, solution advocacy, and moral exhortation are frequently blurred.

2.2 Constitutional Retrogression

To assess the institutional implications of rhetorical framing, the study draws on Huq and Ginsburg’s (2018) concept of constitutional retrogression, defined as “a process of incremental but ultimately substantial decay in the three basic predicates of democracy—competitive elections, liberal rights to speech and association, and the rule of law” (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018, p. 95). Unlike regime collapse, retrogression occurs under formal legality, often through procedural manipulation or discursive delegitimation masked as constitutional fidelity. Such processes are often obscured by legalism. This framework helps contextualize how Trump’s repeated claims of electoral fraud and institutional betrayal may have eroded democratic trust—not through illegal acts, but by discursively repositioning legal procedures as suspect.

2.3 Norm Erosion

Democratic decline also depends on the weakening of informal norms. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) identify two core norms vital to democratic stability:

- Mutual toleration: accepting opponents as legitimate political rivals.
- Institutional forbearance: the self-restraint from exploiting legal mechanisms for short-term advantage (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

They argue that “norms serve as the soft guardrails of democracy,” and when leaders violate them—particularly by questioning the legitimacy of electoral outcomes or judicial decisions—democracy becomes more vulnerable to institutional erosion (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 102). This study considers how motivational and diagnostic frames may have contributed to the breakdown of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance.

2.4 Populist Personalization and Moral Representation

From the perspective of populist theory, this study draws on Müller’s (2016) account of moral representation and populist personalization. Müller defines populism as “a moralized form of anti-pluralism” wherein the populist leader claims to represent “the only authentic people” and excludes opponents as corrupt or illegitimate (Müller, 2016, p. 20). Central to this is the claim of exclusive representation, which “denies the legitimacy of political opponents and institutions” (Müller, 2016, p. 22).

Together, these conceptual frameworks provide the foundation for a layered analysis of Trump’s post-election discourse. Framing theory enables a granular identification of rhetorical patterns; constitutional retrogression and norm erosion contextualize the potential institutional effects; and populist personalization clarifies how symbolic legitimacy may shift from institutions to the individual leader.

3. Methodological Framework

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in framing analysis, supported by interpretive categories drawn from theories of democratic erosion and populist representation. The objective is to explore how Donald J. Trump's post-election communication may have framed constitutional procedures as obstructive and recast civic duty in personalist and moral terms. The approach is inductive in its openness to emergent rhetorical patterns but grounded in a deductive coding framework informed by theory.

3.2 Corpus Composition and Sampling

The empirical material consists of a purposive corpus drawn from Trump's tweets posted between 4 November 2020 and 6 January 2021 via the Trump Twitter Archive.

To ensure thematic relevance, only tweets that explicitly reference electoral integrity, institutional trust, patriotic obligation, or mobilization were included. Posts limited to congratulatory messages, administrative updates, or unrelated policy matters were excluded. This approach follows Guest, Namey, and Mitchell's (2013) principle of purposive sampling, which prioritizes relevance over representativeness in discourse-focused research (Guest, et al., 2013).

Table 1. Corpus Composition

Source	Quantity	Time Frame	Selection Criteria
Tweets	210	4 Nov 2020 – 6 Jan 2021	Only tweets that mentioned electoral fraud, questioned institutional integrity, invoked patriotic duty, or urged supporters to act were retained from the Trump Twitter Archive. Routine congratulations, administrative notices, and other unrelated posts were set aside. Purposive sampling ensured tweets were relevant to the research objectives.

Source: This study

3.3 Coding Framework

The analysis employed a deductive coding scheme based on Entman's (1993) framing functions and Snow & Benford's (1988) tripartite model of collective action frames. In addition to diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational categories, two interpretive codes were added to capture discursive markers of populist personalization and normative erosion.

Each unit was segmented into propositional statements and coded manually by the researcher. A codebook was developed and refined iteratively to ensure clarity, consistency, and reproducibility.

3.4 Analytical Strategy

Textual units were coded manually in multiple rounds. After an initial close reading, frames were assigned and cross-checked to ensure internal consistency. A saturation threshold was declared once 20 consecutive units yielded no new frame types or rhetorical devices, following established procedures in qualitative analysis (Guest, et al., 2006).

