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## A Legacy of Lies: Examining Donald Trump's Record-Breaking Dishonesty

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A Legacy of Lies:  
Examining Donald Trump's Record-Breaking Dishonesty

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HNRS 490 Capstone Project  
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**Abstract:**

Donald Trump told a record number of lies while in office, and ended his term with an unprecedent attack on democracy carried out by his supporters. Presidential lying has a long history in the United States, and significant research has been done on intention, lie typology, and outcomes. Trump's lies go beyond the existing literature, threatening norms of democracy and bordering on authoritarian behavior. My research examines the power of presidential rhetoric by analyzing a dataset of fact-checked tweets, with the intention of better understanding if and how Trump's dishonesty violates democratic norms and its potential implications for political violence. I find that this presidential lying falls outside of known typologies, with the unprecedented effect of undermining core democratic institutions and threatening the legitimacy of the American government. Trump uses anti-democratic call-to-action rhetoric that challenges the widely accepted norms of democracy, widening the scope of acceptable presidential behavior and eroding public trust in government.

Key words: *lies, dishonesty, legitimacy, democracy, rhetoric*

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## Introduction

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Donald Trump's final presidential rally quickly went south, leading to an unprecedented insurrection at the United States Capitol. From its inception, this event had underlying anti-democratic tones, calling for a halt on the certification of the election results, which Trump had alleged to be fraudulent in countless tweets. Many supporters gathered on the Capitol lawn that morning, despite the rally being held over a mile away at the White House. They arrived with Trump paraphernalia, Confederate flags, bulletproof vests, and distinctive orange hats marking some as members of the Proud Boys, a far-right white supremacist group. Fifteen minutes into his speech, Trump gave the call to action, urging his followers to march to the Capitol, which, at that moment, was protected by temporary perimeter fences and few officers. The agitated crowd made quick work of this flimsy protection, violently overwhelming the police and breaching the building's outer perimeter. More officers in riot gear were called in to defend the Capitol against the growing mob, and the fight intensified, with both sides spraying chemical agents at each other. Eventually the National Guard was called in, as protesters continued to encroach on the building and take down officers. Finally, the mob made it inside the Capitol, and legislators were forced to barricade the chamber doors to protect themselves from the angry crowd (Leatherby et al., 2021).

This unique phenomenon will go down in history as the first time a U.S. president's rhetoric has incited an attack against the country's democratic institutions. Presidential lying did not originate with the Trump administration, but Trump's dishonesty stands out among the rest. Presidential lies are told for a variety of reasons and are received differently based on both intention and outcome. Some presidential dishonesty is excused, as long as the end justifies the means and it is done for the good of the country. Other lies are condemned as selfish and

unforgivable. Many of Trump's lies were told for selfish reasons, meant solely to benefit him or his friends, not the American public. Furthermore, his lies were often blatant violations of democratic norms, the rules necessary to maintain the integrity of our democracy. Trump fostered polarization, hatred, fear, and even violence through his constant lying. The end result was an overt attack on democracy inspired by the words of the nation's leader.

My research examines the power of presidential rhetoric in threatening the norms of democracy. I analyze a sample of fact-checked lies that Trump told via Twitter in order to better understand if and how his dishonesty violates democratic norms and its potential implications for political violence. My findings show that Trump used tactics such as fearmongering and defamation to build support, undermine the democratic voting process, and promote his own political interests. His lies not only harm the nation by deteriorating public trust in government; they border on dangerous in their attack against the legitimacy of the opposition, which poses a threat to democracy as a whole. Trump's actions are in line with many warning signs of authoritarianism, leaving the future of the country uncertain and potentially perilous. My analysis finds that previous conceptualizations of presidential lies do not fully capture the lies told by Donald Trump, specifically his calls to actions that culminated in the Capitol insurrection.

## Literature Review

There is a wide variety of articles, books, and research papers that explore presidential dishonesty. They cover the typology of lies told by national leaders, the rationale behind these lies, the contexts within which they are told, and the effects that dishonesty has in terms of public reaction and a leader's legitimacy. There is also expansive documentation on the nation's history of presidential dishonesty, including such presidents as James Polk, Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, George W. Bush, and even some brief

exploration into Donald Trump's legacy of lying. All of this information provides a strong framework for my exploration of Trump's dishonesty and the effect it has had and will continue to have on public trust in government and the legitimacy of democracy.

### *Typologies of Lies*

Previous literature on the typology of presidential lies varies substantially. Political commentators and scholars alike have sought to categorize presidential lying. For example, in a 2013 *CNN* article, John Blake suggests that lies can be divided into two simple categories: forgivable and unforgivable. Forgivable lies are those made in the interest of the nation, whereas unforgivable lies are those made in the interest of the leader (Blake 2013). Political scientist John Mearsheimer (2013) expands on this distinction in his book *Why Leaders Lie*, describing seven different varieties of lies, five of which are forgivable/justifiable, with the other two being unforgivable/illegitimate.

The first type of justifiable lying is inter-state lies, which are aimed directly at other countries but often end up deceiving a leader's own people, as an unintentional consequence (Mearsheimer 2013, 21). This type is more uncommon than other lies because there is a pre-existing lack of trust between states which makes it difficult for leaders to get away with lying to each other. The Bush administration partook in inter-state lying in 2005, lying to Asian allies China, Japan, and South Korea that North Korea sold uranium hexafluoride, one of the main ingredients for nuclear weapons, to Libya. In reality, it was Pakistan that made the sale, and there is no evidence that North Korea played a role in the deal. Bush's administration chose to deceive their Asian allies because they believed that they were not fully appreciating the seriousness of the threat posed by North Korea (Mearsheimer 2013, 38). The administration hoped that the lie

would make North Korea look more menacing, and thus provoke the allies to take the threat seriously.

The second type of lie is fearmongering, when a leader exaggerates a foreign-policy threat to motivate the public to take it seriously and make the necessary sacrifices to counter it (Mearsheimer 2013, 22). Fearmongering is much more common, as Americans implicitly trust their government and assume that its most important job is to protect them. Leaders engage in this kind of deception because they believe they can get away with it and the end result will justify the means (Mearsheimer 2013, 58). One U.S. president who engaged in this kind of lying was Lyndon B. Johnson. In the midst of the Vietnam War, Johnson believed that what was necessary to resolve the situation was an escalation of the fight against North Vietnam. He predicted that the American public would oppose this idea, so he exaggerated the existence of an attack on the U.S. military to garner support for increasing military force against Vietnam (Mearsheimer 2013, 47-48). By inciting fear in his country, he was able to proceed with his controversial policy.

