

**From Campaign to Crisis: The Evolution of Political Leaders' Discourse in the 2020
Election and January 6th Capitol Attack**

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Introduction

The 2020 Presidential election between Joe Biden and President Donald Trump, as well as the events of January 6, 2021, generated an unprecedented volume of political communication from elected officials. Political leaders used social media to frame the election, articulate concerns about legitimacy (“BBC News”, 2020), and communicate their interpretations amid heightened polarization. Because interpretations of the election and January 6 were divided along partisan lines, examining how leaders from different parties communicated is important for understanding the competing narratives that emerged.

This study analyzes how Democratic and Republican political actors used Twitter across three critical periods: the pre-election phase, the contested post-election phase, and the days surrounding the January attack. Rather than treating political communication as a single, unified discourse, the project compares rhetorical patterns across parties. Prior research demonstrates that political elites often rely on identity-based appeals, threat narratives, and legitimacy claims during moments of crisis (Jost et al., 2022; Nacos et al., 2021; Entman, 1993). These dynamics make social media an important site for understanding how leaders construct in-group and out-group boundaries, frame political events, and signal priorities to their supporters (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Allen, 2023).

Building on this literature, the present study conducted a qualitative content analysis of original tweets from eight high-profile political leaders. The analysis focuses on three dimensions of communication: tweet volume and timing, policy-related language, and rhetorical framing, including the use of attack language and the presence or absence of evidence. By examining these patterns across parties and time periods, the study identifies how political actors communicated during a moment of democratic tension and how their messaging diverged.

This research contributes to scholarship on political communication and framing by providing a systematic, comparative analysis of elite messaging during the 2020 election cycle. The findings offer insight into how Democrats and Republicans framed the election, responded to its aftermath, and communicated during and after the events of January 6. More broadly, the study underscores the importance of analyzing partisan differences in political messaging, particularly during periods when competing narratives contribute to public interpretations of democratic processes.

Importance of Language

The January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol has been described in many ways; some call it a riot or an insurrection, while others frame it as a protest or an exercise of constitutional rights (Booker, 2021). This difference in terminology reflects the broader struggle over how the event is understood and remembered. The terminology itself is a form of discourse: referring to the event as a “riot” or an “insurrection” rather than a “protest” can shape how audiences understand it. Entman’s (1993) framing theory contributes to the argument that political leaders’ word choices may shape how the event is interpreted, as framing is “...to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (Page 52). The terminology difference between a riot and a protest builds on the idea that the core function of framing is to enlarge or downplay parts of reality, making certain elements more noticeable than others (Entman, 1993). In this way, Democrats’ and Republicans’ rhetorical choices did not simply describe January 6th; they actively signaled competing interpretations.

In the years since January 6th, scholars have examined the violence of the attack, Donald Trump's role in the events leading up to it, and the influence of online networks in mobilizing participants (Gates, 2023; Gregory, 2020; Starbird et al., 2023). Much of this research has focused on interviewing participants in the attack or on closely reviewing Trump's statements prior to the Capitol breach (Denbeaux & Crawley, 2023). While these studies provide valuable insights into the causes and consequences of the attack, they leave a gap: they have paid less attention to how the language of political leaders evolved over time and how this evolution aligned with differing narratives. My project addresses this dimension by analyzing not only Trump's rhetoric but also that of other prominent Democratic and Republican party leaders, tracing how their language shifted over multiple months. Employing a longitudinal design (Merrigan & Huston, 2014), this study examines the rhetorical evolution across key dates to see how their language changed over time. As Entman (1993) explains, when narratives are not examined side-by-side, it becomes much harder to identify frames clearly, because many framing elements can appear ordinary or natural in language or imagery. By systematically comparing the discourse of Democratic and Republican leaders, this study identifies how their language shifted across the election and crisis periods. This comparative approach is crucial for comparing how different outlets report events that could have been covered similarly, as it helps reveal the key choices in wording and emphasis that shape how the story is framed (Entman, 1993). Through this analysis, I aim to illustrate how political communication reflected and evolved alongside differing party ideas.

Why Language Evolution Matters

Language is powerful, especially within the political scope of Presidential elections. The 2020 election was a high-stakes affair, unfolding under conditions unlike any seen before. Prior

to election day, Donald Trump and his supporters' rhetoric reflected victory, but after the election, this rhetoric shifted towards claims of fraud. Such claims can be classified as misinformation, which Coombs and Holladay describe as capable of sparking crises, intensifying them, or complicating efforts to resolve them. Following the Capitol attack, the rhetoric of many political leaders also shifted, though not necessarily Trump's. His communication carried weight, as he was the sitting President. Scholars note that "Presidents have a great deal of power and resources – both tangible and symbolic – at their discretion that can be employed to promote crises and to manage them" (Coombs & Holladay, 2022, p. 249).

Studying these language shifts and their evolution helps us understand how communication shifts during crises and how leaders respond rhetorically to unfolding events. By analyzing tweets, a major source of political information during this period, this project enables direct observation of crisis communication. As van der Meer (2018) explains, most people do not directly witness a crisis themselves; instead, they rely on social media and online news sources to interpret what is happening, why it occurred, and what its potential consequences and solutions might be.

Overall, language has broad democratic stakes. Language is closely tied to debates about election integrity, public trust in the electoral system, and voting. It is often discussed in relation to polarization, as it deepens divides between parties when leaders employ communication strategies to garner support for their side. Scholars have observed that the "[e]xpansion of partisan media generally and social media specifically... has had a negative impact on Americans' confidence in news media, which, in turn, presidents must recognize as they communicate about crises" (Coombs & Holladay, 2022, p. 251). This shows that, especially during the 2020 election period, Americans looked to their political leaders more than ever for

guidance. Scholars argue that repeated claims of a ‘rigged’ election are associated with declining trust in institutions (Gallagher, 2020).

This period is important to understand because rhetoric reflected both anger and calls for unity: it fueled anger and distrust among some citizens while fostering calm and calls for unity among others during one of the most significant democratic crises in U.S. history. Although the events occurred five years ago, the topic remains highly relevant, as debates around misinformation, accountability, and democratic resilience continue to influence public discourse. With Donald Trump back in office and revisiting claims about the 2020 election, questions of election security and legitimacy have resurfaced, underscoring the need to examine how political communication influences public confidence in democratic processes (Ordoñez and Martínez, 2026).

Framing theory (Entman, 1993) and crisis communication scholarship (Coombs & Holladay, 2022) demonstrate that language is central to how democratic crises are defined, understood, and managed. This project employs qualitative content analysis of tweets from Democratic and Republican political leaders to trace how their rhetoric evolved across the 2020 election period, the contested post-election phase, and the events surrounding January 6. By situating this analysis within the field of communication studies, the project contributes to the academic understanding of framing, misinformation, and crisis rhetoric. At the same time, it offers practical insights for journalists, educators, and policymakers about how evolving rhetoric relates to debates about civic trust, particularly in the context of election integrity. Ultimately, this study underscores the significance of language in moments of democratic rupture and emphasizes the need to critically examine political discourse to better understand democratic communication during crises.

Literature Review

Introduction

The 2020 U.S. presidential election, culminating in the January 6th Capitol attack, represents a unique moment to study the evolution of political language during a high-tension period. During this time, research documents a shift from familiar campaign rhetoric focused on the competition to post-election discourse questioning the election's legitimacy, coinciding with a broader democratic crisis (Starbird et al., 2023). Scholars across communication, political science, and media studies have examined how speech, participatory disinformation, and media discourse have interacted in various ways (Lazer et al., 2023; Gates, 2023). This review summarizes research on political rhetoric, how media ecosystems circulated or reinforced these messages, and how identity cues were used in political communication. It also identifies the scholarly gap that motivates this study: the need to trace rhetorical evolution over time through systematic analysis of political communication.

Elections in America

In 2016, Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton to become the 45th President of the United States. In 2020, Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump to become the 46th President of the United States.

This election took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly altered how candidates campaigned and how voters cast their ballots. In March 2020, Donald Trump signed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act into law, which included funding for states to expand mail-in voting (Weiser et al., 2020). By election day, nearly 30 million absentee and mail-in ballots had yet to be returned, amid widespread use of

mail-in voting, Trump claimed those ballots were fraudulent and should not be counted (Kennedy, 2023).

