

TWITTERCRACY

A TRUMP TWEET ANALYSIS OF THE DELEGITIMIZED
AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS OF 2020

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Abstract

In this research, it is analyzed how and why Donald Trump used Twitter to delegitimize the Presidential Elections of 2020. To explain why Trump used Twitter, literature on *technological posthumanism, populism, political branding and political legitimacy* is used in combination with a contextual assessment of the workings of social media, *algorithmic filtering*, and the American political system. To understand how Trump used Twitter, 2,004 Tweets of Trump between October 1, 2020 – January 8, 2021 were qualitatively analyzed and coded. This research demonstrates that Trump's delegitimization attempts were a slippery slope, with first the media and political opponents, then the elections and ultimately his own party members and the whole American political system as such as targets of his delegitimization. This culminated with the organized 'Save America Rally' on January 6, 2021, where hundreds of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in D.C. to #StoptheSteal. Through the Tweet analysis of this research, it was discovered that Trump assembled different cultural, historical and conspiratorial narratives in his Tweets to delegitimize American institutions and create an authoritative truth: one where it is impossible that Trump lost the elections. This research shows how violence can be incited by a President by continuously delegitimizing the political establishment and flirting with conspiracy ideas. It furthermore stresses how research on social media should evolve into policy recommendations to control the economic imperatives of algorithms that drive online polarization which in turn can manifest itself as offline violence.

Keywords: posthumanism, Donald Trump, political branding, populism, Twitter, Tweet analysis, delegitimization, discourse, political legitimacy, assemblage of narratives.

Preface

I started this research in the pursuit of understanding more of today's social human interaction, which is evidently heavily influenced by our (over)consumption of information on social media. During the COVID-19 lockdown I noticed how much time I was spending on social media, and how I therefore was subjected to the mechanisms of social media. It is a scary realization that our opinions on who and what we like or even who we fall in love with, are steered by the algorithms of social media companies that are designed to make you spend as much time as possible on their platform. We no longer speak of people, but we speak of *users*. We are users of devices that we more and more rely upon for our information but also for our happiness. A continuous distraction of the pains, but therefore also of the highs of our lives.

Neil Postman probably put it best in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. In the preface he writes about how the prophecy of Orwell's *1984* did not become true. However, the less popular dystopian novel *A Brave New World* by Huxley did prophesize some alarming notions on the (post)modern day world that are becoming of ever-growing relevance. Postman writes:

“Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think. (...) Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.”¹

Here is to not let the truth be drowned in a sea of irrelevance, inflicted by a continuous desire for comfort, pleasure and escapism.

Thanks to Hadassah, Julian and of course Chris.

~ Koen Hoogendoorn, Utrecht, 1st of July 2021.

¹ N. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death. Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York 1985), IX.

“I WON THIS ELECTION, BY A LOT!”²

² 3rd most liked Tweet by President Donald J. Trump ever, on the day after the elections were called with Joe Biden as the winner. @realdonaldtrump (November 7, 2020, 10:36 AM EST) [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump), thetrumparchive.com.

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Introduction

Humans are social creatures. We survive and thrive as species when we are communicating, coordinating and cooperating with one another.³ It is therefore not a surprise that during a year when we have been physically distanced, due to a global pandemic, we have craved and found connection and communication through social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Not at all surprising that during the first few months of the global COVID-19 outbreak the demand for social media skyrocketed. For instance, Facebook Messenger and Whatsapp saw a 50 percent increase in usage.⁴ For myself, I saw my phone-screen-time being doubled from two to four(!) hours a day. However, by seeking human connection through social media networks, we are left to the devices of big tech companies like Facebook and Twitter. Because of the *attention economy* these social media companies compete in, and its algorithms they employ to win your attention, *timelines* and *newsfeeds* are consisting of content that is in line with our interests, creating so called *filter bubbles*, which arguably only causes more division and polarization.⁵

How these filter bubbles make radical ideas popular, is something I experienced myself. Two years ago, I came across a video on YouTube about the ‘Flat Earth’. This is a conspiracy theory that believes the earth is flat, surrounded by a wall of ice (Antarctica) which is guarded by the UN-army. Luckily, after one afternoon of being in this thought-experiment, I could escape the Flat Earth *filter bubble* and become a functioning member of society again. It shocked me that when you start with one video, YouTube drags you further into a *rabbit hole* of similar content, instead of also being recommended opposing views (*content diversity*).⁶ However, I did begin to understand how people end up believing in conspiracy theories and, as a result thereof, would potentially start to lose their trust in societal core values, which has implications for a functioning democratic society (such as not believing the results of an election).

My ideas, and worries, about social media were further fueled after watching *The Social Dilemma* (2020) on Netflix, as well as after reading *The Hype Machine* by MIT Professor Sinan Aral (2020). The former is a documentary wherein former employees of

³ S. Aral, *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health – and How we Must Adapt* (New York 2020), p. 1.

⁴ M. Isaac and S. Frenkel, ‘Facebook is “just trying to keep the lights on” as traffic soars in pandemic’, *New York Times* (24 March 2020).

⁵ Aral, *The Hype Machine*, p. 248.

⁶ S.H. Cen and D. Shah, ‘Regulating algorithmic filtering on social media’, *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* August 4 (2020) Pre-print, p. 1.

social media companies are interviewed about social media. They express their worries that social media companies are starting to lose control over their own algorithms. Social media companies use *Algorithmic Filtering* to recommend users the content of which the algorithm thinks will drive the user spend the most time on their platform.⁷ Because social media is free to use, the user becomes the product and money is made as a result of the amount of time a user spends on a platform.⁸ Given the various popular platforms, social media companies are thus *competing for attention*. These ideas were further academically explored by the latter, the aforementioned book by Aral; *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy And Our Health – and How We Must Adapt* (2020). Aral explores the workings of internet marketing employed by (inter)national actors (such as the Russians) to interfere with electoral processes. Through an extensive literature review where he synthesizes his own research with other cutting-edge research on social media, Aral stresses that the limits of social media must be determined through academic research instead of based on how long we as people (or *users*) accept the economic drives and exploitation by social media companies. Aral states that exploitation of social media users is endless because of social media companies their business model, hence why scholars and policymakers should be wary of the societal and political implications of social media (ab)use. With this research, I aim to take part in the larger academic debate on social media and to offer an understanding of how social media is used as a form of power politics.

This research focuses on the case-study of the American Presidential Elections of 2020, and President Donald J. Trump his attempt of delegitimizing these elections through his use of Twitter. In a year where we craved connection and unity more than ever because of the global pandemic and the consequent self-isolation, we have seemingly only become more divided and polarized with racial unrest, conspiracy theories and ultimately the riots and attempted insurrection that happened on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C.. President Donald J. Trump managed to make parts of his following belief in the claim that the elections have been stolen, i.e., through the slogan ‘Stop the Steal’. In a year where the political tension was already tense, due to COVID-19, Black Lives Matter protests and the upcoming elections, President Trump did not try to ease tensions. Instead, President Trump further provoked his followers and his opponents by repeatedly questioning the fairness of the elections, calling the Democrats ‘radical lefts’ or ‘communists that will ruin the country’ and flirting with

⁷ S.H. Cen and D. Shah, ‘Regulating algorithmic filtering on social media’, *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* August 4 (2020) Pre-print, p. 1.

⁸ *The Social Dilemma, Netflix* (2020).

conspiracy theories such as ‘QAnon’.⁹ The political tensions leading up to the elections of 2020 in the United States were internationally described as a build up to a potential outburst of violence, with the International Crisis Group (ICG) publishing a report on the 28th of October 2020 stating that: ‘The 2020 U.S. presidential election presents risks not seen in recent history. It is conceivable that violence could erupt during voting or protracted ballot counts’.¹⁰ The worries presented by the ICG ultimately became, in part, reality with the events on January 6th of 2021 when thousands of Trump supporters stormed Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C..¹¹ This event, and President Trump his polarizing and provocative Twitter behavior, led to Twitter banning the President from their platform.¹²

The puzzling part of these events are the questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’. How did Donald Trump use Twitter to get his following to belief in the allegation that the elections were stolen? Why did Donald Trump use Twitter for this process of *delegitimization*? For these questions to be answered, I will first, in the next Chapter, explain my research process and methodology to clarify how I gathered and selected Donald Trump’s Tweets and what methods I used to analyze them. Then, In Chapter Three, I will set-out the grand theoretical ideas and concepts that help us understand the complexities of social media and political communication. In this chapter, I will discuss the literature and interlinkages of *posthumanism*, *populism*, *political branding* and *political legitimacy*. Then, in Chapter Four, I will present a contextual overview of the American Political System, the workings of social media, the political branding of the Trump Administration and a description of the most popular (conspiracy) narratives spread and popularized on social media in the United States during 2020. Lastly, in Chapter Five and Six, I will present my analysis of President Trump’s Tweets and use methods such as *computer assisted content analysis* and *discourse analysis* to understand how Donald Trump used Twitter in his attempt to delegitimize the Presidential Elections of 2020. This will ultimately lead to an answer to the central question of this thesis:

“How did Donald Trump use Twitter in his attempt to delegitimize the Presidential Elections of 2020?”

⁹ QAnon is ‘a disproven and discredited far-right conspiracy theory alleging that a secret cabal of Satan-worshipping, cannibalistic pedophiles is running a global child sex-trafficking ring and plotted against former U.S. president Donald Trump while he was in office.’

¹⁰ International Crisis Group, ‘The U.S. Presidential Election: Managing the Risks of Violence’, *United States Report N°4* (28 October 2020).

¹¹ L. Leatherby, A. Ray, A. Singhvi, C. Triebert, D. Watkins and H. Willis, ‘How a Presidential Rally Turned Into a Capitol Rampage’, *The New York Times* (12 January 2021).

¹² Twitter Inc., ‘Permanent Suspension of @realDonaldTrump’, *blog.twitter.com* (8 January 2021).

2. Research Process and Methodology

In this chapter I will describe the design and outline of this research. I will first explain the *posthumanist* stance of this research, after which I will address the aim of the research and its assumptions. After that, I will explain how I gathered the data of Donald Trump's Tweets, the decisions I made in data selection and consequently how I analyzed the data to answer the primary research question.

2.1. Posthumanist Stance

The primary question of this research is concerned with the *how* question of understanding Donald Trump's Twitter usage in delegitimizing the Presidential Elections of 2020. However, there is also a *why* element: explaining why Trump used Twitter in the first place. This last question will be answered through a literature review and a contextual overview of social media, Twitter and political branding.

This research takes a *posthumanist* stance, meaning that it is concerned with the *interconnectedness of things*.¹³ This implies that the emphasis of research is not *only* on human action, but also on the consequences of non-human action: such as the spread of polarizing information by algorithms. The consequences of non-human action will mainly be addressed in the contextual chapter, where social media will be explained, its business-model, *algorithmic filtering* and its implications on political communication. This is why adopting a *posthuman* lens is deemed to be necessary to help us understand *why* Trump used Twitter in the first place to spread his ideas and opinions, and how such a social media platform helps to spread and popularize such ideas and opinions.

2.2. Aim of this Research

This research is based on the assumption that President Trump delegitimized the American Political System through spreading (mis)information on Twitter. This means that this research accepts the view that Donald Trump did delegitimize the elections, instead of that Trump tried to save the United States and American Democracy by overturning a corrupt and perverse political establishment. However, it is not of essence to this research to determine whether Trump was right in delegitimizing the elections and the American political system.

¹³ J. Ulmer, 'Posthumanism as research methodology: inquiry in the Anthropocene', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 30 (2017) 9, pp. 832-848, p. 834.

Delegitimization is sometimes morally right, if legitimate governance is unjust, corrupt and harmful to society (delegitimization of the Myanmar government because of the ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas is for instance only applaudable). This research is merely concerned with *how* and *why* Donald Trump used Twitter in his attempts to delegitimize the Presidential Elections of 2020. However, it does follow various fact-check researches that researched the correctness of Trump's statements, discovering that most of Trump's questionable remarks of the last five years were factually wrong.¹⁴

This research is meant to demonstrate how discourse on Twitter by political leaders, amplified by social media algorithms (which are created to generate more profit for social media companies, and not to provide better information to its users) is an important social process that policy makers need to be aware of. This research is a step in that direction, by explaining the influence of social media, its workings and by demonstrating through a case study how politicians can use social media to create an authoritative truth.

2.3. Methodology

This research opts for a multi-method research, as discussed by Professor of Government Andrew Bennett.¹⁵ This means that I will combine computer assisted content analysis with discourse analysis. This was an inductive choice, since the large data set (12.392 Tweets in 2020) calls for computer assisted content analysis to select the most relevant data. However, how did I gather the data with President Trump being banned from twitter.com, and all his Tweets being deleted since January 8, 2021? Luckily for the sake of research, programmer Brendan Brown made thetrumparchive.com, where automatically all of Trump's Tweets were archived.¹⁶ Brown himself said about the website: 'I made this site in 2016, and didn't really think Trump would win the election or continue tweeting like this as president of the United States, but here we are'.¹⁷ I downloaded the full database from the website and then filtered out all of the Tweets outside of the period from January 1, 2020 – January 2021, which left me with 12.392 Tweets. The Tweets outside of 2020 were deemed irrelevant since this research is concerned with the delegitimization of the 2020 Presidential Elections and

¹⁴ Politifact, 'Latest Fact-Checks of Donald Trump', *The Poynter Institute*, politifact.com; out of the 940 questionable statements, 701 were false. Accessed on 28th of July, 2021.

¹⁵ A. Bennett, 'Found in Translation: Combining Discourse Analysis with Computer Assisted Content Analysis', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43 (2015) 3, pp. 984-997, p. 986.

¹⁶ www.thetrumparchive.com, by B. Brown (2016, updated until Trump got banned from Twitter on January 8, 2021).

¹⁷ B. Brown, 'About', *thetrumparchive.com*.

assumes that the most striking attempts of delegitimization took place in the year of the elections. After that, I excluded all the retweets. This was done because this research is concerned with how Trump himself Tweeted: a ‘Trump-made Truth’. It goes beyond of the scope of this research to analyze Trump’s retweets, however, future research could take this next step and focus on what kind of Twitter-users Trump affiliates himself with by analyzing his retweets. These considerations left me with a dataset of 6.384 Tweets by Donald Trump.

6.384 Tweets were still too much to qualitatively research in the timeframe I had for this research, and it may have left me with too much irrelevant Tweets with regards to the question of how and why Trump used Twitter to delegitimize the Presidential Elections of 2020. In order to help me to make a selection for the analysis, I copied the text content of all the Tweets into a plain *.text* file in order to be able to run text analysis applications on it. I first ran a *word cloud generator* on the Tweets of Trump, of which the process and results will be explained and presented in the next paragraph, §2.3.1, of Selection and Data Analysis.¹⁸ According to Heimerl et al., ‘word clouds generated for a body of text can serve as a starting point for a deeper analysis’.¹⁹ On the one hand they help to judge whether a given text is relevant to a specific information need, but on the other hand one of their drawbacks is that ‘they provide a purely statistical summary of isolated words without taking linguistic knowledge about the words and their relations into account’.²⁰ Bennett calls processes like word clouds: *computer assisted content analysis* (CCA), which according to him helps researchers to ‘quickly identify patterns in vast amounts of text and provide clues on which particular texts (and silences) merit a close reading and interpretation in context’.²¹ This close reading can be done through *critical discourse analysis* (CDA), which is necessary to contextualize and interpret the results of the CCA.

CDA stems from the ideas of Foucault about discourse. Foucault adopted the term *discourse* to indicate a historically contingent social system that produces knowledge and meaning, in other words: discourse creates truth.²² This is relevant to Donald Trump his discourse on Twitter, because he tried to create a certain narrative and therefore truth through

¹⁸ I used tagcrowd.com, a web application for visualizing word frequencies in any text by creating what is popularly known as a word cloud, text cloud or tag cloud. Created by D. Steinbock (Stanford University).

¹⁹ F. Heimerl, S. Lohmann, S. Lange, T. Ertl, ‘Word Cloud Explorer: Text Analytics based on Word Clouds’ 2014 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Science, (2014), pp. 1833-1842, p. 1833

²⁰ F. Heimerl, S. Lohmann, S. Lange, T. Ertl, ‘Word Cloud Explorer: Text Analytics based on Word Clouds’ 2014 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Science, (2014), pp. 1833-1842, p. 1833

²¹ A. Bennett, ‘Found in Translation: Combining Discourse Analysis with Computer Assisted Content Analysis’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43 (2015) 3, pp. 984-997, p. 984.

²² G. Kress, ‘Multimodal discourse analysis’, in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by J.P. Gee and M. Handford (New York 2021), pp. 35-51, p. 35.

his Tweets. The question to be researched through discourse analysis therefore is, how does he create his *truth* through his Tweets?

Within CDA, I will look at the branch of the discourse-historical approach (DHA) because it ‘integrates and triangulates knowledge about historical, intertextual sources and the background of the social and political field within which discursive events are embedded’.²³ This method naturally presents itself out of the questions I pose in this research, because I will research the historical, social and political background of the field (the United States) within which discursive events (Donald Trump’s Tweets) take place.

According to discourse analyst Teun van Dijk, CDA does not aim to contribute to a discipline or school of thought. It is mainly interested in social issues, which it hopes to understand through discourse analysis. The theories are merely elaborated upon as a ‘function of their relevance for the realization of such a sociopolitical goal’.²⁴ According to Fairclough, CDA is a three-dimensional framework where three separate forms of analysis are mapped together: ‘analysis of language texts, analysis of discourse practice and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice’.²⁵ Van Dijk furthermore emphasizes the *critical* nature of CDA, stating that analysts should take an ‘explicit social political stance: they spell out their point of view, perspective, principles and aims, both within their discipline and within society at large. Although not in each stage of theory formation and analysis, their work is admittedly and ultimately political’, hence why I addressed my stance and aim for this research in §2.1 and §2.2.²⁶

2.3.1. Selection and Data Analysis

Since the number of Tweets is vast (6.384 original Tweets) and the timeframe is too large (a full year of Tweets), I used word clouds of different timeframes to assist me in what the most relevant timeframe would be to research Trump’s Tweets in relation to the delegitimization of the Presidential Elections. The word clouds showed the most frequent used words in the Tweets by Donald Trump in a certain time window. In order to have results that are useful, I excluded some of the most common everyday words that resulted from running a word cloud

²³ R. Wodak, “Politics as Usual.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by M. Handford and J. P. Gee (New York 2012), pp. 525–40, p. 529.

²⁴ T. van Dijk, ‘Principles of critical discourse analysis’, *Discourse & Society*, 4 (1993) 2, pp. 249-283, p. 252.

²⁵ N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (New York 1995), p.2

²⁶ T. van Dijk, ‘Principles of critical discourse analysis’, *Discourse & Society*, 4 (1993) 2, pp. 249-283, p. 252.

generator on this dataset.²⁷ I ran the word cloud generator multiple times. One being the whole year of 2020 till the day Trump got banned from Twitter (January 1, 2020 – January 8, 2021). Another one from the day George Floyd got killed by the police (May 30, 2020) till January 8, 2021. And the last one from October 1, 2020, the month before the Presidential Elections, until January 8, 2021; as those dates were closer to and after the election and therefore it could be assumed that Trump’s Tweets would be more directed towards the elections.

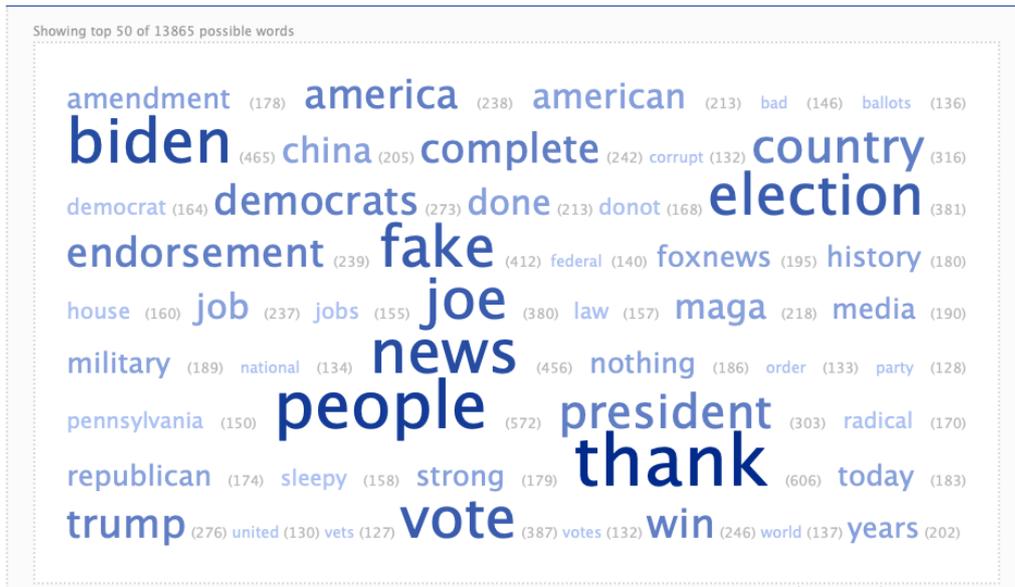


Figure 2.1. Word cloud of Tweets by Donald Trump in the period of January 1, 2020 – January 8, 2021.²⁸

²⁷ The words being typical Twitter wording (such a http for a web-url) or common English words (such as it or is). The full list:
 amp https co t and are as at be been but by even for from get going has have he his if in is it just like many
 more new of on or should so state states than that the their them there this to total very want was were what
 which who will with would you your

am also about always an because before being can did ever far go good got had how most much must gsfsgh
²⁸ Word cloud of Tweets by Donald Trump, *tagcrowd.com* (January 1, 2020 – January 8, 2021).