The third type is strategic cover-ups, lies created to hide failed or controversial policies from the public, in order to protect the country's reputation abroad and maintain national unity (Mearsheimer 63). Kennedy partook in this kind of deception during his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, a nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was threatening the U.S. through their possession of nuclear weapons in Cuba, making clear their ability to start a proxy war if necessary. Conversely, the U.S. possessed nuclear weapons in Turkey, posing a much more proximate threat to the Soviet Union than if those weapons were stored domestically. Kennedy made a deal with the Soviet Union to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey in exchange for Soviet withdrawal of missiles from Cuba. Kennedy

knew that the American public would not approve of bargaining with the Soviet Union, so he swore the Soviets to secrecy and denied the existence of the agreement (Mearsheimer 2013, 67). Kennedy was able to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict, but he did so at the expense of full discretion to the American people.

The fourth type of lie is nationalist mythmaking, when leaders tell lies about the country's past in order to create a sense of group identity among the population and gain international legitimacy (Mearsheimer 2013, 22). This lie is distinct because it is driven from below as well as above; the public wants to be told these stories to validate their sense of pride in their country (Mearsheimer 2013, 72). The United States has used nationalist mythmaking to whitewash the cruel history of its founding. The controversy of genocide and abuse against the native people from whom the lands were overrun and colonized does nothing positive for the U.S.'s reputation abroad. Because of this, American elites have altered the portrayal of the nation's founding, selling myths that the American people are eager to buy into (Mearsheimer 2013, 76). In this instance of government dishonesty, the public condones and even requests falsehoods from the government, as they are much more appealing than the bleak reality.

The final type of justifiable lie according to Mearsheimer (2013) is liberal lies, which are designed to cover up state behavior that contradicts international law and liberal norms (22-23). These are both to protect the nation's reputation abroad and the public's perception of their own country. Liberal lies were employed by American elites during World War II, when they went to considerable lengths to portray Joseph Stalin positively in order to protect their own reputations. They did not want the international community or the American public to conceive of them as ruthless statesmen who would cooperate with a tyrannical mass murderer in order to defeat another, albeit worse, one. They also often downplayed the reality of the Soviet Union's harsh

political system, attempting to give the impression that it was also a democracy (Mearsheimer 2013, 78-79). All five of these lies have some kind of redeeming social value, and thus can be considered legitimate forms of behavior, despite the deception they perpetuate.

In contrast, unforgivable lies have no justification or social value. They are told simply for the benefit of the leader and his own interests. Mearsheimer's two categories of unforgivable lies are social imperialism and ignoble cover-ups. Social imperialism occurs when leaders tell lies in order to promote their own economic or political interests, with the aim of diverting the public's attention from the leader's mistakes or controversies on the home front. They use tactics like fearmongering to lead the public to rally around their leadership and solidify their power (Mearsheimer 2013, 23). President James Polk used this kind of lie in 1846, falsely telling Congress that Mexico had invaded the United States. He did so because he wanted to take the Southwest from Mexico, not because there was an actual threat to the country. His actions led to the Mexican-American War (Blake, 2013). Polk led the country into a war of choice for the purpose of expanding the territory under his leadership, reflecting positively on him while needlessly endangering the lives of U.S. soldiers. Ignoble cover-ups are when leaders explicitly lie about their mistakes or unsuccessful policies in order to protect themselves or friends from the punishment they deserve (Mearsheimer 2013, 23). Lyndon B. Johnson engaged in an ignoble cover-up when he failed to disclose the full cost of spending on the Vietnam War. He kept this from both Congress and the public in an effort to maintain his political power (Blake, 2013). It had no benefit for the country, and only served to shield his mistake. Both of these types of lies have no positive outcome for the nation, and thus cannot be justified.

James Pfiffner (1999) also explores unforgivable lies in his paper. He divides them into two main categories: lies meant to prevent embarrassment and lies of policy deception. He

argues that lies of policy deception are the worst kind, as they deprive the nation of the information they need to make informed choices (Pfiffner 1999, 904). Pfiffner distinguishes between lying to foreign governments versus lying to citizens in a democracy, asserting that international lying is a necessary element of diplomacy, while lying to one's own citizens should entail exceptional justification, as democracies should be accountable to their electorate (Pfiffner 1999, 904, 907). Pfiffner (1999) does not go as far as Mearsheimer in completely dismissing these kinds of unjustifiable lies, but he emphasizes that the responsibility lies with the citizens to examine the context of each lie when judging how it should be weighed in the overall assessment of a leader (916).

### *Why Presidents Lie*

Presidential lying is done for a variety of reasons. In general, presidents must consider the importance of national unity and international legitimacy when making policy decisions, and sometimes they feel that deception is necessary to preserve the country's reputation or maintain the privacy of international policies. Nixon provides a prime example of this kind of deception through his actions in the Cuban exile situation, when the U.S. helped Cuban forces overthrow dictator Fidel Castro. Removing Castro from power was beneficial for both the country suffering under his fascist regime and the U.S.'s mission of global democratization. In the series of presidential debates between Nixon and Kennedy, Kennedy was vocal about his support for U.S. backing of the Cuban anti-Castro forces. Nixon was aware that the government was already actively involved in supporting the Cuban exiles through a covert operation, so he could not publicly agree with Kennedy, for fear of disclosing the existence of the U.S. operation. Thus Nixon attacked Kennedy's proposal, despite his personal views to the contrary (Pfiffner 1999,

905). In this situation, he was telling a blatant lie, but it was legitimate and even necessary. He made an ethical decision to engage in public policy deception for the good of the country.

Presidents also have to shoulder the responsibility of bringing together coalitions of support, so they present their policy preferences differently to suit the goals of different groups. This is not necessarily deception, but it can easily turn into misrepresentation or lying if they go too far (Pfiffner 1999, 907). *The Atlantic* reporter Adam Serwer presents a whole host of reasons for presidential lying in his recent article, covering both of the previously mentioned categories of lies – forgivable and unforgivable. Selfish presidential lies include lying because the politics of their actions are inconvenient, to cover up their own misdeeds, or to conceal friction between themselves and their political allies. Forgivable lies are those told because the facts could harm national security or to prevent unnecessary conflict with political adversaries (Serwer 2021).

Sometimes the public is even aware of and complicit with presidential lying, specifically in situations where presidents hide their medical problems. The president presents a cover-up and the public allows it because both parties know that an incapacitated president is a threat to the stability of the economy and national security (Dallek 2010, 12). Franklin D. Roosevelt is one such president who chose to deceive the country about his personal medical problems. He did so not to protect the economy or national security, but rather to ensure that he would win a fourth term. The consequence of his deception was leaving the country in a period of unexpected transition following his sudden death by aneurysm shortly after his re-election (Dallek 2010, 12). In this situation, he committed a serious ethical breach and his lying was inexcusable. The rationale behind presidential dishonesty varies between legitimate and illegitimate, and must be determined based on both the intention and outcome of a president's lie.