After Biden was officially declared the winner, Trump intensified his rhetoric, insisting that the election was fraudulent and refusing to concede. He tweeted repeatedly that “WE WILL WIN!” and declared that Biden’s victory existed only “in the eyes” of the media (“BBC News”, 2020). This refusal to acknowledge defeat marked a sharp departure from the historical norm of concession and peaceful transfer of power. Scholars note that this moment reflected a shift toward claims of illegitimacy, occurring within the broader crisis rhetoric that developed before January 6 (Coombs & Holladay, 2022; Lazer et al., 2023).

Escalation into Crisis Language

Before the election, leaders relied on familiar campaign vocabulary. Scholars note that immediately after the vote, rhetoric shifted (“Election Integrity Partnership”, 2021; Starbird et al., 2023). Studies such as *The Long Fuse* (“Election Integrity Partnership”, 2021) and Starbird et al. (2023) work on participatory disinformation, documenting how isolated irregularities were reframed into systemic fraud narratives. Trump’s repeated use of “rigged” and “stolen” contributed to a consistent fraud narrative, while Lee et al. (2022) show how rally speeches echoed online, circulating fraud claims across multiple social platforms. Scholars can generally agree that this period marked a shift from persuasion to allegation, although they differ on whether elites deliberately coordinated this effort or whether grassroots improvisation influenced its phrasing (Starbird et al., 2023). Jacobs (2022) further emphasizes that social media provided the infrastructure through which these claims circulated, while Li et al. (2024) quantify the extent to which online activity is associated with offline violence.

Media ecosystems played a central role in circulating these messages. Painter & Fernandes (2022) highlight how partisan outlets and agenda-setting practices repeated fraudulent claims, thereby making the “Big Lie” more visible in public discourse. Headlines condensed leaders’ rhetoric into concise slogans that audiences could easily reuse, creating traction across platforms. *The Long Fuse* (“Election Integrity Partnership”, 2021) report similarly shows how verified accounts and conservative media reframed procedural irregularities into systemic fraud narratives. Repetition contributed to a more consistent rhetorical pattern, though scholars debate whether cable outlets or social platforms were more responsible for standardizing the discourse (Benkler, 2023; Gates, 2023).

Framing theory helps explain this shift in rhetorical and media approaches. Entman (1993) defines framing as the process of selecting aspects of reality and making them salient to promote a particular interpretation. By labeling elections as “rigged” or “stolen”, leaders magnified fraud claims and minimized counter-narratives, framing public discussions of legitimacy. Crisis communication scholarship underscores this point: van der Meer (2018) emphasizes that most people do not directly experience crises but rely on mediated communication to understand causes, consequences, and remedies. Together, these perspectives show how leaders’ rhetoric and media amplification worked in tandem within the broader crisis discourse, reflecting a broader shift from electoral competition to a democratic crisis.

This literature examines post-election communication, highlighting how elite rhetoric and media ecosystems helped stabilize and amplify contested narratives, a pattern that also emerges in the messaging analyzed in this study. However, existing studies focus primarily on media effects or grassroots disinformation. My project builds upon this work by systematically analyzing tweets from both the Democratic and Republican parties across multiple months to

examine how their language relates to narratives of legitimacy. The longitudinal approach highlights the evolution of the broader crisis's rhetoric, helping identify frames that would otherwise appear “natural” or unremarkable.

Social Identity Theory and Political Communication

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a foundational lens for understanding how political leaders’ rhetoric helps explain perceptions of legitimacy and signals collective action. The theory argues that individuals interpret events through in-group and out-group distinctions, and the group they identify with informs how they interpret political events (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Political communication often draws on partisan identity by signaling who belongs, who threatens the group, and what actions are justified in defense of the group (Huddy et al., 2015). Social Identity Theory helps explain why Democrats and Republicans employed different rhetorical strategies during the election and crisis periods (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

During the 2020 election period, identity-based appeals became central to how political leaders framed the election and its aftermath. Research describes how elite rhetoric is associated with heightened group loyalty, threat narratives, and collective identity signaling loyalty, heightening threat perceptions, and motivating collective behavior (Jost et al., 2022; Jackson & Hinsz, 2022).

During the 2020 election and its aftermath, political actors used identity cues to draw boundaries around who was considered part of the legitimate political community. These cues framed certain groups as “real” or “patriotic” voters, cast institutions like state election boards and the media as either trustworthy or corrupt, and portrayed opposing actors as threats to democratic order (Jost et al., 2022; Starbird et al., 2023). Social Identity Theory helps explain

why partisan differences in language matter by showing how political leaders use identity cues to signal in-group membership, define out-groups, and frame political conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These rhetorical choices shape how followers interpret the legitimacy of the election, the credibility of institutions, and the meaning of events surrounding January 6 (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Hate Speech, Threat Narratives, and Delegitimizing Rhetoric

Political communication scholars have long noted that elite rhetoric can escalate political conflict by framing opponents as existential threats, undermining institutional legitimacy, and activating strong in-group identities (Nacos et al., 2022; Entman, 1993). Nacos et al. (2021) argue that political elites frequently rely on threat narratives and delegitimizing rhetoric to mobilize supporters and undermine opponents. Their work demonstrates how leaders construct “us versus them” distinctions, portraying political adversaries, institutions, or social groups as existential dangers to the nation. Such rhetoric is not merely descriptive; it functions as a strategic communication tool that heightens fear, anger, and grievance among followers.

As Nacos et al. show, Donald Trump’s speeches and tweets routinely framed political conflict in terms of “dangerous enemies within”, contrasted with an in-group defined as “one movement, one people, one family” (p. 214-216). This aligns with broader research showing that threat-based rhetoric can intensify partisan identity, justify extraordinary political actions, and erode democratic norms (Gates, 2023; Lazer, 2023). Scholars argue that delegitimizing language, such as claims that elections are “rigged”, institutions are “corrupt”, or opponents are “traitors”, can shift political discourse from disagreement to crisis framing, encouraging supporters to view political outcomes as threats to their group’s identity or safety (Jost et al., 2022)

Threat narratives also intersect with crisis communication research, which shows that leaders' language during high-stakes moments shapes how the public interprets causes, responsibility, and appropriate response (van der Meer, 2018). When elite frame political opponents as threats or depict democratic processes as illegitimate, they contribute to what scholars describe as a "delegitimizing spiral", in which institutional trust declines and partisan hostility intensifies (Huddy et al., 2015).

For this study, Nacos et al.'s framework is particularly useful because it highlights how elite rhetoric blend's identity cues, threat construction, and delegitimizing language. By situating elite tweets within this broader literature, the analysis demonstrates how political leaders' language contributed to competing narratives of legitimacy and crisis during the election and its aftermath.

Group Identity and Networked Incitement

Finally, scholars emphasized how political language increasingly relied on identity cues (Jackson & Hinsz, 2022). *The Group Dynamics* special issue highlights how inclusive pronouns and identity boundaries brought groups closer together, highlighting shared identity (Jackson & Hinsz, 2022). The study by Hoffman et al. (2025) examines "networked incitement," showing how small, recurring phrases can spread across speeches, tweets, and hashtags, appearing alongside rising unrest. An example is the #StopTheSteal messaging, which Starbird (2025) identified as a top hashtag that became a central organizing slogan within online networks. Scholars describe leaders' language as increasingly identity-based appeals, although they differ on whether this was intentional coordination or a coincidence (Starbird et al., 2023; Gates, 2023).

Recent scholarship deepens this understanding by connecting identity cues to broader psychological and sociological processes. Jost et al. (2022) argue that the Capitol attack is

discussed in terms of motivated reasoning, in which individuals interpret elite rhetoric through the lens of group loyalty. Lee et al. (2022) demonstrate that offline speeches are associated with online participation in QAnon networks, illustrating how identity-based appeals migrate across platforms. Paper et al. (2024) add a geographic dimension, showing that the participants were disproportionately drawn from areas with strong partisan identities, suggesting that the rhetoric resonated differently across local political cultures. Similarly, Eady et al. (2023) find that violent protests can intensify expressions of party identity, reinforce partisan divides, and make collective identity more salient in the aftermath of crisis events.