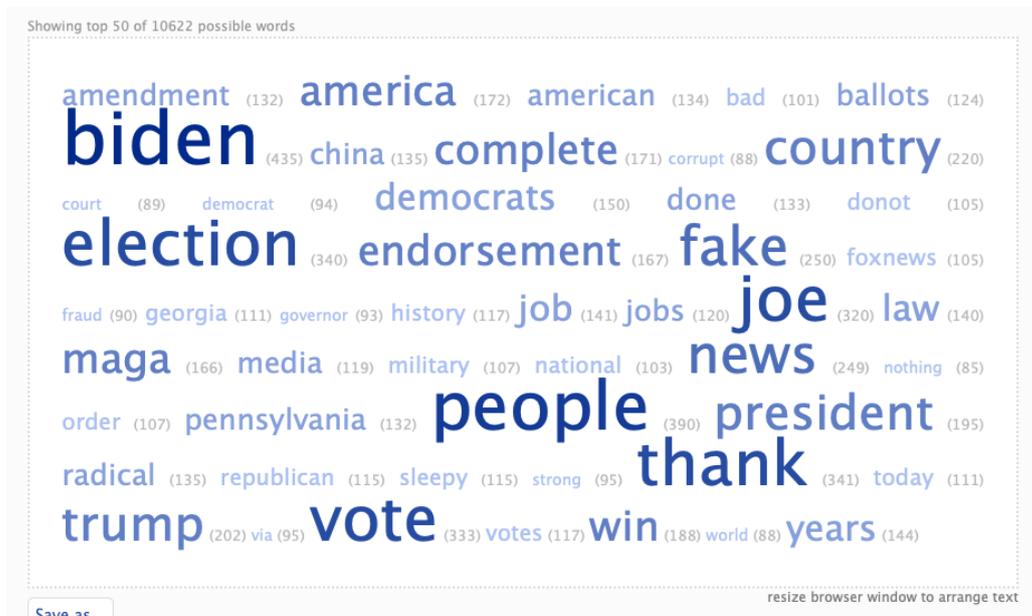


Figure 2.2. Word cloud of Tweets by Donald Trump in the period of May 30, 2020 (killing of George Floyd) – January 8, 2021.²⁹

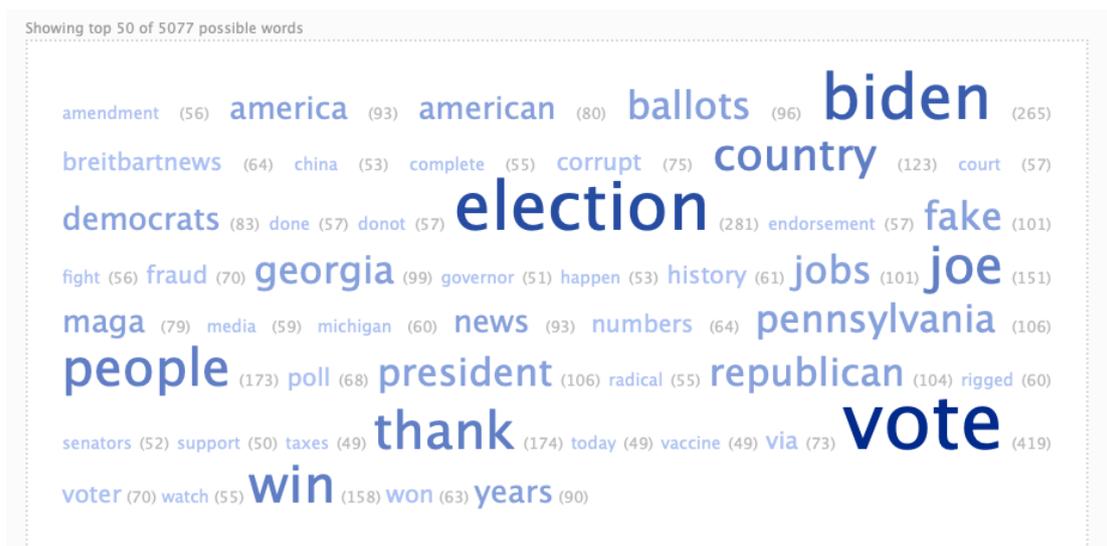


Figure 2.3. Word cloud of Tweets by Donald Trump in the period of October 1, 2020 – January 8, 2021.³⁰

This *computer assisted content analysis* (CCA) on itself tells us little. What is meant with ‘done’ and what does Trump refer to when he talks about ‘endorsement’, ‘people’, ‘fake’, ‘nothing’? In the first word cloud, a pattern is identified by the generator. Namely, Trump uses the words ‘fake’, ‘news’, ‘election’, ‘people’, ‘president’, ‘biden’ a lot in his Tweets

²⁹ Word cloud of Tweets by Donald Trump, *tagcrowd.com* (May 30, 2020 – January 8, 2021).

³⁰ Word cloud of Tweets by Donald Trump, *tagcrowd.com* (October 1, 2020 – January 8, 2021).

between January 1, 2020 – January 8, 2021. I ultimately decided to go with the timeframe of October 1, 2020 – January 8, 2021 because of the relevancy to the main research question, namely understanding how and why Trump used Twitter to delegitimize the Presidential Elections of 2020. In the last word cloud, it becomes clear that Trump started to use the word ‘rigged’, which refers to the elections: ‘the rigged elections’ or ‘the elections are rigged’. This made the choice for the timeframe of October 1, 2020 – January 8, 2021 most sensible since this research is concerned with how and why Trump used Twitter with regards to delegitimizing the results of the Presidential Elections of 2020.

As stated before, it is necessary to interpret these results through close reading with *critical discourse analysis* (CDA), to contextualize, interpret and finally make sense of the data. This close reading was done through the means of qualitative data analysis (QDA) with the software (MAXQDA), whereby the unit of analysis was a Tweet. The literature on political branding, populism and political legitimacy allowed to deductively formulate a coding scheme including main categories and subcategories. However, for this research I have chosen to inductively formulate a coding scheme based upon six chronological readings of all the Tweets. After reading all of Trump’s Tweets multiple times, certain trends started to become visible. Based on these trends, I formulated a coding scheme that is primarily concerned with the distinction between a *delegitimate* Tweet and a *non-delegitimate* Tweet. This distinction is based on the literature on political legitimacy that is presented in Chapter 3.4. There was also an *irrelevant* code, which meant that the Tweet was just a URL (a website link) that either did not work anymore or that did not have any significance to this research. After that, a distinction is made in who or what Trump delegitimizes with his Tweets: *the Media*, *Democratic Institutions* (i.e. the American Courts), *Joe Biden*, *Democrats*, or *the Republican Party*. Furthermore, I added extra codes of: *Call to Action* (when Trump called the people, or party members, to action), *Legitimizing the Self* (when Trump branded himself as the best President, or even a savior) and *Conspiracy* (when Trump flirted with conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, COVID or Antifa conspiracies).

To make the findings clearer and more convincing, I will use examples of Tweets by Donald Trump in Chapter Five and Six. These examples are non-edited quotes of the Tweets, meaning that nothing in terms of interpunction or capitalization has been added or edited. It is important to mention that the Tweets that are used are not taken out of context, because context is given in the text that either precludes or follows the Tweet that is quoted. Often, these Tweets are selected because of their great number of *likes* or *retweets*, meaning that the Tweet made a lot of impact and therefore was spread further than Tweets with fewer *likes* or

retweets. This research is a presentation of trends in Donald Trump's Twitter usage based upon my six readings, coding and analysis of all of Trump's Tweets between October 1, 2020 and January 8, 2021. Analyzing, acknowledging and describing these trends are central in this research to help us understand how and why Donald Trump used Twitter in his delegitimization attempts of the Presidential Elections of 2020.

3. A Posthuman Lens: Populism, Branding & Legitimacy

It is first important to explore the theoretical ideas that help us understand the case of Donald Trump's delegitimization attempts of the American Political System through his use of Twitter. Given the technological elements of the topic of influencing social behavior through technologies such as Twitter, this research calls for ontological and epistemological approaches that take technological agency in account. That is why this research opts for a *posthuman* lens, which will be discussed in the first paragraph by using works of Deleuze and concepts such as *technological posthumanism*. After that, I will discuss the literature on the concept of *political branding* and how this concept is necessary to understand today's political communication. Then, I will define *populism* and explain why this concept helps with analyzing Donald Trump's Twitter behavior. Lastly, I will present a framework on legitimation rhetoric to assess how politicians attain legitimacy, or delegitimize the current political system, through their rhetoric.

3.1. (Technological) Posthumanism

A non-human centered social science approach can be found in the idea of *posthumanism*. The idea of posthumanism mainly draws from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. His essay on *societies of control* is particularly relevant for analyzing the influence of technology on human agency, because here Deleuze acknowledges technological agency, meaning that not only humans have agency but codes, algorithms and other forms of technology can also have agential capacities.³¹ The Deleuzian *society of control* builds on the Foucauldian *societies of sovereignty* (who decides on taxes and death) and *societies of disciplinary* (who controls production).³² A Deleuzian society of control is ruled by technology, and results therefore in a shift from *enclosed structures* (prisons, schools and hospitals) to *entangled systems* (computers, algorithms, code). Thus, there is no longer an exercise of power through Foucauldian power structures such as universities, prisons or factories, but rather a continuous one through systems of technology (i.e., the phone on the table registering your speech, and using that data for personalized ads). The 'numerical language of control is made of codes that [allow or disallow] access to information', and therefore power lies in the codes that allow, or deny, you this access. In the works of Deleuze, individuals have become *dividuals*,

³¹ G. Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October* 92 (1992) Winter.

³² Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', p. 3.

meaning samples, data, markets or banks.³³ This is a necessary insight to how posthumanism perceives reality, because it emphasizes how technology can (and will, or even already has) influence (in) our decision-making, regarding politics, what we like, buy or even who we love.³⁴ From the ontological perspective of posthumanism, individualism is not the center of research anymore; *everything* is connected and should therefore be taken into account. This is especially relevant when researching social media because not only people, *users*, drive information but also, and perhaps even more, algorithms with economic incentives are driving how information is distributed to social media users. The workings of social media and its algorithms will be more addressed and explained in Chapter 4.2.

To further discover posthumanism, qualitative researcher Jasmine Ulmer provides a genealogy of posthumanism in her 2017 article ‘Posthumanism as research methodology’. Ulmer states that posthumanism can, and to a certain degree even *must*, be used as a framework for contemporary social research because of the continuously changing world and its relevant actors.³⁵ Because of climate change and exponential growth in technology such as artificial intelligence, social researchers need to be aware of the *interconnectedness of things*.³⁶ Ulmer describes posthumanism as a shift away from the *Anthropocene* (human-centered) research, and traces this back to Deleuze.³⁷ Ulmer uses Deleuze’s logic of the *and* (i.e., assemblages) to ‘suture different methodological perspectives together’, such as (post)human *and* more-than-human *and* non-human.³⁸ Posthumanism therefore rejects that ‘humans are the only species capable of producing knowledge and instead creates openings for other forms/things/objects/beings/phenomenon to know’.³⁹ This is crucial when analyzing the role of social media, because it creates the opening for technological innovations such as *algorithms* to have agential capacities.

Political scientist Kalpokas uses the opening for algorithms to have agential capacities to formulate an analytical framework using posthumanism and technology, which he naturally coins *technological posthumanism*.⁴⁰ This framework is mainly tied together through the *assemblage of human and non-human agency*. Therefore, in Kalpokas’ work, agency resides

³³ G. Deleuze, ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’, *October* 92 (1992) Winter, p. 5.

³⁴ Aral, *The Hype Machine*, p. 12.

³⁵ J. Ulmer, ‘Posthumanism as research methodology: inquiry in the Anthropocene’, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 30 (2017) 9, pp. 832-848, p. 832.

³⁶ Ulmer, ‘Posthumanism as research methodology’, p. 834.

³⁷ Ulmer, ‘Posthumanism as research methodology’, p. 834.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ I. Kalpokas, *Algorithmic Governance: Politics and Law in the Post-human Era* (London 2019), p. 68.

in assemblages of ‘human actors, code, software and algorithms’ that shape how existing data circulate and how new data are being created based on the present data and their circulations. Simply put: the social media content that is recommended, created and liked is all connected to each other and influences each other continuously in endless circulations. This assemblage brings together ‘humans-devices- software-data-space-time’ that are best conceived of as ‘lively’. Due to their relational nature, such assemblages ‘cannot merely be reduced to [their] constituent parts’, leaving ‘the human subject permanently entangled with agential capacities of nonhumans’ and meaning that ultimately agency would be distributed.⁴¹ This *distribution* of agency is particularly important, because it emphasizes the role of algorithms in a 2021 environment, where social media seems to play an exponentially growing role in our daily lives. This is something that is confirmed by MIT professor Sinan Aral, whose work I will tackle later in Chapter Four, who, perhaps unknowingly, explains social media in a near perfect *posthuman* fashion, namely that social media works as a ‘complex interaction of coordinated bots and unwitting humans [that are] working together in an unexpected symbiosis’.⁴²

This framework of *technological posthumanism* is relevant when researching Donald Trump’s Twitter usage, because it emphasizes the assemblage between human and non-human agency. The underlying point of this thesis is that through the assemblage of algorithms by technological corporations, conspiracy theories and Donald Trump’s Twitter behavior, audiences on the fringes of society can be mobilized to protest, riot or to even attempt a violent insurrection. In the next paragraph I will describe the concept of *political branding* and how in a posthuman political era this concept is becoming of ever-growing importance in mobilizing the electorate through for instance an assemblage of human and non-human agency.

3.2. Political Branding

Political branding is a concept that addresses how politicians create their narrative, their *brand*, to connect with their audience and gain votes.⁴³ The terminology stems from marketing, *branding*, meaning how the identity of a company should be *dressed*: through the

⁴¹ I. Kalpokas, *Algorithmic Governance: Politics and Law in the Post-human Era* (London 2019), p. 73.

⁴² S. Aral, *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health – and How we Must Adapt* (New York 2020), p. 47.

⁴³ I. Kalpokas, ‘Information Warfare on Social Media: A Brand Management Perspective’, *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 10 (2017) 1, pp. 35-62.

name, logo, visual identity, slogans, communications.⁴⁴ This is essential for a company to create a *brand identity*, which is per definition stronger than an *image*. An image is ‘the evoked impression of an entity formed from the recall of all communication impressions’, while a brand is ‘an evoked image that resonates on an emotional level and which stimulates customer loyalty’.⁴⁵ The purpose of branding is to ‘provide marketing efficiencies while building customer loyalty’.⁴⁶ Given these differences, it is easy to see why politicians (and especially their campaign teams) became interested in using marketing strategies for politics, since creating an emotional connection (of trust and faith for instance) between a politician and his electorate creates stability and is therefore vital for governance and (re-)election.⁴⁷ It is therefore not a recent strategy, for instance Franklin D. Roosevelt avoided being photographed in a wheelchair when he was struck with polio to avoid looking weak. However, political marketing used to be mainly identity *management* because politicians could at some point close the curtains of their apartments and be alone and out of the public spotlight. Since the rise of social media, politicians are never alone and offline; they are expected to be active on social media. Hence the need to *brand* themselves online since their social media presence becomes of growing importance to the electorate.⁴⁸

It is essential to tie political marketing to technological posthumanism because (political) marketing is mainly done through social media and is therefore subjected to, and enabled through, algorithmic filtering of social media companies. The aforementioned posthumanist scholar Kalpokas defines branding as a marketing process that ‘seeks to unite every employee activity and communications touchpoint towards a common purpose’.⁴⁹ Because of the authority, and powerplay, of the information market that is social media, Kalpokas emphasizes the marketing aspect of politics. There is a shift of traditional authoritative sources of information, such as newspapers, television or even science, towards social media. Online comments by peers are often more respected than expert-opinions.⁵⁰ This is because of a marketing strategy that is as old as society, namely word-of-mouth. This means that people will appreciate word-of-mouth-like information more than top-down traditional information.

⁴⁴ S. Anholt, ‘Some Important Distinctions in Place Branding’, *Place Branding*, 1 (2005) 2, pp. 116-121, p. 117.

⁴⁵ A. Marland, ‘What is a political brand? Justin Trudeau and the theory of political branding’, *Annual Meeting of the Canadian Communication Association and the Canadian Political Science Association, University of Victoria* (2013) 6, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Marland, ‘What is a political brand?’, p. 4.

⁴⁷ B. Newman, ‘The Role of Marketing in Politics’, *Journal of Political Marketing*, 1 (2002) 1, pp. 1-5.

⁴⁸ N. Manning, R. Penfold-Mounce, B.D. Loader, A. Vromen and M. Xenos, ‘Politicians, celebrities and social media: a case of informalization?’, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20 (2017) 2, pp. 127-144, p. 127.

⁴⁹ Kalpokas, ‘Information Warfare on Social Media’, p. 38.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

Trust lies therefore in the person who spreads the news and in the network it is spread in, which means that the truthfulness of the statement is not of relevance in order for people to trust it.⁵¹ Word-of-mouth in 2021 takes place online, *electronic-word-of-mouth*, where hundreds of like-minded individuals are connected to each other because of algorithmic steered filter bubbles.⁵² Because of the authentic and personal feel of social media platforms such as Twitter, social media becomes an unmissable political outlet for politicians to campaign their *brand*. Especially for a branding strategy that portrays the similarities between the politician and the electorate because this creates the *electronic-word-of-mouth* effect which leads to a scenario where the politician can be a source of *authoritative truth* for his electorate, more so than mainstream and traditional top-down information.

3.3. Populism

The creation of an authoritative truth is something that is also helpful for a populist politician: to *brand* the idea that there is an elite that does not identify the wants and needs of the people. Populism, coming from the Latin word *populus* meaning *the people*, is a political idea where the people are placed against *the elite*. In the last two decades, the term has been making headlines with populist political parties rising in popularity in mainly Europe. According to the *Oxford Handbook of Populism*, a 2017 reference book on the various conceptual and political manifestations of populism throughout the world, it is essential that research on populism builds upon the coherent ‘wealth of research’ that already exists on populism.⁵³ Populism can be defined as an ‘ideology that focuses on the dichotomy between the people, imagined as a homogeneous community’, and the corrupt elite that deprives the people of their sovereign rights. Populism “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”.⁵⁴

The origins of populism are often placed in the political movements that originated in the late nineteenth century, such as The People’s Party in the United States which was created

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 52.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 44.

⁵³ C.R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P.O. Espejo, P. Ostiguy, *Populism: An Overview of the Concept and the State of Art* in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford 2017, ebook) p. 16.

⁵⁴ C. Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, *Government and Opposition* 39 (2004) 4, pp. 541-563, pp. 543-44.

by a group of farmers who were tired of the elite government that had too much power. However, the idea of populism is something that naturally follows from democratic legitimacy. A state is created by its members, and the government is responsive to these members. Hence why *the people* are included in ‘any theory of legitimate government in some capacity’.⁵⁵ Moreover, in the history of modern democracy the people are identified as a ‘unified entity able to act and to retrieve power from government officials: *the sovereign people*’.⁵⁶ This is the legitimization for democracy, the *vox populi*, but also creates the opportunity for a mobilization of the people *against* the elite and government: populism. The campaign of populist politicians is the idea that *the people* are able to authoritatively retrieve the power from the government, or from ‘self-serving elites’ to regain their sovereignty.

Ultimately, according to political scientist Paul Taggart in his monograph about Populism, there are three core conditions that need to be addressed to analyze populist characteristics in a political context: *the people*, *the elite* and the degree of *popular sovereignty*.⁵⁷ These three conditions of populism will be central in the discursive analysis of Donald Trump’s Tweets in Chapter Six. *The people* are a monolithic group of people with shared values.⁵⁸ This group mainly knows who they are *not*, rather than who they *are*. This provides a basis for demonizing the group they are not, in most cases *the elite* or other outsiders such as immigrants.⁵⁹ *The elite* is a high-ranking group which, in the opinion of the people, is guilty of abusing their political power for self-interests and thereby failing to stand up for the interests of the people.⁶⁰ The aim of populists is therefore to replace the existing, negligent, elite with one that *does* identify the wants and needs of the people.⁶¹ The third and final core condition of populism is the need for the people, who have a shared dislike of the current elite, to also have the sovereignty to legitimize this aversion, for instance through voting, protesting or becoming elected themselves. This is *popular sovereignty*, and is often perceived and portrayed, by populists, to being lost to *the elite*. Ultimately, the crux of populism revolves around the question: is the will of *the people* being *identified* - not

⁵⁵ C.R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P.O. Espejo, P. Ostiguy, *Populism: An Overview of the Concept and the State of Art* in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford 2017, ebook) p. 18.

⁵⁶ C.R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P.O. Espejo, P. Ostiguy, *Populism: An Overview of the Concept and the State of Art* in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford 2017, ebook) p. 18.

⁵⁷ P. Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham, 2000), p. 11.

⁵⁸ Taggart, *Populism*, p. 92.

⁵⁹ Taggart, *Populism*, p. 93.

⁶⁰ A. Schedler, ‘Anti-political-establishment Parties’, *Party Politics* 2 (1996) 3, pp. 291–312, p. 292.

⁶¹ K. Vossen, ‘Van marginaal naar mainstream. Populisme in de Nederlandse geschiedenis.’, *Low Countries Historical Review* 127 (2012) 2, pp. 28-54, p. 31

represented - by political institutions in their governance of *the people*?⁶² When a populist politician notices an opportunity to put forward the idea that this is not the case, that the people are losing their popular sovereignty to a self-serving elite, then there is a chance for successful populist rhetoric in politics.

In this research, populism is studied as a manifestation of delegitimization through political branding. It assumes, based on the above literature, that populism can be a *political brand* that can result in delegitimization of political institutions, the elite, the media or election processes when used consistently, repetitively and in a delegitimizing manner. What (de)legitimation is and how it is conveyed through political communication, will be addressed in the next paragraph.

3.4. Political Legitimacy

In this part I will discuss the definition of (de)legitimization, the relationship between discourse and legitimation and what kind of rhetorical tools political leaders use on social media to (de)legitimize.