### *The Effects of Presidential Lies*

The effects of presidential lying are ultimately dependent on context, rationale, and the type of the lie. Justifiable lies are much more likely to have a positive outcome than illegitimate, selfish lies. The nation must determine if a lie serves the national interests before deciding whether or not to accept it. Regardless, human nature admires cunningness, and people will forgive presidential lies out of admiration for a guileful, or even ruthless and manipulative, president (Blake 2013).

Public reaction is completely based on the circumstances of the presidential deception. One important circumstance is what is known as a crisis of legitimacy: when a group feels that they are not being properly represented by the political establishment, and that the political establishment is favoring new social groups over them (Hahl et al. 2018, 3). When the constituency experiences a legitimacy crisis, a lying presidential candidate can appear to be an authentic champion of their interests. Rather than reacting negatively to the leader's deception, they see the lies as gestures of symbolic protest against the dominant group (Hahl et al. 2018, 9). The candidate is challenging the seemingly illegitimate establishment and championing the interests of the aggrieved voters (Hahl et al. 2018, 18). However, without a legitimacy crisis, constituents are much less likely to accept their leader's lies. Thus this is a public reaction very much dependent on circumstance.

The outcome of the lie influences the reaction as well. For example, if a foreign policy deception is successful, the public makes the pragmatic judgment that it was an ethical lie. Kennedy's deception about the Cuban Missile Crisis resulted in a successful, peaceful outcome, so the public did not condemn him for his strategic decision. In the case that the policy fails, it is judged retrospectively as unnecessary and deserving of condemnation (Dallek 2010, 18). In the case of George W. Bush's blatant lie about Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, all

he accomplished was leading the nation into an unnecessary war under false pretenses (Blake, 2013). Because of this, the public is not inclined to forgive his dishonesty. The legitimacy of a president's deception can rest entirely on whether or not it works.

The type of lie also contributes to the effects of presidential deception. Mearsheimer (2013) explains that there are different outcomes based on which type of lie is told. For interstate lying, one potential consequence is a domestic blowback effect, where visible lying spills into the national arena and legitimizes dishonesty in daily life. When leaders lie directly to their people through fearmongering or strategic cover-ups, it has the effect of decreasing public trust in democracy as well as the ability for citizens to make educated choices when voting, as they are basing their decisions on false information (Mearsheimer 2013, 84). Pervasive lying can alienate the public and cause them to lose faith in the value of a democratic government. While they may be able to stomach some lying, if it can be justified and is clearly done for the good of the national interest, excessive lying deteriorates trust. Trust is an essential element in politics and government, both between the public and government officials, as well as within the government itself.

Another consequence of deception is its impediment to the policy-making process. If politicians cannot trust each other or the information they are given, they must instead spend extra time and resources verifying their information before proceeding with the process (Mearsheimer 2013, 85). A final effect of lying is its deterrence from politicians being held accountable for their actions. When strategic cover-ups are carried out, incompetent leaders are able to maintain their positions rather than being removed for of their illegitimate behavior (Mearsheimer 2013, 94). Each type of lie has its own specific consequence, but the general

effects of presidential deception are the normalization of dishonesty in society, decreased public trust in government and democracy, ineffective policymaking, and a lack of accountability.

### *Donald Trump's Lies*

While the United States does have a long and sordid history of presidential deception, Trump's presidency was unprecedented in its sheer volume of lies. Other political scientists have begun to delve into the complexity of these lies: the rationale behind them, why they were effective, and the outcomes of his excessive dishonesty. *The Atlantic* reporter Adam Serwer (2021) asserts that Trump's lying was used as a loyalty test, requiring his supporters to accept his dishonesty in order to prove their loyalty to him. By completely buying into his constant dishonesty, these supporters unquestioningly accepted whatever Trump told them, and even took action on the basis of false information (Serwer 2021). From Serwer's perspective, Trump told his lies for the purpose of gaining a cult-like following, and his supporters were eager to comply.

Another explanation for his supporters' trust is that Trump appeared authentic to them, despite his dishonesty, because they had lost trust in the political establishment and perceived him to be a legitimate champion of their interests (Hahl et al, 2018, 3). This falls under the previously mentioned "crisis of legitimacy" circumstance. Trump's supporters were aggrieved because they saw themselves as unrepresented by the current party. They were thus willing to follow Trump blindly and interpret his lies as a form of symbolic protest against the establishment they resented. Trump made himself a social pariah in order to connect with voters, and that established his authenticity as a leader (Hahl et at., 2018, 24-25).

One political scientist who has begun to examine the extent of Trump's lies and the impact they will have is Carole McGranahan. She analyzes how this archive of lies creates our present reality, including the violence it has caused in the United States. McGranahan theorizes

that the extreme speech and hate speech that Trump presents in the form of lies have had a significant cultural and political impact. One outcome is that these repeated lies create a sort of possible truth that serves as a motivator for both political affiliation and action (McGranahan 3170, 2019). The way Trump changes the context of his words when questioned and deflects responsibility has the effect of creating confusion and irrational fear, which leads to the possibility of violence (McGranahan 3172, 2019). The end result of Trump's public and pervasive dishonesty is a cultural breach of what it means to be a good American. Trump's archive of lies must be used to investigate how his words have had an impact on the public and what responses and outcomes have been and will continue to be generated by such dishonesty (McGranahan 3176, 2019).

Trump's presidency and extreme dishonesty have also inspired literature on democratic breakdown and the rise of authoritarianism. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) detail the behavioral warning signs of an authoritarian, which include rejection of the democratic rules of the game, denial of the legitimacy of opponents, toleration or even encouragement of violence, and a willingness to curtail the civil liberties of opponents, including the media (42). They examine how Trump's behavior aligns with these warning signs, something I also explore in my findings section. Two key norms of democracy that these authors define are mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. Mutual toleration is the concept that as long as one's political rivals play by constitutional rules, they have an equal right to exist, compete for power, and govern (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 140). Institutional forbearance is the idea of avoiding action that does not technically break the law, but violates its spirit (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 144). These two concepts are again relevant to Trump's presidency, as his actions border on authoritarianism through his disregard for these two democratic norms.

I look at a different angle: how Trump's lies go beyond the existing typologies. Trump's presidency produced a new phenomenon: an attack on democracy inspired by the nation's own leader. None of the existing typologies offer an explanation for this phenomenon. I examine what tactics Trump used in his lies in order to undermine the democratic process and incite violence against the national government, and how his behavior deviates from the recognized democratic norms.

