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LEGITIMIZED FEAR
Donald Trump's January 6 Rhetoric as a Narrative of Crisis

Abstract

Emily Catherine May : Legitimized Fear: Donald Trump's January 6 Rhetoric as a Narrative of Crisis
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This thesis serves analyzes the public rhetoric of former US President Donald Trump on the infamous day of the US Capitol Riots: January 6, 2021. It does so with the purpose of answering the following research question: *How does Trump provoke a reaction to the ontological insecurity felt by his supporters through his January 6, 2021 narrative, and could it be seen as justification for the ensuing riots?* The hypothesized answer is that Trump employs a narrative of crisis which capitalizes on the anxieties felt by his supporters by legitimizing their fears and implicitly and explicitly calling for action to prevent his 2020 election loss.

In order to test the above hypothesis and answer the research question, this thesis employs a twofold strategy: (1) conducting two methods of narrative analysis to analyze the dataset, and (2) attempting to find evidence which supports the hypothesis that Trump's narrative is one of crisis. This is done using a dataset containing three parts: (1) Trump's speech from his Save America Rally, (2) Tweets Trump published on Jan. 6, and (3) A video message from Trump to the rioters.

The conducted narrative analyses create results which confirm the hypothesis. TA reveals two key themes: (1) that the election was rigged, and (2) something must be done to fix it. MCA reveals Trump uses strong "Us versus Them" language in order to bolster his narrative. Both of these analyses show that Trump's rhetoric legitimizes his supporters' ontological insecurity by giving evidence of a great misdeed and clearly labeling those responsible ("them"). By also establishing those on the right side ("us") and calling for future action, he legitimizes and justifies the need for something to be done. Several aspects of Trump's narrative align with theories of crisis and crisis communication, establishing it as one of crisis. These results confirm the hypothesis with the conclusion that the Capitol Riots were a clear response to his rhetoric.

This research is conducted within the field of peace and conflict research and draws on theories from the fields of crisis management and communication. It furthers previous scholarly research on ontological security, Trumpism, and crises by combining them with the case study of the US Capitol Riots.

Keywords: Trump, January 6, ontological (in)security, crisis, crisis narratives, rhetoric, thematic analysis (TA), membership categorization analysis (MCA), legitimization

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List of Abbreviations

AP = Associated Press

COVID-19 = Coronavirus Disease 2019

C-SPAN = Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network

IR = International Relations

Jan. 6 = January 6, 2021

MCA = Membership Categorization Analysis

SSCT: Situational Crisis Communication Theory

TA = Thematic Analysis

US = United States

9/11 = September 11, 2001

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

"These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!" (Trump, 2021b)

This was one of the last Tweets posted by former American President Donald Trump before his approximately 2-year ban[1] from Twitter[2]. It marks the end of one of the most infamous days in recent American history: January 6, 2021 (Jan. 6). What started as an exciting (if contentious) day in American politics devolved into chaos when rioters stormed the United States (US) Capitol Building in an attempt to stop the Electoral College vote count and prevent the official election of Joe Biden as President of the United States.

Trump's tweet insinuates a turbulent political landscape: the arrival of inevitable consequences for the theft of something which was due to the persecuted for a long time. Most, however, see the events of Jan. 6 – and the 2020 presidential election as a whole – rather differently. Where Trump sees heroes, others find radical rightwing fanatics. In place of patriotism, fascism. Not truth but lies. Yet something Trump said or did in the presidential race struck a chord with many Americans. He received an impressive 74,224,319 votes, making up 46.9% of votes overall ("Presidential Results"). After he staged a "Save America" rally on the morning of Jan. 6 to protest the results, many rally-goers turned to rioters and marched on the Capitol. One of these rioters even lost her life. Many Americans, this author included, were left wondering: "How anyone could possibly believe Trump's often outrageous claims to such a degree?"

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[1] Shortly after the Capitol riots, Donald Trump's Twitter and Meta platform accounts were suspended for allegedly inciting violence. All were eventually restored. See Clegg (2023), Elon Musk reinstates Trump's Twitter account 22 months after it was suspended. (2022), and X (2021).

[2] In July 2023, Twitter, which had recently been bought by Elon Musk, rebranded to *X*. This thesis, however, will continue to refer to it as Twitter because the riots (& creation of the dataset) predate the name change. See Ivanova (2023) for more details on Twitter's name change.

It was that question which served as the inspiration for this thesis. The answer it argues is that Trump employs a narrative of crisis which sparked the ember of a long-brewing, deeply rooted sense of disconnect with American politics into a flame. This disconnect can be expressed as ontological insecurity, or the anxiety which is the result of a challenge to how one perceives the world and one's place in it.

To perceive Trump's rhetoric as capitalizing on ontological insecurity is not an original idea. Much research has already been done which links the two. Löfflemann examined blame attribution as integral to national identity in the case of Trumpism (2021). Agius' research sought to broaden the study of ontological security under Trump through a gendered perspective (2022). Most helpful to the foundational basis of this thesis is an article by Homolar and Scholz, wherein they examined Trump's populist rhetoric in the 2016 election as affirming the feeling of ontological insecurity felt by his supporters and how it successfully positioned him as the perfect anti-establishment candidate to return them to a place of security (2019). It also classifies Trump's rhetoric as crisis talk with the purpose of creating an impending sense of doom regarding American politics. It examines how such crisis-talk influences voting patterns. What these articles succeed in doing is creating a strong link between Trumpist rhetoric, ontological insecurity, and crisis talk in their varied means. What existing research has yet to do, however, is extend these connections to the Capitol Riots: What is the story Trump gives, and how does it trigger such a reaction? Much of the American public blames Trump for the Capitol Riots: can academic analysis of his rhetoric support this? This thesis attempts to fill this gap. It does so by seeking to answer the following research question:

How does Trump provoke a reaction to the ontological insecurity felt by his supporters through his January 6, 2021 narrative?

As the research question indicates, this thesis takes a rhetorical approach to this topic. It applies adapted thematic and narrative qualitative research techniques to Trump's Jan. 6 rhetoric in order to argue that his rhetoric serves as a crisis narrative which both implicitly and explicitly calls for action to rectify the anxiety his supporters felt at his

election loss. Rhetorical approaches were taken due to the clear link between Trump's narrative and the riots. Videos of rioters during the event show them explaining that "I was there because he called me there and he laid out what was happening" (Rodriguez-Delgado, 2022). This thesis wants to know what exactly Trump was 'laying out.'

In order to properly understand the events and rhetoric of Jan. 6, it is vital to be familiar with the political landscape it sprang from. For this reason, Chapter 2 will serve as a contextualization for the day in question. It begins with an overview of the American presidential electoral system and the significance of the Electoral College. It then explores Trump's unique political ideology (Trumpism) and how it is the result of a long history of American populism. After is an overview of the 2020 presidential election. Finally, this chapter will review the events of Jan. 6 with a brief timeline.

Chapter 3 will identify and define the theoretical frameworks which guide later analysis in the style of a literature review. It begins with a look into ontological security and insecurity and how theories of each have been developed in academia before explaining how they are used in the context of this thesis. Following is a look into the phenomena of crisis, and how various understandings of crises and crisis narratives in the fields of crisis management and communication propel this thesis' argument.

Chapter 4 serves as the Methodology chapter. It begins by establishing the dataset, which consists of three parts: a transcript of a rally speech, Tweets, and a transcript of a video message. The choice of data is justified. Next, it defines the two main methods for analysis: thematic analysis and membership categorization analysis. These are then justified and their applications to the data outlined.

Chapter 5 contains the main textual analysis of data. It begins with an overview of the membership categories Trump creates, and how each support this thesis' hypothesis. Then, it explains the two broad themes found within the dataset via thematic analysis. These analyses demonstrate how his points create a narrative which denotes a state of political and moral crisis, capitalizing on his followers' ontological insecurity and justifying the need for future action.

In Chapter 6, the data drawn from the various analyses is applied to several understandings of crisis definitions and narrative typologies. This forms the primary point of the argument that Trump's Jan. 6 rhetoric is a crisis narrative and justifies the need for continued action against the election results (i.e.: the riots). Finally, the thesis concludes with Chapter 7, wherein main conclusions are drawn, results are contextualized, and ideas for future research are considered.

2. Background

2.1. American Electoral System

The United States functions as a de facto two-party system. While there is, technically, room for other parties, the Republican Party and Democratic Party have held onto power for nearly two centuries (U.S. Department of State…, 2016, p.16). Experts believe this is due to the United States' "first past the post" style of vote-counting (U.S. Department of State…, 2016, p,17), which simply gives full victory to the candidate with the most votes. Smaller parties thus have less likelihood of gaining any governing seats, as they must be more popular than the two primary parties (U.S. Department of State…, 2016, p.17). Many countries[3] use varied processes of proportional representation, wherein percentage of seats are proportional to number of votes received (Ridley-Castle, 2023). Others, such as the United Kingdom, use both methods depending on the political seat ("Types of Voting Systems").

Presidential candidates are selected through nominations and delegate-based voting within their party at conventions. While both primary parties start with several candidates, each selects only one to join the official presidential race (U.S. Department of State…, 2016, p.21). It is the nominee who selects the vice-president (U.S. Department of State…, 2016, p.29). Such decisions are strategically made to boost the candidate's popularity across more demographics.

Voting for president occurs in two stages: (1) the general election and (2) the Electoral College. The general election occurs between the 2nd and 8th of November[4] every four years. All US citizens over the age of 18, with some exceptions[5], are eligible to vote, though they must register in advance. Each state has its own guidelines regarding polling place policies and how votes are counted. Regardless, at the end of Voting Day, votes are tallied and presented in two ways. The first is through a simple

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[3] For examples, see Ridley-Castle, 2023 and "Types of Voting Systems."
[4] Regulations stipulate the election should be "on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November" (U.S. Department of State…, 2016, p.10), which is between November 2nd and 8th.
[5] For more details, see "Who can and cannot vote" (2023).

vote count known as the popular vote. The winner of the popular vote is the candidate with the most votes. The second is through electoral maps based on the Electoral College system, which is the official vote for president.

The Electoral College was first designed "as a compromise between the election of the President by a vote in Congress and election of the President by a popular vote of qualified citizens" ("Electoral College History," 2019). It originally also governed the election of Congress and the Senate, though both are now elected by popular vote instead ("Electoral College History," 2019). The Electoral College is composed of a board of electors who represent each state (and Washington, D.C.) with proportions calculated based on the decennial national census[6]. These electors are nominated first by the political parties in each state and selected based on the results of the general election ("About the Electors," 2023; Rybicki & Whitaker, 2016, p.1). For example, if most votes in X region are for the DNC candidate, the elector for that region is one of the DNC Party's nominees. Federal law does not require electors to vote for any particular candidate ("About the Electors," 2023). However, it does allow for state legislatures and political parties to create such a requirement. Electors generally follow the popular vote, whether required to or not. For this reason, it is very easy to predict the official election winner.

The Electoral College vote takes place between December 13th and 19[th7], approximately five to six weeks after the general election ("About the Electors," 2023; Rybicki & Whitaker, 2016, p.2). Electoral votes are counted in a special session of Congress on 6 January. At this special session, votes are counted state by state. Congressional members may submit objections (Rybicki & Whitaker, 2016, p.6) to a particular vote should they feel the need to challenge the result. Objections, in order to be considered, must have the signature of one Senator and one Representative. Qualified objections are then considered separately by both Congressional bodies: the House and the Senate. Objections must be separately approved by both bodies in order

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[6] For more details, see "Distribution of Electoral Votes" (2023).
[7] Regulations stipulate the election should be "on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December" (Rybicki & Whitaker, 2016, p.2), which is between December 13th and 19th.

to be acted on. After the count is complete and any objections resolved, the Electoral College officially announces the next president.