Language is inherently legitimizing. The words we use with each other in conversations presuppose a hierarchical relationship. Why do doctors use so much Latin? And why do academics generally use hard-to-digest language? Using jargon legitimizes the position one is speaking from. We expect doctors to throw in Latin here and there, just as we expect politicians to talk about how new tax-policy would influence gross domestic product or the rate of tax-evasion in a country. However, it becomes interesting when somebody uses words that you would not expect that person to use in their position. For instance, a politician using mostly simple and everyday language. Berger and Luckmann argue that therefore effectively all of language is legitimation, because ‘incipient legitimation is present as soon as a system of linguistic objectification of human experience is transmitted. For example, the transmission of a kinship vocabulary ipso facto legitimates the kinship structure. The fundamental legitimating ‘explanations’ are, so to speak, built into the vocabulary’.⁶³ Thus, language is hierarchy and legitimation in itself.

Since the process of legitimation is so inherently connected to language, and therefore always contextual, it knows different definitions in different contexts. Berger and Luckmann

⁶² Taggart, *Populism*, p. 11.

⁶³ P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York 1966), p. 112.

have defined legitimation as ‘the ‘explanations’ and justifications of the salient elements of the institutional tradition. (It) ‘explains’ the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings and (...) justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives’.⁶⁴ In simpler terms: legitimation is an answer to the ‘why’ of laws, traditions and other social, political or economic processes: ‘why should we do *this* in *that* way?’ This means that a decontextualized study of legitimation is not possible, because ‘*this*’ needs context and meaning, since the answer is inherently connected to the place, time and the one who asks the question.

Van Leeuwen used this definition of legitimation to build his framework for analyzing the way discourses construct legitimation in public communication.⁶⁵ According to Van Leeuwen, there are four major categories of legitimation. I will explain each category thoroughly and support them with examples since these categories of legitimation will be used in the discursive analysis of Trump’s Twitter usage in Chapter Six.

- 1) *Authorization*; legitimation by referring to ‘the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested’.⁶⁶
- 2) *Moral evaluation*; legitimation by ‘(often very oblique) reference to value systems’, i.e., linking personal agenda to value systems.⁶⁷
- 3) *Rationalization*; legitimation by mentioning the merits (or in case of delegitimization *defects*) of institutionalized social or political practices.
- 4) *Mythopoesis*; ‘legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions’.⁶⁸

According to Van Leeuwen, ‘these forms of legitimation can occur separately or in combination. They can be used to legitimize, but also to de-legitimize, to critique’.⁶⁹ For instance, *authorization* takes place when a political leader refers to a historical figure that represents a type of tradition that he wants to be associated with. The answer to the question: ‘why should we do *this* in *that* way?’ would be answered with: ‘because I say so’ or with:

⁶⁴ P. L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 111

⁶⁵ T. van Leeuwen, ‘Legitimation in discourse and Communication’, *Discourse & Communication*, 1 (2007) 1, pp. 91-112, p. 91.

⁶⁶ T. van Leeuwen, ‘Legitimation in discourse and Communication’, p. 92.

⁶⁷ T. van Leeuwen, ‘Legitimation in discourse and Communication’, p. 92.

⁶⁸ T. van Leeuwen, ‘Legitimation in discourse and Communication’, p. 92.

⁶⁹ T. van Leeuwen, ‘Legitimation in discourse and Communication’, p. 92.

‘because so-and-so says so’, because either the ‘I’ or the ‘so-and-so’ has some kind of authority in the place and time where that statement is made. John F. Kennedy used to do this by referring often to the Founding Fathers, and therefore sending the message to the American People that he prolongs the authority of tradition, custom and law that the Founding Fathers set forth when they gave birth to the United States of America (the answer to the *why* question being: ‘because so-and-so say so’). This is a form of role model authorization, where legitimacy is derived from celebrities or popular (historical) figures. A form of modern-day delegitimization is framing mainstream media (such as CNN, The New York Times, The Guardian etc.) as *fake news*. These outlets of media have been around for sometimes centuries, and yet now they are being questioned for spreading news that is somehow factually wrong. For instance, when Donald Trump Tweets about ‘The Fake News New York Times’ or calls mainstream media ‘LameStream media’, he delegitimizes the media by using his personal authority as President (the answer to the *why* question being: ‘because I say so’).⁷⁰

Moral evaluation is used to legitimize policies by using words such as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. President Bush did this by legitimizing aggressive policies, such as the War on Terror, by pronouncing his enemies an ‘axis of evil’.⁷¹ However, most of the time moral evaluation in discourse is much more subtle. Using words as ‘healthy’, ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ is also a moral evaluation. Politicians use this to morally legitimize policy. This was particularly the case during this last year, 2020, when politicians used moral evaluation in their discourse to legitimize restrictions (sometimes on constitutional rights) implemented to battle the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte for instance used moral evaluations as: ‘the majority of Dutch people realizes that we have to protect ourselves and each by adjusting our behavior. I see (...) people who are courageous and who help other people to not lose sight of the end-goal’. Research by Graso et al., has revealed that moralizing COVID-19 measures had large influence on people acting accordingly to the

⁷⁰ @realDonaldTrump (March 27, 2020), *twitter.com*: “Will someone please explain to the Fake News New York Times (ALL THE NEWS THAT’S NOT FIT TO PRINT) that the Democrats make it almost impossible for us to fill positions within government. They “maximum” delay even the best candidates, including Judges, leaving little time!”, *thetrumparchive.com*.

@realDonaldTrump (January 3, 2021), *twitter.com*: “Something how Dr. Fauci is revered by the LameStream Media as such a great professional, having done, they say, such an incredible job, yet he works for me and the Trump Administration, and I am in no way given any credit for my work. Gee, could this just be more Fake News?”, *thetrumparchive.com*.

⁷¹ T. van Leeuwen, ‘Legitimation in discourse and Communication’, p. 97.

measures, which illustrates that adding moral weight to legitimize measures helps.⁷²

Delegitimizing naturally happens when moral evaluation is used to critique policy, processes or practices. To keep in line with the previous example, Dutch right-wing conservative politician Thierry Baudet used moral evaluation to delegitimize the Dutch policies to control the spread of COVID-19 with for instance saying: ‘I am amazed that the Netherlands is going through this resignedly’, implying that the Dutch people should not go through with the COVID measures ‘resignedly’ and *should*, in fact, resist them.⁷³

Rationalization supports legitimation in an instrumental or theoretical way. With instrumental rationality, there is a causal relationship between the *action* and the *goal*, it therefore has a teleological nature and revolves around the question whether something ‘works or not’. Theoretical rationality focuses more on *explaining* or *predicting* the consequences of a measure, based upon some theory (scientific or experiential). Rational delegitimization can be done for instance through rationalizing how taking action against a certain ethnic group, for instance banning Eastern European men from the country, would lead to more room on the job market for native Dutch workers, based on statistics of how many Eastern European men are working in the country.⁷⁴

Lastly, mythopoesis is (de)legitimization achieved through storytelling. We learn what doing good means through stories we have accepted as truths. Such as rooting for Harry Potter when he re-emerges from the death to save the world from the horrors of Voldemort. These are narrative archetypes that people have embedded in their culture, values and beliefs. We love to root for heroes, that is why using heroism can legitimize policy. The United States did this with nearly all their wars, where they had to ‘save the world from ...’ (terror, communism, drugs etc.). Mythopoesis also takes place when popular narratives, or even conspiracy theories are being used by politicians to legitimize action.

According to Baldi et al., modern day politicians can use a set of *delegitimizing rhetorical tools* to re-shape reality and introduce an alternative representation of facts, with the goal to either delegitimize the opponent(s) or democratic processes themselves. These tools consist of i.e., foul language, hate speech and fake news, mainly spread via social

⁷² M. Graso, F.X. Chen and T. Reynold, ‘Moralization of Covid-19 health response: Asymmetry in tolerance for human costs’, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 93 (2021).

⁷³ T. den Hartog and L. Kok, ‘Thierry Baudet: ‘Ik ben verbijsterd dat Nederland dit gelaten ondergaat’’, *Het Parool* (12 maart 2021).

⁷⁴ www.meldpuntmiddenenoosteuropeanen.nl, a hotline initiated by the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV, Geert Wilders) for Dutch people to report if there are Eastern European men working somewhere. The website got banned eventually, but is still accessible through web.archive.org <https://web.archive.org/web/20121128015542/http://www.meldpuntmiddenenoosteuropeanen.nl/>

media.⁷⁵ Baldi et al. state that social media is especially important, because it can generate ‘an unstoppable swarm of unfalsifiable messages’ giving rise to ‘representations of reality and society different from those consciously controlled by the institutions and instruments provided by Democratic states’.⁷⁶ The above mentioned legitimation framework, is therefore not only relevant for presidential speeches, but even more so on social media because of the *viral* nature of delegitimizing messages which generates that ‘unstoppable swarm of unfalsifiable messages’.

Naturally, these different methods of (de)legitimation can be used together and even in combination with imagery, such as through videos or photographs. In short, politicians (de)legitimize through their language and rhetorical tools such as authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization and mythopoesis with social media being especially helpful for spreading (de)legitimizing political ideas.

⁷⁵ B. Baldi, L. Franco and L.M. Savoia, ‘Alternative truths and delegitimization pragmatic strategies around the 2018 Italian elections’, *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 7 (2019) 2, pp. 293-320, p. 293.

⁷⁶ B. Baldi, L. Franco and L.M. Savoia, ‘Alternative truths and delegitimization pragmatic strategies around the 2018 Italian elections’, *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict*, 7 (2019) 2, pp. 293-320, p. 294.

3.5. Chapter Conclusion

All of the abovementioned academic works help us to understand how and why Donald Trump used Twitter to delegitimize the Presidential Elections of 2020. The genealogy of posthumanism, and its branch in technological posthumanism, the distributed agency in assemblages of human actors, code and algorithms help to understand how it is *not* merely Trump who acts in the delegitimization, but also non-human actors such as algorithms that spread information. These algorithms, and in general the workings of social media, will be further explained in Chapter 4.2. The Posthuman Lens that this Chapter has presented, helps us to acknowledge the possibility that Trump could be a symptom of an ill-turned system, instead of the main *villain* of an otherwise proper working system.

However, this research is qualitative in its essence and primarily focused with how Trump himself used Twitter. That is why the works on political branding were discussed, to assess how political communication is used to form a *political brand identity*. In this age of political branding, people trust *electronic-word-of-mouth* information, which is spread on social media in a network where people feel like they know each other, more than traditional top-down information such as newspapers or television. This is again helpful to understand how Trump is able to successfully spread information on Twitter that delegitimizes the American Political System.

A particular form of political branding is *populism*, which in this research will be used to analyze Trump his discourse on the three core conditions of populism, as presented by Taggart: *the elite, the people* and (the perceived loss of) *popular sovereignty*. Populism has the goal to take the power (of sovereignty) from a self-serving elite back to the people. If taken too far, this can lead to delegitimization. That is why in Chapter 3.4 it was discussed how (de)legitimation occurs through politicians their rhetoric, because all language is in its essence legitimation. However, Van Leeuwen made a framework in which he addressed several rhetorical tools that politicians use in particular to (de)legitimize, namely *authorization, moralization, rationalization* and *mythopoesis*. These concepts will be used in Chapter Six to analyze and understand Donald Trump his delegitimate discourse on Twitter.

But first, what is the American Political System? How does social media work? What is the brand of Donald Trump and why did conspiracy theories become so popular in 2020?

4. The Contextual Backdrop of the Presidential Elections of 2020

In this chapter I will give an overview of four essential elements to provide context to Donald Trump's Twitter behavior in his attempts of delegitimizing the Presidential Elections of 2020. First, I will explain the, for this research, relevant parts of the American Political System. What is the Two-Party system and what is the history of previous alleged fraudulent elections and delegitimization attempts of the electoral process? Then, I will move on to defining and placing social media within the field of political communication. How have technological innovations influenced political communication? And furthermore, what is social media and what are the effects of its mechanics on society? In the third paragraph, I will describe different popular narratives, ranging from the American Dream culture to conspiracy theories that were popularized online in the United States during 2020. The last paragraph is about the Trump Administration. In this section I will use literature on political branding and Donald Trump to describe what kind of *political brand* he employs to win over his audience, and how Trump uses social media.

It is necessary to understand the linkages between American polarization, populism, the (economic and political) workings of social media and the rise of Trump and conspiracy theories, since this all adds to our understanding of how, and primarily *why* Donald Trump used Twitter to delegitimize the Presidential Elections of 2020.

4.1. The American Political System

It is important to address how the American Political System works, because President Trump attempted to delegitimize this system during the elections of 2020. What system did Trump try to delegitimize? And, how does the current American Political System make it possible, and even attractive, for populist leaders to emerge and attempt to delegitimize the system? In this paragraph the two-party system will be discussed, as well as the *myth of electoral fraud* and lastly the role of populism in American politics.

4.1.1. The Two-Party System

The United States currently know a very polarized two-party system with the Democrats and Republicans. These two parties have increasingly become so polarized, that it is hard to imagine that they were not polarized at all even less than 70 years ago. In 1950, the American Political Science Association published a paper in which they pleaded for a 'more polarized political system', saying that the parties contain 'too much diversity of opinion and work

together too easily, leaving voters confused about who to vote for and why'.⁷⁷ In the day and age of Republicans being depicted as racist fascists, and the Democrats being ridiculed as radical communists, it is hard to imagine that there was a problem in the fact that the parties worked together too *easily*. However, the APSA concluded that polarization was necessary for the public to be able to identify themselves with the programs, so that they could make 'an intelligent choice between them'.⁷⁸ Voters needed to be able to identify themselves with a party, so they could trust the party to make decisions that were in line with the ideals of the party, which was crucial for a democracy according to the APSA. Thus, plans were introduced to make parties *more* polarized.

However noble the plans were, it can be argued that the process of polarizing American political parties impacted the polarization of the American people as well. Since 1994, the Pew Research Center has conducted large-scale surveys of American political opinions. The shift, and polarization, in the findings is striking. For instance, in 1994, 39% of Democrats and 26% of Republicans said discrimination was the main reason many black people could not "get ahead" in society. By 2017, those numbers were shockingly different with 64% of Democrats agreeing with that same statement, while just 14% of Republicans agreed with it.⁷⁹ It goes beyond the scope of this research to analyze all the differences, but author Ezra Klein of the 2020 book *Why We're Polarized* found that on all important American political issues (discrimination, immigration, health care) Americans became more polarized based on the difference between the 1994 and 2017 surveys of Pew Research Center.⁸⁰ Thus, APSA succeeded in their goals of making the American Political Parties more polarized; however it correlated heavily with the increasing polarization of the people of the United States as well.

4.1.2. Electoral Fraud

Elections in United States have a long history of 'elites using voter fraud allegations to restrict and shape the electorate'.⁸¹ In the end of the nineteenth century, when newly freed black Americans entered the electorate and instantly filled most of the electorate, it was the

⁷⁷ American Political Science Association, *Towards a More Responsible Two-Party System: A Report of the Committee on Political Parties* (Washington, D.C. 1950).

⁷⁸ American Political Science Association, *Towards a More Responsible Two-Party System: A Report of the Committee on Political Parties* (Washington, D.C. 1950).

⁷⁹ Pew Research Center, *The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider* (October 5, 2017) found in: E. Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York 2020), p. 12.

⁸⁰ E. Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York 2020), p. 12.

⁸¹ L.C. Minnite, *Politics of Voter Fraud* (Washington D.C. 2007), p. 3.

Democrats who were threatened by a loss of power. The Democrats therefore proposed new rules, which they deemed to be necessary to prevent fraudulent votes by black Americans, in the name of ‘protecting democracy’.⁸² Throughout history, allegations of electoral fraud have been used by both Democrats and Republicans to either include or exclude certain people from the electorate if that could lead to a better electoral result for either party. For instance, in 1896 when new immigrants, struggling farmers and wage workers flooded into the electorate, wealthy elites urged for more regulation of the electoral process. Voter registrations systems were implemented that de-mobilized the poor and working classes, all with the argument of *preventing* voter-fraud and the need to eliminate it *in order to protect democracy*.⁸³ This is similar to what Trump argued when he questioned (or ridiculed) the mail-in-voting: that he is trying to protect democracy.⁸⁴

Furthermore, how the American political system works indirectly provides a fertile soil for the birth of voter-fraud allegations. Because of the two-party plurality system, there only needs to be *one* fraudulent vote (in a swing state) to overturn the elections with 50.1% against 49.9% of the votes. With the elections in 2000 and 2016 for instance being close (where the losing party, the Democrats, won the popular vote both times; meaning they had the most votes) the myth of voter-fraud ruining the elections and therefore democracy is stimulated. Moreover, voter registration is not necessary in the United States, in fact it is privatized. That is why at every election there is a massive campaign to get people to register to vote. This campaign is done mostly by thousands of volunteers and temporary workers, to drive people to go vote. Everyone is aware that this could determine the outcome of the elections, which makes everyone very eager to get as many people to vote as possible.⁸⁵ However, the use of these volunteers and temporary workers to attain such an important goal, contributes to the potential for mistakes in the registration process, which could lead to for instance people registering a vote for a person that does not exist, is not allowed to vote or even to somebody registering their dog to vote.⁸⁶ This is one of the consequences of ‘essentially outsourcing voter registration to the private sector rather than placing the burden of voter-registration on the state as is done in many of the European democracies’.⁸⁷

⁸² L.C. Minnite, *Politics of Voter Fraud* (Washington D.C. 2007), p. 3.

⁸³ L.C. Minnite, *Politics of Voter Fraud* (Washington D.C. 2007), p. 14.

⁸⁴ @realDonaldTrump (July 30, 2020, 4:22 PM), *twitter.com*: “Glad I was able to get the very dishonest LameStream Media to finally start talking about the RISKS to our Democracy from dangerous Universal Mail-In-Voting (not Absentee Voting, which I totally support!).” *thetrumparchive.com*.

⁸⁵ L.C. Minnite, *The Myth of Voter Fraud* (Cornell 2010), p. 2

⁸⁶ Minnite, *The Myth of Voter Fraud*, p. 31.

⁸⁷ Minnite, *Politics of Voter Fraud*, p. 19.

In short, the privatization of the American electoral process and its binary elements of the two-party system give way to voter fraud allegations being used as a political campaign tactic, instead of trying to ‘protect democracy’. Or it is used to influence the turnout, which on itself could influence the outcome. That voter fraud allegations are used as a political campaign tactic is partly proven with the elections of 2020, where Sidney Powell, a pro-Trump lawyer, ultimately admitted that ‘no reasonable person’ could believe that the elections were indeed rigged by a(n) (inter)national conspiracy. It was a claim to try to delegitimize the outcome and cause more people to go and vote (naturally for Trump).⁸⁸

4.1.3. Populism

What the United States also has a long history of, is populism. With a system where in theory every American citizen can become a president, it is not weird that there have been movie, television and music stars running for president and sometimes even becoming president. In this paragraph, I will dive into the American history of populism and explain its different traditions, and in paragraph 4.4 I will describe how Trump uses populism in his political communication.

Populism in the United States has its origins in a late nineteenth-century movement, a broad coalition of ‘farmers and workers who came together in a variety of political and economic formations that culminated in the People’s Party’.⁸⁹ Historian Hofstadter depicted the movement as ‘a provincial, moralistic form of agrarianism that was marked by xenophobia and a hatred of cities and cosmopolitanism’.⁹⁰ Others saw it as a revolt that led to a culture of participatory democracy because it opened up the economic market since farmers wanted a say in how their goods were being traded.⁹¹

However, as discussed earlier in Chapter 3.3, defining populism learns that there are various definitions and manifestations of populism. For this part, we assert that populism is the dichotomy between *the people* and *the elite*, where the people feel that they are losing their *popular sovereignty* to a self-serving elite who no longer identifies the wants and needs of the people. Populist politicians steer their discourse in favor of the people and against the

⁸⁸ K. Breuninger, ‘Pro-Trump Lawyer Sidney Powell says ‘no reasonable person’ believes election claims were ‘statements of fact’, *CNBC News* (March 23, 2021).

⁸⁹ J. Lowndes, ‘Populism in the United States’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. C.R. Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford 2017), p. 299-317, p. 299.

⁹⁰ C.R. Kaltwasser, P. Taggart, P.O. Espejo and P. Ostiguy, ‘Populism. An Overview of the Concept and the State of the Art’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. C.R. Kaltwasser et al. (Oxford 2017), p. 18.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 18-19.

wealthy elite. According to American historian Kazin, the United States know two types of populists. The first directs ‘his or her ire exclusively upward: at corporate elites and their enablers in government who have allegedly betrayed the interests of the men and women who do the nation’s essential work’.⁹² These populists base their definition of *the people* based on class and not on ethnicity or religion, which is known as *civic nationalism*. This is contrary to the second type of American populists, who *do* base their definition of *the people* on ethnicity or religion. They also blame elites and the government for ‘undermining the common folk’s economic interests and political liberties’, but they only speak up for a much narrower and more ethnically restrictive variant of *the people*.⁹³ In the case of the United States, this means citizens of European heritage, i.e., Caucasian Americans (in populist terms known as ‘real Americans’). Kazin states that ‘this breed of populist alleges that there is a nefarious alliance between evil forces on high and the unworthy, dark-skinned poor below – a cabal that imperils the interests and values of the patriotic (white) majority in the middle’.⁹⁴ This is also known as *racial nationalism*.

4.2. The Workings of Social Media

Social media definitely played a part in the rise of populism, since it gave a platform to populists to spread their ideas. To give proper contextual background to the topic of social media and political communication, four different, but connected aspects need to be handled in the following order: how political communication changed throughout the past decades, the workings of social media, how fake news spreads on social media and lastly how social media can delegitimize elections.

4.2.1. Shift in Platforms

Neil Postman argues in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* how the *content* of communication is derived from its *form*. For instance, one cannot have philosophical conversations through smoke signals. Postman argues that the shift from a print-focused discourse to a television-based discourse caused an *entertainization* of political discourse and communication. The content became secondary to the visual presentation. This is illustrated

⁹² M. Kazin, ‘Trump and American Populism: Old Whine, New Bottles’, *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016) 17, pp. 17-24, p. 17.