## Methods

This case study examines Trump's lies on Twitter during the 6 months leading up to the Capitol insurrection and his subsequent ban from Twitter. I use the Washington Post Fact Checker's database of false or misleading claims made by Donald Trump. This database has identified and catalogued every single lie that Trump told during his presidency, across a variety of platforms and subjects. It offers an explanation for why each statement should be considered a lie, and gives data about the frequency and repetition of his dishonesty. I focus my analysis on the lies Trump told on Twitter about the 2020 election. I chose Twitter because Trump was known for using the social media platform as his main method of communication with his supporters and the public, unlike past presidents who preferred the use of the more traditional press conference. Trump's relationship with Twitter is also unique in that he was very publicly banned from the platform after his incessant false claims and his support of the Capitol insurrection. A total of 511 tweets were collected from the period of August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020 to January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021. I chose this dataset because it establishes a framework in which to examine the variations in typology of Trump's lies and how their effects go beyond what has previously been documented about presidential dishonesty.

I categorized the tweets in several different ways. First I identified which category of lie they most aligned with, using Mearsheimer's (2010) seven kinds of lies. None of the lies fell into one of his justifiable categories, so I only used the two unjustifiable lie types: social imperialism and ignoble cover-ups. I further sorted the tweets within the social imperialism type into my own categories based on intention: fearmongering, sugarcoating, or defamation. Some lies fit into multiple categories. I define fearmongering as false claims about the election, the Democratic party, or other candidates – both Democrats and Republicans – meant to cause fear among the public. Sugarcoating within this context refers to false claims that Trump makes about himself, his own party, or the amount of support he has in order to inspire confidence among his supporters. Defamation lies are those that refer to the Democratic party in general, specific candidates or politicians on both sides, or the media with the intention of damaging their reputation.

Next, I inductively coded the subject of each tweet. The tweets fell into at least one of four subjects: election fraud, claims about Trump's success, rhetoric against Biden or the Democrats, and anti-media. Election fraud broadly encompasses the danger of mail-in ballots, ballot rigging scams, vote stealing, Republican vote suppression, and any kind of voter fraud. Claims about Trump's success can refer to his approval rating, leading in the election, or winning states or the election overall. Rhetoric against Biden or the Democrats includes over-the-top claims, general defamation, or any sort of negative false claims. Anti-media refers to Trump's use of the term "fake news", claims about media interference in the polls, and direct attacks on specific media outlets. These concepts can be coded as any of the intention categories I previously mentioned, but each had strong trends toward a specific category. Election fraud

mainly fell under fearmongering, claims about Trump's success mainly fell under sugarcoating, and rhetoric against Biden or the Democrats and anti-media mainly fell under defamation.

Finally, I flagged any tweets that contained some kind of call to action or reference to the January 6<sup>th</sup> rally. I categorized a tweet as containing a call to action if it used buzzwords such as "revenge", "protest", or "fight". I noted rhetoric intended to incite action against democratic institutions, a previously unexplored type of presidential language.

## **Findings**

### *Major Findings*

In the six months leading up to the Capitol insurrection, Trump only told unjustifiable, self-serving lies on Twitter, which have effects far beyond the standard unjustifiable lie typologies that Mearsheimer identifies. His lies not only promote his interests and protect him from deserved punishment, they also undermine and even attack the legitimacy of the government and democracy. He uses tactics such as fearmongering, sugarcoating, and defamation to delegitimize his opponents, the mainstream news media, political institutions, and the democratic voting process. The end result is an extremely uninformed and loyal political base potentially willing to do anything for their leader, including engaging in violence against the state.

### *Statistical Summary*

As stated previously, none of the lies could be classified as justifiable, and instead all fell into the unjustifiable category. In sorting the lies into Mearsheimer's two unjustifiable types, I found that ninety-nine percent of the tweets fit the criteria for social imperialism. Only four tweets, about one percent of the total data, were ignoble cover-ups. I explore each of these four tweets in the ignoble cover-ups section below.

Table 1: Percentages of Lies Labeled as Fearmongering, Defamation, or Sugarcoating

Category of lie	Occurrences	Percentage
Fearmongering	350	58%
Defamation	142	23%
Sugarcoating	115	19%

I further identified whether the lies fit into one or more of my own categories: fearmongering, defamation, and sugarcoating (see Table 1). Some of them could be classified as more than one of these categories, so the total amount of occurrences exceeds the total number of lies. In terms of percentages, fearmongering was the most common category. Defamation and sugarcoating occurred a similar amount, but at a much lower level than fearmongering. I found that eighty-one percent of the tweets fit into a single category, while nineteen percent were identified with multiple categories.

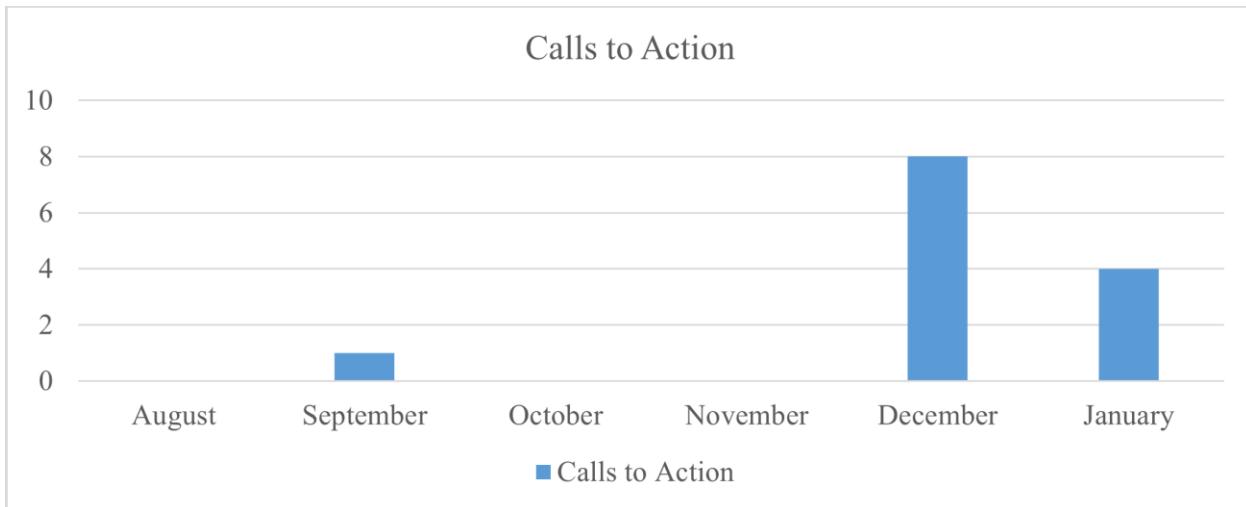
Table 2: Percentage of Lies Labeled as Election Fraud, Trump Success, Rhetoric, or Anti-Media

Subject of lie	Occurrences	Percentage
Election fraud	353	64%
Trump success	101	18%
Rhetoric against Biden or Democrats	81	15%
Anti-media	19	3%

I summarized the subjects of the lies into four broad topics: election fraud, Trump success, rhetoric against Biden or Democrats, and anti-media (see Table 2). Ninety-two percent

of the tweets were about a single topic, and eight percent concerned a combination of two topics. As there were some tweets that had multiple topics, the total number of occurrences exceeds the number of tweets. The most repeated topic was election fraud, significantly outnumbering the others. This is not surprising, given that all of the tweets I analyzed were specifically related to the election, but it is still significant that Trump told such a large quantity of lies about election fraud. Trump success and rhetoric against Biden or Democrats had a similar number of occurrences, and anti-media was rare.