This literature underscores how elite rhetoric did more than contest election legitimacy; it included identity markers that supporters could adapt and circulate. Inclusive pronouns (“we”, “our movement”), slogans (“Stop the Steal”), and contradictions (“patriots” versus “traitors”) framed political discourse into identity-based appeals. For my research, these studies help explain how elite discourse framed identity cues that were amplified by psychological processes, geographic contexts, and online networks. By tracing the evolution of these appeals over time, my project extends this scholarship to demonstrate how elite discourse framed legitimacy and democracy not only as political issues but also as matters of group belonging and loyalty.

Participatory Disinformation

Beyond elite rhetoric, scholars emphasize the participatory nature of disinformation during the 2020 election period (Starbird et al., 2023; Prochaska et al., 2023). Starbird and colleagues (2023) describe how disinformation was participatory, and misinformation efforts emerged through coordinated activity among political leaders, highly partisan media outlets, influential social media figures, and engaged online communities. Prochaska et al. (2023) further develop this idea, demonstrating how participatory disinformation is discussed as contributing to

a narrative in which many supporters believed the election had been stolen. These collaborative efforts were not accidental; they stemmed from actors who strategically disseminated misinformation to their advantage, aiming to generate support (Prochaska et al., 2023). The manufactured reality appeared alongside calls for action, providing rhetorical justification used by some supporters to “defend” the election outcome (Prochaska et al., 2023).

With the rise of social media, disinformation campaigns became easier to launch and harder to contain (Lazer et al., 2018). As Lazer et al. (2018) note, digital platforms enable the rapid dissemination and resharing of false information at unprecedented speed and scale, thereby making misleading narratives more visible in public discourse. This participatory dynamic illustrates how elite rhetoric contributed to an environment in which isolated claims became widely repeated frames, ultimately creating one in which they became widely accepted frames of illegitimacy. For my research, this literature highlights the importance of analyzing elite discourse alongside participatory practices, highlighting how leaders’ language aligned with emerging narratives surrounding the January 6th crisis. Because Democrats and Republicans engaged with these narratives differently, participatory disjunction helps explain why party-level rhetoric diverged across the election and crisis periods.

Taken together, this literature highlights the importance of analyzing elite discourse alongside participatory practices to understand how narratives surrounding the election and January 6 developed. This gap in existing scholarship leads directly to my proposed research question:

RQ1: How did the language and messaging used by Democratic and Republican political leaders evolve across the 2020 election period, the post-election dispute, and the aftermath of the January 6th Capitol Attack?

Methods

Sampling Rationale

Twitter was selected as the data source because it functions as a primary platform for political communication, allowing leaders to deliver direct, unmediated messages to the public in real time. Tweets provide immediate rhetorical responses to unfolding events, making them well-suited for examining how political language evolves during periods of political uncertainty and transition. The political actors included in this study were selected based on their institutional roles and prominence in public discourse during the 2020 election periods and the events leading up to January 6. These figures were central communicators whose messaging shaped public narratives about the election, its validity, and the transition of power.

The timeframe of October 20, 2020, through January 20, 2021, was chosen because it captures the full communicative spread of the election cycle: the pre-election mobilization period, the contested post-election phase, the lead-up to the January 6 Capitol event, and the two-week aftermath through Inauguration Day. This window allows for a systematic evaluation of how political language shifted across these distinct phases and provides the necessary context to assess rhetorical evolution over time.

Research Design

This study investigates the research question through a content analysis of the language used by political leaders and its evolution from the 2020 election period to the January 6 Capitol event. Discourse analysis is appropriate because it examines how language constructs meaning, frames legitimacy, and mobilizes collective action (Philips & Hardy, 2002). Merrigan and Huston (2014) emphasize that communication research methods allow researchers to systematically capture and interpret verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Content analysis enables

close examination of rhetorical strategies with qualitative depth and situates language within its broader social and political context, recognizing that rhetoric both reflects and shapes democratic legitimacy.

The study uses a longitudinal design, collecting daily data from October 20, 2020, to January 20, 2021, for a total of 92 days. This continuous sampling strategy allows for systematic comparison across the pre-election period, the contested post-election phases, the day of the attack itself, and the transition through Inauguration Day. Collecting data daily rather than on selected dates provides a more complex picture of rhetorical escalation, stabilization, and transformation over time. The longitudinal design, therefore, supports the goal of examining how political leaders' language evolved across distinct phases of democratic tension.

Participants and Units of Analysis

The political actors included in this study were selected based on their institutional roles, prominence in public discourse, and relevance to the 2020 election and the events surrounding January 6. The final sample includes President Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence, President-elect Joe Biden, Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, former President Barack Obama, Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer, House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy, and Representative Liz Cheney. These figures were chosen for their key roles in shaping public narratives about voting, election legitimacy, and the transition of power. Political leaders such as Nancy Pelosi and Mitch McConnell were excluded because they produced too few Tweets during the timeframe to allow for meaningful analysis. Focusing on actors with consistent, publicly available communication to ensure that the dataset reflected sustained rhetorical patterns rather than isolated statements.

The unit of analysis for this study is each individual tweet posted by the selected political actors during the sampling period. Tweets function as self-contained rhetorical acts, making them appropriate for examining shifts in language over time. All available tweets from October 20, 2020, through January 20, 2021, were collected from X archives (formerly Twitter), the Wayback Machine, and the UCSB presidential project.

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

Data for this study were collected from all publicly available communications produced by the selected political actors between October 20, 2020, and January 20, 2021. Tweets were gathered using a combination of publicly accessible Twitter archives (X Corp., n.d.) and archived screenshots from the Wayback Machine (Internet Archive, n.d.) to ensure inclusion of posts that had been deleted or were no longer available. Tweets from President Donald Trump were collected through the UCSB American Presidency Project (Peters & Woolley, n.d.), which maintains a complete archive of his presidential tweets.

All tweets authored or retweeted by each political actor during the timeframe were compiled into a master Excel file. Multiple archival sources were necessary because some tweets had been removed either by Twitter or by the political figure. Cross-referencing across archives ensured the most complete and accurate dataset possible.

Data Preparation

After collecting the raw data, all tweets were cleaned and standardized to ensure accuracy and consistency. Duplicate entries were removed, and each tweet was checked to confirm it included the actor's name, date, full text, and source link. Duplicates occurred when the same tweet appeared in multiple archival sources. Missing or incomplete entries were verified and

filled using archived snapshots from the Wayback Machine. Dates and times were converted into a consistent format, and all tweets were copied exactly as originally posted.

The dataset was organized in a master Excel file with the following variables: actor name, date, tweet type (tweet or retweet), and source link. To prepare the data for coding, additional columns were added for each coding category, including Policy, Frame, Attack Present, and Data Present.

To reduce code bias, actors' names were removed from the dataset, and the order of tweets was randomized before coding began. The final dataset included every tweet or retweet posted by the selected political actors between October 20, 2020, and January 20, 2021; however, only original tweets were coded for analysis.

Tweet Counts and Sample Construction

A total of 5,468 posts were collected across the eight political leaders during the sampling period. This included all tweets and retweets available from archival sources. Retweets were removed because they do not represent the leaders' own authored rhetoric. A small number of duplicate posts (10 across the full dataset) were removed, as noted before during data cleaning. After excluding retweets and removing duplicates, the final dataset consisted of 3,793 original tweets. This means 1,675 retweets were excluded from analysis. Table 1 reports, for each political actor, the total number of posts collected, the number of retweets removed, and the final number of original tweets included in the analysis.

Table 1

Tweet Collection and Sample Construction by Political Actor

Political Actor	Total Tweets Collected	Retweets Removed	Final Sample
Trump	2201	697	1504

Pence	714	380	334
Biden	684	17	667
Harris	741	172	569
Obama	87	12	75
Schumer	596	174	422
McCarthy	385	202	182
Cheney	60	21	39
Total	5468	1675	3793

Only original tweets were coded because they reflect leaders' direct rhetorical choices. Retweets introduce interpretive thoughts: political actors may retweet to endorse, critique, signal alignment, or simply amplify visibility, and these functions cannot be reliably inferred from the retweet alone. Including retweets would also unevenly inflate tweet volume across leaders, as some rely on them while others rarely do. Restricting the dataset to original tweets, therefore, ensures a consistent and comparable measure of elite-authored messaging across individuals. After constructing the final dataset of 3,793 original tweets, each tweet was coded using a structured coding framework designed to capture its substantive content, rhetorical strategy, and the use of evidence.