2.2. The Rise of Trumpism

Trump's administration was a far departure from those which came before him. Prior to running for office, Trump was a well-known celebrity businessman. His political platform is seen as far right-wing, with a unique ideology known as *Trumpism* that has been described by some as fascist[8] in nature. As it is a fairly recently established ideology (beginning approximately 2015), the scholarly literature regarding Trumpism is still new and continues to be developed. Some academics and multiple journalists have, however, attempted to identify the key characteristics of Trumpism which can be used to create a working definition for it. The two works which this thesis in particular relies on are a 2018 discourse analysis by student Rachel D. Beeman and a 2016 article from *The Hill* by David Edward Tabachnik, PhD. In reference to these and other works, the employed definition of Trumpism used in this thesis has three key features. In this section, Trumpism will be explored first through exploring the three characteristics and then through a historical overview of the circumstances which allowed it to be possible.

The first of these is populist rhetoric. Referencing various scholarly literature, Beeman's article creates a working description of populism which this thesis also adopts: "reliant on a charismatic leader seeking to deconstruct the power held by the elite, and continuously maintain a connection to the masses" (Beeman, 2018, p.5). The three aspects of populism which Beeman identifies within Trumpist rhetoric are: an appeal to the average citizen's desires, disparaging elite opponents, and simplifying complex ideas (Beeman, 2018, p.7). These themes appear in various forms throughout this thesis. Tabachnik (2016) writes that Trumpism "embodies a particular kind of American populism composed of a mish-mash of overt patriotism, economic

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[8] Whether or not Trumpism, or any modern political ideology, can be described as fascist is a contentious debate among scholars and politicians. That debate extends far outside the scope of this thesis and is, while hereby acknowledged, not further addressed.

nationalism, along with a vague commitment to the middle class and an aggressive but indefinite foreign policy." Populism is both a characteristic of Trumpism and the larger sphere Trumpism is rooted in. The historical context which created Trumpism is explored in Chapter 2.2.1.

The second key feature of Trumpism is anti-establishmentism. Trump's self-positioning as a candidate from outside the system is considered by many to have been a deliberate tactic employed to take advantage of the low levels of trust held in the American government by its populace (Aguirre, 2020). Trump has regularly and consistently referred to himself as an outsider to politics, citing his instinct as a businessman as his guiding principle in politics (Beeman, 2018, p.10). He uses his celebrity businessman status to differentiate himself from the status-quo political elite (Tabachnik, 2016), which he regularly establishes as corrupt and out-of-touch (Beeman, 2018, pp.11-13).

Thirdly, Trumpism is characterized by strong partisanship and membership categorization, rooted deeply in a policy of nativism. Nativism is a political movement which has at some level or another been relevant throughout US history and is characterized by "an antipathy for internal "foreign" groups…which has erupted periodically into intensive efforts to safeguard America from [them]" (Friedman, 1967, p.408). Trump's endorsement of nativism began long before his political career in 2011, when he publicly demanded for then-President Obama to release his birth certificate (Tabachnik, 2016), claiming he was feigning his status as a natural-born American citizen. This theory was quickly debunked[9], though it helped to establish the earliest of his political support base (Tabachnik, 2016). Prioritization of natural-born citizens over immigrants and domestic over foreign policy, known as the 'America First' plan, was a key campaign platform for Trump in both 2016 and 2020. Nativism in Trumpist rhetoric serves as the base for much of his heavily polarized partisanship, characterized by clearly delineated 'us versus them' rhetoric (Yang, 2018). Campani et al.'s research

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[9] See Zurcher (2016) for more details.

(2022) finds that this nativist rhetoric particularly connects Trumpism to past American populism, which has addressed immigration in many ways over the years.

Trumpism, as defined through the aforementioned synthesis of populism, anti-establishmentism, and polarized partisanship, serves as the ideological base for much of Trump's Jan. 6 rhetoric. An understanding of Trumpism is necessary in order to truly analyze any of Trump's political rhetoric. In this thesis, this working definition of Trumpism assists in the *rectification* phase of thematic analysis (See Chapter 4.2.2.).

2.2.1. American Populism

American populism did not begin with Trumpism. Rather, Campani et al. classify American populism "as a permanent historical phenomenon" (2022, p.156) which finds itself supporting the rhetoric of different groups at different points. This subchapter will provide a brief overview of the history of American populism to contextualize the rise of Trumpism within the larger American political history.

The first populists in the United States emerged in part as a result of the American Civil War and are found in The Farmers' Alliance of the 1870s and 80s. As suggested by their name, the Farmers' Alliance focused on agrarian issues such as high loan interest rates and fees for good transportation, which they blamed on the political elite. Out of the Farmer's Alliance came the People's Party of the 1890s, who first earned the nickname of 'populists.' They also included other laborers and reformers, all "against corruption, monopolies, laissez faire capitalism…[and] wanted government to reduce the economic inequality that capitalism, when left to its own devices, was creating, and…to reduce the power of business in determining the outcome of elections" (Campani et al., 2022, p.158). These early days of populism were neither truly left or rightwing, as at the time to be left generally meant supporting the abolition of capitalism in favor of socialism, and the populists simply supported amending the capitalist system. Still, they were further left than right (Campani et al., 2022, p.158). Though the People's Party itself was dissolved in 1909, the influence of

populist ideals continued to influence leaders and legislation. A particularly noteworthy example was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s, which helped pull the United States out of the Great Depression.

Populism's shift from left to rightwing rhetoric was gradual, beginning with the teachings of Charles Coughlin in the late 1930s. Its shift is best exemplified, however, by the case of Alabama governor George Wallace. As explained by Campani et al., "Wallace was not originally a conservative" (2022, p.159). He was an avid supporter of the New Deal and advocated for the common laborer. However, his vision of 'the people' was a key characteristic: they were white. Wallace saw any anti-segregation efforts as the "tyranny of Washington bureaucrats" (Campani et al., 2022, p.159). Those Wallace defended would later be referred to as the MARS, or Middle American Radicals. It is them who would go on to become the foundation for Trump's primary support base, though it does include individuals of all backgrounds. Research by the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group (Ekins, 2017) found Trump's supporters to be made of five main groups. The first, Staunch Conservatives, tend to be older, upper-middle class Republicans concerned with issues of gun control and immigration. Free Marketeers, the second type, tend to be middle-aged, politically centrist, and were likely to have voted Trump simply as the alternative to Hillary Clinton in 2016. The third group, American Preservationists, are those most classically stereotyped with Trump voters: lower class, white Christian nativist, and poorly educated. Anti-Elites, on the other hand, are far more moderate and tend to vote against political elites. Finally, The Disengaged are the least politically active, and tend to feel a detachment from political institutions.

2.3. 2020 Presidential Election

The 2020 US presidential election took place on November 3, 2020. The Republican Party sponsored incumbent Donald Trump. The Democratic Party, after starting with several candidates such as Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Pete Buttigieg, selected former Vice President Joe Biden. Official party candidates from minor parties included Jo Jorgensen of the Libertarian Party and Howie Hawkins of the

Green Party. While officially in the running, these candidates had little effect on the major events of the larger campaign process.

One key issue[10] during the election process was the ongoing pandemic of a disease known officially as Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). As the virus was still strong and many stay-at-home orders were still in place, mail-in ballots were seen as a safer alternative to going and voting in person, where one could be standing in line in close proximity to dozens (if not hundreds) of other people for hours. It was an especially important measure for immunocompromised voters. Mail-in ballots, as well as official presidential responses to the pandemic itself, were highly contentious during the campaign. Trump's administration had a history of minimizing the COVID-19 pandemic and health officials[11]. For example, Trump infamously[12] referred to it as the "China Virus," relating it to its origins in Wuhan, China. Critics condemned the statement, declaring it racist and that by further emphasizing the disease's origins, Trump was facilitating racist retaliation against Chinese and Asian Americans. Trump was highly critical of mail-in ballots, purporting that they could be used to commit voter fraud[13]. Biden and more left-leaning candidates, on the other hand, were supportive of mail-in ballots. They also were in favor of tighter restrictions to prevent the disease, such as masking and stay-at-home orders (Kates et al., 2020). Trump's administration and supporters found these restrictions to be examples of the federal government overstepping its bounds and restricting the freedom of choice of citizens (Kates et al., 2020).

A related issue was that of economic recovery. Stay-at-home orders forced businesses to close (both temporarily and permanently), with experts in 2020 estimating the pandemic would cost the American economy a minimum of 16 trillion USD (Powell, 2020). In order to combat this, Trump proposed tax cuts, deregulation, a quick

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[10] The following section of this subchapter examines certain issues from the 2020 presidential election campaign. It is not comprehensive, instead highlighting only a few key issues and platforms to increase a contextualized understanding of the political environment at the time of Jan. 6.

[11] For examples, see "Timeline of Trump's Coronavirus Responses" (2022).

[12] See Vazquez & Klein (2020) for more details.

[13] Mail-in ballots as a source of voter fraud was a key point in much of his post-election and Jan. 6 rhetoric. This is explored further in Chapter 5.2.

economic reopening from pandemic closures, and investing in job creation in a larger plan known as the 'America First' policy. It sought to domesticize jobs and decrease reliance on foreign labor. Biden, on the other hand, supported comprehensive COVID-19 relief measures, including increased testing, vaccine distribution, and additional stimulus packages to support individuals and businesses affected by the pandemic, as well as called for increased support of the globalized economy (rather than increasing economic independence). Biden also supported increased taxes for businesses and wealthy individuals, directly in opposition to Trump's tax policy interests.

Another major issue of the 2020 presidential election was racial justice. In May 2020, an unarmed black man named George Floyd was fatally shot by a white police officer while being arrested. This sparked a massive series of protests across the United States demanding justice and pushing for police accountability and reform measures known as Black Lives Matter (BLM). Candidates were compelled to address these concerns, reflecting a broader societal demand for substantive change. Biden made racial justice a central component of his platform, advocating for criminal justice reform, police accountability, and investments in marginalized communities. His choice of Kamala Harris as his running mate, making her the first black and South Asian woman on a major party's presidential ticket, underscored a commitment to diversity and representation. Trump's approach centered on a commitment to law enforcement and economic opportunities for minority communities. His support of law enforcement can be found in his frequent characterization of himself and his supporters as "the Party of Law & Order" (Trump, 2021b).

After many months of campaigning and debating these issues, Joe Biden won the election. He secured a total of 306 electoral votes to Trump's 232. Biden also received over 81 million individual votes (51.3% of the total), while Trump garnered over 74 million (46.9%) ("Presidential Results"). The Electoral College Joint Session of Congress was held on Jan. 6. Despite interruptions by riots (see Chapter 2.4.), the Joint Session confirmed Biden's victory. He was inaugurated as the 46th President of the United States on January 20, 2021, and Kamala Harris became the first female vice president in American history.

2.4. January 6, 2021

Jan. 6 saw several politically and historically significant events: a political rally by Trump, the Electoral College Joint Session of Congress, and the US Capitol Riots. This subchapter serves to chronologically narrate the events of Jan. 6.