Graphic 1: Quantity of Calls to Action Across Months of Data



Finally, I tracked the timeline of Trump's calls to action (see Graphic 1). I noted each tweet that contained some kind of buzzword meant to incite action from his supporters. The most occurrences were in December and January, just prior to the Capitol insurrection. I will explore the significance of this escalation in a later section.

### *Types of Lies*

The first distinction between Trump's lies that I noted was whether or not they could be considered justifiable according to the definitions established by previous literature. I did not

find a single justifiable lie in all of the tweets that I analyzed. Every lie that Trump told on Twitter concerning the election was self-serving, meant only to benefit himself and sometimes his supporters. He did not lie for the benefit of the country or democracy in general. Instead, his lies were detrimental to democracy rather than beneficial.

Mearsheimer's two unjustifiable lie types are both identifiable in Trump's tweets. The vast majority of his tweets fall under the social imperialism category, as they are lies told to promote Trump's own interests and distract from his mistakes, controversies, or failures. The four ignoble cover-ups are explicit lies he told to protect himself or his supporters from rightful punishment.

### *Social Imperialism*

Almost all of the election-related lies Trump told on Twitter during this time period fall into the social imperialism category. Depending on the topic, his lies either promote his political, economic, or personal interests, most of the time with the intention of making himself look good or making others look bad. All of these lies work to maintain his image as a public figure, an image he has curated over the years. In his tweets, Trump presents himself as highly successful, powerful, and intelligent. He presumes to know everything, and dismisses information that goes against him as "fake news" or lies. When things do not go his way, he claims that he has been cheated or defrauded, rather than accepting the reality of his defeat. This is clear in many of his post-election tweets, such as this claim: "We will soon be learning about the world 'courage', and saving our Country. I received hundreds of thousands of legal votes more, in all of the Swing States, than did my opponent. ALL Data taken after the vote says that it was impossible for me to lose, unless FIXED!".<sup>1</sup> Trump makes broad, baseless claims about evidence that supports his

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. December 8, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=31544>

supposed victory, promoting his political interest of being re-elected while simultaneously attempting to distract from his failure in the election. However, this lie goes beyond the standard instance of social imperialism, as it presents an attack to the legitimacy of the country's democracy and government. Trump is actively attempting to delegitimize the democracy of the country he is leading, a never-before-seen phenomenon by a United States president. This behavior violates both of the previously mentioned democratic norms – mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. Trump is refusing to accept that Biden played by constitutional rules in the election and thus has a legitimate right to govern, and simultaneously criticizing the political establishment. He is doing the opposite of forbearance, what is known as constitutional hardball (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 148), specifically through his use of the court system to dispute the votes. Trump's campaign unsuccessfully brought lawsuits in a number of states to halt vote certification, dispute the results, or bar electors from casting their votes (Kessler et al., 2021). He is so focused on defeating his partisan rival that he does not care about the future of the country's democracy.

### *Ignoble Cover-ups*

Trump's first two instances of the ignoble cover-up type in my dataset involve his performance in regard to the pandemic. In both of these tweets, Trump aims to avoid punishment for his failure to handle the pandemic by claiming that the media is being untruthful and inaccurate. In the first tweet, he borders on social imperialism by claiming that his successful handling of the pandemic has led to an increase in the polls. He claims that "My Campaign spent a lot of money up front in order to compensate for the false reporting and Fake News concerning our handling of the China Virus. Now they see the GREAT job we have done, and we have 3

times more than we had 4 years ago - & are up in polls. Lots of \$'s & ENERGY!".<sup>2</sup> In reality, he trailed Biden in the polls for the vast majority of the election, and was legitimately criticized for his handling of the pandemic. His approval rating on this particular topic consistently hovered in the low-to-mid 30s, with roughly two-thirds of the country criticizing his slow response time to the outbreak (Karson, 2020). His rhetoric in this tweet is also significant, especially the terms "China Virus" and "Fake News". He is both attacking the media and using racist rhetoric to scapegoat China for his own mistakes. While the virus did originate in China, his poor handling exacerbated the problem in the U.S., and placing the blame entirely on China only serves to mislead the public and enhance his support.

In the second tweet, Trump tries to discredit a poll that found his approval rating on COVID-19 to be at only 35%. He states that, "ABC's Trump In Trouble Poll Surveyed Just 533, Not Likely Voters, Asked Over 20% More Biden Supporters Than Conservatives ... Total Fake Poll. ABC is just like the rest of them!".<sup>3</sup> Trump claims that this poll was fake and used biased data, but it was in fact the fourth-straight poll to report this finding, and the poll methodology was completely disclosed (Kessler et al., 2021). In this case, Trump is lying about the legitimacy of the poll and blaming the media in order to protect himself from the reality of his poor approval ratings. Based on the data, the American public is unsatisfied with his handling of the pandemic and that reflects in his approval rating. Trump hopes to avoid blowback from his poor performance by lying about the media outlets instead.

The third ignoble cover-up I identified has a stronger fearmongering aspect. Trump deflects from the facts that incriminate him, instead telling explicit lies to the public. Trump says that China "is a FAR greater threat than Russia, Russia, Russia. They will both, plus others, be

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Sep 7, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=23326>

<sup>3</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Sep 13, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=24163>

able to interfere in our 2020 Election with our totally vulnerable Unsolicited (Counterfeit?) Ballot Scam. Check it out!”.<sup>4</sup> Trump claims that China presents a more viable threat to the election than Russia. However, intelligence issued by his own administration proves that Russia is actively interfering in the 2020 election on Trump’s behalf, while China does not have any active measures and also does not support Trump. He even directed the Department of Homeland Security to prioritize information about Chinese interference over Russian interference (Kessler et al., 2021). This is a prime example of the ignoble cover-up type, where Trump is explicitly lying about interference that would benefit him in order to protect himself from scrutiny and perhaps claims about the illegitimacy of his leadership. He is pointing the finger at China despite any evidence so that the country does not consider the reality of Russia’s interference. He is also blaming the mail-in ballot system for this potential meddling, spreading further misinformation about the legitimacy of mail-in voting.