Coding Framework

The coding framework was designed to capture the rhetorical, thematic, and ideological content of each original tweet. Each tweet was coded for its policy, dominant frame, presence of attacks, and presence of qualitative data. Coders followed a consistent workflow and applied explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria for each category to ensure replicability. Coding

proceeded in four sequential steps: Identifying the Policy Code, selecting the dominant Frame Code, coding Attack Present, and coding Data Present. Coders applied these steps in the same order for every tweet to ensure consistency and reduce interpretive drift.

Policy Codes

Policy Codes captured the primary political issue referenced in each tweet. Policies were selected based on the most salient issues in American political discourse during the study period. Coders assigned a policy category when a tweet clearly referenced a political issue; tweets that did not fit any predefined category were coded as Other, such as the tweet, “Today will go down as one of the darkest days in the Senate’s 231-year history...Democrats will never stop fighting for Americans”, which referenced political conflict but did not align with any specific predefined policy category. Other was defined as any political issue not captured by the existing categories (e.g., policing, criminal justice, civil rights). If a tweet mentioned more than 1 issues (e.g., “It’s this simple: Republicans are trying to bypass the will of voters and have the Supreme Court dismantle the Affordable Care Act”), coders selected Other rather than listing both policies as in the tweet, which referenced both voting and health care. This rule was implemented to maintain consistency and avoid coder speculation. This approach reduced variance and ensured that coders did not overinterpret or guess at the tweet’s intended emphasis. Tweets that did not reference any political issue, even implicitly, were coded as Other. These included greetings, personal messages, non-religious holiday wishes, or general statements unrelated to governance or public affairs (e.g., “Florida, it’s great to be back!”). In this dataset, tweets that reference a political issue not captured by the predefined categories and tweets that contained no political content at all were both coded as ‘Other’. These two cases were combined into a single category

to maintain consistency and avoid requiring coders to distinguish between low-information political content and genuinely non-political messages.

Coders identified the primary issue by determining which policy area was most central to the tweet's meaning, prioritizing explicit references over implied meanings. In ambiguous cases, coders relied on the inclusion/exclusion criteria in the codebook and selected the category that best aligned with the tweet's explicit content rather than inferred intent. Policy Codes were included to capture the substantive issue agenda communicated by political leaders during the study period.

Frame Codes

Frame Codes captured secondary strategies present in the message. After coders identified a policy, they then applied a frame when the tweet contained additional elements that were not strictly policy based. Coders chose the dominant frame by selecting the content that best represented it. For example, any tweets that were positively or negatively related to a candidate during the 2020 presidential cycle were coded as Election Campaign 4 (e.g., "We can't let President Trump tear down Obamacare."). Any tweets that referenced the election and encouraged their supporters to act, whether through donations or voting, were coded as Mobilization (e.g., "I'm going to be honest with you: this election is going to come down to the results in a few critical states...If you can, please chip in."). Like the policy coding procedure, the "Other" frame was used when a tweet contained multiple competing frames, when no single frame clearly dominated, or when no frame available fit the tweet (e.g., "Thank you, Charles. She will be a great one!"). This decision was made to prevent coders from overinterpreting various content and to ensure that frame assignments remained conservative, consistent, and replicable across coders. Tweets were coded as having no frame when they contained only

information or descriptive content without an identifiable rhetorical strategy (e.g., “Tune in as my campaign adviser Bob Bauer provides a post-election legal briefing.”). Tweets that referenced voter fraud, a stolen election, or any aspect of vote counting fell under the Voting Processes Category (e.g., “A brave patriot. More & more people are stepping forward to expose this Rigged Election!”). When tweets included links or images, coders evaluated only the tweet’s text, not the content of the linked material.

Frames, therefore, represent the interpretive or additional layer of the message, while policy codes capture the substantive issue being addressed. Frame Codes were included to capture the interpretive layer of elite communication, revealing how political actors shaped meaning beyond the policy content of their messages.

Attack Codes

Attack Present was coded as a binary variable (Yes/No) based on whether the tweet contained a personal, institutional, or delegitimizing attack. The codebook included examples and boundary rules to ensure consistent application. Negativity directed at a policy itself was also coded as an attack, even when no individual was named. This variable was coded as a simple binary indicator to avoid interpreting intent. Coders marked “Yes” (e.g., “Donald Trump claimed he would be ‘the greatest jobs president God ever created.’ Instead, he’s on track to become the worst jobs president in 100 years,”) for Attack Present whenever the tweet included negative evaluative language directed at a policy, person, institution, or political party. This included any form of criticism, blame, or derogatory characterization. If no negative evaluation was present, the tweet was coded “No” (e.g., “We can’t just imagine a better future; we’ve got to fight for it and vote for it...If you’ve already voted, text three friends to make sure they have a plan.”).

A simple Yes/No structure reduced guessing for coders when negativity was implied, but the attack was not explicit. Criticism of a policy counted as an attack only when it included a negative evaluation (e.g., “This policy is dangerous”); neutral disagreements (e.g., “I oppose this policy”) were coded as “No”. Sarcasm or indirect criticism was coded as an attack only when the negative meaning was clear from the text. Attack Present was included to capture the use of delegitimizing rhetoric, which is central to understanding how political leaders communicate conflict and opposition.

Data Codes

Data Present was also coded as a binary variable (Yes/No). This variable captured the use of quantitative evidence and statistics used to support an argument, whether the data was factual or not. Coders marked “Yes” (e.g., “Under my leadership, our ECONOMY is now growing at the fastest rate EVER recorded – 33.1%!”) for Data Present only when the tweet included a specific statistic or numerical claim. If no measurable quantity was provided, the tweet was coded “No” (e.g., “Climate change isn’t a hoax – it’s a threat to millions of Americans like Velma and Amirah.”). The variable was coded as binary to maintain consistency and avoid requiring coders to evaluate the accuracy, quality, or credibility of the evidence. The goal was to capture whether data was used at all, not whether it was correct. General numerical language (e.g., “millions, “a lot”, “many”) was coded as “No” unless they referenced a specific measurable quantity. Statements that implied evidence without providing numbers (e.g., “studies show...”) were also coded as “No”. Unverifiable or misleading statistics were still coded as “Yes” if they were presented as factual claims.

When the presence of data was unclear, coders defaulted to “No” to avoid rhetorical language being confused as evidence. This approach ensured that only explicit, measurable

claims were coded as data. Data Present was included to assess whether political elites relied on quantitative evidence to support their messaging, a factor central to understanding how they construct credibility and authority. Coders evaluated only the tweet text itself, as noted before, and did not follow external links to determine whether data was present.

Analytical Strategy

Content analysis was used to examine the data and the pivot tables derived from it. After each tweet was coded for Policy, Frame, Attack, and Data, pivot tables were generated to summarize the frequency of each variable across political actors and across time. These summaries allowed for the identification of patterns in issue emphasis, rhetorical strategies, attack usage, and reliance on quantitative evidence.

A longitudinal design was used, with all tweets collected between October 20th and January 20th for each political actor and entered into the master Excel file. This design enabled the examination of how rhetorical patterns evolved over the three-month period, particularly before, during, and after key political events. The combination of content analysis and longitudinal descriptive summaries allowed for a systematic assessment of how political leaders' messages evolved over time.

Quantitative Pattern Identification

Pivot tables were created from the master Excel sheet, with a separate table generated for each coded variable (Policy, Frame, Attack, Data). These tables were used to calculate frequencies and distributions across political parties and across the full timeline. Pivot tables also enabled comparisons across the three phases of the study (pre-election, post-election, and post-January 6). Through these summaries, it was possible to identify shifts in policy focus, changes in framing strategies, spikes in attack rhetoric, and variation in the use of quantitative data. These

descriptive patterns provided the foundation for interpreting the evolution of political communication over time.