⁹³ M. Kazin, ‘Trump and American Populism: Old Whine, New Bottles’, *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016) 17, pp. 17-24, p. 17.

⁹⁴ M. Kazin, ‘Trump and American Populism: Old Whine, New Bottles’, *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016) 17, pp. 17-24, p. 17.

with for example Richard Nixon stating he lost the election for presidency when he was ‘sabotaged by makeup men’ before the infamous Kennedy-Nixon debate in 1960.⁹⁵ ‘A major new medium changes the structure of discourse; it does so by encouraging certain uses of the intellect, by favoring certain definitions of intelligence and wisdom and by demanding a certain kind of content’, Postman argues.⁹⁶ This can be directly applied to the switch to social media.

In the following part I will demonstrate why social media demands polarizing and radicalized content, because of the business model of social media companies. Furthermore, Twitter for example demands direct and unnuanced content because of its character limitations. This is what Professor of Communication Ott refers to, when he states that Twitter promotes public discourse ‘that is simple, impetuous and frequently denigrating and dehumanizing’.⁹⁷ Just like Postman argues that entertainment on television is not wrong (according to Postman it is in fact the *junk* on television what makes it so great), funny Tweets or short updates on factual news are not the problem. According to Ott it becomes alarming when ‘issues of social, cultural and political importance are filtered through the lens of Twitter’. Because of the three key-features of Twitter (simplicity, impulsivity and incivility) it *simplifies*, *impulsifies* and *incivilizes* the public discourse.⁹⁸ This creates the stage for someone like President Trump, who uses simple, impulsive and often in-civil discourse in his Tweets. But why does social media lead to such discourse?

4.2.2. The Mechanisms of Social Media

MIT professor Sinan Aral’s book *The Hype Machine* (2020) offers crucial insight into the workings of social media (what he calls *the hype machine*) and its influence on democracies. In this book, he refers to a broad palette of cutting-edge research on social media, group behavior and technological innovations such as algorithms, artificial intelligence and deep learning, which makes the book relevant for researching how President Trump used social media to try to delegitimize the 2020 elections.

⁹⁵ ‘Was Nixon Sabotaged by TV Makeup Artist?’ *Chicago Daily News* (29 September 1960), accessed through https://scalar.usc.edu/works/dme_johnson/was-nixon-sabotaged-by-tv-makeup-artist

⁹⁶ Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, p. 27.

⁹⁷ B.L. Ott, ‘The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement’, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34 (2017) 1, pp. 59-68, p. 60.

⁹⁸ B.L. Ott, ‘The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement’, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34 (2017) 1, pp. 59-68, pp. 60-62.

Aral refers to how social media is driven by an *attention economy*. This means that attention is the currency of social media, it is what ‘powers the business models of all social media platforms’.⁹⁹ Since social media is free to use, the user becomes the product. Hence why there is an economical drive for social media companies to make the user spend as much time as possible on their platform, in comparison to them spending time on other platforms or even in the real world. To achieve this, social media companies make use of notifications to alert you that you ‘have missed something’, but also of a process called *algorithmic filtering*.

Algorithmic filtering is the process of organizing, selecting, and presenting subsets of a corpus of information for consumption. An algorithm is “a finite, discrete series of instructions that receives an input and produces an output”, and companies like Facebook, Google, Twitter use algorithms as information intermediaries that determine what information should be displayed and what should be hidden.¹⁰⁰ It is a continuously changing interdependent process between the users that generate data, and the algorithm that selects information based upon the generated data. Because of its interdependent process, there is a chance that a feedback loop, or *filter bubble*, will be created. This is a bubble where the algorithm, through user generated data, selects and presents the content for a user that lacks content diversity. This leads to i.e. content that is increasingly polarizing, since this is the type of content that generates the most user engagement (number of clicks) and therefore maximizes reward (revenue) for a social media company.¹⁰¹ This is important to understand because it could help us to understand why people who follow, and engage with, the Tweets of President Trump are also referring to online conspiracies such as QAnon, for instance during the events on the 6th of January, 2021 on Capitol Hill.¹⁰² This understanding of the escalating effects of social media, through algorithmic filtering, is therefore crucial in order to research President Trump’s attempts to delegitimize the elections.

⁹⁹ Aral, *The Hype Machine*, p. 202.

¹⁰⁰ Aral, *The Hype Machine*, pp. 215-218

¹⁰¹ S.H. Cen and D. Shah, ‘Regulating algorithmic filtering on social media’, *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* August 4 (2020) Pre-print, p. 4.

¹⁰² D. Barry, M. McIntire and M. Rosenberg, ‘‘Our President Wants Us Here’: The Mob That Stormed the Capitol’, *The New York Times* (9 January 2021).

4.2.3. Fake News & Political Marketing

A 2017 article by Allcott and Gentzkow discusses the impact of fake news during the 2016 election.¹⁰³ Their article is helpful in that it explains the economics behind fake news and provides empirical evidence for the exposure of the average American to fake news and the partisanship in fake news (pro-Trump or pro-Clinton). Allcott and Gentzkow define fake news as ‘news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers’.¹⁰⁴ Both because of the lower barriers to entry in the media industry, due to social media, and how easy it is to set up website and monetize these websites through advertising platforms, fake news has grown in importance according to the authors.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, because of the majority of the American people using Facebook as their primary news-source, fake news ‘creators’ have a higher chance of succeeding to reach their goal (that is, to generate readers and believers).¹⁰⁶ This is also in line with Kalpokas his article on the electronic-word-of-mouth, as addressed in Chapter 3.2. Because of this, fake news spread through online platforms is being trusted more than traditional news information. This is important because President Trump is delivering political statements as ‘online comments’, which makes it more personal and therefore increases his credibility and authenticity to his following in an era of online political marketing and fake news.

Online marketing with political ends, such as delegitimizing an election, is not new in the United States. In the presidential elections of 2016, there have been attempts by Russia to delegitimize the election through spreading fake news. This was done by an online marketing agency, called the Internet Research Agency (IRA) which was based in St. Petersburg, Russia. As a result, the United States experienced, what Starbird et al. call, a *strategic information operation*.¹⁰⁷ The IRA created fake accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and basically every other social media platform, sometimes years in advance of the 2016 elections. Through actively engaging in online communities, they gained trust of their followers and ultimately reached 126 million Americans. This is exactly what Kalpokas, in Chapter 3.2, is referring to with the importance of gaining trust through online comments and communities, i.e. *branding*. After gaining trust from their following, they started spreading

¹⁰³ H. Allcott and M. Gentzkow, ‘Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election’, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31 (2017) 2, pp. 211-236.

¹⁰⁴ Allcott and Gentzkow, ‘Social Media and Fake News’, p. 213.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 214.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem, p. 232.

¹⁰⁷ K. Starbird, A. Arif and T. Wilson, ‘Disinformation as Collaborative Work: Surfacing the Participatory Nature of Strategic Information Operations’, *Proceeding of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction CSCW* (2019) 3, pp. 1-26, p. 2.

fake news intended to suppress voting and change voter choices, mainly steered towards Donald Trump and away from Hillary Clinton. This was around the time when the infamous *Pizza-Gate* conspiracy was released onto the internet (where Clinton was accused of running a child sex ring out of the basement of a pizza restaurant in D.C.).¹⁰⁸ Starbird et al. find that mainly the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was employed by the IRA (both pro and anti-BLM accounts) to mobilize people to protest. This is in line with Aral's findings, that during the elections of 2016 black people were targeted with advertisements (by IRA) that 'no one during this election represents you. Do not vote'.¹⁰⁹ Both of these findings show that social media can influence the democratic process of an election. In 2016 this was done by international actors, but in 2020 we have seen President Trump's Twitter behavior escalating to an insurrection at Capitol Hill in D.C.. The article by Starbird et al. is therefore relevant in its proof that American elections can be interfered with and potentially delegitimized through social media.

4.3. The Rise of Conspiracy Theories

This part will be about conspiracy theories that have been popularized and spread in the United States throughout Donald Trump's presidency, almost exclusively through social media. Describing these conspiracy theories will help to analyze in Chapter Six whether President Trump refers to these ideas in his Tweets in order to appeal to the believers of these theories. In this Chapter, the theories around QAnon, COVID-19 and Anti-Vaxx will be mainly discussed as these seem the most relevant in 2020 with many QAnon followers for instance being present on January 6th, 2021 during the #SaveAmerica rally in Washington D.C..

4.3.1. QAnon

Trump is known as a conspiracy theory lover and so are his followers. It is therefore not a surprise that one of the most infamous conspiracy theories of 2020, QAnon, placed Donald Trump in the spotlight. QAnon believers claim 'that a satanic cabal of pedophiles and cannibals controls world governments and the media. This cabal, QAnon claims, includes Bill and Hillary Clinton, George Soros, Tom Hanks and Lady Gaga, among others, while Donald

¹⁰⁸ Starbird et al., 'Disinformation as Collaborative Work', p. 16.

¹⁰⁹ Aral, *The Hype Machine*, pp. 34-45.

Trump is believed to be working behind the scenes to bring it down'.¹¹⁰ This shows some resemblance with Donald Trump's own fringe ideas during the elections of 2016, stating repetitively that Hillary Clinton was part of a major conspiracy to cover up illegal activities.¹¹¹ Apart from the bizarre claims of a global network of pedophiles and blood-drinking celebrities, the most interesting element for this thesis is that QAnon-followers strongly believe that Donald Trump will save the United States, and consequently the world, by dismantling this global network of child-traffickers, pedophiles and cannibals. Trump is the savior, the one who will save innocent American children and who will 'Make America Great Again'.

It proves to be difficult to pinpoint how many Americans truly *believe* in QAnon. However, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security have released bulletins warning of 'the possibility of future violence from domestic terrorists, potentially including QAnon followers'.¹¹² There are various polls trying to measure how many Americans believe in QAnon, varying from 56% of Republicans (14% of the country), to 37% of registered voters having heard of QAnon. However, the polling firm Ipsos did a poll where respondents were asked if they believed specific QAnon teachings were true and found that 17% thought the core belief was true – that "a group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media."¹¹³ Furthermore, 83% were concerned about the spread of false information. With President Trump being a prominent figure in stating that the media provides fake news, it shows how effective Trump's statements are in trying to take down the authority of traditional media.

4.3.2. Anti-Vaccine, Anti-Science Extremism and COVID-19

Another conspiracy movement that has resurrected the last years and came into full force last year with the outburst of COVID-19 and the prospects of Americans needing to be vaccinated, is the anti-vaccine movement. Although the societal doubt around vaccines has a long history, primarily at the end of the eighteenth century, many doubts have been taken away due to the massive successes of vaccines with curing humanity from diseases such as

¹¹⁰ S. Moskalenko and C. McCauley, 'QAnon: Radical Opinion versus Radical Action', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 15 (2021) 2, pp. 142-146, p. 142.

¹¹¹ Z.J. Miller, 'Donald Trump Has a Grand Unified Campaign Conspiracy Theory', *Time* (October 13, 2016).

¹¹² J. Shanahan, 'Support for QAnon is hard to measure – and polls may overestimate it', *The Conversation* (March 5, 2021).

¹¹³ M. Newall, 'More than 1 in 3 Americans believe a 'deep state' is working to undermine Trump', *Ipsos Polling* (December 30, 2020).

polio, measles and being well underway to eradicate malaria. Furthermore, the Enlightenment and the increased trust in science (and simultaneous religious doubt) caused people to trust the vaccines. However, the last two decades there has been an alarming rise in people distrusting vaccines again. This started with an article by Wakefield (1998) ‘in which he related the possibility of suffering autism with the administration of the vaccine against rubella, mumps and measles’.¹¹⁴ In the end, it was proved that ‘Wakefield and the co-authors of the article had conflicts of interests and the journal was forced to publish a retraction but, despite that, this belief is still maintained today’, with the United Kingdom the year after the publication of the article already seeing a 9% drop in vaccination rates.¹¹⁵ These beliefs have only gotten worse in the past few years. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, 74% of pediatricians find parents ‘who oppose or have delayed the administration of vaccines to their children’.¹¹⁶

These anti-vaccine movements go hand in hand with ‘anti-science extremism in America’.¹¹⁷ In the United States, the last five years have seen a rise in anti-science rhetoric, mainly coming from the political far right and mostly focused on vaccines. This has led to significant declines of vaccine coverage in more than 100 counties, ultimately leading to measles outbreaks in 2019.¹¹⁸ The anti-vaccine movement turned political around 2015, when they branded themselves as fighting for ‘health freedom’ or ‘medical freedom’.¹¹⁹ This narrative of fighting for medical freedom obviously continued when the COVID-19 pandemic started. With the patient-zero being located most likely in China, soon conspiracy theories were spread online about how COVID-19 could be a virus that was made in a Chinese lab. Following anti-science extremism and the anti-vaccine movement, people soon started to come out stating that they would not take the vaccine, for they were sure that the pharmaceutical industry had capitalistic intentions instead of global health-based ones. This illustrates how powerful, and potentially harmful, conspiracy theories can be. President Trump further fueled these beliefs, by referring to COVID-19 as the ‘China-virus’ on

¹¹⁴ E. Ortiz-Sanchez, A. Velando-Soriano, L. Pradas-Hernandez, K. Vargas-Roman, J.L. Gomez-Urquiza, G.A. Canadas-De la Fuente and L. Albendin-Garcia, ‘Analysis of the Anti-Vaccine Movement in Social Networks: A Systematic Review’, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17 (2020) 15, p. 1.

¹¹⁵ Ortiz-Sanchez et al, ‘Analysis of the Anti-Vaccine Movement in Social Networks’, p 1.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 1.

¹¹⁷ P.J. Hotez, ‘Anti-science extremism in America: escalating and globalizing’, *Microbes and Infection*, 22 (2020) 10, pp. 505-507, p. 505.

¹¹⁸ Hotez, ‘Anti-science extremism in America’, p. 505.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

numerous occasions. This will be further analyzed in the Tweet analysis part of this research in Chapter 5 and 6.

4.3.3. The Dying American Dream

Although not a conspiracy theory or fringe idea, it is an important cultural narrative that is deeply embedded in the average American: ‘The American Dream’. The historian James Truslow Adams popularized the ‘American Dream’ in 1931 in his book *The Epic of America*. Adams described the American Dream as: ‘that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement’.¹²⁰ However, the American Dream was about more than just acquiring wealth and fame. It is ‘a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable’.¹²¹ The American Dream represents a state of mind – that is, ‘an enduring optimism given to a people who might be tempted to succumb to the travails of adversity, but who, instead, repeatedly rise from the ashes to continue to build a great nation’.¹²²

The land of endless opportunity, the land that saved the world from facism, communism and terror. The land with ever expanding frontiers, being it on land, at sea or in space. This is a cultural belief that is predominantly popular under conservative Americans who would describe themselves as patriots. On the other hand, progressive ‘liberal’ Americans often repel against the notion of an American Dream, saying that the dream only exists for a certain group of people and how Americans did a lot of harm with their endless expansion of American beliefs, values and frontiers.

In politics there is a division as well between who supports the ideas of an American Dream and who does not. With the Trump campaign slogan being: ‘Make America Great Again’ and his own Netflix documentary named ‘Trump: The American Dream’, it is obvious that President Trump falls in the category of supporting and trying to defend the American Dream. In Chapter Five and Six, this notion will be important to analyze how Trump uses the American Dream in his *branding*, which brings us to the *branding of Trump* in the following paragraph.

¹²⁰ J.T. Adams, *The Epic of America* (1941) p. 404.

¹²¹ Adams, *The Epic of America*, p. 404.

¹²² J.K. White, ‘The Making and Persistence of the American Dream’, in *The American Dream in the 21st Century*, ed. S. Hanson and J. White (Philadelphia 2011), pp. 1-16, p. 3.

4.4. Political Branding of Donald Trump

In this last contextual paragraph, I will describe the Trump Administration and in particular the political branding of Donald Trump leading up to the 2016 elections and after being elected. This is helpful in order to understand what kind of brand Trump embodies on Twitter and how this brand might have changed during the Presidential Elections of 2020. After that, I will describe how Trump seems to mingle with conspiratorial thinkers and ideas that are popularized online. This helps us to analyze in Chapter Five and Six how Trump uses conspiracy ideas to strengthen his political brand, and ultimately delegitimize the American Political System,

4.4.1. Political Branding

Schneiker did a qualitative research on President Trump's Twitter behavior.¹²³ Schneiker used a sample of 1469 tweets that were posted between March 2016 and April 2017. For this qualitative analysis Schneiker used political branding concepts and the different kinds of *branded* politicians (i.e., a celebrity politician). The article is useful for its further explanation, and application, of *political branding* (as described in §3.2) and its different manifestations. For instance, Schneiker states that a celebrity politician (such as Trump) often can be categorized in two different *brands*. One, as an everyday celebrity politician.¹²⁴ This is a politician that got famous through business, reality shows or the internet and is relatively close to the people. The other brand is the superstar celebrity politician (i.e., Kanye West) who appears on traditional media such as one-way broadcast programs.¹²⁵ Schneiker finds that Trump has the characteristics of both, which makes him have the brand of the *superhero anti-politician*. This is essential, because it correlates with Trump's identity as the one who saves the people and fixes problems for the United States (i.e., seen through the conspiracy theory QAnon).

A potent mix of branding techniques give Trump the ability to present himself as 'a persona that has inside experience with politics but is still an outsider', which give him the opportunity to either, depending on the context, present himself as a strong and decisive leader or as an ordinary citizen.¹²⁶ Trump also holds the persona of the 'superhero', because he presents himself as being 'better suited to define and solve problems than anyone else by

¹²³ A. Schneiker, 'Telling the Story of the Superhero and the Anti-Politician as President: Donald Trump's Branding on Twitter', *Political Studies Review* 17 (2019) 3, pp. 210-223.

¹²⁴ Schneiker, 'Donald Trump's Branding on Twitter', p. 213.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 214.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 220.

simultaneously devaluating ordinary ‘politicians’’. The superhero anti-politician celebrity branding ‘reflects an understanding of political decision-making as an *authoritative setting of ‘the truth’* by one individual instead of a deliberative process based on a pluralism of ideas and interests’.¹²⁷ This is especially important for the analysis of how Trump creates an *authoritative truth*, one wherein it is not possible that Trump lost the elections, as will be further discussed in Chapter Six.

4.4.2. Trump: the conspiracy theory lover

President Trump is known as a conspiracy theory lover and his followers are very much alike. For instance, Trump made a lot of effort in 2014 to fuel the conspiracy idea that President Obama was not born in the United States and would ‘therefore have no constitutional claim on the office’.¹²⁸ Trump furthermore propagated that climate change is a ‘hoax perpetrated by the Chinese’, that the ‘pharmaceutical industry suppresses evidence for a link between vaccines and autism, and that Hillary Clinton was part of a major conspiracy to cover up illegal activities’.¹²⁹ Large portions of ‘normal, non-pathological citizens endorse such theories’, it is therefore plausible to assume that Trump got elected ‘not despite but *because* of these conspiracy theories’.¹³⁰

Right before the research time-window of this thesis, on September 15, 2020, Trump retweeted a prominent QAnon-believer’s Tweet that referred to Biden as #PedoBiden.¹³¹ This is important to mention, since it strengthens the beliefs of Trump’s following about a perverse, pedophile, democrat-run political establishment, while at the same time promoting QAnon’s beliefs. When Trump was asked about QAnon during a press conference in August, 2020 he replied with: ‘I don’t know much about the movement other than I understand they like me very much, which I appreciate’.¹³² In October that year, Trump went on stage in a nationally televised town hall saying that QAnon are ‘very much against pedophilia’ and that he agrees with that sentiment.¹³³ Trump later refused to denounce QAnon on live television

¹²⁷ Ibidem, p. 220.

¹²⁸ M. Barkun, ‘President Trump and the “Fringe”’, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 29 (2017) 3, pp. 437-443, p. 438.

¹²⁹ J.W. van Prooijen, ‘Populism as Political Mentality Underlying Conspiracy Theories’. In B. Rutjens, & M. Brandt (Eds.), *Belief systems and the perception of reality* (London 2018), pp. 81-96, p. 81.

¹³⁰ J.W. van Prooijen, ‘Populism as Political Mentality Underlying Conspiracy Theories’, p. 81.

¹³¹ @realdonaldtrump (September 15, 2020, 8:02 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*. “RT @ConservUSA38: We can beat them at their game .. #PedoBiden <https://t.co/SjNsUTrdGA>”

¹³² M. Vazquez, ‘Trump again refuses to denounce QAnon’, *CNN Politics* (October 16, 2020).

¹³³ M. Vazquez, ‘Trump again refuses to denounce QAnon’, *CNN Politics* (October 16, 2020).

when he was asked to do so by the interviewer, again saying: ‘I know nothing about QAnon’.¹³⁴

This behavior of Trump regarding QAnon seems flirtatious, at one point saying that he has heard of them and even knowing that they are against pedophilia and at the next time stating that he knows nothing about them. This is the behavior that infuriates people, but at the same time gives hope to the QAnon followers that their theory is in fact true, and that Trump is indeed trying to battle the perverse and corrupt establishment against pedophilia and child-trafficking.

4.5. Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the context, the *backdrop* of the stage on which Trump performed his discursive acts: the American Political System, the use of social media in political communication, the branding of the Trump Administration and the rise of conspiracy theories in the United States during 2020. The most important take-aways are that the American Political System has been polarized in the 1960s, to make the parties more different from one another. However, as a consequence, the American people have also become more polarized, as illustrated in the growing contrasting extremes of their political opinions. Allegations of fraudulent elections are also not new; it is usually used as a campaigning strategy of discrediting the political opponent. It became clear that these allegations are a logical consequence of the privatized and economized electoral process in the United States.