The fourth and final ignoble cover-up that came up in my data is a very straight-forward, explicit lie. Trump directly denies that his supporters harassed a Biden-Harris campaign bus, simply stating that “This story is FALSE. They did nothing wrong”.<sup>5</sup> The incident in question involved a convoy of vehicles adorned with Trump flags, who surrounded a Biden-Harris campaign tour bus and attempted to drive it off the road. The FBI became involved in investigating the incident and Trump was quick to defend his supporters, calling them “patriots” and retweeting their video (Villarreal, 2020). In this instance, Trump is telling an explicit lie to protect himself and his supporters from the punishment they deserve, the very definition of an ignoble cover-up. This lie was told for completely selfish reasons, and has further implications that Trump’s avoidance of taking the blame for his actions. In this instance, he is condoning the

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Sep 16, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=24474>

<sup>5</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Nov 1, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=30185>

harassment of his opponent, which violates the standard conception of a fair election. Trump blatantly breaks the democratic norm of mutual toleration with his willingness to use whatever means necessary to defeat Biden, including physical harassment by proxy. He is going outside of the bounds of appropriate political behavior to defeat his political rival, disregarding the fact that Biden has an equal right to exist, compete for power, and govern (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 140). Trump is continuing his subtle campaign against the democratic processes and institutions that are a fundamental part of our society, one tweet at a time.

### *Intention of Lies*

All of the tweets I examined can be categorized based on intention. To do so, I created three distinctive intention categories: fearmongering, sugarcoating, and defamation. While theoretically these categories could be used in a legitimate way, such as justifiable fearmongering in order to garner support for a policy or sugarcoating to maintain the confidence of a nation in the midst of some kind of disaster, Trump uses them for the sole purpose of advancing his own interests. All three are important tools in his attack on democracy.

### *Fearmongering*

The most common and potentially most impactful category of lie is fearmongering. As opposed to the fearmongering type that Mearsheimer describes, this kind of fearmongering has no reasonable justification. It is a tactic for inciting fear in the general public in an attempt to increase Trump's legitimacy and power, often at the expense of his opponents, the media, or democratic institutions. One of the identifying factors of his fearmongering tweets is the use of powerful language, such as "maintain the integrity of our Elections",<sup>6</sup> "They [Twitter] and the

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Nov 20, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=31459>

Fake News, working together, want to SILENCE THE TRUTH”,<sup>7</sup> “SAVE AMERICA”,<sup>8</sup> and “our Country is being stolen”.<sup>9</sup> These short soundbites are attention-grabbing and evocative, prompting Trump’s supporters to take him at his word without considering any context or questioning the legitimacy of these claims.

Trump has built his platform on fear, particularly racially-based fear. He appeals to white voters who believe that the federal government cares more about people of color and immigrants and is giving them advantages through affirmative action (Hahl et al., 2018, 9). Rather than simply saying that he will prioritize the white working class, Trump takes it a step further and fuels these beliefs, claiming that “Joe Biden spent the last 47 years outsourcing your jobs, opening your borders, and sacrificing American blood and treasure in endless foreign wars. He is a diehard globalist who cares nothing for working people”.<sup>10</sup> This tweet is a combination of fearmongering and defamation, which I will cover later. Trump increases the racially-motivated fears of his supporters while simultaneously delegitimizing the federal government under the opposing party. He tells them that the government does not care for them and will give away their jobs and open the borders to the immigrants they so vehemently dread. His claims are especially effective because of the power of racial dog whistles in mobilizing white voters. White people are no longer secure in the belief that they hold a disproportionate share of resources, and white identity has become salient as they feel increasingly threatened (Jardina, 2019). Trump exploits the fears that white people have about immigration and demographic changes as a political strategy. This is more than just an attack on his opponent, it is an attack on the authenticity of government in the United States. If constituents are led to believe that the

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<sup>7</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Nov 26, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=31446>

<sup>8</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Nov 30, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=30879>

<sup>9</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Dec 9, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=31556>

<sup>10</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Oct 29, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=29168>

government is working against them instead of for them, they may lose trust in the democratic process and eventually be driven to action.

### *Sugarcoating*

This second category uses the word sugarcoating to describe Trump's explicit lies about any kind of success, whether in the polls or the election overall. These lies are meant to make him look better, more powerful, and more successful than his opponents, and maintain the confidence that his supporters have in him. He paints himself as superior to others while simultaneously using fearmongering and/or defamation to tear down the competition. One example is his post-Republican National Convention (RNC) tweet where he claims that "We had FAR more people (many millions) watching us at the RNC than did Sleepy Joe and the DNC, and yet an ad just ran saying the opposite. This is what we're up against. Lies. But we will WIN!".<sup>11</sup> Not only does he inflate his viewership; he also insults Biden and the Democratic National Convention. The intention behind this lie is to make him look highly successful to the public.

Another example of Trump's sugarcoating is his exaggerations about his poll numbers. Throughout his campaign he makes claims about his position in the polls, saying that he is "Leading in Michigan, leading in Minnesota, leading all over. Sorry!".<sup>12</sup> He plays up his lead to assure his supporters that he will be victorious, and continue to feed their delusions that he is greatest and most triumphant president in history. This false confidence has the potential to inspire extreme loyalty to him, which could increase the value of his rhetoric. It is not necessarily dangerous by itself, but when paired with his lies about election fraud and his calls to action, this

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<sup>11</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Sep 1, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=23213>

<sup>12</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Aug 27, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=23088>

lie has the potential to increase the likelihood that his supporters will take action on his behalf. Recent studies have found that Trump's election norm violations impact those who approve of his performance in office, decreasing their trust and confidence in elections (Clayton et al., 2021, 10). These voters already approve of Trump's performance in office, and are thus willing to believe and support his violations of democratic norms. The more that Trump can undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions like the election, the more influence he holds over his followers.

### *Defamation*

The final category I coded is defamation, which applies to any negative message or attack on Trump's political opponents, the Democratic Party in general, or the media. Defamation lies are mainly meant to discredit information that goes against his claims, regardless of its truthfulness. His attacks against the media are dangerous because they attempt to control what news his supporters believe and how he is portrayed to the general public. One example is this aggressive attack against the media: "SO MUCH FAKE NEWS! The Lamestream Media has gone absolutely insane because they realize we are winning BIG in all of the polls that matter. They write or show one false story after another. They are truly sick people. VOTE!!!".<sup>13</sup> Trump essentially discredits all major media outlets, giving his followers the impression that he is the only viable source of information for them. He goes beyond simply denying a claim that has been made about him, calling the news reporters insane, sick people and claiming that all of their stories are false. By limiting which sources of information his supporters will trust, Trump controls their perceptions of the government. This is a threat to the integrity of democracy and a clear example of one of the warning signs of an authoritarian leader. Trump is suppressing the

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<sup>13</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Oct 11, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=25637>

media, which has long been recognized as an essential element in the political system (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 253). The independent press is a democratic institution in the U.S. that provides a necessary service: providing a non-partisan account of political events to the public. Without the independent press, the nation's leader has too much influence over the information that the public receives, and can distort narratives to his favor.