Phase-Based Comparative Analysis

The three major phases of this timeline are Pre-Election (Oct 20-Nov 3), Post-election contestation (Nov 4-Jan 5), and the January 6th event and the aftermath (Jan 6-Jan 20). These phases represent distinct political contexts and correspond to meaningful shifts in the language used by political parties. In the pre-election phase, no candidate had been declared the winner, and both parties were actively campaigning. In the post-election phase, a winner had been declared, and post-election claims of fraud had begun to circulate. The final phase captures the period when Congress met to certify the presidential Electoral College results, the breach of the Capitol, and the uncertainty that followed until the inauguration.

To assess how political communication changed across these periods, I compare frequencies of all coded variables across the three phases. For Policy Codes, I examine which issues were emphasized before and after the election, and whether certain issues spiked after November 3 or before January 6. For Frame Codes, I analyze how political parties framed events differently across phases and whether crisis-oriented or procedural frames increase as January 6 approached. For Attack Present, I assess whether the use of adverse language increased or decreased across the phases and whether the targets of the attacks shifted. For Data Present, I examine whether political parties relied on quantitative claims during each period.

These comparisons are conducted using pivot tables that summarize counts and percentages for each variable within each phase. This phase-based approach allows for systematic evaluation of how political rhetoric evolved over time and how political actors responded to major events during the study period.

Intercoder Reliability

To assess the consistency of the coding scheme, a subset of 500 Tweets was double-coded by two independent coders. A subsample of 500 tweets was selected because it represented a sufficiently large proportion of the dataset to assess consistency while remaining feasible for double-coding. Retweets were excluded to maintain consistency with the main dataset. Both coders used the same codebook, which had been refined through an initial practice round of 100 Tweets to ensure shared understanding of the categories.

Intercoder reliability was calculated using ReCal2, an online tool for two-coder reliability. Agreement levels were strong across all four variables: Policy (86%), Frames (81%), Attacks (87%), and Data (95.2%). The lowest agreement occurred in the Frames variable, as expected given the coding scheme's complexity and the 16 available frame categories, a level of category differentiation that typically reduces agreement in content-analysis research.

Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus, and the final codebook reflects the clarifications made during this process. High intercoder reliability is essential in content analysis because it demonstrates that the coding scheme can be applied consistently and that the resulting patterns reflect the data rather than the coder's subjectivity. These reliability levels indicate that the coding was applied consistently and that the resulting dataset is appropriate for analysis.

Results

This section presents the results of the longitudinal discourse analysis, organized around four major findings that emerged from patterns in tweet volume, policy language, framing, and rhetorical tone.

Finding 1A: Tweet Volume by Party

Tweet activity differed substantially between Democrats and Republicans across the study period. Table 1A reports the average number of tweets per day by each party. Republicans posted an average of 22.2 tweets per day, while Democrats posted 18.6, indicating that Republican political leaders used Twitter more frequently overall.

Table 1A
Average Tweets Per Day by Party (All Phases Combined)

Party	Tweets/Day
Democrats	18.63
Republicans	22.15

To illustrate what high-volume tweeting looked like in practice, the following examples come from days when tweet activity exceeded each party's daily average (Republicans: 22.2/day; Democrats: 18.6/day). For Republicans, October 31, 2020, with 78 Tweets posted (e.g., "Under President @realDonaldTrump, ICE has deported over 16,000 gang members & arrested over 2,000 MS-13 members. We're keeping Arizona's and America's families safe!"). Their activity remained high on November 2, when they posted 80 tweets (e.g., "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 & we will SAVE THE AMERICAN DREAM!").

Democrats also exceeded their daily average on key dates. On November 2, they posted 79 tweets (e.g., "We have one shot. One opportunity. One moment. Don't miss the chance — vote."). On November 3, Democrats posted 62 Tweets (e.g., "Who we are. What we stand for.

Who we are going to be. It's all at stake — and you have the power to determine the outcome. Vote before polls close: <http://iwillvote.com>").

Over the 93-day period, both parties showed clear spikes in tweet activity at key moments of the election cycle. Republicans average 22.2 original tweets per day, but their output surged dramatically on October 31 (78 tweets) and November 2 (80 tweets), reflecting an intensified push to mobilize supporters and reinforce core campaign themes. Democrats, who average 18.6 tweets per day, also showed elevated activity on November 2 (79 tweets) and on election day, November 3 (62 Tweets). The examples from these dates illustrated the kinds of messages each party circulated during periods of heightened activity, showing that tweet volume rose in conjunction with major electoral moments rather than remaining constant across the period.

Finding 1B: Tweet Volume Across Phases

Tweet volume also varied across the three phases of the study period. Table 1B reports total tweets by party within each phase.

Table 1B

Tweet Volume by Party Across Phases

Phase	Democrats	Republicans	Total Tweets
Pre-Election (Oct 20-Nov 3)	604	686	1290
Post-Election (Nov 4-Jan 5)	934	1297	2231
Jan 6 Period (Jan 6-Jan 20)	195	77	272
Total	1733	2060	3793

During the pre-election phase, both parties posted their highest volume of tweets. Democrats posted 604 tweets (40.3 per day), and Republicans posted 686 tweets (45.7 per day). Tweeting decreased in the post-election phase, with Democrats averaging 14.8 tweets per day (934 total) and Republicans averaging 20.6 tweets per day (1297 total). Although daily averages declined, total tweet volume nearly doubled for Republicans from Phase 1 to Phase 2, reflecting a substantial increase in overall output during the contested post-election period. Activity declined further during the January 6 period, when Democrats posted 195 tweets (13.0 per day) and Republicans posted 77 tweets (5.1 per day).

These patterns show that both parties concentrated their communication most heavily in the days leading up to the election, with tweet volume decreasing afterward and reaching its lowest point during the January 6 period.

Finding 1 Interpretation

The tweet-volume patterns show that political leaders did not use Twitter at a constant rate during the study period. Both parties posted their highest number of tweets during the pre-election phase, with activity decreasing in the post-election period and declining further during the January 6 period. This indicates that tweet frequency varied substantially across the three phases rather than remaining stable over time.

The party-level comparison shows that Republicans consistently tweeted more frequently than Democrats across all phases. This difference suggests that the two parties relied on Twitter to varying degrees throughout the study period. The spikes in activity on October 31, November 2, and November 3 illustrate periods when both parties increase their output well above their daily averages. The examples from these high-volume days demonstrate the types of messages circulated during periods of elevated activity.

Overall, the quantitative patterns in tweet volume establish a clear baseline for understanding how communication frequency differed by party and across phases. These descriptive differences provide the foundation for examining how message content, framing, and rhetorical strategies varied in the subsequent findings.

Finding 2: Variation in Voting-Related Policy Language Across Phases and Parties

Finding 2 examines how Policy 7 (Voting) appeared across the three phases and how its policy language shifted over time. While the quantitative distribution of Policy 7 remained relatively stable between the pre-election and post-election periods, the function and rhetorical use of voting-related policy language changed substantially.

Finding 2A: Frequency of Policy 7 (Voting) Across Phases

Table 2A

Displays the frequency of Policy 7 (Voting) across the three phases of the study

Phase	Policy 7 Count (%)
Pre-Election	386 (10.17%)
Post-Election	639 (16.84%)
Post-January 6	19 (0.50%)

Table 2A shows that Policy 7 references increased from the pre-election to post-election period, before declining sharply after January 6. Although the overall proportion of voting-related tweets rose modestly after Election Day, the purpose of these references shifted from mobilizing voters to contesting results and asserting legitimacy.

Finding 2B: Party Differences in Policy 7 Usage

Table 2B

Policy 7 Mentions by Party Across Phases

Party	Pre-Election (Oct 20-Nov 3)	Post-Election (Nov 4-Jan 5)	Post-January 6 (Jan 6-Jan 20)	Total
Democrat	245	122	4	371
Republican	141	516	15	672
Total	386	639	19	1,044

Table 2B shows that Democrats dominated Policy 7 messaging during the pre-election period, accounting for 245 of the 386 tweets (63.5%). After Election Day, however, Republicans became the primary drivers of voting-related policy language, producing 516 of the 639 tweets in Phase 2 (80.9%). This pattern continued into Phase 3, where Republicans posted 15 of the 19 Policy 7 tweets (78.9%).

Finding 2C: Qualitative Variation in Policy Language Across Phases

To examine how Policy 7 language tweets frequently referenced voting procedures, deadlines, and access.