The early morning saw large crowds creating tensions at several landmarks throughout Washington, D.C. A crowd broke through a barrier at the Washington Monument, while others gathered outside the Lincoln Memorial (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023; Williams, 2021). By about 08:51, over 10,000 people were reported being at the Ellipse, where Trump's rally was scheduled to be held a few hours later (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023). Many attendees are reported as having "weapons, including pistols, rifles, bear spray and spears" (Cohen and Lotz, 2022). At about 10:41, the crowds in the city were so large that D.C. Fire and Emergency Medical Services called for assistance in navigating the downtown area (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023). Soon after, some crowds "are seen heading towards the Capitol…one member of the group says: 'We're taking our country back.'" Some within the crowd are identified as members of the right-wing Proud Boys militia ("Capitol Riots Timeline").

Trump begins his rally speech at noon, praising his followers for their support and calling for marches to the Capitol building (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2021; "Capitol Riots Timeline"; Lonsdorf et al., 2022; Cohen and Lotz, 2022). While he speaks, the crowd around the Capitol grows. By 12:45, they are reported as beginning to push against the police barricades (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023) despite containment efforts by police ("Capitol Riots timeline"). The "outer police barrier" is officially broken by 13:00 (Lonsdorf et al., 2022; Cohen and Lotz, 2022). Just after 13:00, the Electoral College Joint Session begins (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023; Lonsdorf et al., 2022).

Trump ends his rally speech at 13:10 (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023; Cohen and Lotz, 2022; "Capitol Riots Timeline") with further calls for supporters to march to the

Capitol: "So let's walk down Pennsylvania Avenue" (Trump, 2021a). After this, Trump returns to the White House (Lonsdorf et al., 2022; Cohen and Lotz, 2022).

At about 13:45, Capitol crowds push past more police barricades and officers officially declare the event a riot (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023; "Capitol Riots Timeline"; Lonsdorf et al., 2022). The National Guard is called to assist (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023). At 14:00, rioters enter the building by breaking windows and "open doors for others to follow" (Lonsdorf et al., 2022). Between 14:00 and 14:15, Vice President Pence and some other members of Congress (for example, Speaker Nancy Pelosi) are evacuated while other Congressional staff hide and barricade in various offices and conference rooms (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023; "Capitol Riots Timeline"; Lonsdorf et al., 2022). It is at this point that the Senate Session is put into recess, and the Capitol building is officially put on lockdown (Lonsdorf et al., 2022; Cohen and Lotz, 2022). The House goes into recess a few minutes later (Cohen and Lotz, 2022).

Rioters reach and enter the Senate Chambers at about 14:40 (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023; "Capitol Riots Timeline"; Lonsdorf et al., 2022; Cohen and Lotz, 2022). Defending Capitol Police near the House Chamber ("Capitol Riots Timeline") shoot rioter Ashli Babbitt "as she tries to climb through the doors" (Lonsdorf et al., 2022; Cohen and Lotz, 2022). She later dies from this injury. During this period, Capitol Police continue "extracting and securing congressional staff, some of whom are hiding beneath tables in their offices, and some of whom have barricaded doors" (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023). At 16:17, Trump releases his video message to the rioters on Twitter (Cohen and Lotz, 2022), urging them to leave the building peacefully ("President Trump Video Statement on Capitol Protesters", 2021).

Over the next several hours, this chaos continues, and the city of Washington D.C. is given a curfew (Cohen and Lotz, 2022). The riot does not end until after the arrival of the National Guard just before 18:00 (MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023; Lonsdorf et al., 2022). Mike Pence opens the Senate once again "just after" 20:00 and Nancy Pelosi opens the House at about 21:00 (Lonsdorf et al., 2022; Cohen and Lotz,

2022). The Joint Session officially resumes at 23:32, and Biden is declared the winner

of the presidential election at 03:42 on January 7 (Cohen and Lotz, 2022).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Ontological Security

Ontological security is a social-psychological concept which, simply put, describes the feeling of stability an individual has in their environment. High levels of ontological security involve strong senses of self and a stable understanding of where one fits in with the world around them. Ontological insecurity, on the other hand, is the perceived lack of security in one's environment. The concept of ontological security originated in the existential psychology research of R.D. Laing (1999), who primarily focused on ontological insecurity as the basis for understanding psychological disorders, namely schizophrenia. His theory centers around the loss of 'realness,' and the constant internal struggle to maintain it:

> If the individual cannot take the realness, aliveness, autonomy, and identity of himself and others for granted, then he has to become absorbed in contriving ways of trying to be real, of keeping himself or others alive, of preserving his identity, in efforts, as he will often put it, to prevent himself losing his self. (Laing, 1999, p. 44)

One of the strengths of Laing's theory of ontological security is its introduction of politics or social structures as a contributing factor towards mental disorders (Rossdale, 2015, p.3). Still, scholars of psychology often critique the theory's lack of practical application; it was intended to "outline a framework which might account for the fractures and traumas of certain forms of mental illness without enacting a depersonalization liable merely to exacerbate the problem" (Rossdale, 2015, p.4) rather than form the basis for mental health treatment. Laing's ontological security theory is also a highly individualistic one. While this makes sense within the field of psychology, the individualistic nature of Laing's theory is a common critique from scholars of political science or international relations (IR).

Ontological security was brought out of psychological studies and into the realm of IR most notably by Anthony Giddens in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Krickel-

Choi, 2021, p.8-9). In his *The Constitution of Society* (1984), Giddens explores ontological security within his larger framework of structuration theory, which sought to analyze the relationship between the individual and societal structures. It emphasizes that this relationship is recursive with a structural duality, meaning individuals both shape and are shaped by the social structures in which they exist. This is widely considered to be one of the main strengths of Giddens' ontological security interpretation: that he accounts both for individual agency and existing societal structure. Some of the more recent work in the field of ontological security, such as that of Mitzen (2006), has attempted to apply the theory on a state level. This move has invited its own critiques, which suggest that ontological security should remain based on the "intersubjective framing of the insecurities of individuals" (Croft, 2012, p.225).

Another main critique of Giddens is that he overlooks the role of emotion as an ontological security factor. This is not a critique uncommon in other areas of IR theory. Particularly in realist circles, IR tends to assume rational action: actors (namely states) act in ways consistent with their goals and which yield the most benefit with the least cost (Novelli, 2018, p.122). As explained by Krickel-Choi (2021, p.9), the role of emotion as a motivator for action is one of the key developments brought to the IR field by studies of ontological security. Group or even state-level action consists of the unity of multiple individuals, so the individual perspective (which entails emotion) should be considered in ontological security studies.

Overall, ontological security has evolved into a multidisciplinary concept with applications in both individual, existential psychology and IR. While praised for its integration of societal structures and individual agency, ontological security theories face ongoing debates regarding their practical applications, individualistic focus, and the role of emotions in shaping human behavior at both individual and collective levels. This thesis attempts to explore ontological security in a manner which accounts for the aforementioned strengths and weaknesses of previous theories. It assumes that ontological security (and conversely insecurity) is a product of both individual and societal factors and can exist both within an individual or within a larger societal group. Emotion is considered not only a variable but a key characteristic of ontological security.

Ontological security is a key component of this thesis' hypothesis. As explored in Chapter 2.2.1., the core of Trump's support base can be seen as the descendants of Warren's (1976) MARS group: white, middle-class Americans who felt ostracized by the political elite, who they saw as siding with their inferiors: the lower class, non-white Americans. As explained by Campani et al. (2022), this group morphed into what is known today as Trump's support base as politics crept further and further towards the left of the spectrum. Throughout all this, they carried a deep-seated sense of existential anxiety which was only worsened by Trump's 2020 election loss.

3.2. Crisis

3.2.1. Defining & Labeling

In academia, there is no singular understanding of crisis events. This is due to two main characteristics which make specified definitions or context-free labels impossible. In this subchapter, this thesis will examine these two problems and combine their solutions in order to create a 'formula' with which an event can be labeled a crisis.

Firstly, creating a definition for crisis is difficult due to their vast typology. For example, the most widely recognized instances of crisis are natural disasters or accidents. Seeger and Sellnow give examples such as the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear crisis, Hurricane Katrina, and the sinking of the Titanic (2015, pp.1-5). However, crises are encountered in a wide variety of other contexts. A political crisis, for example, may be an attempted coup. A business may face a technical crisis wherein their operating software goes down and prevents their work. Economic crises, such as recessions, also exist. In order to create a definition which accounts for this variety in typology, it is vital to establish what these types of events have in common. Seeger and Sellnow's research (2015) finds three commonalities among crisis events: surprise, high uncertainty, and threat (p.11). Using these three traits, Seeger and Sellnow create the following working definition for crisis: "a specific, unexpected, nonroutine event or series

of events that create high levels of uncertainty and a significant or perceived threat to high-priority goals" (2015, p.11).

Secondly, labeling an event a crisis is difficult due to their highly subjective nature (Coombs, 2010, p.19). To make a simplified example, consuming wheat products may result in serious medical crisis for the individual with celiac, gastrointestinal discomfort for the gluten-intolerant, and no consequences for others. Houlberg Salomonsen and 't Hart (2020), in analysis of subjectivity in political crises, reinforce that the ability to label a crisis comes less from the event itself and more from how involved actors perceive it (p.442), highlighting the importance of the context in which an event occurs:

> Events that in operational terms may be relatively small…can nevertheless be perceived politically and institutionally to be highly pivotal…In other words, since it is the subjective perceptions of threat, urgency and uncertainty that count, it becomes vitally important to take the temporal, cultural and political context in which certain dramatic incidents occur to understand why only some incidents, accidents and adverse events become perceived and thus responded to as crises, (2020, p.442)

Summarily, they say that in order to understand why some perceive certain events as crises and not others, the researcher must examine context.

This thesis combines the points made by Seeger and Sellnow (2015) and Houlberg Salomonsen and 't Hart (2020) into a formula for crisis identification:

> *Does **[ACTOR]** perceive **[EVENT]** to be (1) surprising, (2) creating high uncertainty, and (3) a threat to their goals?*

Applying the research topic to this formula, the following question is created:

> *Does Trump perceive losing the 2020 presidential election to be (1) surprising,*
>
> *(2) creating high uncertainty, and (3) a threat to his goals?*

The answer to each of these, as explored in Chapter 6.1., is yes, opening the door for further analyses. Labeling an event as a crisis has the further implication of an inherent rhetorical call to action, as seen in the research of Seeger and Sellnow (2015, p.10) and explored in Chapter 6.4.

3.2.2. Narrative Creation

As noted previously, crises are events which take people by surprise and create high levels of uncertainty in the world around them. In this way of interrupting the status quo, crises have a notable quality of "disrupting the processes and patterns of sense making" (Seeger and Sellnow, 2015, p.11). It is thus necessary for those affected to find a way of once again making sense of the world around them and explaining the crisis. Seeger and Sellnow (2015) assert this explanation to be the crisis narrative (p.11). Narratives of crisis are academically significant due to the "patterns and relationships that can help explain their larger impact" (Seeger and Sellow, 2015, p.8). Analyzing the different layers, sub narratives, and strategies can create a more intersectional understanding of a particular crisis event and different actors' reaction to it. Narrative analysis also allows for classifying an event within the larger crisis typology.

The crisis which this thesis examines is political in nature – having to do with the election of a head of state and political-motivated riot event. Houlberg Salomonsen and 't Hart (2020) find that, in theories of political crisis management, there are two broader categories of crisis which it is most important to distinguish between: situational and institutional (p.443). In situational crises, the source of crisis is external and political leaders are looked to for guidance. In institutional crises, on the other hand, the source is internal and public leaders "can well become the target of public scrutiny, indignation and repudiation" (Houlberg Salomonsen and 't Hart, 2020, p.443). Both types can manifest either rapidly ("acute") or slowly ("creeping"), creating a quadrant-like spectrum of political crisis types.