The platform of communication has a large influence on what kind of discourse is used in political communication. For instance, political communication became more visual with the introduction of television debates in the 1960s. In today’s *Twitter* times, political communication becomes more impulsive, simple and often in-civil because that is the nature of the platform. As Postman argued, the content of communication is derived from its form. Furthermore, social media communication is steered (and fed) by algorithms that are created to recommend *users* the content of which the algorithm thinks will drive the user to spend the most time on their platform. This *algorithmic filtering* often leads to users being recommended provocative and ultimately polarizing content, leading to users ending up in *filter bubbles* or *echo chambers* where they constantly read the same type of information. The economic imperative of the information spread is therefore a crucial insight in understanding how social media operates, because social media is not the product; the *user* is the product.

¹³⁴ M. Vazquez, ‘Trump again refuses to denounce QAnon’, *CNN Politics* (October 16, 2020).

The way information is spread on social media also partly explains the rise in popularity of fringe conspiracy theories in the United States in 2020. Conspiracy theories have always existed, but normally on the fringes of society. The algorithms of social media, however, see that users who are active in conspiracy theory *groups* online are spending more time on social media than other users. With the algorithm being trained to recommend users the content which drives them to spend the most time on social media, it is only logical that the algorithm starts recommending conspiracy theory content to other users who *might* like it. Combine this with a global pandemic which forces everyone to stay inside and be relied upon social media for all their social interactions, it becomes understandable why conspiracy theories such as QAnon have become so popular in 2020.

QAnon is a group that believes that there is a conspiracy between the political elite (the Democrats primarily), the Media and Hollywood Celebrities who traffick children, drink their blood to prolong their lives and that Trump is trying to get rid of this conspiracy. Trump is therefore portrayed as the savior of the American people and children. This is an extreme conspiracy theory, other theories are primarily concerned with a distrust in the political elite, science and the media. All have at least somewhat to do with *institutional doubt* and see Trump as the one who does stand for and represent the wants and needs of the people.

Trump himself has namely branded himself as a man of the people and conspiracy lover when he came in the political spotlight for the Presidential elections of 2016. What first was not really taken serious by the media and political elite, suddenly became a force that could not be stopped and led to Trump being elected as President in 2016. Found was that Trump branded himself as the *superhero anti-politician*, meaning someone who is *not* a politician and truly does save the people instead of the false promises by politicians who never do what they say. This is a typical Trumpian populist rhetoric. In the next chapters, it will be analyzed whether this 2016-Trump-brand still holds true during the 2020 elections, or if Trump's brand escalated and radicalized when the polls were no longer in his favor.

5. The Trump Tweets: A Slippery Slope

In the Chapter Two, I described how I gathered the *evidence* and in Chapter Three I described the *ideas* that are helpful in the pursuit of understanding that evidence. In the next two chapters, I will tell the story that results from the connection between Donald Trump's Tweets and the theories on posthumanism, political branding, populism and political legitimacy. I will first start off with a chronological analysis of the findings, since there is an interesting shift in Donald Trump's Tweet behavior over time. To do this, I have divided the analysis in three different time windows. One is pre-elections (October 1st – November 1st), one is during the elections themselves (November 1st – November 9th) and the last one is post-elections (November 10th – January 8th). In these paragraphs, I will present the findings that have resulted from reading and coding the 2.004 Tweets by Donald Trump multiple times. Emphasis will be placed on *if* Trump's Tweets were *delegitimate* and to whom they were directed. The results will be both quantitatively and qualitatively presented, with statistics of percentages of the Tweets that were delegitimate and with examples of Tweets. Attached in the Appendix are visual presentations, pie-charts, of the coding results.

After that, in Chapter Six, I will do a discursive analysis in which each theoretical idea from Chapter Three will be linked with the data to find bridges, but also roadblocks between the ideas and evidence. The focus within the findings will be on the elections, since this research is primarily interested in how Trump managed to let Americans believe that the elections were rigged: in such a manner that thousands of them traveled to Washington D.C. to violently protest and trespass Capitol Hill, with the goal to 'save America' and 'stop the steal'. However, we will see that Trump was able to do this not only by delegitimizing the elections, but also by strengthening his political brand as man of the people through an assemblage of narratives that allowed him to create an *authoritative truth*; in which Trump losing the elections was not a possibility.

5.1. Chronological Analysis

In this part I will first present a chronological overview of the story and trends that emerge when the Tweets of Donald Trump between October 1st, 2020 and January 8th, 2021 are analyzed. Through this chronological analysis, different important elements will come forward that will be analyzed more in depth in the discursive analysis in Chapter Six.

5.1.1. Pre-Election Weeks

When analyzing the Tweets of October, the first things that is remarkable is the number of Tweets: 877 Tweets out of the 2004 Tweets in total (in the period of October-January). This means that most of the Tweets (43%) have been sent in the month leading up to the Presidential Elections. This makes sense, because President Trump was losing ground in the polls; moving from percentages in the high 40s in the summer to low 40s and high 30s in October.¹³⁵ President Trump responded to this news with allegations of the media showing fake polls:

“Will be back on the Campaign Trail soon!!! The Fake News only shows the Fake Polls.”¹³⁶

“How does Biden lead in Pennsylvania Polls when he is against Fracking (JOBS!), 2nd Amendment and Religion? Fake Polls. I will win Pennsylvania!”¹³⁷

These are examples of Trump’s Tweets that had a delegitimate character in October, in this case aimed against the media and their polls of the elections. Trump mainly directed his Tweets against the media and against Biden in the month of October (see Appendix A for the pie-charts for a visual presentation). However, his Tweets were still in the realm of what could be expected from Trump after being accustomed to his Twitter behavior in the past years. Most of Trump’s Tweets were aimed at campaigning, making announcements of his rallies and TV appearances or other non-harmful subjects: these were marked as ‘non-delegitimate’ (499 out of the 877 Tweets, 56%). 168 Tweets (17%) were delegitimate, nearly a third of which (50 Tweets, 29%) were aimed at the media. This is quite a lot, considering

¹³⁵ *Project FiveThirtyEight*, President: general election, National

<https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/president-general/national/>

¹³⁶ @realdonaldtrump (October 5, 2020, 10:23 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹³⁷ @realdonaldtrump (October 6, 2020, 5:00 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

that ‘only’ 99 Tweets in total (from October-January) were coded as delegitimate about the media, which means that half of all the Tweets that were directed at the media were in the month of October.¹³⁸ This again could be explained due to the media reporting results of polls that showed that Trump was losing, but also as a way to create an *authoritative truth*: one where the media does not tell the truth, but Trump does. I will dive deeper in this point in Chapter 6.2.

At points Trump even insinuates that the media is cooperating with the Democrats to make Joe Biden president, for instance:

‘I just hope the voter understands that they are all Fake News trying hard to push a man that should NEVER be president of our Country’.¹³⁹

‘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!!!’.¹⁴⁰

These Tweets illustrate how President Trump tried to frame the media as an opponent because of the polls and news they broadcasted, which put Trump in a ‘losing’ context. In Chapter 6.2 I will dive deeper in how and why Trump used Twitter to create a belief under his following that the media only told lies and therefore should not be trusted.

5.1.2. Election Week

The time window of the elections, between November 1st and November 9th, 2020, is the period where President Trump lost the elections to Joe Biden. This is a *tipping point* in Donald Trump’s Twitter behavior, since it became increasingly more delegitimate in nature. In this timeframe, 68 out of the 233 Tweets were coded as ‘delegitimate’ (29%) and 38 of these (55%, and 16% of total) were coded as delegitimizing the Presidential Elections of 2020 (see Appendix B for the pie charts for a visual presentation). This is an alarmingly high number, given that Trump Tweeted 26 times a day on average during this election week, around 4 tweets per day would be delegitimizing the elections.

¹³⁸ See Appendix A.

¹³⁹ @realdonaldtrump (October 7, 2020, 12:23 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁴⁰ @realdonaldtrump (October 12, 2020, 01:02 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

Immediately after the results of the elections started to come in (in the morning of the 4th of November, 2020) President Trump came out with his first statements regarding the results:

“We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the Election. We will never let them do it. Votes cannot be cast after the Poles are closed!”¹⁴¹

“I will be making a statement tonight. A big WIN!”¹⁴²

Despite the results were looking bad for Trump, the President Tweeted that ‘they’ (the Democrats / Media) were trying to *steal* the elections and that he himself had won. Trump’s Twitter behavior became increasingly assertive with him demanding that no more votes should be counted, implying that new votes were still being cast.

“STOP THE COUNT!”¹⁴³

“ANY VOTE THAT CAME IN AFTER ELECTION DAY WILL NOT BE COUNTED!”¹⁴⁴

The ‘STOP THE COUNT!’ Tweet was the 11th most favorited and retweeted Tweet of Donald Trump in the period of October – January, with 749 thousand favorites and 121 thousand retweets. Sending out a Tweet like that, as a President, in the middle of the day right after the Elections has the characteristics of an executive order: implying that somebody (or anybody) *needs* to stop the count, as ordered by the President of the United States. This is incredibly delegitimizing of the American electoral process, the Democratic Party and Joe Biden, the, then, democratically soon-to-be elected President of the United States.

In the evening of November 6th, the elections were called by Decision Desk HQ, after they projected that Biden had won Pennsylvania which would give Biden a total of 273 electoral votes. This meant that it was not possible anymore for Trump to win. In the morning

¹⁴¹ @realdonaldtrump (November 4, 2020, 05:44 AM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁴² @realdonaldtrump (November 4, 2020, 05:45 AM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁴³ @realdonaldtrump (November 5, 2020, 2:12 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁴⁴ @realdonaldtrump (November 5, 2020, 3:09 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#). (this Tweet was flagged by Twitter for spreading harmful misinformation and therefore could not be favorited or retweeted by other users).

of November 7th, all major news stations (ABC, NBC, CNN, Associated Press etc.) called the election for Biden. President Trump responded to this news, with his 3rd most favorited and retweeted Tweet ever:

“I WON THIS ELECTION, BY A LOT!”¹⁴⁵

With this Tweet, President Trump not only delegitimized the electoral process, but also the media and Biden. The results showed that Trump lost, with a significant number of votes (306 electoral votes for Biden against 232 votes for Trump). By Tweeting that he ‘won, by a lot’ Trump ignores, and delegitimizes, the difference of 7 million votes by the American people and 74 electoral votes between himself and Biden.

5.1.3. Post-Election Weeks

The post-elections time frame, from the 10th of November 2020 till the day President Trump got banned from Twitter, 8th of January 2021, marked a shift in Trump’s delegitimate Tweets (see Appendix C for a visual presentation). Instead of merely focusing on the elections, Joe Biden and the media, Trump turned towards his own party, with nearly a third (80 Tweets) of his delegitimate Tweets (total of 281) being about the Republican Party. Brian Kemp in particular, the Republican Governor of Georgia, was under fire by President Trump with 36% of the delegitimate Tweets regarding the Republican Party being targeted at Governor Kemp (29 Tweets).

“Do something @BrianKempGA. You allowed your state to be scammed. We must check signatures and count signed envelopes against ballots. Then call off election. It won’t be needed. We will all WIN!”¹⁴⁶

“Why won’t Governor @BrianKempGA, the hapless Governor of Georgia, use his emergency powers, which can be easily done, to overrule his obstinate Secretary of State, and do a match of signatures on envelopes. It will be a “goldmine” of fraud, and we will easily WIN the state....”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ @realdonaldtrump (November 7, 2020, 10:36 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁴⁶ @realdonaldtrump (November 7, 2020, 10:36 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁴⁷ @realdonaldtrump (November 30, 2020, 8:59 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

“Rigged Election. Show signatures and envelopes. Expose the massive voter fraud in Georgia. What is Secretary of State and @BrianKempGA afraid of. They know what we’ll find!!!”¹⁴⁸

President Trump puts Governor Brian Kemp in the line of fire by Tweeting these statements, even insinuating in the last Tweet that Kemp has conspired with the Democrats to rig the election, and thus accusing him of committing electoral fraud. Through Twitter, Trump publicly forces a State Governor to make a governmental decision. This way, Trump abuses his executive rights as a President, by overruling the governmental jurisdiction independence of the state Georgia. Next to that, Trump calls Brian Kemp ‘hapless’, meaning somebody who is unfortunate and deserves pity. This has paternal and condescending characteristics, as in that Trump pities Kemp and tries to console him by giving him advice on what to do next. Furthermore, the use of interpunction by Trump is also demanding, for instance by using multiple exclamation marks, periods and writing ‘WIN’ in all caps. This emphasizes urgency and dedication, which is found in most of Trump’s Tweets.

Next to Trump’s delegitimization attempts of the Republican State Governor of Georgia Brian Kemp, Trump exceded in delegitimizing the elections during this time window. Out of the 896 Tweets in total, 357 were coded as delegitimate, out of which 244 were about the elections. This means that a third of all Trump’s Tweets between November and January were delegitimizing the elections, which counts for about 5 Tweets per day (out of the 15 per day on average he Tweeted during this time). Some exemplary Tweets on how Trump addressed the elections during November – January:

“RIGGED ELECTION. WE WILL WIN!”¹⁴⁹

“I WON THE ELECTION!”¹⁵⁰

“Most fraudulent Election in history!”¹⁵¹

“The Media is just as corrupt as the Election itself!”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ @realdonaldtrump (December 1, 2020, 10:27 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁴⁹ @realdonaldtrump (November 15, 2020, 9:16 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁵⁰ @realdonaldtrump (November 15, 2020, 11:55 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁵¹ @realdonaldtrump (November 16, 2020, 8:15 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁵² @realdonaldtrump (November 21, 2020, 6:13 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

“Why is Joe Biden so quickly forming a Cabinet when my investigators have found hundreds of thousands of fraudulent votes, enough to “flip” at least four States, which in turn is more than enough to win the Election? Hopefully the Courts and/or Legislatures will... ...have the COURAGE to do what has to be done to maintain the integrity of our Elections, and the United States of America itself. THE WORLD IS WATCHING!!!”¹⁵³

In these Tweets, Trump at first simply states (or demands) that he won the election, using all caps and exclamation marks. After that, Trump delegitimizes the media as well, next to the elections, as a corrupt institute. This Tweet referred to how the media at the time was reporting COVID cases in the United States. Trump was of the opinion that the United States was doing an outstanding job, and being on the way to be the fastest vaccinated country (which ultimately turned out to be true) while the media was ‘fearmongering’ (in Trump’s opinion) the COVID situation in the US. The last Tweet quoted above is demanding in nature and has the characteristics of an executive order, this time towards the judicial courts of the United States. Demanding them to have courage and stating that the world is watching (with multiple exclamation marks and all caps). This could be perceived as a threat to the impartiality of the court, when the President demands a specific outcome of a yet-to-take-place case in court, referring that the world is watching (and therefore judging).

¹⁵³ @realdonaldtrump (November 21, 2020, 8:19 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*, two Tweets right after each other. Hence the three periods.

5.1.4. Conclusion of Chronological Analysis

There is a trendline that becomes visible when the Tweets of Trump are chronologically read and analyzed multiple times. First, Trump focuses primarily on discrediting the media ('Fake News!') and Joe Biden ('Sleepy Joe', 'Corrupt Joe'). It is harmful to discredit the media, and to call a politician corrupt without much proof, but it is unfortunately not out of the ordinary in today's American political discourse. However, there is a *turning point* in Trump's discourse when the election week, the first week of November, starts. President Trump starts to become more assertive and delegitimize in his discourse, ordering to 'STOP THE COUNT!' and 'STOP THE STEAL!', implying that the elections are being stolen by the Democrats. Trump started Tweeting statements like these only at the time when the polls and first results showed that he was likely to lose the elections.

This delegitimizing Twitter behavior of that first week of November set the norm for the next (and last) 1,5 months that Trump was active on Twitter, before he got banned by the platform. In these last 1,5 months Trump started to discredit his own party, and governor Brian Kemp in particular. By doing this, Trump delegitimized the governmental jurisdiction independence of an American state. Trump publicly ordered, through Twitter, the state governor to make governing decisions that were only in favor of Trump and went against the electoral processes of the United States. Ultimately going as far as demanding what the Courts should decide when the court case of the alleged fraudulent elections would take place, thus delegitimizing the impartiality of the American Courts. In short, it can be said that delegitimization was a slippery slope between October 2020 and January 2021. With the targets of delegitimization traveling from the media and political opponents; to the elections, the Republican Party and ultimately the entire American System as such. In the next chapter, I will dive deeper in the empirical findings and make the connection between the *ideas* of Chapter Three and the *evidence* of this Chapter through a discourse analysis of Trump's Tweets.

6. The Trump Brand

In this part, I will present my discursive analysis of the 2.004 Tweets by President Donald Trump between the period of October 1, 2020 and January 8, 2021. Central is the question of how President Trump used Twitter to strengthen his political brand. The argument of this research is that Trump created his brand to create an *authoritative truth* and to attain legitimacy from his following and the American people in general, to ultimately delegitimize the Presidential Elections of 2020 and have people believe that the elections were in fact stolen. This argument will be presented in this Chapter by connecting the different theoretical insights of Chapter Three with the empirical data. In all the paragraphs, the ontological perspective of posthumanism and the framework on political legitimation of Van Leeuwen presented in Chapter Three will be considered. This means that this research accepts that the algorithms of Twitter and other social media platforms have an influence both on what type of content is produced (short, direct and with lack of nuance) and how this content is spread and amplified (spread to users who like similar content, creating *filter bubbles* or *echo chambers*). However, this research is focused on the discursive ways of Trump's Twitter behavior and will therefore not provide an analysis of the algorithms of Twitter or the spread of the Tweets.

In the first paragraph, I will connect Taggart's notions on populism, a homogeneous *people*, a perceived corrupt *elite* and a perceived loss of *popular sovereignty*, with Trump his notions on the current American political climate. In the second paragraph, I will analyze how Trump assembles different cultural, historical and conspiratorial narratives in order to strengthen his own brand and attain political legitimacy through *mythopoesis*. In the third and last paragraph, I will describe how Trump his *political brand* has shifted throughout the researched period from the *superhero anti-politician celebrity*, to a *whistleblower* and ultimately as an *authoritarian figure*. In all of the paragraphs, I will use the rhetorical tools, *authorization*, *moral evaluation*, *rationalization* and *mythopoesis* of the (de)legitimization framework by Van Leeuwen, as presented in Chapter 3.4, to analyze how Trump uses discourse on Twitter to (de)legitimize. Ultimately, this will all help us understand how Trump was able to make Americans believe that the elections were in fact stolen by a conspiracy of Democrats, the Media and Hollywood Celebrities and that this 'steal' should be stopped, a belief that climaxed when thousands of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021, to literally try and 'stop the steal'.

When Trump talks about the people, or ‘Americans’, ‘patriots’, he refers directly to them as if he addresses them personally as one whole unit. This is what Taggart would describe as the homogeneity of the people that Trump creates and emphasizes through his Twitter discourse by his direct way of addressing the people.

“The Republicans are giving the Democrats a great deal of time, which is not mandated, to make their self-serving statements relative to our great new future Supreme Court Justice. Personally, I would pull back, approve, and go for STIMULUS for the people!!!”¹⁵⁵

“Proud citizens like you helped build this Country—and together, we are taking back our Country. We are returning power to YOU, the American People! #MAGA”¹⁵⁶

In these above Tweets, Trump clearly portrays that *the people* are losing ground against the elite. With the Democrats their ‘self-serving statements’, Trump states that the people will take *back* the Country; implying that the country, and the power of the people (the *popular sovereignty*) is lost and taken from the people.

“We are ONE movement, ONE people, ONE family, and ONE GLORIOUS NATION UNDER GOD! Together with the incredible people of Pennsylvania, we will MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN! #ElectionDay #MAGA”¹⁵⁷

In the above Tweet, Trump uses the homogeneity (oneness) of the concept of ‘the people’. By referring to the American people as one movement, people and family under one nation under God, Trump underscores the homogeneous characteristics of the American People. Trump represents these people, because together they ‘will MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!’. Furthermore, Trump links the oneness of the nation to God (also a singular entity), claiming a divine legitimacy of the oneness of the American nation. This is an example of attaining legitimacy through *authorization*, as explained in the legitimation framework by Van Leeuwen in Chapter 3.4. By referring to the authority of tradition and customs, in this case the customs of Christianity in the United States, Trump attains legitimacy to say what he says.

¹⁵⁵ @realdonaldtrump (October 12, 2020, 9:56 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁵⁶ @realdonaldtrump (October 13, 2020, 9:23 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁵⁷ @realdonaldtrump (October 31, 2020, 9:36 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

6.1.2. The Elite

Interestingly enough, President Trump does not use the word ‘elite’ at all in his Tweets throughout the researched period of October, 2020– January, 2021. However, Trump does Tweet about the ‘establishment’, which he describes as a self-serving, corrupt and Democrat run ‘swamp’ that conspires with the media against the American (patriotic) people. Trump seems to mean the Taggartian *elite* when he talks about ‘the establishment’, but it might be a thought-out strategy to not call them ‘the elite’. After all, with himself being the President, Trump could also be classified as the elite.

“I am standing up to the global special interests who got rich bleeding America Dry. The corrupt establishment hates me because I don’t answer to THEM – I answer to YOU!”¹⁵⁸

In this Tweet, Trump makes the difference between the ‘corrupt establishment’ (i.e., the elite) and himself: Trump only answers to *the people* (‘YOU’) while the establishment only listens to ‘global special interests’ to make themselves rich. This is a typical populist rhetoric, with Trump serving the people while the elite is not, which causes America to ‘bleed dry’ according to Trump.

“Joe Biden is a corrupt politician who is bought and paid for by China! In 2016, Georgia voted to FIRE this corrupt political establishment and you elected an outsider as President who is finally putting AMERICA FIRST!”¹⁵⁹

In the above Tweet, Trump makes it clear that the ‘elite’ (Biden, the political D.C. establishment) is corrupt and serves foreign interests (of China). According to Trump, the people of Georgia even voted to fire Biden (while Biden did not run in 2016) and consequently elected an anti-politician as Trump as a President who is placing the needs of *the people* first instead of his own needs or the needs of the establishment / elite. This is a case of *authorization* to attain political legitimacy, since Trump does not provide any source to what he is saying: it is true because Trump says it is true.