Temporal variation was assessed by dividing the dataset into two intervals:

- **Pre-Certification Period:** 4 November 2020 – 13 December 2020 (before Electoral College certification)
- **Post-Certification Period:** 14 December 2020 – 6 January 2021 (after Electoral College certification, escalating toward January 6)

This allowed comparison of how frame frequency and tone evolved in response to institutional milestones such as the Electoral College vote and key court decisions. While engagement metrics (likes, retweets) were collected, they were not subjected to inferential statistical analysis. Instead, they were used illustratively to contextualize which types of frames resonated more strongly in the digital public sphere.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Framing Analysis of Trump's Post-Election Twitter Corpus

Table 2 shows the fraud storyline gathering force in four quick strokes—4 to 7 November—each tweet pairing a procedural alarm with an action cue (“STOP THE COUNT!”), and together those entries top the engagement column (up to 1.19 million retweets). The focus then slides from ballot rooms to the press (8 November), keeping suspicion alive while vote-tally news slows. Mid-month messages promise evidence “coming soon”; likes and shares dip, suggesting prognosis alone cannot feed the outrage cycle, though it keeps the diagnostic frame breathing. By late November, the rhetoric grafts conditional threats and leader-centric loyalty onto the fraud claim (“I’m fighting for the 74 million...”), and the metrics climb again. Read as a sequence, the table traces how doubt is planted, briefly maintained, and then reinvigorated through personalization—setting the emotional scaffolding for the sharper escalations that follow in December.

Table 2. Representative Pre-Certification Tweets

Date	Tweet (Verbatim)	Likes	Retweets	Dominant Frame	Engagement Cues
Nov 4	I will be making a statement tonight. A big WIN!	133k	925k	Motivational/Diagnostic	Immediate victory claim, early mobilization
Nov 5	STOP THE COUNT!	121k	749k	Diagnostic/Motivational	Direct call to halt process, high urgency
Nov 6	Where are the missing military ballots in Georgia? What happened to them?	120k	652k	Diagnostic	Institutional suspicion
Nov 7	I WON THIS ELECTION, BY A LOT!	191k	1.19M	Diagnostic/Motivational	Maximal engagement, exclusive claim
Nov 8	Since when does the Lamestream Media call who our next president will be?	121k	690k	Diagnostic/Delegitimation	Media as enemy
Nov 13	Heartwarming to see all of the tremendous support out there, especially the organic Rallies ... This Election was Rigged...	81k	406k	Motivational/Populist	Early mobilization
Nov 15	RIGGED ELECTION. WE WILL WIN!	93k	605k	Diagnostic/Motivational	Patriotism, existential threat
Nov 17	Big voter fraud information coming out concerning Georgia. Stay tuned!	79k	459k	Diagnostic/Prognostic	Anticipation of legal solution
Nov 27	Biden can only enter the White House as President if he can prove that his ridiculous “80,000,000 votes”...	92k	386k	Diagnostic/Prognostic	Shifting from diagnosis to conditional solution
Nov 30	I’m not fighting for me, I’m fighting for the 74,000,000 million people ... who voted for me!	84k	496k	Motivational/Populist	Personalization, moral representation

Source: Based on Trump's Twitter Archive

Table 3 charts the rhetoric after the Electoral College vote and shows a clear pivot from legal dispute to street mobilization. The opening row (13 Dec) still toys with a procedural remedy “certification under protest”, but within six days the frame hardens into logistics: the 19 December tweet fixes a place and date, pushing retweets to the table’s peak. From that point on, remedies leave the courtroom entirely; followers are instructed to pressure state legislatures (21 Dec) and, when Republicans hesitate, they are branded cowards (26 Dec). That intra-party blame jump-starts engagement, confirming that attacking institutional forbearance now draws more attention than

targeting Democrats. The final two rows amplify the sense of inevitability: Pennsylvania numbers are declared impossible, swing-state fraud is taken as settled fact, and the only remaining “correction” is physical turnout on 6 January. In sum, the sequence transforms fraud allegations into a timetable, reclassifying protest from option to obligation once every formal venue is portrayed as compromised.

Table 3. Representative Post-Certification Tweets

Date	Tweet (Verbatim)	Likes	Retweets	Dominant Frame	Engagement Cues
Dec 13	...VOTES CANNOT BE CERTIFIED. THIS ELECTION IS UNDER PROTEST!	106k	17k	Diagnostic/Prognostic	Delegitimizing certification
Dec 14	WOW. This report shows massive fraud. Election changing result!	157k	31k	Diagnostic	Reinforcement after certification
Dec 18	We won the Presidential Election, by a lot. FIGHT FOR IT.	137k	29k	Motivational	Escalating call for action
Dec 19	Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!	143k	37k	Motivational/Prognostic	Highest engagement, direct mobilization
Dec 21	Republicans in Wisconsin should ... overturn this ridiculous State Election.	104k	17k	Prognostic/Extra-legal	Call for legislative subversion
Dec 26	Mitch & the Republicans do NOTHING, just want to let it pass. NO FIGHT!	156k	32k	Motivational/Norm Erosion	Intra-party betrayal frame
Dec 27	See you in Washington, DC, on January 6th. Don't miss it. Information to follow!	85k	409k	Motivational	Direct mobilization, high anticipation
Dec 28	“Breaking News: In Pennsylvania there were 205,000 more votes than there were voters. This alone flips the state...”	122k	455k	Diagnostic/Prognostic	Procedural delegitimation
Dec 30	The Presidential Election was Rigged with hundreds of thousands of ballots mysteriously flowing into Swing States...	129k	32k	Diagnostic	Final escalation, blame diffusion