An important question in the classification of crises is what kind of response a crisis necessitates. Coombs (2010) addresses this in realm of crisis management theory with his *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT), which states that responses in times of crisis must be *situational*, or tailored to the crisis event at hand. He typologizes crises events in a system of "clusters." These are similar to the spectrum created by Houlberg Salomonsen and 't Hart (2020) in that they are categorized by levels of organizational blame. In the *Victim cluster*, blame is external, and the organization has low responsibility for the crisis. In the *Accidental cluster*, the organization has moderate levels of responsibility, but the fault was not deemed intentional, and only partially preventable. The most responsibility is taken in the *Preventable cluster*, wherein the organization is fully to blame for the crisis. Using these clusters, he creates four primary categories of response strategies: (1) Denial, wherein blame is attributed externally, or the crisis altogether denied, (2) Diminishment, in which the severity of the crisis is lessened, (3) Rebuilding, wherein apologies and/or compensation is offered, and (4) Bolstering, in which measures to aid one's reputation are employed (Coombs, 2010, p.103). Though Coombs' SCCT is meant for the construction of a narrative by actors, applying its logic in reverse reveals how an actor positions itself on the responsibility scale and can support other forms of narrative analysis.

As Coombs' systems of clusters suggest, narratives of crisis, like the crisis events themselves, come in a wide variety. Different narratives serve different rhetorical purposes. In *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal* (2015), communication scholars Seeger and Sellnow create a typology of crisis narratives with real examples of analysis for each. They include Blame, Renewal, Victim, Hero, and Memorial Narratives. They also study how such narratives are created and how they relate to one another. Seeger and Sellnow's typology is beneficial in its acknowledgement of *convergence*, in which differing narratives combine to create a larger, more complete narrative of crisis. It gives frameworks from which the analysis of crisis narratives can be conducted. Chapter 6 applies several of these types to Trump's Jan. 6 rhetoric with the primary purpose of further analysis.

3.3. Application of Theoretical Frameworks

Ontological security and crisis build the theoretical foundation of this thesis' hypothesis, which asserts that Trump capitalizes on his supporters' fears following his 2020 election loss by legitimizing their fears and justifying the need for action. The fear felt by his supporters is ontological insecurity. Trump's support base, as established in Chapter 2.2.1., have a long history of feeling excluded from mainstream politics. When Trump won the presidency in 2016, they felt that they, the true Americans, were finally being represented; the *silent majority* had spoken. When he then loses the 2020 election, their understanding of themselves is challenged, creating ontological insecurity. Trump legitimizes this anxiety by giving evidence of election fraud, as found in the textual analysis (See Chapter 5.2.). He justifies the need for action in two ways: explicit messaging for the next steps (See Chapter 5.3.) and by framing his rhetoric in a crisis narrative, which inherently calls for action to 'fix' the crisis and prevent further devolution into chaos. Understanding Trump's narrative as one of crisis is explored in Chapter 6.

LEGITIMIZED FEAR

4. Methodology

4.1. Data Set

The dataset for this thesis includes: (1) A transcript of a speech given by Trump at his "Save America" rally on Jan. 6 (Trump, 2021a), which was just over an hour long and given on The Ellipse in Washington DC. It was from this rally that many rioters marched to the Capitol building. (2) Archived Tweets from Trump's Twitter account published on Jan. 6 (Trump, 2021b). Some Tweets were "re-Tweets" (Tweets from other users which Trump again shared), some were links to videos, and the rest were authored by Trump. (3) A transcript of a video message from Trump recorded in response to the riots and posted on his Twitter account on Jan. 6 ("President Trump Video Statement on Capitol Protesters", 2021).

Selection of the dataset followed two criteria: (1) Said or written by Former US President Trump and (2) Published on Jan. 6. The timeframe for data was purposefully limited to narrow the scope of research and prevent post-event narrative evolution. This thesis' goal is to examine Trump's narrative specifically at the time of the riots. Only Trump's public rhetoric is examined. While an analysis of the converged narratives of multiple involved actors could certainly provide a more intersectional dimension to this study, it would detract from the primary focus of this research, which is to determine whether or not Trump justifies the need for action and thus, directly or otherwise, called for the riots. This is justified by the clear link between Trump's rhetoric and the riots, as demonstrated by many of those who were present. For example, one said, "I was there because he called me there and he laid out what was happening" (Rodriguez-Delgado, 2022). Any comments Trump made privately are likewise excluded due to the focus on the link between him and the riots. Private comments, though they may have been aired soon after, were not a part of his official public narrative. Their accuracy is also more difficult to determine as they are reported secondhand.

Transcripts were obtained from the Associated Press (AP) (Trump, 2021) and the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN) (2021). Tweets, including deleted Tweets, were obtained from *The Trump Archive*, a blog specifically dedicated to

archiving Trump's Twitter account. The full dataset can be found in the Works Cited (Trump, 2021a; Trump, 2021b; "President Trump Video Statement on Capitol Protesters", 2021).

4.2. Frameworks for Analyses

Application of the following methodological frameworks was conducted manually, as opposed to with a qualitative coding software. Qualitative coding softwares were explored, but ultimately not used. This decision was primarily a matter of the author's personal preference. In this subchapter, the primary analysis frameworks are defined and the ways in which they were applied specified.

4.2.1. Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis is a form of qualitative research which seeks to study a *story*. Its focus is not necessarily on the elements of rhetoric found within it, but "the story itself" (Kohler Riessman, 1993, p.1). 'Stories' is a broad term used to encompass a wide variety of narratives: historical, fictional, personal, and so on. Analyzing a narrative helps to identify a motive. For the purposes of this thesis, the 'story' being identified is the political and historical narrative being portrayed. It is both the subject of and the reason for the speech given and may or may not be a product of ontological insecurity.

Narrative analysis is not a singular form of analysis, but rather a category. Forms of narrative analysis include structural, thematic, discourse, and so on. This thesis will focus on two types of narrative analysis: thematic and membership categorization. It will also employ SOAPSTone; a simplified narrative analysis tool.

4.2.1.1. The SOAPSTone Strategy. The *SOAPSTone* strategy is a common tool used for simplified rhetorical analysis. While not the most advanced of rhetorical strategies, it is a reliable method for contextualizing text and creating a base for further analysis. *SOAPSTone* is an acronym of different basic rhetorical elements:

S peaker

O ccasion

A udience

P urpose

S ubject

Tone

SOAPSTone analyses were used to examine the rally speech and video message. While it could be applied to Tweets as well, the scope of application to each individual post is unnecessary for this thesis' purposes. As *SOAPSTone* is merely a simplified analysis tool, it does not constitute a major framework for this thesis. Elements of *SOAPSTone* are noted when relevant in analysis discussion or in relation to the other data and are referenced throughout the text. The *SOAPSTone* table used for analysis in this thesis is located in the appendix, entitled Figure 1. (Newbold, 2017)

4.2.2. Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is a broad school of research which has no clear origins–- usage of the term outdates specific theory or definition (Terry et al., 2017, p.17). Clarke and Braun (2006) sought to create a working, standardized version of TA to be more cohesive in qualitative research. This paper was very successful, and TA has continued to grow rapidly. The three main sources on TA used in this thesis are based in the theories of that paper.

These sources define themes as "meaning-based patterns" which are created by researchers through systematic analysis of a dataset to answer a research question or construct a narrative based on said data (Terry & Hayfield, 2021, p.13). This thesis

seeks to construct a theme of ontological insecurity in the narrative of former US President Trump on Jan. 6.

Analysis began with TA to identify key themes in order to assist in the later narrative analysis. The process for TA used was adapted from the works of Vaismoradi et al. (2016) and Terry and Hayfield (2021), both of which sought to create a practical guide to theme development in qualitative research. Vaismoradi et al.'s guide outlines a process comprised of four discrete stages: (1) Initialization, wherein the text was read and annotated with notes for further analysis , (2) Construction, in which the preliminary 'coding' of potential themes and ideas is begun , (3) Rectification, wherein potential themes were compared to data from existing literature to "verify," and (4) Finalization, in which a narrative is developed in order to connect the various themes and create a more complete sense of the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, pp.103-107).

Terry and Hayfield (2021) follow a similar process which is divided into five stages: (1) Familiarization, in which the given data is meaningfully engaged with, for the purposes of future analyses, (2) Coding, wherein data is further interpreted and smaller lines of text (codes) are created, (3) Initial Theme Generation, in which codes are combined "to construct multifaceted and meaningful patterns" (p. 43), (4) Developing and Reviewing Themes, wherein potential themes are scrutinized and eliminated or adapted, and (5) Naming and Defining Themes, in which chosen themes are refined and defined for future use in writing (pp.30-63).

The TA in this thesis followed a process of approximately four stages, which came from a combination of the aforementioned guides. Firstly, I read each data set once in full with no annotation or note-taking in order to establish a basic familiarity with each. This stage also involved watching and listening to the rally speech and video message. Then, I re-read each and began taking notes which included questions for further research, repeated ideas, and highlighting things which stuck out to me. Secondly, I began to create 'codes' and piece together preliminary themes. These first two stages were applied to each dataset individually. Thirdly, I began comparing my codes, themes, and annotations of each dataset with each other and with other

materials in order to verify their significance (or lack thereof). The bridging of datasets in this stage is a sub-phase of TA referred to by Vaismoradi et al. (2017) as 'stabilizing.' According to them, stabilizing is valuable in TA in that it ensures themes are related to each other and used to "explain the phenomenon under study" (2017, p.107). It grounds them within a wider context and prevents the assumption of a wider phenomenon for only a singular instance. This was the lengthiest process with several rounds of revision. Themes were solidified, merged, broken, and deleted countless times. Finally, I began to create definitions for each theme and tried to place them within the narrative I had interpreted in reading the dataset. This final phase was concurrent with the writing of the thesis, and I returned to the third stage at various points to adjust my analysis based on the contents of other chapters.

4.2.3. Membership Categorization Analysis

Membership categorization analysis (MCA), as best and most simply defined by Leudar, Marsland, and Nekvapil, "is a formal analysis of the procedures people employ to make sense of other people and their activities" (2004, p.244). One foundational work in MCA is Harvey Sacks' 1972 paper "An Initial Investigation of the Usability of Conversational Data for Doing Sociology." In this paper, Sacks introduces the idea that people routinely use categories to organize their experiences and that these categories are crucial for understanding social order. Sacks argues that membership categories, such as gender, ethnicity, and social roles, play a central role in how individuals make sense of the world and navigate their interactions (1972).

The study of MCA seeks to identify the purpose of a particular categorization; be it religious, political, etcetera. For example, a religious purpose for categorization might be to identify those who are moral and good from those who are evil. MCA in this thesis will be used to identify the ways in which Trump's rhetoric places different actors in the political system at the time of the riots. This is conducted with the purpose of proving actors' roles within a larger crisis narrative. This is similar to research by Homolar and Scholz, wherein they examine Trump's 'team-creation' into 'us and them' (2019). It

LEGITIMIZED FEAR

differs from this thesis, however, in the manner of examination. Rather than using specified MCA, they simply identify the different teams through linguistic analysis.

Unlike TA, the MCA I conducted did not follow a specific pattern. In the earliest stages of this thesis, I kept quantitative notes of MCA data, such as how many times a particular group was mentioned. It was helpful in first identifying the most important members of each group and creating initial references for later use. However, further analysis was focused on the qualitative aspects of MCA. I focused on the words used around each membership category and what the connotations of these words implied for both members of that group and other groups. I then compared the data I had created with themes from TA and studied how these worked together. In analyzing Trump's rhetoric as a crisis narrative, MCA was especially useful for identifying different strategies and placing it within typologies of crisis narratives created by researchers in the field of crisis communication.