¹⁵⁸ @realdonaldtrump (October 31, 2020, 9:36 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁵⁹ @realdonaldtrump (November 2, 2020, 1:26 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

6.1.3. Popular Sovereignty

This brings us to the last factor in populism, the portrayed fear that *the people* are losing *popular sovereignty* to the self-serving and corrupt *elite*. In the Tweets that have already been tackled in previous paragraphs, it becomes clear that Trump sees it as his duty to become President to fulfill the unheard wants and needs of the people. Especially the Tweet on the previous page (footnote 157), illustrates the *perceived* loss of popular sovereignty of the American People (while in fact, there was not even a vote possible for Biden in 2016, except when Trump meant that everyone apart from himself was part of the corrupt establishment and got ‘fired’ when the people voted for Trump).

“This election will decide whether we restore the rule of a corrupt political class – or whether we declare that in America, we are still governed by THE PEOPLE! Get out and VOTE!”¹⁶⁰

In the above Tweet, Trump expresses urgency in the upcoming elections for the popular sovereignty of the American People. The United States are *still* governed by ‘THE PEOPLE’, and that should be expressed in the elections in order to keep it that way.

However, the clearest cases of Trump portraying the loss of popular sovereignty happened post-elections when Trump accused the Democrats of stealing the elections and therefore the power and vote of the people.

“Washington is being inundated with people who don’t want to see an election victory stolen by emboldened Radical Left Democrats. Our Country has had enough, they won’t take it anymore! We hear you (and love you) from the Oval Office. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!”¹⁶¹

“I WON THE ELECTION IN A LANDSLIDE, but remember, I only think in terms of legal votes, not all of the fake voters and fraud that miraculously floated in from everywhere! What a disgrace!”¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ @realdonaldtrump (October 30, 2020, 3:06 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁶¹ @realdonaldtrump (January 5, 2021, 10:05 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁶² @realdonaldtrump (December 12, 2020, 1:05 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

The above two Tweets are examples of the loss of popular sovereignty, since Trump is stating literally that the votes of the people have not been heard and that there were fake voters that overturned the elections. Trump legitimizes these claims through *authorization*. By referring to ‘the Oval Office’, Trump uses the authority and power-claim of a President in the United States, who resides in the Oval Office. Trump also uses *moral evaluation* in the second Tweet. By stating: ‘I only think in terms of legal votes’, Trump evaluates himself as morally and legally correct which implies that the media and political establishment are morally incorrect since they were, according to Trump falsely claiming that Trump had lost.

6.2. Assemblage of Narratives

In this paragraph, I will analyze how President Trump skillfully assembles different popular American narratives to be identified with them and thus attain legitimacy from them. This will be done by analyzing cultural, historical and conspiratorial narratives and how Trump uses these in his Tweets. These three, especially the first two, can overlap, especially when being told by a storyteller like Trump. With Trump being a successful businessman, it should come to no surprise that Trump is an effective marketer and salesman. Trump knows how to win an audience, and how to sell them something. A good salesman does not care what he sells, as long as he sells; whether it may be a belief that America can be great again, that the ideal of the American Dream is dying, or the allegation that the Presidential Elections are rigged.

6.2.1. Cultural Narratives

The externalities of President Trump’s life could be described as the embodiment of the American Dream. A successful businessman, making his way to the top of social, economic and ultimately political hierarchies. It should come to no surprise then that President Trump Tweets about the protection of the American Dream. It is remarkable that *all* of Donald Trump’s Tweets about the American Dream, in the researched period of October 2020 – January 2021, were in October, the month leading up to the elections. This could mean that using the term ‘American Dream’ could have been a campaigning strategy. In this next Tweet, Trump refers to himself *saving* the American Dream, implying that the American Dream is dying and will be even less present in the American culture when Biden will be elected.

“Finally! Suburban women are flocking over to us. They realize that I am saving the Suburbs - the American Dream! I terminated the Regulation that would bring projects and crime to Suburbia. Not on my watch! Biden will bring the Regulation back, but bigger and worse.”¹⁶³

In the other (10) Tweets where Trump mentions the American Dream during the month leading up to the elections, he showcases his skill of assembling different narratives to gain legitimacy and trust from the American people that sympathize with these narratives. For instance, in the next Tweets Trump refers to COVID-19 and how Biden would use the pandemic to enforce a grand lockdown on the entire country.

“This election is a choice between a TRUMP RECOVERY or a BIDEN DEPRESSION. It’s a choice between a TRUMP BOOM or a BIDEN LOCKDOWN. It’s a choice between our plan to Kill the virus – or Biden’s plan to kill the American Dream!”¹⁶⁴

“Joe Biden will lock down our entire Country. Biden will make you a prisoner in your own home, and a prisoner in your own Country. Biden’s plan will kill the American Dream—Get your friends, get your family, get your neighbors and GET OUT AND VOTE! #MAGA”¹⁶⁵

Trump smartly connects the ideal of the American Dream to the potential of Biden making Americans unable to fulfill ‘the Dream’ because of Biden’s planned total lockdown. The dystopian ideas of an intense state-controlled lockdown were, and still are to this day, vivid in the minds of the American People. Drawing comparisons to George Orwell’s *1984*, people are scared that the government will continually spy on them, making it impossible to freely move around, see friends, form connections and therefore being unable to climb the social ladder in the pursuit of fulfilling the American Dream. Trump makes use of these fears, by contrasting the dying American Dream which Trump can save, with the potential of a Biden enforced total-lockdown. The second Tweet ends with #MAGA, meaning: Make America

¹⁶³ @realdonaldtrump (October 22, 2020, 11:32 AM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁶⁴ @realdonaldtrump (October 27, 2020, 4:32 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁶⁵ @realdonaldtrump (October 30, 2020, 6:02 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

Great Again. This is a phrase that Trump coined during his campaign in 2016, again referring to how the United States were once a great country of endless opportunity (the American Dream), and how this is no longer the case. With him as President, the United States will return to be ‘great’, while with Biden as President, this will not happen.

“This election is a choice between the AMERICAN DREAM and a SOCIALIST NIGHTMARE. Our opponents want to turn America into Communist Cuba or Socialist Venezuela. As long as I am President, America will NEVER be a socialist Country!”¹⁶⁶

“I’ve done more in 47 months than Joe Biden has done in 47 years! A vote for Republicans is a vote for the American Dream, and the party of Abraham Lincoln! #MAGA”¹⁶⁷

In these above two Tweets, Trump assembles historical narratives with the American Dream. In the first Tweet, Trump refers to the Red-Scare of the 60s in the United States. This was the fear of socialism and communism, caused by the Cold War between the communist Soviet-Union and the United States. Trump refers to himself as the ‘AMERICAN DREAM’ President, and to Biden as the ‘SOCIALIST NIGHTMARE’ President. A classic sales strategy, placing an extreme (less desirable) alternative next to your own ‘product’. Trump does this both symbolically (a dream versus a nightmare) as ideologically (socialism versus capitalism, with the American Dream being the ideal of capitalism).

In the second Tweet, Trump further underscores that a vote for him is a vote for the American Dream, and also for Abraham Lincoln. By referring to Lincoln, Trump supports the people, mostly his following, that felt attacked when there was a lot of controversy about Lincoln. Black Lives Matter activists protested that schools should not be called ‘Abraham Lincoln High School’ for instance, because of Lincoln’s controversial history with the largest one-day mass execution in American History in 1862 when 38 Dakota (native American) men were hanged as ordered by Lincoln. By referring to Lincoln, Trump uses *authorization* to attain legitimacy for the Republican Party and also *moral evaluation* because it means that

¹⁶⁶ @realdonaldtrump (October 29, 2020, 3:58 PM EST) [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump), thetrumparchive.com.

¹⁶⁷ @realdonaldtrump (October 30, 2020, 5:52 PM EST) [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump), thetrumparchive.com.

Trump still respects Lincoln and therefore disagrees with the (left) opinions that Lincoln's history should be retold in a more honest and respectful manner, with regards to the Native Americans.

“The Depraved Swamp have been trying to stop me – because they know I don't answer to THEM – I answer only to YOU. Together, we will defeat the corrupt establishment, we will DETHRONE the failed political class, we will drain the Washington Swamp and we will SAVE THE AMERICAN DREAM!”¹⁶⁸

This Tweet refers to the ‘drain the swamp’ catchphrase, which I will tackle in §6.2.3 which is focused on conspiratorial narratives, and uses it to imply that draining the swamp, thus getting rid of the current D.C. political establishment, is necessary to save the American Dream.

All the above examples show that Trump is proud of being the embodiment of the American Dream. The President emphasizes the desire to keep the ideal of the American Dream alive, and fearmongers his following by stating that Biden would kill the American Dream by turning the United States in a ‘socialist nightmare’. Trump uses the term American Dream to assemble historical, cultural and ideological narratives to strengthen his *political brand* as a ‘man of the people’ and a capitalist patriot that is proud of the ideals that America stands for.

6.2.2. Historical Narratives

The United States have a very recent history, with the country only being founded on the 4th of July of 1776: Independence Day. Ever since the United States were founded, the country has excelled financially, culturally and ideologically: with the climax perhaps being World War II and the few decades after. A time where the United States could claim they had ‘saved the world’ and consequently spread the liberal ideals of a capitalist free-market across the world, and ultimately ‘won’ the ideological battle of whose ideology was best for the world against the communist Soviet-Union.

With Donald Trump seemingly having incarnated the neo-liberal values of capitalism and the free-market, being a successful entrepreneur and businessman, it is no shock that Trump still uses the historical narrative of Communism¹⁶⁹ versus Capitalism, as seen in the

¹⁶⁸ @realdonaldtrump (November 02, 2020, 7:05 PM EST) [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump), thetrumparchive.com.

¹⁶⁹ Trump seemingly means *communism* when he Tweets about *socialism*. There is a difference between socialism and communism, but President Trump uses the terms interchangeably.

previous paragraph. Even though this ideological battle took place 40 years ago, Trump still refers to it in his Tweets:

“Our Country cannot survive as a Socialist Nation, and that’s what the Democrats want it to be. The USA will never become a large scale version of Venezuela. All control is already being taken away from Sleepy Joe. He has Zero to say!!!”¹⁷⁰

“A vote for Sleepy Joe Biden is a vote to give control of government over to Globalists, Communists, Socialists, and Wealthy Liberal Hypocrites who want to silence, censor, cancel, and punish you. Get out and VOTE #MAGA tomorrow!”¹⁷¹

“Your VOTE on Tuesday, November 3rd is going to SAVE OUR COUNTRY. We are going to defeat the Marxists, Socialists, Rioters, Flag-Burners, and Left-wing Extremists! Get out and VOTE! #MAGA”¹⁷²

It is clear, given from these examples as well as the examples seen in the previous paragraph, that Trump uses the Red-Scare narrative, the American fear of communism and socialism, to portray himself as the opposite of socialism and everything that the United States do *not* want. President Trump presents himself therefore as everything that the United States *do* want and need. Trump knowingly does this, since he assumes that a large portion of his following still remembers the Cold War and the Red-Scare. Therefore, Trump is able to attain legitimacy through *moral evaluation* as a patriotic American-capitalist leader and portray the political opponents as the radical communists that will (again) threaten the country, just like *they* (the communists) did during the Cold War.

Another historical narrative that Trump uses politically is the discovery of the Americas by Christopher Columbus.¹⁷³ In these below Tweets, Trump uses Columbus Day to make clear that he is proud of Columbus Day. Over the past few years, Columbus Day has become more and more controversial since there are Americans that do not feel comfortable celebrating the day that a western voyager discovered the Americas and consequently,

¹⁷⁰ @realdonaldtrump (October 12, 2020, 10:02 AM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁷¹ @realdonaldtrump (November 2, 2020, 10:45 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁷² @realdonaldtrump (October 29, 2020, 7:54 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁷³ The Americas were not actually discovered by Columbus, as other voyagers such as the Vikings and Russians already set foot in the Americas before, but this has historically been the narrative of the birth of the United States.

violently, took it from its native inhabitants. However, Americans who consider themselves patriots are usually proud on Columbus Day. It is a day to celebrate the United States, and all the good that the United States has brought into the world (Trump refers to this by stating Columbus started a ‘new chapter in history of humanity’, implying that it was the start of a new and even better humanity by bringing a new version of western European culture to unfound soils).

“HAPPY COLUMBUS DAY TO ALL!”¹⁷⁴

““The Radical Left is trying hard to undermine the Christopher Columbus legacy. A great Italian opened new chapter in history of humanity by discovering the Americas”.
@OANN Not on my watch!”¹⁷⁵

Trump seems to use these historical narratives to strengthen his political brand as ‘man of the people’ and as a proud American. The last decade, some Americans have become more ashamed of the nation’s history in racism, colonialism and stretched out wars. These critical, often liberal and Democrat Americans have been represented by the party of the Democrats. The support of the Black Lives Matter movement by Biden, Obama and Clinton is a good example of this. Trump did not support the Black Lives Matter movement; in fact, he supports typical American historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Christopher Columbus whose acts are being questioned by movements such as Black Lives Matter. While the political establishment of the Democrats hears these critiques, Trump places himself on the opposite end of the ideological argument and defends these historical figures and the people that are still proud of them. Therefore, Trump strengthens his brand as a patriotic American man of the people through an assemblage of ideological, cultural and historical narratives.

6.2.3. Conspiratorial

As described in Chapter 4.4.2, Trump is a conspiracy theory lover, and his Tweets are no exception of that. In the researched period between October – January however, Trump did not explicitly spread conspiracy theories, but he did flirt with them on occasions. Trump, yet again, shows how he can touch upon beliefs that live in society, to attain trust and legitimacy

¹⁷⁴ @realdonaldtrump (October 12, 2020, 1:30 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁷⁵ @realdonaldtrump (October 13, 2020, 9:43 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

from his following and reach new people that previously felt neglected by national politics. As described in Chapter 4.3, the year 2020 saw a lot of conspiracy theories rise and escalate in the United States, mainly directed at the establishment, COVID-19 and allegations of a child-trafficking cabal of the establishment consisting of the Democratic elite, the media and Hollywood celebrities (QAnon).

“Joe Biden is the living embodiment of the corrupt political class that enriched itself while draining the economic life and soul from our Country. For the last 47 years, Joe Biden shipped away your jobs, shut down your factories, threw open your borders, and ravaged our cities...” “...while sacrificing American blood and treasure in endless foreign wars. Joe Biden is a corrupt politician — and the Biden family is a criminal enterprise. This makes Crooked Hillary Clinton look like amateur hour!”¹⁷⁶

“I am not just running against Biden, I am running against the Corrupt Media, the Big Tech Giants, and the Washington Swamp. It is time to send a message to these wealthy liberal hypocrites by delivering Joe Biden a THUNDERING defeat on November 3rd! #MAGA”¹⁷⁷

In these above Tweets, Trump mentions how there is a conspiracy of ‘the Corrupt Media, the Big Tech Giants, and the Washington Swamp’ that he needs to ‘fight’ to remain President. Furthermore, Trump brands Biden as the embodiment of the corrupt establishment, which in their nature are only self-serving and concerned with enriching themselves. Trump goes on by linking events of national trauma (wars in the Middle East Region, homelessness-epidemic in large cities) to Biden’s wrongdoings of the last 47 years as a politician, a case of *moral evaluation* namely connecting national feelings of despair and loss to your political opponent. The fact that Biden has been a politician for so long, emphasizes the point that Trump often makes with ‘the Washington Swamp’ or with ‘draining the swamp’. This catchphrase alludes to the physical draining of swamps to keep mosquito populations low to battle malaria, thus implying that the swamp of Washington D.C. needs to be drained in order to be cleansed from parasites that ruin national politics.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ @realdonaldtrump (October 18, 2020, 2:25 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com* (two Tweets that were posted at the same time, meant as one statement).

¹⁷⁷ @realdonaldtrump (October 22, 2020, 1:47 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁷⁸ Ironically, the sentence ‘drain the swamp’ actually stems from socialist critiques on the capitalist politics of D.C.

“Three BIG Rallies today. Heading to Pennsylvania. I have plenty to say about the dishonesty of the Media and Sleepy Joe. A terrible coverup is happening in our Country!!!”¹⁷⁹

Probably the most notorious conspiracy theory that rose to popularity during 2020 was QAnon, which is described in Chapter 4.3. Trump did not explicitly Tweet about QAnon, but as described in Chapter 4.4.2, Trump retweeted many Tweets during the summer of 2020 of avid QAnon believers. However, in this research the Tweets that are written by Trump himself are being researched and not his retweets. In his Tweets, Trump does not explicitly mention QAnon, because that would likely cause too many integrity questions. However, Trump does wink at QAnon throughout his Tweets. For instance in the below Tweet, Trump refers to an article by Fox News where Biden is portrayed as a ‘creep’, because Biden was making suggestive comments about young girls in his audience.¹⁸⁰

“He’s been a wacko for years, and everyone knows it. The Lamestream Media is stuck with him and they are just now trying to clean up his act. Notice how all of the bad things, like his very low IQ, are no longer reported? Fake News! #MAGA
<https://t.co/LU2o2m7CSs>”¹⁸¹

Since QAnon is concerned with the allegations of sexual abuse and trafficking of children by the perverse establishment, a Tweet that refers to Biden being inappropriate with young girls by the President only fuels these allegations. Especially since in the conspiracy theory, Trump is regarded as the savior of the children by trying to expose and ultimately take down the perverse establishment.

¹⁷⁹ @realdonaldtrump (October 26, 2020, 11:39 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁸⁰ J. Wulfsohn, ‘Biden raises eyebrows after telling ‘these beautiful young ladies’ he wants to ‘see them dancing when they’re four years older’’, *Fox News* (October 6, 2020).

¹⁸¹ @realdonaldtrump (October 7, 2020, 2:18 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com* (the URL leads to the Fox News article).

The COVID-19 Pandemic caused a lot of civil confusion in the United States during 2020. In combination with anti-science tendencies, as described in Chapter 4.3 there was critique on how the media portrayed the pandemic.

“Cases up because we TEST, TEST, TEST. A Fake News Media Conspiracy. Many young people who heal very fast. 99.9%. Corrupt Media conspiracy at all time high. On November 4th., topic will totally change. VOTE!”¹⁸²

Trump played with these tendencies, stating in the above Tweet how COVID-19 cases are only high because the United States are testing a lot. With more tests, you will automatically get more positive cases of infections. In this Tweet Trump alleges that the media is conspiring with his political opponents to portray Trump in a negative way about how he is handling the pandemic. At the time, the cases were indeed high in the United States, hence why Trump had to respond to all the negative press about the (lack of) American pandemic control. Trump responded to this negative press by implying that the press only reports about the high number of COVID-19 cases as an anti-campaign for his Presidency, stating that after the elections the press will not report about it anymore. Trump uses *rationalization* to attain legitimacy for what he is saying, since more tests implies more cases according to him, as well as the use of percentages (99.9%).

6.2.4. Mythopoesis

President Trump assembles different cultural, historical and conspiratorial narratives in order to attain political legitimacy through *mythopoesis*. As described in Chapter Three, mythopoesis means (de)legitimation acquired through narratives. Trump does this by assembling these narratives that determine what according to himself is legitimate versus illegitimate. For instance, with the Red-Scare narrative of Communism vs Capitalism, Trump legitimizes capitalism and delegitimizes the Biden Administration as a communistic force that will ‘kill’ the American Dream and economic growth.

The narrative that American culture and the American Dream are being killed by a perverse and corrupt establishment, in a year of institutional doubts because of a global pandemic, a year where people are spending more time than ever online and therefore are more subjected to the economic and polarizing algorithms of social media corporations, leads

¹⁸² @realdonaldtrump (October 26, 2020, 12:46 PM EST) [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump), thetrumparchive.com.

to Trump being able to assemble these different narratives and in turn strengthen his brand as the President who represents the real patriotic American and not the corrupt and perverse elite. Trump gives the Americans that are not being heard a voice. The Americans that believe that they are not allowed to love their country, that they should be ashamed of their national history. The Americans that believe that science is no longer trustworthy. The Americans that believe that the elite is self-serving and collaborates with the media and institutions such as universities to take-over the United States from the people. The Americans that believe in a perverse elite that drinks the blood of children and are covering up massive child-trafficking, as expressed in the QAnon conspiracy theory. These are the Americans that Trump tries to reach through his Tweets, either by addressing them directly or hinting at them. By assembling cultural, historical and conspiratorial narratives, Trump builds his brand as man and savior of *the people* and of American culture. In the next part, I will dive deeper in Trump's *brand*.

6.3. The Brand

In this part I will analyze how the *political brand* of Donald Trump seems to shift over the course of the researched period between October 2020 and January 2021. This will be done by selecting a handful of exemplary Tweets per timeframe (pre-elections, elections and post-elections), and critically analyzing them to assess what *brand* and message they convey.

6.3.1. The Superhero Anti-Politician Celebrity

During the month leading up to the elections, Trump seems to closely follow the brand that Schneiker et al. had analyzed from his Tweets during the 2016 elections (described in Chapter 4.4); namely the one of *the superhero anti-politician celebrity*.¹⁸³ Trump does this by portraying himself as one of the people, and by turning against the political establishment of Washington D.C. to save the American culture and people.

“If I don’t sound like a typical Washington politician, it’s because I’m NOT a politician. If I don’t always play by the rules of the Washington Establishment, it’s because I was elected to fight for YOU, harder than anyone ever has before!”¹⁸⁴

In this Tweet, Trump makes the strict difference between himself and Washington politicians: stating that he is “NOT a politician”. This is clear evidence for his branding as an anti-politician. This is also a Tweet that Trump posted, a word-for-word copy, four more times during the month of October, therefore it acted as a sort of political campaign: to present himself as anything *but* a politician.

“People don’t remember the chaos, hatred & discord that we all went through during the 8 years of Obama/Biden. St. Louis, Oakland, Baltimore, and so many other places, were a complete & total disaster. I wouldn’t be in the beautiful White House if it weren’t for Sleepy Joe, etc.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ A. Schneiker, ‘Telling the Story of the Superhero and the Anti-Politician as President: Donald Trump’s Branding on Twitter’, *Political Studies Review* 17 (2019) 3, pp. 210-223.