Policy 7 language shifted qualitatively across the three phases, reflecting how candidates adapted voting-related messaging to the changing political context. During the pre-election period (Oct 20-Nov 3), voting references emphasized participation, deadlines, and access, often functioning as mobilization appeals. Candidates paired turnout messaging with broader campaign themes (e.g., "We are in a battle for the soul of this nation — and it's a battle we can and must win. Vote." Biden, Oct 20; "To the great people of New York, California, and Illinois, your states are way too highly taxed, big crime, people fleeing, and just about every other problem you can have. VOTE TRUMP, I will turn them around for you, FAST!" Trump, Oct 20). In this phase, Policy 7 primarily served as a tool to mobilize voter turnout.

In the post-election period (Nov 4-Jan 5), Policy 7 language shifted toward ballot counting, verification, and certification. Candidates referenced the ongoing tabulation process and the legitimacy of the results (e.g., “ANY VOTE THAT CAME IN AFTER ELECTION DAY WILL NOT BE COUNTED!” Trump, Nov 5; “The election is over. It’s time to put aside the partisanship and the rhetoric designed to demonize one another. We have to come together.” Biden, Nov 24). Here, voting-related language became a mechanism for contesting or affirming electoral procedures and outcomes.

During the January 6 period (Jan 6-Jan 20), voting language centered on institutional procedures tied to congressional certification and the transition of power. Candidates used Policy 7 references to situate their messaging within the institutional moment (e.g., “The 75,000,000 great American Patriots who voted for me, AMERICA FIRST, and MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, will have a GIANT VOICE long into the future. They will not be disrespected or treated unfairly in any way, shape or form!!!” Trump, Jan 8; “As we start this new chapter, we cannot forget what helped get us to this point: investing in candidates up and down the ballot who are ready to lift up and represent our communities in need. Chip in now to help us build on that success.” Harris, Jan 17). In this phase, voting language reflected the institutional stakes of certification and the aftermath of January 6.

Finding 2 Interpretation

Across all three phases, the language of Policy 7 (Voting) shifted in both frequency and function, reflecting the changing political context of the election cycle. In Phase 1, Democrats used voting language primarily to mobilize turnout, emphasizing participation and access, while Republicans paired voting appeals with broader political messaging. After Election Day, Republicans became the dominant users of Policy 7, and their voting-related tweets shifted

toward contesting ballot-counting, verification, and certification processes. This is reflected in examples such as Donald Trump’s claim that “ANY VOTE THAT CAME IN AFTER ELECTION DAY WILL NOT BE COUNTED!” and other references to procedural irregularities. Democrats, by contrast, used voting language in Phase 2 (post-election) to reinforce the legitimacy of the results and call for acceptance of the outcome, as seen in Joe Biden’s November 24 tweet urging Americans to “put aside the partisanship.” By Phase 3 (post-January 6), references to Policy 7 declined sharply, and the remaining tweets focused on institutional procedures and the aftermath of January 6. Democrats used voting language to emphasize continuity and transition, while Republicans referenced their voter base in their arguments about the certification process. These shifts show that Policy 7 moved from turnout messaging (Phase 1) to procedural contestation (Phase 2) to institutional stabilization and transition (Phase 3), with Republicans driving the post-election surge in voting-related rhetoric.

Finding 3: Framing Patterns Shifted from Mobilization to Procedural Contestation to Crisis-Response and Unity

Finding 3 examines how the 16 coded frames appeared across the three phases of the study and how their usage differed by party. Figures 1 and 2 display the distribution of frames for Democrats and Republicans, allowing for comparison phases.

Figure 1: Democrats

All 16 Frames across all 3 phases (X Axis: All 16 Frames – Reference Appendix A; Y-Axis: Number of Tweets)

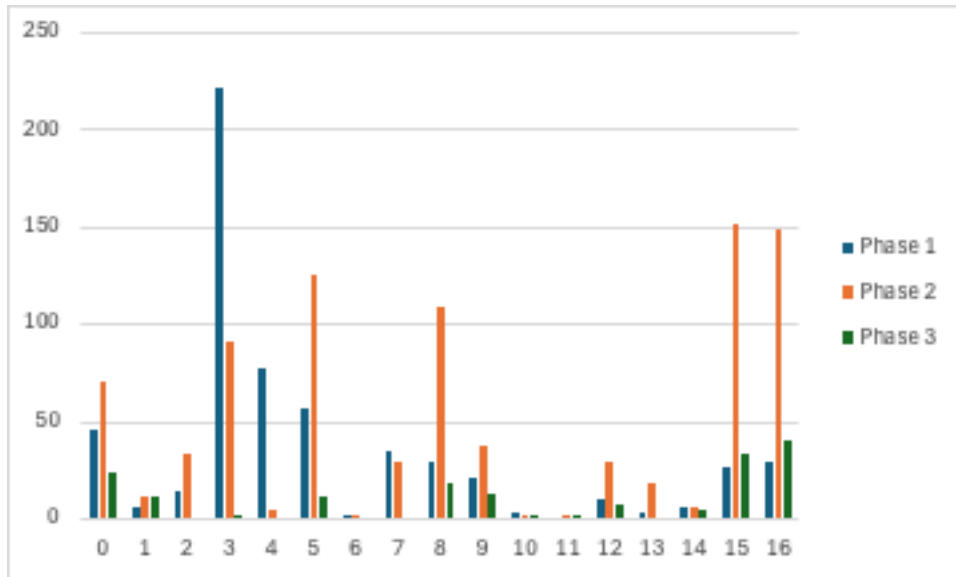
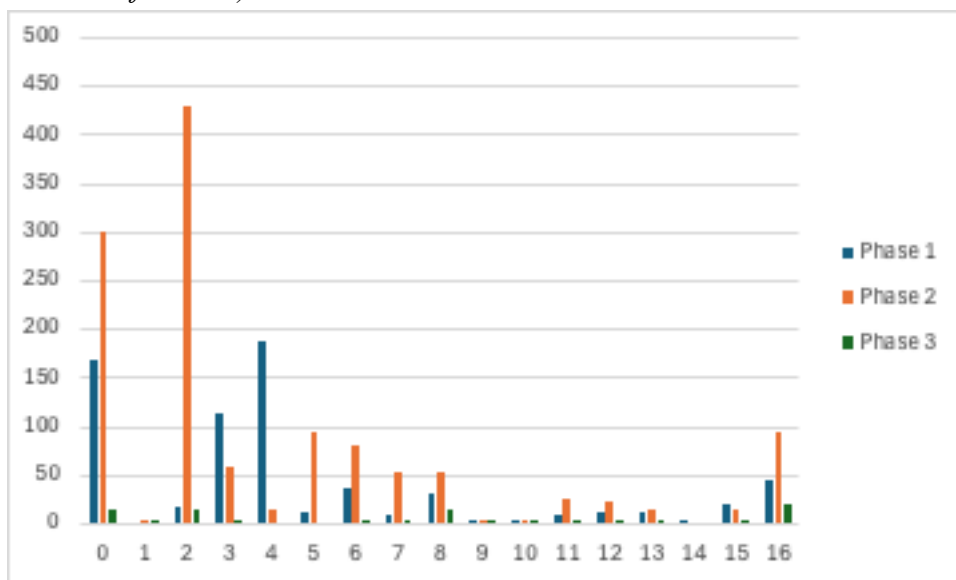


Figure 2: Republicans

All 16 Frames across all 3 phases (X Axis: All 16 Frames – Reference Appendix A; Y-Axis: Number of Tweets)



Phase 1: Pre-Election (Oct 20-Nov 3)

In the pre-election period, both parties relied heavily on campaign-related frames. For Republicans, the most frequently used frame was Election Campaign (189 uses, 27.7% of all Republican frames in Phase 1), often highlighting accomplishments and promises (e.g., "Ohio is WINNING under President @realDonaldTrump with 82,000 JOBS created in just three years!

That's Promises Made and Promises Kept!"). Democrats, the most frequently used frame was Mobilization (222 uses, 37.7% of all Democratic frames in Phase 1), emphasizing turnout and participation (e.g., "Trump and Pence are doing everything they can to rip away health care for millions of Americans in a global pandemic. When elected, @JoeBiden and I will do everything we can to ensure health care is a right for all—not a privilege for the few."). Overall, framing in this phase centered on energizing supporters and reinforcing core campaign themes.