4.3. Justification for Analysis Frameworks

The decision to investigate ontological security through narrative analysis can best be justified by exploring Giddens' theory of ontological security, wherein "A person's identity [ontological security] is not to be found in behaviour, nor–- important though this is–- in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*" (1991, p.54). Keeping in mind that the nature of Giddens' work with ontological security was psychological, this logic can be applied to themes of governance. Part of the question this thesis seeks to answer is whether or not the media published by Trump on Jan. 6 can be interpreted as attempts of narrative continuation in crisis due to ontological insecurity.

TA was chosen as a method for this thesis due to its flexibility and allowance for researcher interpretation. Terry and Hayfield, following in the work of Clarke and Braun, write:

However, it is common in some methods or approaches to TA to view themes as

somehow preexisting in a data set… Emergence is assumed within this rubric…
it can subtly undermine the considerable effort (and researcher creativity) that
goes into developing themes from a data set that does not have an inherent
thematic structure. (Terry & Hayfield, 2021, p.13)

It allowed examination of the dataset with a specific goal in mind: to identify ontological
insecurity and indicators of crisis narratives.

MCA was chosen due to the high level of in and out group dynamics in Trump's
rhetoric. Though not mentioned by name, this type of analysis is found in Homolar and
Scholz's article with significant results. Given that the purpose of most of his Jan. 6
communications was to blame the election loss on fraud, it makes sense to look at who
he places this blame on.

4.4. Limits & Ethics of Research

This thesis, while drawing on previous scholarly arguments and attempting to
combine them into a politically and historically significant case study, has its limits. For
example, the chosen dataset amounts to only an approximate thirty-two pages. While
the data was specifically designed to remain focused on a very specific point in time, it
also eliminates the inclusion of other relevant data. This might include other Tweets in
the days leading up to Jan. 6, or other public comments made about the 2020 election.
By its limited nature, the dataset excludes the possibility to examine the convergence of
differing narratives. Narrative convergence, as explained by Seeger and Sellnow,
involves the puzzling together of a broader narrative through different viewpoints (2015,
pp.143-144). Such viewpoints might, for example, include interpretations of the election
and Jan. 6 by Trump's political rivals. Rather than seeking to create a multidimensional
narrative of Jan. 6, this thesis instead focuses solely on the narrative account given by
Trump.

Another limit of this thesis is that it avoids speculation on other potential causes
of the riots, such as plans by far-right groups (i.e.: Proud Boys) to storm the Capitol. It

assumes that there were no pre-made plans and thus the riots were purely reactionary, though evidence published in media has suggested otherwise[14].

Finally, another factor which affected this research is the author's positionality and bias. As an American, I voted against Trump and have been steadfastly opposed to his policies since the 2016 presidential election. In the early stages of this thesis, I was concerned that this would tamper with the validity of my research and its findings. In response, I limited the thesis' scope to not include discussion of crisis narratives as justification for action. However, through careful consideration of my own opinions and crafting of the research methodology, I found my positioning to be an asset, and eliminating any discussion of justified response detrimental to the argument. It informed my academic curiosity: How could rhetoric I so quickly dismissed be the inspiration for such emotionally charged action in others? Concrete steps taken to avoid tampering of the results include critical analysis of my own phrasing in the writing of this thesis and how language and the inclusion of certain sources may impact the interpretation of results. I attempted to read my writing through the eyes of those Trump supporters I was writing about and asked the question: Does this read as dismissive of their concerns? Does it address the fears which, even if not to me, are real and valid?

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[14] See Reilly (2022) for more details.

5. Analysis

As outlined in Chapter 4.2., the initial narrative analysis conducted on Trump's Jan. 6 rhetoric consisted of TA and MCA. The purpose of these analyses is to show that Trump is confirming the feeling of ontological insecurity his supporters are feeling after the election by giving them reasons for it. By doing so, he creates a crisis narrative which justifies their response and, later, the riots. Whether or not the individual claims he makes (especially about the election) are true or false is, for the purposes of this thesis, irrelevant. What is relevant, rather, is that they give reason behind the disruption in ontology his support base feels.

The first section of this chapter is dedicated to sharing the results of MCA and exploring what analysis of these results suggests. The following two sections are each dedicated to a major theme found in the TA. TA was conducted with the purpose of looking for ontological insecurity as a major theme in Trump's Jan. 6 rhetoric. Thus, the created patterns are more accurately considered *subthemes*, which all contribute to an overall theme of ontological insecurity and created crisis narrative. The two created subthemes are *Rigged Election* (Chapter 5.2.) and *Future Action* (Chapter 5.3.).

5.1. Us Vs. Them

MCA reveals that Trump's created narrative relies heavily on the juxtaposition between two teams in an "us vs them" style. These two teams, simply put, are: (1) Those who rigged the election and/or supported it ("them"), and (2) Those who are fighting for justice and challenging the election's results ("us"). This answers the *who* of Trump's narrative. MCA is used to identify the purpose of categorization, not merely the categories themselves. In the case of Trump on Jan. 6, this purpose is primarily political, with moral undertones: Trump delineates these groups with the purpose of justifying the sense of ontological insecurity his supporters are feeling after the election loss. This subchapter explores and analyses the results of MCA on Trump's rhetoric.

5.1.1. Them

The "they" of Trump's rhetoric is clearly defined; in fact, he spends much of it talking about them and their actions. His particular focus is those who are either responsible for him losing the 2020 election or, alternatively, are responsible through inaction. Descriptors for actors (and their actions) in this category are almost exclusively negative. He uses words and phrases such as "corrupt," "hopeless," "fools," "scoundrels," "so bad and so evil" (Trump, 2021a; 2021b; "President Trump Video Statement on Capitol Protesters", 2021). Such descriptors identify 10 specific individuals (by name) and 12 generic or group actors as members of the outgroup. The outgroup can be divided into three primary actors: the Democrats, the mainstream media, and the 'weak' Republicans.

Trump's creation of an outgroup which is participating in election rigging is a legitimization tactic. His supporters are experiencing a great challenge to their ontological understanding of themselves in society. They considered themselves the silent majority, sure to win the election. The election loss directly contradicts that belief. By saying that there are enemies at play who are directly (or indirectly) to blame for this anxiety, Trump is confirming that this anxiety is legitimate and valid. He is communicating to his supporters that there is a real threat to their security which has caused their pain. This is the primary purpose of naming an outgroup: to create a 'bad guy' on whom to place their anger. Establishing an outgroup aligns with crisis communication theories of blame narratives (See Chapter 6.3).

5.1.1.1. The Democrats. The first membership group of this category is the Democratic Party. Democrats are frequently mentioned, both specifically and categorically, throughout the rally speech and Tweets. They are identified as outgroup members implicitly due to the overwhelmingly negative language surrounding their mentions, and explicitly with accusations of misdeeds: "Democrats attempted the most brazen and outrageous election theft" (2021a). Trump characterizes Democrats as "corrupt," "emboldened radical-left," and "hopeless" (2021a). Their actions, too, are

negative in nature: they made "illegal and unconstitutional changes to election procedures," "oppose every effort to clean up their voter rolls," and "scrounge[d] up votes from mystical places" (Trump, 2021a; 2021b).

It is the Democratic party, Trump claims, which is primarily responsible for the long-term corruption in politics and the most recent election loss. For example, there was an incident during the vote count in which a water pipe burst in the election facility in Georgia (See Chapter 5.2. and Footnote 20). Once the room had been cleared of Republican election officials, it was Democratic election officials, Trump alleges, who counted "boxes…and suitcases of ballots out from under a table…This act coincided with a mysterious vote dump…for Joe Biden, almost none for Trump" (Trump, 2021a). This was just one instance among many in which Democrats sought to rig the election (See Chapter 5.2. for other examples). The election was just the most recent in a long pattern of political corruption and failures in their duties as elected officials (Trump, 2021a).

As the Republican party candidate in a highly polarized de-facto two-party system, it was expected that Trump would make Democrats the target of attacks in his election campaign rhetoric. By attacking the other, the parties seek to make themselves appear more favorable to voters. However, Trump's characterization of Democrats as "operatives" (2021a) whose primary goal is to illegally win an election has much more serious moral implications: not only do they believe things which Republicans (true Americans) would see as bad for the country, but they will go to unconstitutional means, including "totally breaking the law" (Trump, 2021a) to get them. This breeds distrust in the political system, which is both a standard characteristic of Trumpism and a way to legitimize the ontological insecurity felt after the election loss.

5.1.1.2. The Media. The next member of the outgroup are the mainstream media. According to Trump, they are the most pervasive site of corruption in the United States:

> Our media is not free. It's not fair. It suppresses thought. It suppresses speech, and it's become the enemy of the people. It's become the enemy of the people. It's the biggest problem we have in this country. (Trump, 2021a)

Trump's struggles with the media are not new. Rather, they are longstanding major themes in Trumpist rhetoric, extending back to the days of his 2016 presidential campaign, where he was known to decry sources which criticized him[15]. It was around that time when Trump popularized the phrase 'fake news' in everyday speech[16], which referred to supposed lies being spread about him in and by the media. Even four years later in 2020, Trump maintained that the media is full of fake news and chooses only to show things that fit its pre-made narratives: "Now what they do is they go silent…Unless it's a bad story" (Trump, 2021a).

The word "media" alone appears sixteen times throughout the speech, each time in reference to the mainstream media. 'Media' as a categorical actor also includes references to 'Big Tech,' as for the purposes of this thesis it is unnecessary to separate them. Trump uses mostly negative language surrounding it: "the biggest problem," "fake news media," the enemy of the people," "corrupt," "the people who want to deceive you and demoralize and control you" (Trump, 2021a). Though most of the mentions are not directly related to election fraud, Trump emphasizes mainstream media's corrupt nature, claiming it outright lies to the public and refuses to show them any sort of Republican or conservative-backed truth. This goes so far to even include the true size of the crowd during in rally speech:

> Media will not show the magnitude of this crowd. Even I, when I turned on today, I looked, and I saw thousands of people here. But you don't see hundreds of thousands of people behind you because they don't want to show that. (Trump, 2021a)

He also accuses the media of limiting the social network reach for Republicans and conservatives by flagging their social media posts: "Every time I put out a tweet, that's,

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[15] See Diamond (2016) for an example of Trump publicly criticizing the media in 2016.
[16] See Lee (2018) for more details.

even if it's totally correct…I get a flag…They don't let the message get out nearly like they should." (Trump, 2021a). Ironically, it would be some of his posts from this day which resulted in his ban from several social media platforms just two days later (See Footnote 1).

Like his characterization of the Democrats, Trump's negative representation of the media serves the larger purpose of legitimizing ontological insecurity amongst his supporters. This is particularly notable in that it extends the crisis outside of purely political actors into the general American society, no longer merely legitimizing insecurity but intensifying it. It is, as above noted, backed up by Trump's long history of feuding with the media.

5.1.1.3. The Weak Republicans. 'Weak Republicans' is a term coined by Trump in his rally speech to describe those Republicans who "turned a blind eye" to long standing Democratic corruption (Trump, 2021a). Within the narrative, they are the smallest of the outgroup member categories. Context also shows that in many of the times Trump only says the word 'Republicans', multiple also belong in the 'weak' category. Language used to describe them is similar to that used for the other members of the 'them' category: they "turn a blind eye" to Democratic corruption, are "weak," and need to "get tougher" (Trump, 2021a). However, the words used to describe their actions have less intensely negative connotations. Rather than being evil and corrupt, they simply lack the resolve to stand up for what is right.