¹⁸⁴ @realdonaldtrump (October 29, 2020, 8:39 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁸⁵ @realdonaldtrump (October 11, 2020, 1:16 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

“I ran for office 4 years ago because I could not sit by and watch any longer as a small group of Washington Insiders continued to get rich bleeding America Dry. No one embodies this betrayal and treachery more than Joe Biden. Joe profited from the misery he unleashed on PA workers!”¹⁸⁶

”For years, I watched one betrayal after another, as politicians like Joe Biden sold out American Workers at every turn—shattering the lives of millions of American families while THEIR families raked in millions of dollars... ...I could not sit by and watch THEM take advantage of YOU anymore. They are coming after me because I am standing in their way, and standing guard for this Country we LOVE!”¹⁸⁷

In the above Tweets, Trump makes the statement that the politicians of the previous 8 years made a mess of the country, or even led America ‘bleed dry’. Trump implies with this that he felt called to take upon the role as President, not because he wanted to but because he needed to. A typical *superhero* narrative: ‘not the hero we deserve, but the hero we need’. This could be explained as Trump trying to attain legitimacy in his claims through *moral evaluation*, because Trump links his personal agenda (trying to win the elections) to value systems such as courage and justice (‘I could not sit by (...)’ and ‘(...) standing guard for this Country’).

6.3.2. Trump from Whistle-blower to Authoritarian

However, in the week of the elections, November 1 – November 9, 2020, Trump’s branding started to change into something that resembles more a whistle-blower; meaning ‘a person who informs on a person or organization regarded as engaging in an unlawful or immoral activity’.¹⁸⁸ Trump used Twitter to inform the American People about how the elections were fraudulent and stolen by the Democrats. Trump used *authorization* to attain legitimacy with his claims by referring to his lawyers, as in the following Tweet:

¹⁸⁶ @realdonaldtrump (October 31, 2020, 6:37 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁸⁷ @realdonaldtrump (October 24, 2020, 2:06 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁸⁸ Oxford Languages definition of whistle-blower

“Our lawyers have asked for “meaningful access”, but what good does that do? The damage has already been done to the integrity of our system, and to the Presidential Election itself. This is what should be discussed!”¹⁸⁹

As a whistle-blower, Trump states what *should* be discussed, namely the integrity of the American Political System and its Presidential Elections. This is moral evaluation, as it prescribes what should be discussed and this morally devaluates and delegitimizes the media that is ‘merely’ broadcasting the results of the elections.

“I easily WIN the Presidency of the United States with LEGAL VOTES CAST. The OBSERVERS were not allowed, in any way, shape, or form, to do their job and therefore, votes accepted during this period must be determined to be ILLEGAL VOTES. U.S. Supreme Court should decide!”¹⁹⁰

“BALLOT COUNTING ABUSE!”¹⁹¹

In these above Tweets, Trump again uses *authorization* to attain legitimacy in his claim. This time, Trump refers to the U.S. Supreme Court as if they would decide in his favor. Trump calls out, and therefore delegitimizes the observers and therefore the democratic process of the elections of the United States. This is a typical whistle-blower act, because Trump *exposes* the defects of the American Political System by a Tweet like this one. Trump is continuously balancing on a thin line of being a whistle-blower, versus being an authoritarian figure with outrightly delegitimizing everyone apart from himself.

“STOP THE COUNT!”¹⁹²

“STOP THE FRAUD!”¹⁹³

In these Tweets, Trump’s brand is already shifting to a more authoritarian one: being demanding in both interpunction (use of capitals and exclamation marks) and calling for

¹⁸⁹ @realdonaldtrump (November 4, 2020, 6:24 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁹⁰ @realdonaldtrump (November 6, 2020, 2:22 AM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁹¹ @realdonaldtrump (November 10, 2020, 10:33 AM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁹² @realdonaldtrump (November 5, 2020, 9:12 AM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

¹⁹³ @realdonaldtrump (November 5, 2020, 12:21 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

action. The second Tweet (footnote 191) got flagged and deleted by Twitter because they deemed it to be harmful and potentially leading to violence if Trump's following listened to these calls to action.

6.3.2.1. 'I Won'

After Trump's efforts to be a 'whistleblower' and saying that the elections were being rigged, by spreading videos of ballots being 'thrown away' and the likes, Trump started to flat-out say that he 'won' the elections. These Tweets were extremely popular, for instance the below Tweet was the third most liked Tweet (719 thousand likes) of the researched period.

"I WON THE ELECTION!"¹⁹⁴

Here, Trump uses *authorization* to make that claim. By simply stating that he won the election, Trump is delegitimizing, by authority, the American political system and legitimizing himself as the President.

"Poll: 92% of Republican Voters think the election was rigged!"¹⁹⁵

In the above Tweet, Trump uses *rationalization* to legitimize the statement that the elections were rigged by referring to a poll. However, Trump does not refer to any source that backs this claim. He could have said: 99% of Republican Voters think the election was rigged, and it would have been just as verifiable as it is now. Therefore, Trump also, again, uses *authorization* as the President to attain legitimacy by making such a claim. Only because Trump is President, statements without a source like this one can be believed. The Tweet was liked 458 thousand times, meaning that it was spread heavily. Through Tweeting like this, Trump is creating an *authoritative truth*, one where no sources are needed (as in traditional top-down information), but where mostly the person who spreads it (Trump) and the network it is spread in matter (*filter bubbles* of social media such as Twitter, the *electronic-word-of-mouth*, see §3.2).

"VOTER FRAUD IS NOT A CONSPIRACY THEORY, IT IS A FACT!!!"¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ @realdonaldtrump (November 15, 2020, 11:55 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁹⁵ @realdonaldtrump (December 16, 2020, 4:54 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁹⁶ @realdonaldtrump (December 24, 2020, 8:56 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

6.3.2.2. Demanding a Fight

Throughout Trump's Tweets in the post-election phase, Trump often insinuated or even demanded that Republicans should fight for their country because of the rigged elections. Trump obviously did not mean this literally, but the amount of times he repeats this figure of speech could be interpreted by his following as a literal signal to start fighting. Especially with Trump's infamous order towards the extreme-right-wing nationalist and violent Proud Boys movement in September 2020, when Trump said on live television: 'Proud Boys, stand back and stand by.'¹⁹⁷

“WE HAVE JUST BEGUN TO FIGHT!!!”¹⁹⁸

“Wow! Thousands of people forming in Washington (D.C.) for Stop the Steal. Didn't know about this, but I'll be seeing them! #MAGA”¹⁹⁹

In these above Tweets of December 12, 2020, there seems to be a turning point in Trump's Twitter behavior. Turning more violently suggestive and harmful, In these Tweets, Trump is supporting the Proud Boys rally in Washington D.C. where multiple people got stabbed.²⁰⁰ The Proud Boys marched the streets of D.C. with bullet-proof-vests, arms and masks. Instead of Trump demanding them to step down, Trump cheered them on with the above (second) Tweet. The first Tweet was send out just an hour before the Proud Boys rally, which could have been interpreted as a sign of approval by the President to go out and fight for the elections, especially after the earlier mentioned acknowledgement of the Proud Boys movement on television.

“It's all about the signatures on the envelopes. Why are the Democrats fighting so hard to hide them. We will find massive numbers of fraudulent ballots. The signatures won't match. Fight hard Republicans. Don't let them destroy the evidence!

<https://t.co/qN2jHGeWEN>”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ E. Davies etal, 'Multiple people stabbed after thousands gather for pro-Trump demonstrations in Washington', *the Washington Post* (December 13, 2020).

¹⁹⁸ @realdonaldtrump (December 12, 2020, 8:47 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

¹⁹⁹ @realdonaldtrump (December 12, 2020, 9:59 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

²⁰⁰ E. Davies etal, 'Multiple people stabbed after thousands gather for pro-Trump demonstrations in Washington', *the Washington Post* (December 13, 2020).

²⁰¹ @realdonaldtrump (November 22, 2020, 12:24 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

“GET TOUGH REPUBLICANS!”²⁰²

“#OVERTURN”²⁰³

“Democrats would never put up with a Presidential Election stolen by the Republicans!”²⁰⁴

In all these above Tweets, Trump uses *authorization* and *moral evaluation* to command that Republicans should fight for their country. By drawing comparisons to the Democrats (‘would never put up with’), Trump implies that the Republicans are weaker than the Democrats and therefore he tries to light gasoline on the impending fire that was felt and feared by the United States and the world when the election results were not accepted by Trump. The Tweet “#OVERTURN” comes across, again, as an executive order by the President. An order to *overturn* the official and democratic results of the elections. Trump uses *authorization* to delegitimize the official results and American political system as such, by Tweeting and commanding to overturn the results in his favor.

“If a Democrat Presidential Candidate had an Election Rigged & Stolen, with proof of such acts at a level never seen before, the Democrat Senators would consider it an act of war, and fight to the death. Mitch & the Republicans do NOTHING, just want to let it pass. NO FIGHT!”²⁰⁵

“There is tremendous evidence of wide spread voter fraud in that there is irrefutable proof that our Republican poll watchers and observers were not allowed to be present in poll counting rooms. Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia and others. Unconstitutional!”²⁰⁶

The above two Tweets are examples of how Trump uses *authorization* (‘there is tremendous evidence’) to create an authoritative truth, one where the media spreads lies and where Trump spreads the truth. Trump does not refer to any sources, and hence leans on his authority as

²⁰² @realdonaldtrump (December 4, 2020, 1:54 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

²⁰³ @realdonaldtrump (December 9, 2020, 3:34 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

²⁰⁴ @realdonaldtrump (December 17, 2020, 11:10 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

²⁰⁵ @realdonaldtrump (December 26, 2020, 1:00 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

²⁰⁶ @realdonaldtrump (November 14, 2020, 6:07 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

President to make these delegitimizing claims about the media and the American electoral process.

6.3.2.3. January 6

This creation of an *authoritative truth* culminated in the insurrection of the Capitol in D.C. on January 6, 2021, where thousands of Trump supporters violently tried to ‘stop the steal’. This event was promoted by Trump on various occasions, see below Tweets, referring to the event as the ‘SAVE AMERICA RALLY’, a ‘historic day’ and that he and his followers (‘BIG CROWDS’) will ‘StopTheSteal!’.

“The “Justice” Department and the FBI have done nothing about the 2020 Presidential Election Voter Fraud, the biggest SCAM in our nation’s history, despite overwhelming evidence. They should be ashamed. History will remember. Never give up. See everyone in D.C. on January 6th.”²⁰⁷

“I will be there. Historic day! <https://t.co/k6LStsWpfy>”²⁰⁸

“The BIG Protest Rally in Washington, D.C., will take place at 11.00 A.M. on January 6th. Locational details to follow. StopTheSteal!”²⁰⁹

“I will be speaking at the SAVE AMERICA RALLY tomorrow on the Ellipse at 11AM Eastern. Arrive early — doors open at 7AM Eastern. BIG CROWDS!
<https://t.co/k4bIXESc0c>”²¹⁰

The event escalated, with hundreds of Trump supporters being arrested and with a woman who tried to breach into the Senate being shot and killed by the police in the Capitol. Trump did not Tweet for a long window of time while these events occurred. *Not* Tweeting could therefore be explained as a strategy, because these people were literally fighting for Trump.

²⁰⁷ @realdonaldtrump (December 26, 2020, 1:14 PM EST) [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump), thetrumparchive.com.

²⁰⁸ @realdonaldtrump (January 3, 2021, 3:27 PM EST) [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump), thetrumparchive.com.

²⁰⁹ @realdonaldtrump (January 1, 2021, 7:23 PM EST) [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump), thetrumparchive.com.

²¹⁰ @realdonaldtrump (January 5, 2021, 10:43 PM EST) [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump), thetrumparchive.com.

The National Guard was called by Vice President Mike Pence to protect the Capitol, since Trump neglected to respond.²¹¹

Trump Tweeted multiple times during the weeks prior to January 6th, how Republicans should 'FIGHT'. Possibly meaning political party members, but tactically left ambiguous for his followers. Even on January 6, he Tweeted right before the event, at 5:43 AM with the protest starting at 09:00 AM, the following:

“Get smart Republicans. FIGHT! <https://t.co/3fs1oPVnAx>”²¹²

These Tweets read like executive orders. A commander in chief demanding his followers to fight for him. And that is what they did. At 10:58 AM, a Proud Boys contingent leaves the rally and marches towards the Capitol Building. At 12:00 PM, Trump started his over one-hour speech in which the President encouraged the protestors to march to Capitol Hill and to continue protesting there. This resulted in about 15,000 people gathering outside the U.S. Capitol building, ultimately leading to reports of explosive devices which were found around the Capitol building around 12:49 PM.²¹³

Trump only responded to the events later in the afternoon, after armed rioters already broke the windows of the Capitol, entered the building with smoke grenades and Vice President Pence was evacuated by national security. Trump did not calm the rioters down, instead he Tweeted at 2:24 PM (2,5 hours after Trump's public speech where he repeatedly made allegations that the elections were stolen and blaming Vice President Pence for not being courageous enough) :

"Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth!"²¹⁴

²¹¹ R. Farley, 'Timeline of National Guard Deployment to Capitol', *FactCheck.org* (January 13, 2021).

²¹² @realdonaldtrump (January 6, 2021, 5:43 AM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

²¹³ R. Farley, 'Timeline of National Guard Deployment to Capitol', *FactCheck.org* (January 13, 2021).

²¹⁴ @realdonaldtrump (January 6, 2021, 2:24 PM EST) *twitter.com, thetrumparchive.com*.

With this Tweet, Trump only fueled the allegations of the elections that were stolen, and that Pence conspired with the opponents to make Trump lose the elections, thus not giving the rioters a reason to back down. Only at 2:38 PM, Trump tried to calm down the rioters with the Tweet:

"Please support our Capitol Police and Law Enforcement. They are truly on the side of our Country. Stay peaceful!"²¹⁵

Despite the casualties of the day, Trump did not back down with the allegation. In a Tweet at 6:01 PM Trump concluded the day, while there were still hundreds of people outside the steps of the Capitol, with:

"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!"²¹⁶

In all these Tweets, Trump uses *authorization* to attain legitimacy. Trump refers to the police for instance with saying that they are on their side, for 'our Country' implying that Trump is also standing for 'our Country'. Trump also refers to the Constitution, a typical form of *authorization*. Pence failed to protect the Constitution (footnote 206), so that legitimizes the actions of the rioters that ensued: to 'Save America'.

²¹⁵ @realdonaldtrump (January 6, 2021, 2:38 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

²¹⁶ @realdonaldtrump (January 6, 2021, 6:01 PM EST) [twitter.com](#), [thetrumparchive.com](#).

6.4. Chapter Conclusion

Throughout the researched period of October 1, 2020 – January 8, 2021 Trump moved from his usual anti-politician branding to a whistleblower and ultimately an authoritarian. Just like delegitimization happened as a slippery slope, so did Trump's branding; only getting stronger and more harmful to the integrity of the electoral process, the Democratic Party, the Republican Party and ultimately to the whole American political system as such. In this chapter it became clear how Trump used populist rhetoric: by creating and emphasizing a homogeneous American *people*, by showcasing how the elite (which Trump refers to as the establishment instead of the elite) does not identify the wants and needs of said American people and how the people are losing their popular sovereignty to this corrupt establishment. By repeatedly referring to the establishment as corrupt, and to the people as 'one' and patriotic and as victims of the establishment's lust for power, Trump brands himself as a man of the people: the savior of the American people, culture and values. Through this repetition, Trump is able to create an *authoritative truth*; one wherein it is not possible that Trump lost the elections.

Trump strengthens his *brand* by assembling different cultural, historical and conspiratorial narratives to attain legitimacy. For instance, Trump refers to controversial historical events or people, such as Christopher Columbus and Abraham Lincoln, to affiliate himself with the Americans who still admire American history despite of the increasing controversy of the last decade regarding some of the darker pages, such as racism and imperialism, in American history. By assembling narratives of the death of the American Dream, the birth of a Socialist Nightmare, the flirts with QAnon, Trump is able to attain legitimacy through *mythopoesis* and strengthen his brand as the President, the *anti-politician*, that gives a voice to the Americans who feel are not being heard by the traditional politicians of D.C..

The slippery slope of Trump his delegitimization which was described in Chapter 5, can also be seen through his *branding* throughout the researched period. It is clear how Trump's brand radicalized in delegitimization. First being a political voice of power for the Americans that felt unheard by the political establishment of D.C., then a whistleblower to make people aware of the grand electoral fraud, and ultimately as some sort of authoritarian commander who delegitimizes every other voice of power including his own party and Vice President: with Trump himself as the *last-man standing*.

7. Conclusion

The goal of this research was to understand how and why Donald Trump used Twitter in his attempts to delegitimize the Presidential Elections of 2020. First of all, the ‘why’ of this question was explained through the concept of political branding and a contextual literature review on social media and the American political system. Twitter is a platform where Trump had direct access to his following and potential new followers and voters. Because of the personal character of Twitter, Trump could make use of the political branding concept of *electronic-word-of-mouth*, which means that the person who spreads the information, and the network it is spread in, is of more value with regards to the trustworthiness of the information than the piece of information itself. This means that traditional top-down information, such as newspapers and television, is of less value than the Tweets of Trump. This is confirmed by how the news channels in the United States treated the Tweets of Trump, namely as headline news. With one Tweet, Trump could determine how news channels would open their shows: meaning free publicity of his political opinion, even to his non-Twitter-followers.

Furthermore, the American people were more active on social media in 2020 than ever before because of the lockdown that was enforced as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, people used social media for most of their social interactions, meaning they were subjected to the way information is spread on social media. The way this is done, is through *algorithmic filtering*. Because of social media companies’ business model (the more time a user spends on their platform, the more money they make) the algorithms are trained to recommend the content which causes the user to spend the most time on their platform. This has resulted in users being recommended conspiracy theories on social media, such as QAnon or the Anti-Vaxx movement. What happens after, is that users get recommended more similar content because the algorithm notices that a user spends more time on the platform when they are reading about for instance a child-trafficking elite-cabal consisting out of celebrities and famous politicians (QAnon). The algorithms consequently recommend more triggering information, for the user to stay interested and keep on reading and engaging. This causes *filter bubbles* and *echo chambers*, where users are constantly seeing the same type of information which can lead to them being polarized or even radicalized.

Through the literature, it becomes apparent why Donald Trump used Twitter as a platform to delegitimize the Presidential Elections of 2020. Because of the authentic and

personal nature of the platform, which causes the *electronic-word-of-mouth* effect, the shift from traditional top-down sources of information such as newspapers to social media and the algorithmic spread of information to new followers. It was the easiest way to distribute non-edited information by Trump. On top of that, Trump's Tweets, as everyone's Tweets, were subjected to the algorithms of Twitter and therefore had the chance to reach even more people than just his followers. This research, however, was primarily concerned with the discursive strategies that Trump used in his Tweets to delegitimize the elections: the pursuit of understanding *how* Trump used Twitter to delegitimize.

In order to understand this, all of Trump his original Tweets (so no retweets) between October 1, 2020 and January 8, 2021 were coded and analyzed using qualitative data analysis. The coding was primarily focused on *delegitimation* and *non-delegitimation*: i.e., is the Tweet delegitimizing someone or something? And who or what is being delegitimized? This analysis demonstrated that Trump his delegitimization attempts occurred as a slippery slope, with the month October being primarily focused on the media and Joe Biden. The election-week was, naturally, focused on delegitimizing the electoral process of the United States. The turning point was the post-election phase, from November 10, 2020 – January 8, 2021, where Trump got increasingly more authoritarian in his Tweets. At first, Trump acted more as a whistleblower: delegitimizing the election results, the media and the Democrats by stating that the elections were rigged. However, ultimately Trump started to delegitimize his own party members of the Republican Party with a leading role for the governor of Georgia Brian Kemp. Trump used Twitter for instance to command governor Kemp to recount the votes.

After the chronological analysis, a discourse analysis was done to close-read the Tweets of Donald Trump and to analyze discursive strategies he used to attain legitimacy in his claims that the elections were stolen. What was discovered, was that Trump assembled different cultural, historical and conspiratorial narratives to strengthen his *political brand* as an *anti-politician* and a patriotic man of the American people. Narratives Trump assembled were the American Dream ideal, the Red-Scare of Communism versus Capitalism, the founding history of the United States and conspiracy theories such as QAnon were flirted with. The argument of this research is that Trump assembled these narratives to give a voice to the American people that feel unheard in national politics. The Americans that are proud of their American history. The Americans that are, because of the increased social media usage and the consequent popularization and going mainstream of fringe conspiracy ideas, worried about a corrupt elite that is ruining American culture, the American Dream and trafficking American children.

By continuously giving a voice to these groups of people, and by delegitimizing the media and sowing institutional doubt; Trump was able to create an *authoritative truth*. One where Trump was speaking the truth, while others were ‘fake’ or ‘corrupt’. Trump did this by repeatedly stating, over the last years but especially during the 2020 elections, that the media only spread fake news and that the corrupt and perverse ‘swamp’ of Washington D.C. should be drained. In this authoritative truth, it was impossible that Trump lost the Presidential Elections of 2020.

Future research could be done on the mechanics of social media to analyze how polarizing information is spread and to what people (or *users*) in particular. This remains difficult however, since the algorithms of social media are not public and protected under intellectual property rights. This is a large roadblock between social media and research, but also between the ways we use social media today and the positive opportunities social media could have. It seems that the price of social media’s business model, namely keeping the user on their platform for as long as possible, is rather high in terms of its political and societal implications. *The Center for Humane Technology*, a research organization founded by the inventor of the Facebook ‘like’ button, Tristan Harris, is doing research on how social media could improve if news-outlets would be paid (by social media companies) to repost their news. This could potentially reverse the shift in journalism of the last years, since journalists today write news with the algorithms of social media in mind and therefore write in a different way online than they would offline (a way that generates more clicks). Of course, more academic research would need to be done to establish the correctness of this assumption. Most importantly, social media is an ever-growing force. Facebook has nearly three billion users, more than any country’s population in the world, and should therefore be treated not as a private company, but more as an international state-like actor. Policy makers need to become aware of the large effects that social media has on society and policy should be drafted to control social media, while at the same time not limiting free speech. To protect the ideals of democracy, and not turn into a *Twittercracy*, we need to keep pushing technological corporations, researchers and policy makers to incorporate the great democratic possibilities of social media.