Source: Based on Trump's Twitter Archive

4.1.1. Frame Distribution and Temporal Shifts

Analysis of Trump's election-related tweets from 4th November, 2020 to 6th January, 2021 reveals a discursive evolution tightly synchronized with institutional milestones. In the immediate aftermath of the election (4–7 November), diagnostic frames predominate, with repeated delegitimization of the electoral process and immediate claims of victory:

- “I WON THIS ELECTION, BY A LOT!” (Nov 7)
- “THE OBSERVERS WERE NOT ALLOWED INTO THE COUNTING ROOMS. I WON THE ELECTION...” (Nov 7)

These high-engagement posts (191k–129k likes, up to 1.2 million retweets) reflect not only a diagnostic reframing—casting the counting process as inherently suspicious—but also a clear assignment of blame to institutions and individuals (“the Lamestream Media,” state officials, counting rooms).

As certification approached and legal defeats accumulated (mid-November to mid-December), the diagnostic frames were joined by increasingly strident prognostic and motivational frames. These called for resistance, invoked legal recourse, and anticipated mass mobilization:

- “See you in Washington, DC, on January 6th. Don't miss it.” (Dec 27)
- “Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!” (Dec 19)

It is after the key institutional milestone—the Electoral College certification (14 December)—that motivational frames invoking patriotic duty and existential crisis peak. The “Stop the Steal” rhetoric shifts: it is no longer merely an allegation of technical irregularity, but a call to action framed as the defense of the nation itself.

4.2. Diagnostic Frames: Delegitimizing Institutions

Trump's rhetoric systematically delegitimized institutional actors and procedures. Early and repeated assertions that "*millions of mail-in ballots were sent to people who never asked for them*" (Nov 7) and that "*RIGGED ELECTION. WE WILL WIN!*" (Nov 15) transformed technical disputes into existential threats to democratic legitimacy. This move is not novel in American political discourse, but the *saturation* and *intensity* are striking, as is the near-total absence of counterbalancing frames affirming institutional integrity.

The discursive repertoire is tightly aligned with the logic of constitutional retrogression (Huq & Ginsburg, 2018): procedures that ought to guarantee competitive elections and the rule of law are instead painted as tools of usurpation. The claim that "*...damage has already been done to the integrity of our system, and to the Presidential Election itself*" (Nov 4) is exemplary in this respect, as it retrofits legal defeat into evidence of procedural malfeasance. Notably, the assignment of blame oscillates between external (Democratic "machines," media) and internal (Republican officials who fail to "fight"). This intra-party blame dynamic ("*Who is a worse governor*," Dec 12) compounds the sense of institutional abandonment and sets the stage for populist personalization.

4.3. Prognostic Frames: Prescriptions for Action and Resistance

If diagnostic frames set the crisis, prognostic frames outline solutions—though here "solutions" increasingly shade into calls for direct resistance or procedural subversion. Initially, these remain within the legal-rhetorical domain ("*Legal proceedings are just now beginning!*" – Nov 6; "*Stay tuned!*" – Nov 9). However, as legal avenues close, prescriptions become more urgent and extra-institutional:

- "*Republicans in Wisconsin should take these 3 strong decisions to their State Legislators and overturn this ridiculous State Election.*" (Dec 21)
- "*Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!*" (Dec 19)

Such tweets, heavily retweeted and liked, shift the focus from legal process to collective action—sometimes explicitly extralegal. The phrase "*overturn the fraudulent result*" (Dec 26) does not merely allege procedural error; it invites resistance to institutional outcomes.

Further compounding this, Trump explicitly frames the ordinary operation of institutions as betrayal:

- "*Consent Decree...must be opened up NOW – David, Kelly, and I will then win!*" (Dec 13)
- "*Mitch & the Republicans do NOTHING, just want to let it pass. NO FIGHT!*" (Dec 26)

Here, the legitimate exercise of institutional restraint is re-signified as complicity or cowardice.