Another target of Trump's defamation tweets is his political opponent, Joe Biden. One of his most repeated claims about Biden is that he is corrupt. This is over-the-top rhetoric meant to frighten supporters and discourage them from even considering both candidates in the race. Trump declares that "Joe Biden is a corrupt politician who has done nothing but betray you for 47 long years – selling out to lobbyists, China, big pharma, and foreign countries. He will stab you in the back. He only cares about political power & he will use that power to hurt you and enrich his cronies".<sup>14</sup> Trump is especially effective in his defamation by using strong words and phrases like "corrupt", "betray", and "stab you in the back". All of these statements are completely uncorroborated; Biden has no evidence of corruption or shady dealings. However, for Trump's supporters, this information makes them fear Biden's leadership and invest even more trust in Trump. His lies incite fear and delegitimize his opposition in a way that is harmful to the democratic process. This is another instance of Trump undermining the norm of mutual toleration, where he is willing to do whatever is necessary to defeat his opponent and win the election, even at the expense of the integrity of the country's democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 148). If his supporters will not even take the time to learn about the opposing candidate, they are making uninformed vote choices, and the election process is not operating as it should. This weakens the structure of the country's democracy.

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<sup>14</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Oct 29, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=29159>

### *Topics of Lies*

There are four general topics that the tweets fall under: election fraud, Trump success, rhetoric against Biden and Democrats, and anti-media. Most tweets are much more specific than these broad areas, and some can be identified with multiple topics. These topics tend to align closely with the previously mentioned categories, but not always. Election fraud is commonly categorized as fearmongering, Trump success is majorly categorized as sugarcoating, and rhetoric against Biden and Democrats and anti-media tend to be categorized as defamation. Different topics of lies serve different purposes in Trump's undertaking of delegitimizing democracy.

#### *Election Fraud*

The most common subject of the tweets is fraud or corruption related to the election. This spans from the voting process, especially mail-in ballots, all the way past the election when Trump tries to dispute the results. The election fraud topic is a key component of his attack on the democratic voting process. One example is when Trump claims that "The Unsolicited Mail In Ballot Scam is a major threat to our Democracy, & the Democrats know it. Almost all recent elections using this system, even though much smaller & with far fewer Ballots to count, have ended up being a disaster. Large numbers of missing Ballots & Fraud!".<sup>15</sup> This is a completely unsubstantiated claim meant to cause panic and question the legitimacy of the voting process. Trump is driving his supporters to discredit the validity of the election results before they have even occurred by stoking fears that Democrats will fraudulently win the election. One major failing in Trump's logic is that he supports the use of absentee ballots but not mail-in ballots, while the fact is that mail-in ballots and absentee ballots are functionally identical.

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<sup>15</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Sep 11, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=24026>

A second relevant tweet on the subject of election fraud is from the period after the election when Trump refuses to acknowledge the results. He makes the misleading claim that “THE DEMOCRATS DUMPED HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF BALLOTS IN THE SWING STATES LATE IN THE EVENING. IT WAS A RIGGED ELECTION!!!”.<sup>16</sup> Trump is unwilling to accept that he lost the election, and instead uses baseless fearmongering to delegitimize the election in the eyes of his supporters. He set this up before the election results even came in by claiming that the election was rigged months in advance. He dismissed every poll that showed that he was trailing Biden, and then was shocked by the fact that he lost. By asserting that the only way he could have lost is if the election was fraudulent, he is again leading his supporters to reject information provided by democratic institutions and instead take his word as gospel. These false charges of fraud work to undermine public confidence in elections, and if citizens cannot trust the electoral process, they end up losing faith in democracy itself (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 250). The less faith they have in democracy, the easier it is for him to manipulate and control them.

### *Trump Success*

This lie topic goes hand in hand with the goals of Trump’s election fraud tweets. However, in this case, Trump is attempting to build himself up and make it seem clear that he will win the election, or, posthumously, that he did win the election. His supporters must have an abundance of trust in him to accompany their lack of trust in the democratic voting process, which Trump has fostered by undermining the legitimacy of the media, mail-in voting, his political rivals, and democracy in general. An example is this claim: “We are spending more in Florida, and we are winning big in Florida. Actually, we are winning big in many states as the

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<sup>16</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Dec 21, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=31105>

Great Red Wave begins to form!”.<sup>17</sup> What stands out most in this tweet is the phrase “Great Red Wave”, Trump’s attempt at representing how widespread he believes his support to be. He is suggesting that he has made major gains nationwide, when the polls consistently show that he is trailing Biden. Evoking the imagery of a red wave spreading across the U.S. is likely to inspire confidence in his supporters and increase their sense of unity. And they are likely quick to take him at his word because of his constant defamation of other sources of information – the media, democratic institutions, and opposing politicians.

#### *Rhetoric Against Biden and Democrats*

While the rhetoric that Trump put forward against his opposition is almost all considered defamation, some tweets also contain a strong aspect of fearmongering. All of this rhetoric is intended to serve the previously mentioned functions: delegitimize his opponents through misinformation and fearmongering, garner support for his own platform, and damage the integrity of democracy in the process. One such tweet attacking Biden states that “For 47 years, Sleepy Joe Biden betrayed Hispanic-Americans. Now he wants to close your small businesses, eliminate school choice, and attack our Hispanic Law Enforcement Heroes. I will always stand with the incredible Hispanic-American community!”.<sup>18</sup> This tweet is completely factually inaccurate, but it serves its purpose of demeaning Biden, promoting Trump, and sparking fear among his fanbase. This again undermines the principle of mutual toleration, and has potentially dire consequences for society. Trump is exacerbating the partisan rivalry to the point of perceptions of mutual threat. By portraying Biden as a dangerous threat rather than a legitimate rival, he is creating a justification for authoritarian measures and potentially encouraging the rise

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<sup>17</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Oct 26, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=29032>

<sup>18</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Nov 1, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=30183>

of antisystem groups that will reject the rules of democracy altogether (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 143, 155-156).

Aside from misconstruing Biden's policy and beliefs, Trump also portrays him as a corrupt puppet being controlled by special interest groups. He maintains that "Joe Biden is bought and paid for by Big Tech, Big Media, Big Donors, and powerful special interests. They are desperate for him to win because they own him, they control him, and they know he will always do their bidding!".<sup>19</sup> There is some strong fearmongering language in this tweet that exaggerates Trump's already inaccurate claims. This particular assertion is motivated in part by a feeling of inadequacy on Trump's behalf, as he raised much less campaign funds than Biden. Rather than considering the reality of Biden's campaign fundraising, which was comprised of many small donations and almost 50% women donors (Kessler et al., 2021), Trump deflects from his failure by suggesting Biden is guilty of corruption. This brings Biden's character into question and again incites fear of his potential leadership. Baseless claims like those that Trump makes about Biden and the Democrats are ultimately harmful for democracy because they unnecessarily delegitimize prominent politicians and their political power (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 155-156).