This research makes clear that President Trump is not the issue, nor the *villain*. Trump is merely a symptom of a political system that is enchanted with technology based on economic imperatives, namely social media with algorithms that drive, spread and popularize a certain type of information (which is economically most beneficial). What can be learned from this research is that therefore this populist rhetoric on Twitter is a new form of populism,

of *political branding* and, as a consequence, of *delegitimization*. This is a form of *posthuman* and technological populism. One that uses the powers of technology and social media to spread and popularize fringe ideas on the *people, elite* and fearmonger about the loss of *popular sovereignty*.

It is frightening how the media has had such an influence on how we perceive Trump. It seems that now Trump is out of office, and banned from social media, that there is no longer an issue with neither his ideas nor with social media in general. Trump has been calling, albeit provocatively, COVID-19 the China-virus since day one. The media chastised him, with right, however, President Biden has now ordered that research needs to be done in Wuhan in the lab where Trump (and conspiracy thinkers) alleged that COVID-19 was created and leaked. All of a sudden, it is not that strange of an idea anymore. It seems that the label ‘conspiracy’ has been used to delegitimize ideas of Trump, just as Trump tried to delegitimize the media and the American Political System when he was in office. This mutual delegitimization makes it look like the media has used Trump as a scapegoat, someone to whom most of political and systemic faults could be attributed.

However, as *posthumanism* illustrates, it is not about humans alone. It is about the *interconnectedness of things*, of our systems, our technology and even our climate. More or less all of the same political and systemic problems still exist, there is only a new President that is a bit less provocative and *in the picture*. However, despite Trump’s defeat, Trump is still having a large influence on the Republican Party with his speeches and rallies and still has the support of many of the Republican voters. This illustrates that Trump’s Twitter behavior is not the sole reason for Trump’s success in delegitimizing the American Political System. However, Trump showed how effective assembling different cultural, historical and conspiratorial narratives on Twitter, through a *populist branding*, can be.

This research has shown how Twitter can be used as a tool for delegitimization, and how delegitimization of a political system can happen as a slippery slope. It further has showed how social media can be a platform for an unstoppable swarm of unfalsifiable messages, and that Trump merely was a master in how to play (and almost win) the social media game as a form of power politics. With Trump banned from Twitter, the threats of a *Twittercracy* have not perished. Let us still be aware, for the dystopian prophecy of Huxley in *Brave New World* to not be fulfilled: to not let the truth be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.

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Appendix A: Pie Charts of the Pre-Election Weeks

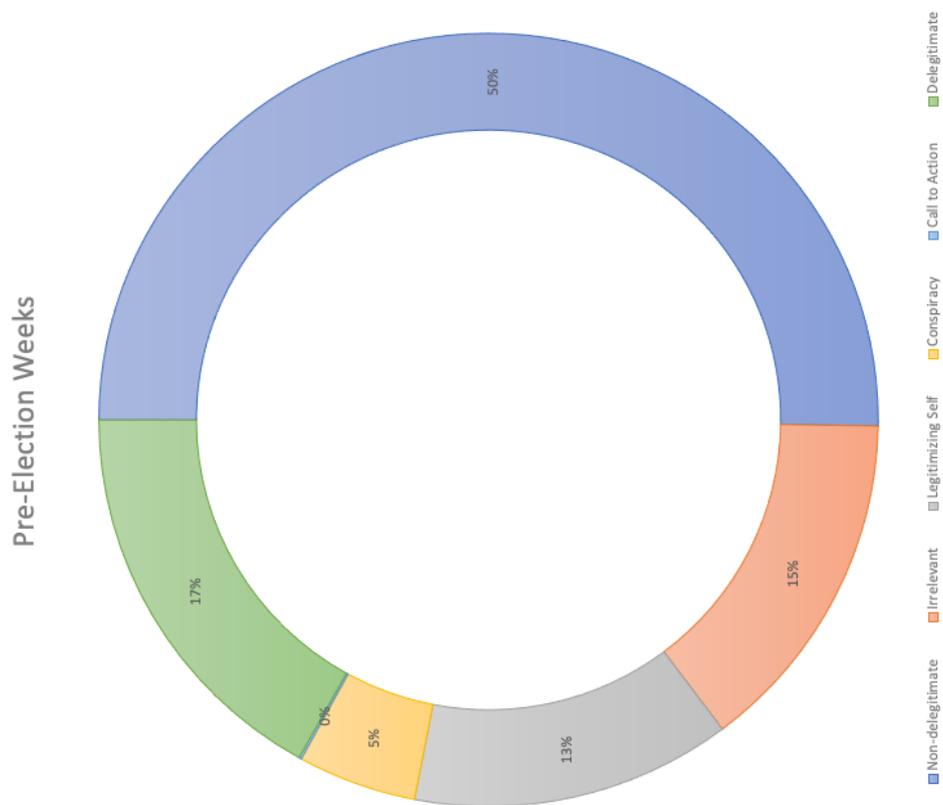


Figure A.1. Pie Chart of the Coding Results of Tweets by Trump between October 1, 2020- November 1, 2020.

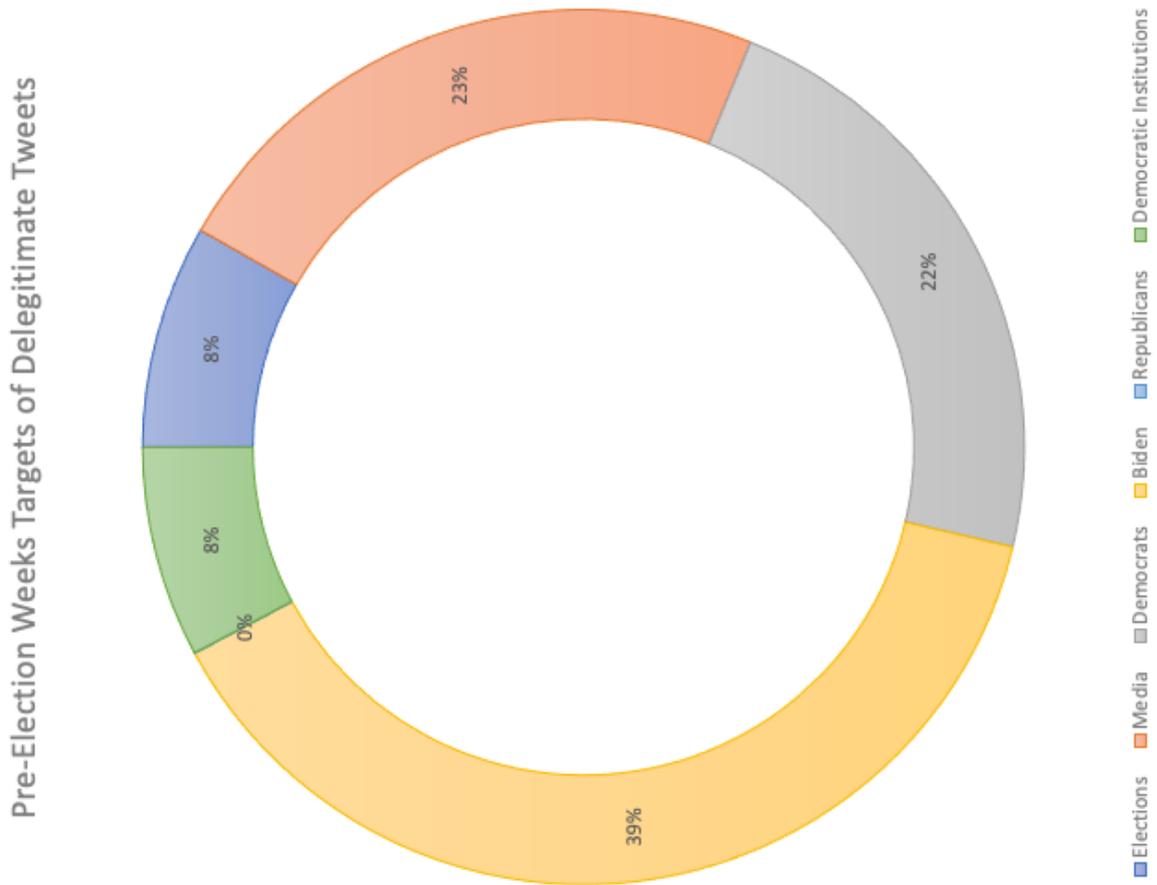
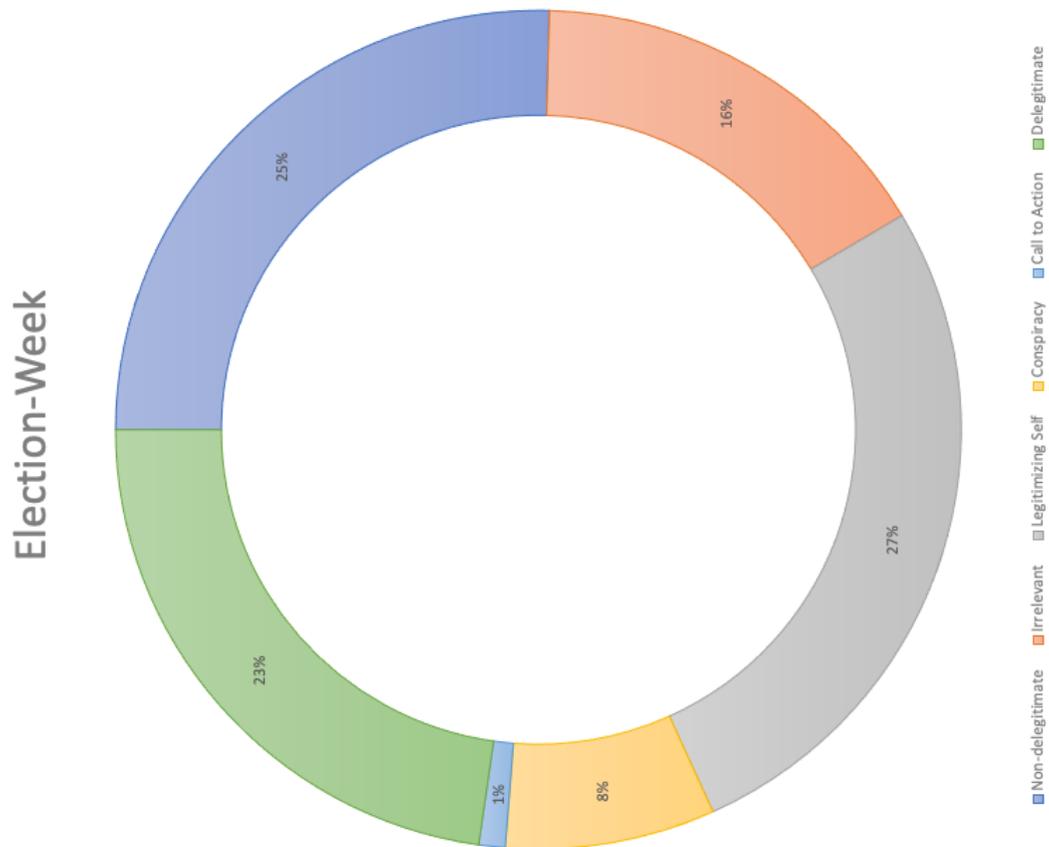


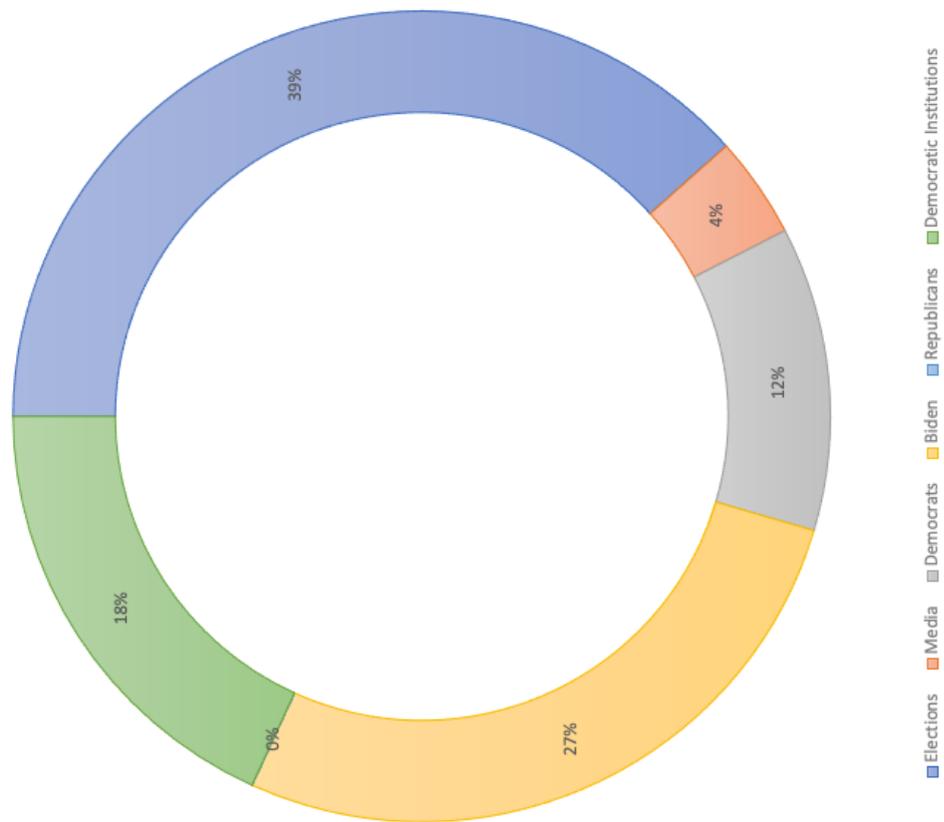
Figure A.2. Pie Chart of the Coding Results of the Targets of all the Delegitimate Tweets by Trump between October 1, 2020 – November 1, 2020.

Appendix B: Pie Charts of the Election-Week



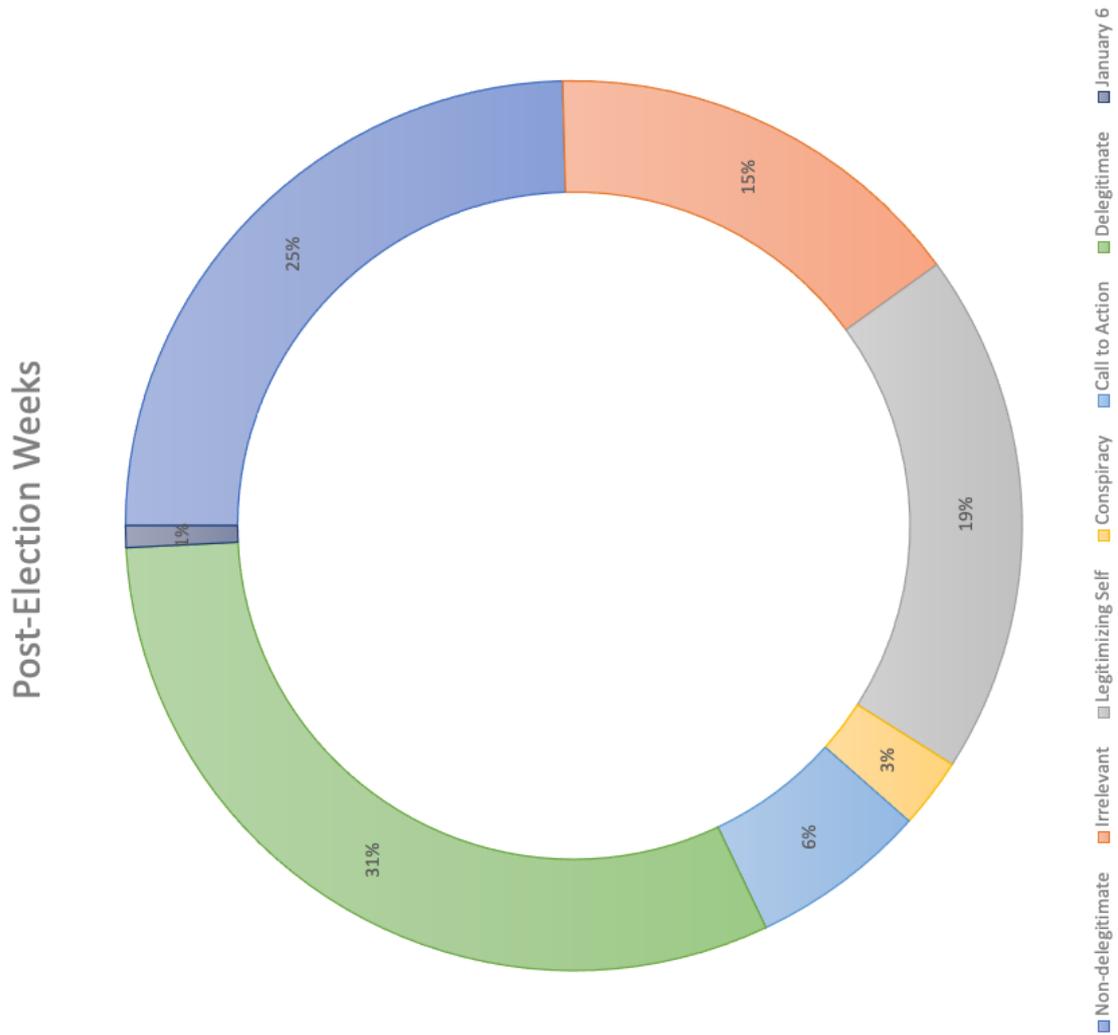
Appendix B.1. Pie Chart of the Coding Results of Tweets by Trump between November 1, 2020- November 9, 2020.

Election-Week Targets of Delegitimate Tweets



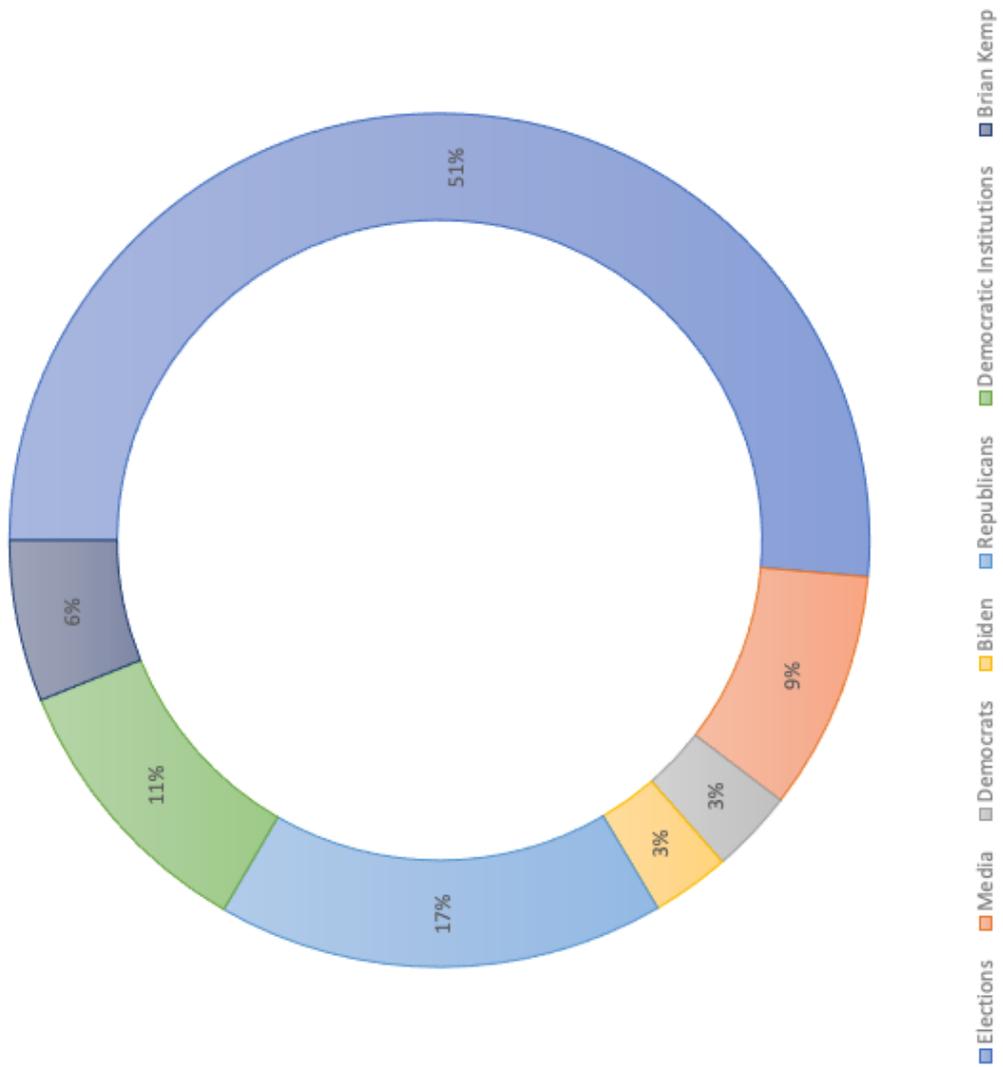
Appendix B.2. Pie Chart of the Coding Results of the Targets of all the Delegitimate Tweets by Trump between November 1, 2020 – November 9, 2020.

Appendix C: Pie Charts of the Post-Election Weeks



Appendix C.1. Pie Chart of the Coding Results of Tweets by Trump between November 10, 2020- January 8, 2021.

Post-Election Weeks Targets of Delegitimate Tweets



Appendix C.2. Pie Chart of the Coding Results of the Targets of all the Delegitimate Tweets by Trump between November 10, 2020 – January 8, 2021.