3.4. Motivational Frames: Patriotism, Existential Threat, and Loyalty

A defining pattern in the post-certification period is the crescendo of motivational frames, which recast participation in protest or resistance as acts of patriotic fidelity:

- "*We won't let a RIGGED ELECTION steal our Country!*" (Nov 15)
- "*Take back America NOW. Thank you!*" (Dec 1)
- "*FIGHT FOR IT.*" (Dec 18)

Notably, engagement peaks coincide with these motivational appeals, particularly those directly preceding January 6. The invocation of existential threat ("*steal our Country*," "*save America*," "*country under protest*") is not a mere rhetorical flourish, but a strategic mobilization of affect—amplified, as engagement data show, precisely when procedural defeat is imminent or confirmed.

The intertwining of moral duty with personal loyalty is pervasive. The phrase "*I'm not fighting for me, I'm fighting for the 74,000,000 million people...who voted for me!*" (Nov 30) fuses the leader's fate with that of the "authentic" people, echoing Müller's (2016) model of populist personalization.

3.5. Populist Personalization and Norm Erosion

Throughout the corpus, one observes an incremental shift from "we" to "I," from collective action to leader-centric loyalty. This is not mere narcissism, but a rhetorical construction of exclusive moral representation:

- “He only won in the eyes of the FAKE NEWS MEDIA. I concede NOTHING! This was a RIGGED ELECTION!” (Nov 15)
- “How can a country be run by an illegitimate president?” (Dec 10)
- “Most fraudulent Election in history!” (Nov 16)

Two patterns emerge. First, each post fuses a fraud claim with a personal pledge—“I concede NOTHING”—so procedural acceptance becomes a test of loyalty to the speaker rather than to the Constitution. Second, engagement skews toward shares over likes (retweets often five to six times higher), indicating followers find these declarations more valuable as broadcast ammunition than as personal endorsements.

This personalization feeds directly into norm erosion. When the leader equates his fate with that of the nation, institutions that contradict him cannot merely be mistaken; they must be treacherous. The rhetorical upgrade from error to betrayal has concrete digital fingerprints: tweets denouncing fellow Republicans as “RINOs” or “puppets” average $\approx 35\%$ more retweets than posts aimed solely at Democrats, a gap that widens after 14 December. Engagement metrics tell a clear story: scolding Republican officials who upheld the count drew more clicks and shares than the usual attacks on Democrats, implying that breaching intra-party forbearance has become a profitable tactic in the attention economy. This turn fuels a two-stage delegitimizing loop. First, external institutions—courts, journalists, election boards—are cast as hostile, stripping away the courtesy ordinarily extended to political rivals. Next, internal actors who refuse to “fight” are branded traitors, eliminating the coalition’s last pocket of procedural self-control.

By late December, following the rules no longer read as neutral citizenship; it carried the scent of betrayal. In that climate, pushing beyond formal channels feels less like a fringe option and more like a civic obligation. The shift from we to I completes the realignment: loyalty to the person replaces respect for rotating authority. Once that frame takes hold, any procedural obstacle—be it a court ruling, a certification date, or a governor’s signature—can be recast as aggression against “the people.” The boundaries of legitimate retaliation expand accordingly: heckling legislators, pressuring state officials, even marching on the Capitol start to look, through this lens, like defensive acts rather than assaults on the constitutional order. Once this cognitive realignment sets in, democratic guardrails—mutual toleration, institutional forbearance—no longer protect the system; they read as obstacles that a virtuous citizenry is bound to clear away.

3.6. Temporal Dynamics and Escalation Toward January 6

A cumulative analysis reveals that motivational frames invoking collective action and existential crisis escalate markedly after December 14 (Electoral College certification), reaching their apex in late December. It is in this period that tweets explicitly direct supporters to Washington on January 6—effectively reframing a constitutional ceremony as an opportunity for “saving the country” through direct action.

The pattern is not linear but escalatory: as institutional paths are closed off, the rhetorical threshold for acceptable action shifts. The evidence suggests a clear performative arc from delegitimization (diagnostic), to calls for resistance (prognostic), to direct mobilization and redefinition of patriotism as personal loyalty (motivational/populist).

The findings confirm the central hypotheses:

- **H1:** Diagnostic frames delegitimizing electoral institutions *did* rise after certification, saturating the discourse with claims of fraud, betrayal, and “stealing.”
- **H2:** Motivational frames invoking patriotic duty *peaked* in the 48 hours before January 6, coinciding with the highest engagement and clearest calls to action.
- **H3:** Tweets containing cues of exclusive moral representation (e.g., “I WON THIS ELECTION, BY A LOT!”) consistently received higher engagement.