### *Anti-Media*

The final subject area of Trump's tweets is very similar to the rhetoric against Biden, but targets the mainstream news media instead. Trump's claims about the media can be as simple as using his favorite term "fake news" to dismiss the legitimacy of their articles, or more complex, insinuating that their actions are illegal and they are contributing to the downfall of society. A more basic accusation is this tweet against news polls, insisting that "In 2016, the ABC

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<sup>19</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Nov 1, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=30197>

News/Washington Post Poll was such a complete disaster that these two Fake News Organizations changed the numbers prior to the Election. Now these haters are trying the same thing, though on a lesser scale, again. Will have a bigger win than even 2016!”.<sup>20</sup> Trump uses some name-calling and defamatory language, and falsely contends that ABC and Washington Post does not have accurate polling information. Calling into question the validity of a major election poll is a strategic tactic to encourage his supporters to avoid the factual reality of the polls and instead only listen to him. This way they believe that he is winning and have no reason to look at the real polls that show Biden’s lead. Evidence has shown that even when Trump supporters are exposed to fact-checked information that disproves Trump, they continue to support him. Supporters are aware that their candidate lies and stand by him regardless (Resnick, 2017).

On the other side of the scale, Trump makes drastic claims about the legality of election polls, while simultaneously asserting his success. Against addressing the ABC-Washington Post poll, he declares that “The Fake Pollsters at @ABC/@washingtonpost produced a possibly illegal suppression Poll just before the Election showing me down 17 points in Wisconsin when, in fact, on Election Day, the race was even - & we are now preparing to win the state. Many such 'deplorable' instances!”.<sup>21</sup> This tweet is worse than the previous one because Trump severely undermines the legitimacy of polls in the eyes of his supporters, using more than just name-calling. He falsely claims that the media produced an illegal suppression poll, when in reality they mis-estimated the margin (Kessler et al., 2021). Regardless of the poll results, he still lost in Wisconsin. However, claims like these could be sufficient to convince his followers that the media has it wrong and Trump did win. If the media cannot be trusted and Trump is the only

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<sup>20</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Oct 9, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=25618>

<sup>21</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Nov 10, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=30578>

reliable source of information, his supporters are completely at his disposal. This gives him the power to instigate violence against the democratic institutions he believes have wronged him.

### *Calls to Action*

The final data I collected from Trump's election tweets is the occurrences of rhetoric meant to provoke action against democratic institutions. The first instance of this happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>, when Trump told voters of "NORTH CAROLINA: To make sure your Ballot COUNTS, sign & send it in EARLY. When Polls open, go to your Polling Place to see if it was COUNTED. IF NOT, VOTE! Your signed Ballot will not count because your vote has been posted. Don't let them illegally take your vote away from you!".<sup>22</sup> In tweeting this, Trump is soliciting illegal and undemocratic behavior, telling voters to commit voter fraud by voting twice. The majority of his rhetoric against Biden and the Democrats involves claims of corruption and fraud, and yet he directly told voters to break the law for the purpose of his re-election. If voters are receiving this kind of misinformation from the president of the United States, they are bound to lose either their faith in or their understanding of democratic institutions (Clayton et al., 2021, 12). The value of elections decreases when citizens have no faith in the leaders they elect, and this in turn weakens the foundations of representative democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 252-253).

The remaining calls to action are significant because of the strong language they contain. Trump repeatedly uses the word "fight", telling his constituents to fight for his presidency and not let the democrats take it away. He invites them to participate "if [they] want revenge on the Democrats for their efforts to steal the Presidential election".<sup>23</sup> Not only is he consistently

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<sup>22</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Sep 11, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=24025>

<sup>23</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Dec 4, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=30980>

eroding the validity of the election results by referring to it as rigged or stolen, he is also telling supporters to enact an attack against the party in power. It is not explicitly stated whether this is a legal attack, a political attack, or a physical attack, but the language he uses evokes imagery of physical aggression.

The first call to action happens in September, and then the pace increases after the election, with eight in December and six in January. Trump first urges action on January 6<sup>th</sup> in mid-December, starting a series of tweets to announce the event to his supporters. His initial tweet reads: "Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!".<sup>24</sup> By calling it a protest rather than a rally, Trump is setting the tone for the event. It is not a gathering of supporters coming together to hear their lame duck president give a final speech. It is a protest of the election results, which have repeatedly been called fraudulent, rigged, stolen, and corrupt. Trump says that it "will be wild", subtly referring to the violence to come. His remaining tweets about the January 6<sup>th</sup> event continue this trend of strong language, culminating in his support for the rioters: "Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever!".<sup>25</sup> Through his delegitimization of his opponents, the media, and the democratic institutions essential to the balance of this nation, Trump was able to turn a portion of the citizenry against their own government, decreasing their trust and confidence in the democratic process (Clayton et al., 2021, 11).

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, Trump's lies go far beyond the implications of known typologies. While they can be categorized into Mearsheimer's unjustifiable lie types, they do more than just deceive the

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<sup>24</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Dec 18, 2020. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=31092>

<sup>25</sup> Donald Trump. Twitter. Jan 5, 2021. <http://wapo.st/trumpclaimsdb?claim=31405>

public for personal gain. Trump's dishonesty has the unprecedented effect of undermining core democratic institutions and threatening the legitimacy of the American government. His tweets show that he is willing to do whatever necessary to defeat his political rivals, with no regard for the impact his actions will have on the country he is leading. Trump consistently uses tools such as fearmongering, sugarcoating, and defamation to distort his followers' perspectives, simultaneously garnering support while delegitimizing his political opponents and fundamental democratic institutions. His actions have the detrimental effect of expanding acceptable presidential behavior, normalizing politicians' use of tactics such as lying, cheating, and bullying, which were previously considered aberrant and inadmissible (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 247). His lies also threaten the societal structure maintained by democratic norms. Without mutual toleration and institutional forbearance, politicians are not constrained within the realm of democracy. This opens them up to the possibility of using authoritarian actions to increase their political power.

The threat that Trump presents goes beyond the constant stream of dishonesty throughout his four years in the presidency. Trump's anti-democratic call to action rhetoric is dangerous for the continued stability and health of our democracy. His willingness to challenge these unwritten but widely accepted norms of democracy sets a new precedent for future leaders (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018, 249). If Trump can flout democratic norms and come away unscathed, there is nothing to stop other presidents from engaging in these potentially authoritarian behaviors. Furthermore, by denying his public access to credible, unbiased information, he is eroding trust in government. This research is significant because Trump's actions are an attack on democracy on all fronts, and present a serious concern about the future of the United States as a legitimate democracy. Research done prior to the insurrection had not found that Trump's tweets increase

support for political violence. Given this unprecedented event, future research should examine the effects of rhetoric that contains such calls to action, including its potential to deteriorate democracy and facilitate the rise of authoritarianism.

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