In another departure from other members of the outgroup, the weak Republicans are also urged to take action in a way the other categories are not. Trump suggests that they can be convinced into doing the right thing: "But we're going to try and give our Republicans, the weak ones because the strong ones don't need any of our help…the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country" (2021a). This is an example of the crisis response strategy known as corrective action, in which an actor who holds responsibility for a crisis can take steps to amend for it (See Chapter 6.3.). The inclusion of a corrective action implies that, at least for some of the weak Republicans, there is still the chance to be included in the 'us' team. This is similarly

explored in Chapter 5.1.2.2.1. in the especially relevant case of then-Vice President Pence.

5.1.2. Us

The ingroup in Trump's narrative is less clearly defined. As supported by Kazin's (2016) study of the populist elements of Trumpist rhetoric, Trump focuses more on his enemies than his friends. This is likely because "It may be impossible to come up with a credible definition of "the people" that can mobilize the dizzying plurality of classes, genders, and ethnic identities that coexist, often unhappily, in the United States today (p.23). However, in the times he does reference the ingroup, Trump uses more positive language: "a great guy," "great patriots," "most courageous" (2021a; 2021b). Using these types of descriptors and context clues, 19 specific and 9 general actors Trump has mentioned can be considered members of the 'us' group.

By creating an ingroup, Trump follows the crisis response strategy of creating a community for his supporters to turn to. Seeing others who also are experiencing a challenge to their identity is legitimizing in that it allows for "social comfort and vicarious relief" (Seeger and Sellnow, 2015, p.122). This is further explored in Chapter 6.4.

5.1.2.1. The Public. Certainly included in the ingroup are those present at the rally. This is the most important ingroup category as these are the people who continued on to riot at the Capitol. Trump emphasizes their place in the ingroup by rhetorically linking himself to them with the pronoun "we": "We're gathered together," "We're going to walk down to the Capitol" (2021a). He also links himself to the public by identifying their common goals: "All of us here today do not want to see our election victory stolen" (2021a). This rhetorical linkage of himself to the common man is another common tactic of his ideology, further classifying himself as a political outsider (See Chapter 2.2.).

Trump speaks directly to the public frequently throughout the datasets. In fact, they are continually his primary audience (See Figure 1.). While Trump is giving his rally

speech, he is interacting directly with the public and responding to them in real time. He acknowledges their size, emphasizing that the ingroup is larger than they are being led to believe by the results of the election: "Media will not show the magnitude of this crowd. Even I, when I turned on today, I looked, and I saw thousands of people here…We have hundreds of thousands of people here" (2021a). Twitter, as a social media platform, serves as a forum in which the public can directly interact with Trump, adding an interpersonal level to this type of communication. This is explored in the concept of *parasocial relationships*, wherein users of social media feel a bond to a public figure they do not actually have contact with due to the especially personal nature of social media posts. Parasocial relationships based off Trump's Twitter account (which, pre-ban, was infamous for its high levels of activity and engagement) are studied by Paravati et al (2019). They serve to further bond members of the ingroup to one another. The video message, too, is directed at members of the public, but especially those present at the riots. Once again, he uses this opportunity to endorse himself as one of them: "I understand your pain. I know you're hurt" ("President Trump Video Statement on Capitol Protesters", 2021). This particular quote demonstrates two strategies: Trump again links himself to his supporters, and he legitimizes their anxiety. Trump also legitimizes their understanding of themselves in society by describing them and their actions with positive language: "And think of what you're doing…Somebody says, "Well, we have to obey the Constitution." And you are, because you're protecting our country and you're protecting the Constitution. So you are" (2021a).

5.1.2.2. The Good Republicans. Opposite to the weak Republicans of the outgroup are the good Republicans of the ingroup. Unlike their inverse actor, these Republicans are described as fighting the good fight despite nearly insurmountable odds: "Republicans are constantly fighting like a boxer with his hands tied behind his back" (2021a). By identifying the good Republicans, Trump creates another group which his supporters can rely on in order to give hope. Similarly to how identifying the outgroup legitimizes ontological insecurity by giving a scapegoat, identifying these members of the ingroup legitimizes the need for future action by showing that there is fighting already being done in their favor.

When describing these ingroup politicians, Trump also makes several references to his administration, discussing things it has done or achieved. He mentions, for example, building the border wall and improving the Veterans Affairs Department (VA) (2021a). Trump clearly specifies his leadership role in his administration's achievements: "We got you the biggest regulation cuts. There's no president, whether it's four years, eight years or in one case more, got anywhere near the regulation cuts" (2021a). This alludes to a particular type of crisis narrative known as the hero narrative (See Chapter 6.4.).

5.1.2.2.1. What About Pence? In including his administration as part of the "us" category, it would normally be assumed that this group includes his second-in-command, then-Vice President Mike Pence. However, like some of the those to the weak Republicans, Trump's specific references to Pence actually imply a more unstable membership for him[17]. He demands repeatedly that Mike Pence do the "right" thing by contesting the results of the election at the electoral college vote count later in the day ("I hope Mike is going to do the right thing" (Trump, 2021)). This is another example of corrective actions, analyzed in-depth in Chapter 6.3. The reasons Trump gives that Mike Pence should challenge the results, besides being "right," include that the country is in danger of an illegally elected government, and that if he did not, it would be a "sad day" (Trump, 2021). This implies the presence of a threat, which inherently calls for preventative action to be taken.

More interestingly, however, Trump makes the following remark:

And Mike Pence, I hope you're going to stand up for the good of our constitution and for the good of our country. And if you're not, I'm going to be very disappointed in you. (Trump, 2021a)

Trump is so clear in establishing Pence's membership categorization as unstable that it is no longer an implication, but an explicit ultimatum. He is in the *us* if he declares the

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[17] Pence has many of the same characteristics as the weak Republicans and could be considered a prime example of them. However, he is here put in his own category due to his unique circumstance as such a high-ranking member of Trump's administration and the repeated and specific mentions of him across all datasets.

election results invalid, but one of *them* if he refuses. This sets up a potential qualifier for the in-group–- believing the election was rigged and interfering with processes which would declare otherwise.

5.2. Rigged Election

This first section of TA results involves quotes which contribute to the narrative of a rigged, fraudulent, or stolen election. They are largely the *how* of Trump's crisis narrative. This is by far the largest category of subthemes, in part due to the fact that it is the purpose for much, if not all, of Trump's Jan. 6 narrative (See Figure 1). Corruption in elections, according to Trump, is not a new phenomenon and Democrats have been, for years, committing election fraud and enacting "policies that chipped away our jobs, weakened our military, threw open our borders and put America last" (Trump, 2021a). This characterization of Democrats as the primary creators and enablers of election corruption begins their placement in the 'them' category.

Trump primarily emphasizes a "fake voter tabulation process" (Trump, 2021b). He does not spell out one singular process for fake voter creation, but instead lists many ways which contributed to an overall false election. For example, Trump lists many ways in which fake ballots were cast in the election. They include but are not limited to: ballots registered to vacant addresses (2021a), ballots registered to felons[18] (2021a), and ballots registered to people who died prior to the election (2021a). One of the largest ways Trump purports fake ballots were received was through mail-in ballots. Mail-in ballots had to some extent been present in most recent elections, but their use more than doubled to 43% of total election votes in 2020 from 21% 2016 (Scherer, 2021). As discussed in Chapter 2.3., this was due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was ongoing at the time of the election and riots. The United States had not experienced a widespread epidemic since the influenza of 1918-1920, so much of the populace was understandably hesitant in responding appropriately (i.e.: with masks and

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[18] Laws regarding felon voting rights vary state-by-state. For a brief overview of felon voting rights in 2020, see Uggen et al. (2020).

distancing). Trump fueled this fire. By claiming rampant misuse of mail-in ballots, Trump is exploiting a previous instance of ontological fear and insecurity to further his crisis narrative.

Another allegation Trump makes in regard to the election is that in many states, proper legislative procedures were ignored in order to improperly count votes. While these claims only appear in the rally speech, they are significant both in the weight of its claim (that proper process was simply and illegally ignored) and in how they support the other supposed instances of voter fraud. Trump alleges that not only did it occur, but it was widespread across the country:

> In every single swing state, local officials, state officials, almost all
> Democrats, made illegal and unconstitutional changes to election procedures
> without the mandated approvals by the state legislatures. (2021a)

Here, Trump encourages distrust of the political elite, drawing on his ideological positioning as a political outsider. They, he argues, have become so complacent that the election-stealers were simply able to ignore those procedures which would have prevented the fraud. Those proper procedures, he alleges, are still imperfect. Trump claims that the lost election was also in part due to repeated systematic failures in the electoral process. That which he refers to most frequently is when it is not required to check for voter identification. This gives people who are otherwise ineligible, such as noncitizens, the ability to vote anyway. It is especially egregious to Trump because even countries he generally disregards, namely, Mexico[19], make sure to check for identification (Trump, 2021b).

Another instance of election-rigging Trump mentions is an incident where a water pipe broke in an election center in Fulton County, Georgia, delaying the ballot-count by several hours[20]. Trump alleges that the pipe never actually burst, and the delay was actually spent adding "tens of thousands of votes" (Trump, 2021a) to the official count. This claim was referenced frequently around the election period, with one example

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[19] See Reilly (2016) for examples of Trump's views of Mexico.
[20] See Feldscher (2020) for more details.

appearing in the dataset in the form of a re-shared Tweet from follower Tomi Lahren (Trump, 2021b).

Trump also asserts that in Wisconsin, there were "more than 500 unmanned, unsecured drop boxes" (Trump, 2021a) which mysteriously gathered large numbers of ballots:

> They have these lockboxes. And, you know, they'd pick them up and they disappear for two days. People would say where's that box? They disappeared. Nobody even knew where the hell it was…

> …In Madison, 17,000 votes were deposited in so-called human drop boxes. You know what that is, right? Where operatives stuff thousands of unsecured ballots into duffle bags on park benches across the city, in complete defiance of cease-and-desist letters from state legislature. (Trump, 2021a)

These claims are just some of many examples Trump gives to explain how the election was stolen from him. They are the reasons why his supporters are experiencing such fear (ontological insecurity). He (and, by extension, they) did not win the election as expected due to this large variety of schemes enacted by those seeking to undermine them. In this way, this theme has the rhetorical purpose of legitimizing ontological insecurity with evidence which 'proves' the event which caused it.

5.3. Future Action

This category of quotes can also be considered the "What now?" of Trump's Jan. 6 rhetoric. Here he spells out what needs to happen in order to counter the rampant fraud. It consists mostly of targeted messages to specific groups or individuals and builds upon the justifications for ontological insecurity explained in Chapter 5.2. by calling for responsive action. These messages create a rhetorical 'call to action,' an implicit necessity in crisis narratives (See Chapter 6.4.), further advancing Trump's rhetoric as an ongoing narrative of crisis. The recipients of these messages are

generally members of the ingroup or those whose membership is questionable, such as Vice President Pence.

Trump begins his call to action with the claim that the state legislatures have realized the election fraud and want a chance to recount their votes (Trump, 2021a; 2021b; "President Trump Video Statement on Capitol Protesters", 2021). In order for the recount to happen, challenges must be raised and approved during the Electoral College conference. The Electoral Conference is headed by the Speaker of the House, which is in this case then-Vice President Pence. Trump repeatedly demands that Pence overturn the election results in that day's electoral college count (Trump, 2021a; 2021b). For example: "...Do it Mike, this is a time for extreme courage!" (Trump, 2021b).