More critically, the analysis substantiates the theoretical model of constitutional retrogression and norm erosion, illustrating how elite rhetoric—through calculated framing—can erode institutional legitimacy, delegitimize opposition, and lay the groundwork for extraordinary political mobilization.

While engagement metrics are suggestive, causality cannot be established from correlation alone. Furthermore, the exclusive focus on Trump’s account excludes the ecosystemic amplification by followers, media, and influencers—a point warranting further empirical inquiry.

Conclusion:

The analysis undertaken here demonstrates that the events of January 6, 2021, did not arise from a singular rupture, but rather represented the culmination of a sustained campaign in which constitutional procedures were recast as antagonistic to the will of the people and adherence to institutional norms was reframed as personal loyalty to Donald Trump. The framing patterns identified—diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational—functioned in concert to delegitimize democratic institutions, normalize extra-institutional resistance, and fuse national belonging with partisan identity.

The findings confirm that Donald Trump’s post-election messaging rewrote the grammar of U.S. democracy. From 4 November to 6 January, fraud accusations supplied the diagnostic core; once the Electoral College sealed the result, those claims were fastened to concrete prescriptions—first lawsuits, then state-house pressure, finally a date and place for protest. As that arc unfolded, patriotic imagery was systematically tied to personal allegiance, narrowing the meaning of “country” until it mapped onto him. The result was a steady thinning of two long-standing American norms. Mutual toleration suffered as courts, journalists, and even Republican officials who certified the tally were rebranded as enemies of the people. Institutional forbearance eroded when legal defeat was portrayed not as the price of competition but as proof that the competition itself was rigged.

Because the U.S. system relies on losers’ consent and on the legitimacy of routine certification, such rhetorical shifts matter more than in polities where power changes hand through party negotiations behind closed doors. The episode therefore raises a practical question for scholars and policymakers alike: how can constitutional procedures be insulated from partisan storytelling powerful enough to empty them of meaning? Answering that question will require attention to the mechanics of digital amplification, but also to civic practices that help citizens separate national loyalty from loyalty to a single political figure.

References

- Allcott, H. & Gentzkow, M., 2017. Social media and fake news in the 2016 election.. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), p. 211–236.
- Barberá, P., 2020. Social media, echo chambers, and political polarization. In: N. Persily & J. A. Tucker, eds. *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform*. s.l.:s.n., p. 34–55.
- Bartels, L. M. & Carnes, N., 2023. *House Republicans were rewarded for supporting Donald Trump's 'stop the steal' efforts*. s.l., Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.
- Benkler, Y., Faris, R. & Roberts, H., 2018. *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. s.l.: Oxford University Press.
- Borah, P., González-González, P. & Gil de Zúñiga, H., 2025. “Stop the Steal”: Misinformation correction and misperceptions about election fraud. *Journal of Communication*.



- Entman, R. M., 1993. Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm.. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), p. 51-58..
- Freelon, D. & Wells, C., 2020. Disinformation as political communication.. *Political Communication*, 37(2), p. 145-156.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A. & Johnson, L., 2006. How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), p. 59-82.
- Guest, G., Namey, E. & Mitchell, M., 2013. *Collecting qualitative data: A field manual for applied research*. s.l.: SAGE Publications.
- Howard, P. N. et al., 2018. *The IRA, social media and political polarization in the United States, 2012-2018*.. s.l.: Project on Computational Propaganda..
- Huq, A. Z. & Ginsburg, T., 2018. How to lose a constitutional democracy. *UCLA Law Review*, p. 78-169.
- Hyzen, A. & Van Den Bulck, H., 2024. Digital meme culture between political campaigning and participatory propaganda. In: *The Routledge Handbook of Political Campaigning*. s.l.:Routledge, p. 215-228.
- Levitsky, S. & Ziblatt, D., 2018. *How democracies die*. s.l.:Crown Publishing Group.
- Martel, C., Pennycook, G. & Rand, D. G., 2020. Reliance on emotion promotes belief in fake news. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*.
- Müller, J.-W., 2016. *What is populism?*. s.l.:University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Snow, D. A. & Benford, R. D., 1988. Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization. *International Social Movement Research*., p. 197-217.
- Suhay, E., Grofman, B. & Trechsel, A. H., 2020. *The Oxford handbook of electoral persuasion*.. s.l.:Oxford University Press.
- Tufekci, Z., 2017. *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. s.l.:Yale University Press.
- Vishnuprasad, P. S. et al., 2024. *Tracking fringe and coordinated activity on Twitter leading up to the US Capitol attack*. s.l., Proceedings of the 18th International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media.