Phase 2: Post-Election (Nov 4-Jan 5)

In the post-election period, Republicans showed a substantial increase in the Voting Process frame, rising from 17 uses in Phase 1 to 431 uses in phase 2 (2435% increase). Their framing focused on ballot counting, verification, and procedural legitimacy (e.g., "Every legal vote must be counted. Every recount must be completed. Every legal challenge must be heard. Then and only then does America decide who won the race." McCarthy, Nov 8; "Look at this in Michigan! A day AFTER the election, Biden receives a dump of 134,886 votes at 6:31AM!" Trump, Nov 9). Democrats used the Voting Process frame far less frequently (34 uses in Phase 2), and their most common frames remained Future Plans, Public Health, and Patriotism.

Phase 3: January 6 Period (Jan 6-Jan 20)

In Phase 3, the most frequently used substantive frame for both parties, excluding "Other" and "No Frame", was Patriotic. Republicans used patriotic language to highlight sacrifice, heroism, and national resilience (e.g., "Officer Sicknick is an American hero who gave his life defending our Capitol and this Nation will never forget or fail to honor the service and sacrifice of Officer Brian Sicknick." Pence, Jan 8; "The United States remains exceptional. And right now, the eyes of the world are upon us. We must seize this opportunity to heal and grow stronger." McCarthy, Jan 13). Democrats paired patriotic framing with governance, transition,

and institutional restoration (e.g., “As we work to contain the pandemic and open our economy responsibly, we must also build back better to lift up all Americans. Tune in as @JoeBiden and I announce key nominees to our economic team.” Harris, Jan 8; “I am proud that we have finished naming the members of our Cabinet. It’s a Cabinet that looks like America and taps into the full range of talents we have in our nation.” Biden, Jan 9). In this phase, framing reflected crisis-response, institutional reassurance, and calls for unity.

Finding 3 Interpretation

Across all three phases, framing patterns shifted in ways that closely tracked the political context of the election cycle. In Phase 1, both parties relied heavily on campaign-oriented frames, but Democrats emphasized Mobilization while Republicans leaned more on Election Campaign messaging, reflecting their different strategic priorities heading into Election Day. In Phase 2, Republicans’ dramatic increase in the Voting Process frame, rising from 17 to 431 uses, shows a clear pivot toward contesting ballot counting and certification. As illustrated by tweets from Donald Trump and Kevin McCarthy alleging irregularities and demanding recounts. Democrats, by contrast, continued to emphasize Future Plans, Public Health, and Patriotism, using framing to reinforce stability and legitimacy rather than contest outcomes. By Phase 3, both parties converged on Patriotic framing, but with different emphases; Republicans highlighted sacrifice, heroism, and national resilience, while Democrats paired patriotic language with messages about governance, transition, and institutional restoration. These shifts show that framing shifted from turnout and campaign messaging (Phase 1 – pre-election) to procedural contestation (Phase 2 – post-election) and, finally, to crisis response and unity-oriented communication (Phase 3), with Republicans driving the procedural escalation and Democrats driving the post-crisis stabilization.

Finding 4: Attacks and Data Use Declined in Parallel with Shifts in Policy and Framing

The attacks and data of political language changed in ways that reinforce the evolution observed in policy and framing.

Table 4A

Displays the frequency of attack rhetoric by party and phase

Phase	Democrats	Republicans
Pre-Election	128	216
Post-Election	41	192
Post-January 6	7	3

Table 4A shows that Republicans used attack rhetoric more frequently than Democrats across all phases of the study. In the pre-election period, Republicans produced 216 attack-coded tweets, compared with Democrats' 128, reflecting a more aggressive campaign posture. This partisan gap widened in Phase 2, where Republicans generated 192 attacks, nearly five times the Democratic total of 41. By Phase 3, attack rhetoric declined sharply for both parties, dropping to single-digit counts (7 for Democrats and 3 for Republicans), indicating a broad rhetorical shift away from adversarial messaging after January 6.

Qualitative evidence reinforces these patterns. In Phase 1, Republicans frequently targeted political opponents and external threats. Kevin McCarthy (October 20, 2020) criticized Democrats for "refus[ing] to acknowledge the threat China poses," while Donald Trump (October 20, 2020) attacked the media as a "Fake News Media Conspiracy." Democrats also used attack rhetoric in this period, though more often in policy-based critiques, such as Chuck Schumer's October 20, 2020, tweet accusing Senate Republicans of blocking COVID-19 relief, or Kamala Harris's October 27, 2020, claim that the president "mishandled" the pandemic.

In Phase 2, Republican attacks intensified and focused heavily on media organizations, election officials, and Democratic leaders. Donald Trump repeatedly accused news outlets of “tampering with an Election” (November 20, 2020) and claimed that leadership failures would have “destroyed millions of lives” under a Biden administration. Kevin McCarthy (November 11, 2020) attacked Speaker Pelosi for attempting to “consolidate power” through remote voting procedures. Democrats also used attack rhetoric in this period, but their messaging centered on delegitimizing Republican legal challenges. Kamala Harris (November 15, 2020) accused Republicans of attempting to “dismantle our decisive victory with baseless lawsuits”, while Chuck Schumer (November 16, 2020) declared, “[t]he election is over. Donald Trump lost.”

By Phase 3, attack rhetoric nearly disappeared, but the few examples that remained were highly pointed. Donald Trump (January 6, 2021) attacked Mike Pence for lacking “the courage to do what should have been done,” while Democrats directed blame at Trump for inciting the violence. Chuck Schumer (January 7, 2021) described the events as “an insurrection...incited by President Trump,” and Joe Biden (January 7, 2021) framed the attack as the culmination of an “all-out assault on the institutions of our democracy.”

Overall, attack rhetoric reveals a clear partisan divergence: Republicans used attacks more frequently and more aggressively, especially during the post-election contestation period, while Democrats shifted away from adversarial messaging as the crisis intensified.

Table 4B
Displays the frequency of data

Phase	Democrats	Republicans
Pre-Election	31	54
Post-Election	52	114
Post-January 6	14	3

Table 4B shows that both parties used data-present frames less frequently than attack frames, but the patterns reveal meaningful differences in how Democrats and Republicans deployed numerical evidence. In Phase 1 (pre-election), Republicans used data more often than Democrats (54 vs. 31), typically to highlight economic performance or policy outcomes. For example, Mike Pence (October 20, 2020) cited “82,000 JOBS created” in Ohio, while Donald Trump (October 22, 2020) warned that the Biden-Harris agenda would “slash the typical American’s income by \$6,500 per year.” Democrats also used data in this period, but often to support policy arguments, such as Chuck Schumer’s October 20, 2020, claim that “72% of Americans support another \$2 trillion stimulus package.”

In Phase 2 (post-election), both parties increased their use of data, but Republicans again used it more frequently (114 vs. 52 post-election). Republican data use centered on contesting election results or highlighting polling discrepancies. Donald Trump (November 10, 2020) cited polling errors in Wisconsin and Iowa as evidence of media bias (e.g., “In Iowa, the polls had us 4 points down, and I won by 8.2%! Fox News and Quinnipiac were wrong on everything...”), while Kevin McCarthy (November 9, 2020) referenced vaccine trial data to credit the Trump administration (e.g., “...preventing infection in 90% of its volunteers.”). Democrats used data in Phase 2 to emphasize COVID-19 metrics and economic conditions. Chuck Schumer (November 9, 2020) highlighted a vaccine’s “90% effectiveness,” and Kamala Harris (November 12, 2020) cited income thresholds to argue for Biden’s tax plan (e.g., “...and he won’t ask a single person making under \$400,000 per year to pay a penny more in taxes.”).

By Phase 3, data use declined sharply for both parties, though Democrats used data more frequently than Republicans (14 vs. 3 Post January 6). In this period, Democrats used data to

contextualize the severity of the pandemic and the economic fallout. Kamala Harris (January 14, 2021) cited “384,000 Americans” lost to COVID-19, while Joe Biden (January 16, 2021) referenced “14 million Americans” behind on rent. Republicans used data sparingly, often to reinforce claims of election irregularities or to appeal to their base, as in Donald Trump’s January 6, 2021, claim that “50,000 ballots” were found late at night.