As for his followers, Trump encourages them to stay the course and keep pushing for the election to be overturned. In the rally speech (pre-riots), he encouraged social action through means of marching to the Capitol to protest: "So we're going to, we're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue… And we're going to the Capitol, and we're going to try and give" (2021a). He encourages this, as well as other forms of resistance and remembrance, throughout the entire dataset (2021a; 2021b; "President Trump Video Statement on Capitol Protesters", 2021).

Trump also is sure to include the consequences of not speaking out: "And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore" (2021a). This consequence is dire, speaking to the ontological insecurity his supporters are experiencing. As they understand it to be, the United States is a nation of free and fair democracy. They also understand themselves, as mentioned previously, to be the 'silent majority' (Sanders, 2016); even if the silence is not of their own volition (instead forced by the corrupt government and media; Trump, 2021a). This majority, silent or otherwise, must by logic win the election (electoral college exceptions excluded), as they had in 2016. Such an understanding of their place within the American political system and current electoral situation is a clear cause for ontological insecurity. Trump's calls to action acknowledge the future as well as the present: "Remember this day forever!" (2021b).

Trump's messages also continue throughout the riots in directed messages to the rioters. While Trump does urge them to peacefully leave, he also continually legitimizes the emotions which brought them there: "I know your pain. I know you're hurt… We had an election that was stolen from us…I know how you feel, but go home, and go home at peace" ("President Trump Video Statement on Capitol Protesters", 2021). This legitimization is particularly poignant in his final Tweet for the day, wherein he implies that such events are not only legitimate, but unavoidable:

> These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever! (2021b)

As previously explained, Seeger and Sellnow's theory of crisis narratives postulates that by labeling something as a crisis, the need for action is inherently implied (2015, p.10). The notion of unavoidability which Trump portrays in the above Tweet furthers this thesis' argument in reverse: since these events happened, there must have been a crisis to create them. In this way, this subtheme serves as the justification for future action as well as a thematic confirmation that Trump's rhetoric is a crisis narrative. This, of course, is further explored in Chapter 6.

6. Crisis Narrative

Crisis narratives are composed of several devices and serve multiple rhetorical purposes. The first section of this chapter serves to prove Trump's Jan. 6 rhetoric to be a narrative of crisis by using the understanding of crises and crisis narratives established in Chapter 3.2. The second section looks at the most basic elements of Trump's crisis narrative, supported by SOAPSTone Analyses (see Chapter 4.2.1.1. and Figure 1.). The rest of the chapter is devoted to identifying and exploring different rhetorical strategies Trump employs within his crisis narrative to further attempt to understand his message(s) and purpose(s).

Crises rarely, if ever, have one single narrative. Over time, the narratives of different actors involved *converge* into a broader picture, combining "many other stories, themes, perspectives, and pieces of information" (Seeger and Sellnow, 2015, p.144). Jan. 6 is no different. It is viewed differently by people of different political backgrounds and beliefs. For the purposes of this thesis, however, data was focused to only examine the narrative Trump shared on Jan. 6. It does not attempt to find the converged narrative of the riots, only examine one of them as a crisis narrative in order to potentially prove a justification for the riots provided by Trump.

6.1. Applying Definition of Crisis

As explained in Chapter 3.2.1., academia lacks a singular definition for crisis due to its incredibly interdisciplinary nature. This thesis, by combining several understandings of crises, builds a formula for determining whether or not an event can be considered a crisis (See Chapter 3.2.1.). That formula considers the two primary challenges of crisis defining: vast typology and high subjectivity. It addresses the vast typology of crises by including the three common characteristics of crises which Seeger and Sellnow (2015) used to establish their working definition: surprise, high uncertainty, and threat. It addressed the subjectivity challenge by purposely using only Trump's narrative in which to locate the common characteristics. These interpretations likely will

not appear sensical to those outside Trump's target audience (his support base). This thesis does not make the claim that interpreting Trump's election loss, or any other ongoing issues, as a crisis is factually accurate. It only seeks to find that interpretation which is held by Trump and his support base. The formula, as used in this case, is as follows:

> *Does Trump perceive losing the 2020 presidential election to be (1) surprising, (2) creating high uncertainty, and (3) a threat to his goals?*

This subchapter's contents, supported by the textual analyses of Chapter 5, finds that the answer is yes. Hence, Trump's narrative on Jan. 6 can be considered one of crisis and further analysis can be applied.

6.1.1. Surprise

The first common element among crises is that of surprise. If there is time to prepare against an event in advance, its effects will be less intense. Routine events, even if unpleasant, lose their crisis status as life adapts around them. Thus, for an event to be considered a crisis, it must be unexpected and a break from normal life. Trump's support base considered themselves the 'silent majority' (Sanders, 2016). Confirmed by Trump's 2016 election, this was their normal. Even though the electoral college allows for exceptions, the general understanding is the candidate with the majority of votes wins the presidential election. In the view of Trump's following, they are the majority, so they must be the ones to win the election[21].

Trump even notes that early in the vote count, he held the majority for a while: "That election, our election was over at 10 o'clock in the evening. We're leading Pennsylvania, Michigan, Georgia, by hundreds of thousands of votes…And all of a

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[21] Somewhat ironically, Trump did not win the 2016 popular vote despite winning the election. However, this does not interfere with his support's view of themselves as the American majority. Rightwing politics is state-focused, not federal-focused. His followers in the case of the 2016 election likely viewed themselves as "the states" rather than individuals. In this way, they are still the majority.

sudden it started to happen" (2021a). The early lead Trump held in the election only served to confirm what he and his supporters expected: another electoral victory. The 'it' he mentions is the election loss. Biden's vote count caught up to and surpassed Trump's quickly. While the election and vote count may have been expected events, losing them was not. In this way, it can be confirmed that, to Trump, the loss of the 2020 election was a surprise.

6.1.2. High Uncertainty

Crises also have the power of creating high levels of uncertainty by destroying meaning. They challenge ideas which serve as a fundamental part of a person or group's identity or worldview. Summarizing the writings of Kierkegaard on existential anxiety, Seeger and Sellnow write the following:

> The lack of meaning creates a sense of confusion and disorientation.
> An existential crisis occurs when individuals are forced to confront the foundational meaning of their lives and is often provoked by events such as psychological trauma, a major loss, or a life-threatening experience. (2015, pp.31-32)

When Trump lost the 2020 election, his support base faced a major challenge to their political identity as the so-called silent majority. This acted as a break in the continuity of their identity within the American political structure. Their understanding of themselves became unstable: they became ontologically insecure and uncertain about the world around them.

Chapter 5 finds several parts of Trump's rhetoric which suggests ontological insecurity. Ontological insecurity serves as the 'high uncertainty' which is common among various crisis events. This proves the presence of high uncertainty within Trump's rhetoric.

6.1.3. Threat

Trump clearly and repeatedly demonstrates how his election loss is a threat to the United States throughout the dataset: the American government is rife with corruption, and he is the one who can fix it, as he has been doing over the past four years. If he loses the election, the country loses its best chance at recovering from said corruption. Trump demonstrates the benefits of having him as president by giving examples of his administration's successes. This includes, but is not limited to, their reform of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and creation the Space Force[22] (2021a). Of course, the election is technically not entirely lost, as his rhetoric on Jan. 6 began before the Electoral College Joint Session. This means that there are two foreseeable futures at stake:

> But think of this. If you don't [overturn the election results], that means you will
> have a president of the United States for four years, with his wonderful son. You
> will have a president who lost all of these states. Or you will have a president, to
> put it another way, who was voted on by a bunch of stupid people who lost all of
> these states. (Trump, 2021a)

Trump's explanation makes the logic seem simple: why allow someone voted for by "stupid people" to become President? In this way, we can confirm the presence of threat within Trump's narrative.

6.2. The Account & Communicator

The most basic building block of a crisis narrative is the account, which serves to answer the basic question of what has happened. Accounts have the power to apply meaning to events in multiple ways:

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[22] For more details, see "Veterans" (n.d.) and "President Donald J. Trump is Establishing America's Space Force" (2019).

> Accounts influence impressions through the strategic portrayal of events, attribution of cause, omission of details, emphasizing some elements of the story over others, and connections to other elements and events. (Seeger and Sellnow, 2015, p.51)

Due to these functions of the account, the one who communicates the account may have the ability to shape how an event is seen (Seeger and Sellnow, 2015, p.50). When the communicator is trusted, these accounts are more likely to be trusted. In the case of Trump, any account which he gives is more likely to be believed by his supporters than by his opponents.

Simply put, Trump's account alleges that the election has been rigged, and his victory stolen from him. With the addition of more details, Trump fervently relays a clear plot. The United States, he claims, is in dire trouble, as it has been plagued for years by dishonest politicians and failed elections: "For years, Democrats have gotten away with election fraud and weak Republicans" (Trump, 2021a). Trump's election to the presidency in 2016 had been a tremendous upset to this pattern of corruption: "We beat them four years ago. We surprised them" (Trump, 2021a). In order to prevent another surprise to the system, Trump alleges, those involved in the corruption rigged the 2020 election "like they've never rigged an election before" (Trump, 2021a) through a vast variety of means (see Chapter 5.2.).

Trump's position as communicator is legitimized by his previous rhetoric. As discussed in Chapter 2.2., Trump's ideological platform characterizes him as a political outsider. Though he was president, he maintained this positioning through the 2020 campaign process. In his rally speech, Trump cites examples of changes he made, and how these types of changes were unique to him, which further prove his positioning:

> We've created the greatest economy in history. We rebuilt our military. We get you the biggest tax cuts in history. Right? We got you the biggest regulation cuts. There's no president, whether it's four years, eight years, or in one case more, got anywhere near the regulation cuts…So we've taken care of things, we've done things like nobody's ever thought possible. (2021a)

These examples establish Trump's credibility as an outsider, making his account of a crisis of corruption and election fraud more plausible to his audience.

6.3. Blame & Victimization

One style of crisis narrative is that of blame narratives. These, as their name suggests, serve the primary purpose of assigning blame for the crisis at hand. Questions of blame will always appear in instances of political crisis (Houlberg Salomonsen and 't Hart, 2020, p.449). Blame narratives come in several forms. That which is relevant to Trump's Jan. 6 rhetoric is what Seeger and Sellnow refer to as *transcendence*. In transcendence narratives, the guilty party seeks to avoid blame by creating an account which places guilt on a societal-level problem:

> On occasion, assigning guilt beyond a single person, organization, or even government to address a larger problem on the industrial or macrosocial levels. In this way, the blame narrative transcends the crisis at hand to align with greater issues for which a macronarrative already exists. (Seeger and Sellnow, 2015, p.71)

This explanation, like the others Seeger and Sellnow explore, assumes the narrative as published by the party assumed to be at guilt. In Trump's case: he is not guilty in a traditional sense. Losing the election is not a direct result of actions he took. Rather, it is the result of who the American public voted for. However, he still uses the transcending technique in order to blame his loss on others: he did not lose the election because he was less popular than Joe Biden. Rather, he argues, he lost because corrupt politicians rigged the election. Trump's narrative in this way transcends to place blame on a macrosocial level. If there were not such a pattern of corruption, he would not have lost.

Trump spends much of his rhetoric assigning blame in ways which line up with Coombs' response strategy of denial (2010, p.103). Trump clearly identifies individuals on whom he blames his loss. This was seen and supported most clearly through MCA (See Chapter 5.1.1.): Democrats, the mainstream media, and weak Republicans are to

blame for the election fraud and long-term pattern of political corruption. MCA also revealed that Pence falls into a membership category whose alliance is, at that point, unknown (See Chapter 5.1.2.2.1.). Should he fail to overturn the results of the election, Pence will belong to the outgroup. Specifically, he would be considered a weak Republican who could not stand up to corruption. This can be seen as demand for a *corrective action*. Corrective actions are those which would resolve the crisis. In this case, it would resolve the crisis by placing Trump in his rightful position as winner of the election (Benoit, 2014, p.26). By demanding Pence do a "right thing," it implies that Pence also has the ability to do a "wrong thing." This wrong thing would, of course, be failing to overturn the election results.

As suggested above, Trump's blame narrative has the purpose of portraying him as a victim. The election loss had nothing to do with him; it was instead the corrupt political system trying to keep him out. In this way, Trump's rhetoric also serves as a *victim narrative*. Victim narratives are those which express the victims of a crisis: be it self-described or otherwise. They are especially powerful in that they are "the most direct expression of personal loss" (Seeger and Sellnow, 2015, p.110). Direct personalization of loss adds an emotional level to rhetoric.

Since Trump is the communicator of this crisis narrative, he would be understood as the 'organization' in Coombs' SCCT. Thus, by portraying himself as victim, Trump is classifying the election loss within the victim cluster. This emphasizes that he has low, if any, levels of responsibility for the crisis. If we were to ignore Trump's role as communicator in his narrative, his narrative still clearly portrays himself as the victim. In this case, he can be seen as assigning high levels of responsibility to the 'organization.' Using the MCA of Chapter 5.1., the organization would be the members of the outgroup directly responsible for the election loss: the Democrats who committed election fraud.

Trump's victim narrative portrays himself as the immediate victim, personalizing the election loss. The presidential election was primarily stolen from him. It was him who should have won. His supporters, by extension, are secondary victims. It is they who will suffer in the long term from the corruption of the political state, as they had for so long

previously (Trump, 2021b). MCA supports this interpretation. As explored in Chapter 5.1.2.1., Trump uses the pronoun 'we' to include his supporters with him in the ingroup. By doing this, he equates himself with his supporters, who view themselves as the standard, average American. This is a powerful tactic in distancing himself from the political elite, which is only further supported by his ideological positioning as the political outsider. It also serves to intensify the crisis by vastly enlarging those who are affected. It is no longer only his loss: it is the loss of all the ingroup, all the "great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long" (Trump, 2021b). By including his supporters as victims of this crisis, Trump explains the anxiety which they feel. He is, in essence, saying that they should be anxious because they, too, have been victimized. This anxiety, of course, is ontological insecurity.

6.4. The Rally Effect

Another notable aspect of Trump's narrative is that it positions him as a hero within the electoral crisis. As the hero in his crisis narrative, Trump positions himself as authority. In the midst of great ontological insecurity, he is the source of continuity for his supporters' identity. In this way he aims to provide a sense of "social comfort and vicarious relief" (Seeger and Sellnow, 2015, p.122) for those hurt by his loss. While ontological insecurity creates fear, hero narratives seek to create hope.

While the thought of heroes in crisis may more clearly bring to mind images of first responders in natural disasters, Seeger and Sellnow explain that narratives of heroism often also star political leaders (2015, pp.120-121). A particularly poignant example of a political leader being considered heroic in times of crisis is President George H.W. Bush leading the United States after the September 11, 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks. After the attacks, Bush's approval rating rose dramatically, as did the American sense of unity: 62% of American adults in the year reported increased patriotism (Hartig and Doherty, 2021). This increased sense of community after crisis is referred to by scholars as the 'rally 'round the flag effect.' Schubert et al. (2002) found that Bush's address after the attacks was the only significant factor for that particular

instance, highlighting the potential political leaders have in influencing groups post-crisis. Trump's positioning of himself as a hero, in general Trumpist rhetoric but especially on Jan. 6, is highly intentional. By doing so, he makes himself the metaphorical flag which his supporters should rally around.

This leads into another significant element of crises: the call-to-action. According to the work of Seeger and Sellnow, rhetorical calls-to-action are an inherent part of all crisis narratives (2015, p.10). Any actions taken as a result are known as the *consequences of crises*, and take many shapes: "social, political, economic, demographic, physical, and technological" (Seeger and Sellnow, 2015, p.168). In political crises, the consequences are often rally effects. Though Trump's crisis narrative aimed at the larger consequence of having the election results overturned, the Capitol Riots mark his calls-to-action as successful in creating a rally effect. While they were certainly very different types of crises, parallels can be drawn between the rally effects of Jan. 6 and 9/11: where Bush's rally effect bolstered general support for the War on Terror, Trump's rally effect stirred his supporters into rioting at the Capitol.

There were also other consequences, which took form in widespread calls for systematic change among right wing supporters and the condemnation of his opponents. However, the Riots were the most significant consequence, especially due to their physical nature. Rioters smashed windows, overran barricades, injured Capitol police, and destroyed property within the Capitol Building. The crowds of rioters were so powerful that the National Guard was called in to respond. Congressional staff were barricaded inside offices and conference rooms. One rioter, while attempting to climb through a smashed window, was shot and killed (Lonsdorf et al., 2022; "Capitol riots timeline," 2023; MacFarlane and McDonald, 2023).

7. Conclusion

Trump communicated to the world in three main ways on Jan. 6: (1) in a rally speech, (2) with Twitter, and (3) in a video message to the Capitol Rioters. Through adapted techniques of thematic analysis (TA), it was revealed that Trump's rhetoric heavily relied on two main themes: (1) that the election was rigged, and (2) that something needed to be done about it. Election rigging was a multi-faceted operation involving fraudulent ballots, illegal legislative practices, and a vast network of actors. It came as the culmination of long-term corruption by the political elite, who had been shocked at the upset to their system when Trump won the 2016 election. Trump relayed this message fervently throughout the dataset, demanding action be taken both by those in power (such as Pence) and by his followers. Membership categorization analysis (MCA) supported these claims by identifying the two major teams through which Trump viewed the political system. On his side, that of the "great patriots" (Trump, 2021a), were his followers and loyal administration members. They are characterized by resistance to the establishment and their protest of the election results. Those labeled as enemies included the Democrats (the masterminds of political corruption), the lying mainstream media, and the weak Republicans who enabled them. Finally, there was Pence, whose membership would be defined by his actions. The final parts of the dataset, Tweets posted at the end of the day, confirm his position within Trump's enemies. Each of these themes and membership categories serve various rhetorical purposes of legitimizing ontological insecurity or justifying the need for future action.

Both TA and MCA support the interpretation of Trump's Jan. 6 rhetoric as a crisis narrative in several ways. Firstly, they identify key narrative themes which relate to the three characteristics of Seeger and Sellnow's understanding of crisis: surprise, high uncertainty, and threat. Trump's rhetoric also fits several typologies of crisis narratives. There are elements of blame and victimization, supported by MCA identifying the in and out groups. Trump classifies himself in a heroic fashion, contributing to a hero in crisis style of narrative. These different narrative types suggest different levels of responsibility for the different involved actors, supporting analysis through the lens of

several of Coombs' SCCT clusters. Finally, Trump's crisis narrative serves as a rhetorical justification for further action, likely inciting the riots.

Key to all these arguments and analyses was a sense of ontological insecurity: the feeling of anxiety which results from being one unable to maintain a stable sense of identity within the world around. A rigged election legitimized the fear felt; they were still the silent majority they believed themselves to be, and the election loss was due to external factors. This legitimization also confirms their belief in themselves as the victims with Trump. Trump's heroic narration and demands for action helped to unify his supporters in a common goal: to overturn the election results and dispose of the political elite.

The arguments in this thesis served to build upon much other previous research in related topics. Most closely related is Homolar and Scholz's "The power of Trump-speak: populist crisis narratives and ontological security" (2019). This research conducts similar analysis methods on previous Trumpist rhetoric; campaign materials from the 2016 election. It too served to establish Trumpism as built upon a narrative of crisis. However, it differed in its aim. The consequence of the crisis narratives in this case was Trump's 2016 election win. Ontological insecurity was both brought about and quelled within Trump's speeches, facilitating votes for him, who would otherwise be a longshot candidate for presidency. I found its aims to be a bit shortsighted: crisis narratives can be the inspiration for much more dramatic results than an altered ballot. Though the article was written far before the Capitol Riots, I found it to be a solid foundation for attempting to understand them. In this way, this thesis attempts to build upon that research.

Other research includes that of Agius, who explored ontological insecurity and border policies under Trump through a gendered lens. This work theorized that by looking at border policies with a special focus on how masculinity can contribute to the ontological insecurity which promotes increased border policies, one can find a stabilizing source in Trumpist ideology. This research helped to further establish the link

between Trumpism and ontological security themes. While gender was not explored in this thesis, it easily could have been.

While the Capitol Riots only lasted a day, their legacy is incredibly significant, both as a case study in modern political violence and as a historical event. Trials for rioters are still ongoing nearly three years later, making their impact far from over. This thesis' scope was especially limited with a dataset of only approximately 32 pages. Yet there is much more to be analyzed. For example, Trump's rhetoric began far before Jan. 6 and continued for long after. Early phases of this research attempted to include longer time periods of his Tweets, such as those posted in the period between election day and Jan. 6. These were not kept due to the immensity of the data set; Trump's notoriety for frequent Tweets proved true. Future research could examine this dataset, possibly even with the aim of identifying shifts in narrative. A larger dataset could contain multiple narratives. Those narratives also do not have to be ones of crisis. Even within this thesis' dataset is the potential to find other narrative typologies. Other future research could examine the narratives of other key actors on Jan. 6, such as the politicians in the Capitol Building during the riots or responding narratives from Pence. The long-term impact of the riots, and the crisis narratives which triggered them, also serve as a base for future research. Academics in the field of legal research are likely to find significance within the ongoing trials for rioters. The use of social media as a communication channel also holds great potential. In these, and countless other ways, the potential for future research is great.

To conclude this thesis, it feels important to state and examine the research question once again:

How does Trump provoke a reaction to the ontological insecurity felt by his supporters through his January 6, 2021 narrative?

I hypothesized that Trump exploited ontological insecurity amongst his supporters by creating a narrative of crisis, which served to legitimize further reactions. Thematic and membership categorization analyses provided several promising results which indicated heightened ontological insecurity and ways in which Trump legitimized this fear. This

was successfully applied to theories of crises and crisis narratives, definitively establishing Trump's Jan. 6 rhetoric as a narrative of crisis. From there, several implications of the rhetoric were drawn.

To answer the research question most simply:

Trump speaks in a way which demonstrates his 2020 election loss as a political and moral crisis. He capitalizes on his supporters' long held ontological insecurity by legitimizing it with evidence of election fraud and calls for future action both implicitly and explicitly.

LEGITIMIZED FEAR

8. Appendix

Figure 1
SOAPSTone Analyses

	Rally Speech	**Video Message**
Speaker	Donald Trump	Donald Trump
Occasion	"Save America" Rally	Response to Capitol Riots
Audience	Rally crowd, "Weak Republicans," Mike Pence	Rioters
Purpose	To demand overturning of election results.	To quell the riots
Subject	2020 election results, electoral college vote count	Riots; stolen election
Tone	Serious in topic yet generally informal in word choice–- colloquial	Serious in topic but gentle in delivery, demonstrating commonality with his audience

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