Overall, data-present coding reveals a clear partisan divergence: Democrats used data to mobilize supporters and later to reassure the public during a period of crisis, while Republicans used data primarily to contest electoral outcomes and highlight perceived institutional failures. The overall decline in data use mirrors the broader shift toward narrative-driven, crisis-response communication after January 6.

Finding 4 Interpretation

Across all three phases, attack rhetoric and data-present tweets shifted in ways that closely mirrored the broader political trajectory of the election cycle. In Phase 1 (pre-election), Republicans used attacks more frequently than Democrats, often targeting political opponents, the media, and external actors. While Democrats’ attacks were more commonly tied to policy disputes, such as COVID-19 relief. Republicans also used numerical evidence more often in this period, typically to highlight economic performance or projected policy outcomes. This early selected use of numbers reflects the initial cues that scholars identify as helping seed later participatory disinformation (Starbird et al., 2023).

In Phase 2 (post-election), both attacks and data use increased, but Republicans accounted for most of this rise: their attacks focused on media organizations, elected officials, and Democratic leaders, while their data use centered on ballot counts, polling discrepancies, and claims of procedural irregularities. These patterns align with research showing how elite rhetoric

fed into participatory misinformation, as unverified claims circulated between political leaders, partisan media, and highly engaged online communities (Starbird et al., 2023). Democrats, by contrast, used fewer attacks and relied on numerical evidence primarily to emphasize COVID-19 metrics, economic conditions, and the legitimacy of the election outcome.

By Phase 3 (post-January 6), both attacks and data use declined sharply, but the remaining examples were highly pointed. Republicans used attacks to criticize individual actors, such as Mike Pence, and used numbers to reinforce claims of election irregularities. These claims persisted even after being widely discredited, reflecting how participatory disinformation can sustain grievance narratives beyond the initial moment of contestation (Starbird et al., 2023). Democrats used both attacks and data to attribute responsibility for the January 6 violence and to contextualize the scale of the pandemic and economic crisis.

These patterns show that Republicans' use of attacks and numerical evidence was closely tied to contesting electoral procedures in the post-election period, in ways that overlapped with broader participatory disinformation dynamics. Democrats' use of these rhetorical tools shifted toward stabilization, reassurance, and institutional continuity.

Discussion

This study examined how political actors' language evolved across the October 20 to January 20 election cycle, a period marked by significant political events and shifting public narratives. Understanding this evolution is important because political leaders play a central role in shaping how individuals interpret electoral processes, legitimacy, and national events. The findings show that political language changed rapidly across the three phases of the timeline: pre-election communication emphasized mobilization, post-election discourse shifted to interpreting and contesting election results, and post-January 6 messaging reflected a more

selective, institution-focused approach. Together, these patterns demonstrated that political rhetoric did not remain static but adapted in response to changing political conditions and public pressures.

Research Question Answer

Overall, these findings demonstrate substantial evolution of political language over the period from October 20 to January 20. Political actors shifted from mobilization-focused communication before the election, to contestation-oriented messaging after November 3, and finally to more selective, stability-focused language following January 6. This evolution reflects how leaders adapted their rhetoric in response to changing political conditions, public uncertainty, and institutional pressures. The progression from activating voters, interpreting and disputing results, to emphasizing governance and institutional reassurance shows that political communication during this period was dynamic rather than static. Overall, the findings indicate that political actors adjusted both the purpose and content of their messaging as the election cycle unfolded, shaping how the public understood the election and its aftermath.

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the four findings reveal a coordinated evolution in political communication across the 2020 election cycle, with clear shifts in policy emphasis, framing strategies, attack rhetoric, and the use of numerical evidence. Across all dimensions, political language moved through three distinct phases: mobilization before the election, procedural contestation after November 3, and crisis-response communication following January 6. Although Democrats and Republicans participated in each phase of this rhetorical progression, they did so in different ways, producing a consistent partisan divergence across the findings.

Across Findings 1 and 2, policy language shifted from turnout-oriented messaging to procedural and legitimacy-focused communication. Before the election, Democrats dominated voting-related policy language and emphasized access, participation, and deadlines, while Republicans paired voting appeals with broader political messaging. After the election, however, Republicans became the primary users of Policy 7, shifting the function of voting language toward contesting ballot counting, verification, and certification. Democrats, by contrast, used voting language to reinforce the legitimacy of the results and call for acceptance of the outcome. By the January 6 period, both parties referenced voting policy far less frequently, and the remaining tweets focused on institutional procedures such as certification and transition. These patterns show that policy language did not remain stable but adapted to the political moment, with Republicans driving the post-election surge in procedural contestation.

Findings 3 and 4 show parallel shifts in framing, attack rhetoric, and data use. Before the election, both parties relied heavily on campaign-related frames, but Democrats emphasized mobilization while Republicans leaned on election-campaign messaging. After November 3, Republicans dramatically increased their use of the Voting Process frame and paired it with a risk in attack rhetoric and satirical claims about ballot counts, polling discrepancies, and procedural irregularities. Democrats, meanwhile, continued to emphasize frames related to public health, future plans, and patriotism, using fewer attacks and deploying numerical evidence primarily to contextualize COVID-19 metrics and economic conditions. Following January 6, both parties reduced their use of attacks and data, and their framing converged around patriotic, unity-oriented messages, though Republicans often highlighted individual actors or grievances, while Democrats emphasized governance, transition, and institutional stability.

Across all findings, a consistent pattern emerges: Republicans escalated procedural contestation in the post-election period, using policy language, framing, attacks, and numerical evidence to question ballot counting and institutional processes. Democrats, by contrast, shifted toward stabilization and legitimacy reinforcement, using policy references, frames, and data to emphasize continuity, public health, and governance. By the January 6 period, both parties adopted more selective and institution-focused communication, but the pathways they took to reach that point differed substantially. These cross-finding patterns demonstrate that political language during this period was not only dynamic but also deeply shaped by partisan goals, strategic adaptation, and the rapidly changing political environment.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the central role of political communication in shaping public understanding of democratic processes during periods of uncertainty. Across the election cycle, political actors used language not only to mobilize but also to support beneficiaries, communicate policy priorities, and construct narratives about legitimacy, institutional trust, and the meaning of unfolding events. The shift from mobilization before the election, to contestation afterward, and finally to stabilization following January 6 illustrates how elite rhetoric adapts to changing political conditions and can influence how citizens interpret the integrity of democratic outcomes. This progression reflects the crisis-oriented rhetorical shift documented in prior scholarship, where delegitimizing language gradually reframes political competition as a democratic threat (Entman, 1993; Nacos et al., 2022; Coombs & Holladay, 2022; van der Meer, 2018).

More broadly, the results show that political language is highly responsive to moments of tension and ambiguity. When electoral outcomes were contested, rhetorical strategies shifted

toward procedural claims, challenges to institutional processes, and interpretations of legitimacy. When the crisis peaked on January 6, communication narrowed toward unity, governance, and institutional continuity. These patterns suggest that elite rhetoric can both escalate and de-escalate public uncertainty, depending on how leaders choose to frame events. The post-election emphasis on irregularities and procedural doubt aligns with research on participatory disinformation, which shows that elite cues, partisan media, and online networks collectively amplify misleading narratives and transform isolated claims into broader frames of illegitimacy (Starbird et al., 2023; Prochaska et al., 2023; Lazer et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2022).

Finally, this study underscores the broader democratic implications of elite communication in a digital environment. Because political messages circulate rapidly and widely on social media, shifts in tone, framing, and emphasis can have immediate downstream effects on public perception. The evolution of political language across this period demonstrates how elite cues can shape collective interpretations of democratic events, increase trust in institutions, and contribute to the stabilization or destabilization of public narratives during moments of national significance. These dynamics mirror findings from media ecosystem research, showing how repetition and amplification help standardize contested narratives (Painter & Fernandes, 2022; Election Integrity Partnership, 2021; Gates, 2023). They also resonate with Social Identity Theory, illustrating how leaders use identity cues to signal loyalty, define out-groups, and frame legitimacy in ways that resonate differently across partisan communities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Importantly, these patterns did not unfold uniformly across parties. As outlined in the introduction, Democratic and Republican leaders advanced distinct and often competing narratives across the election, post-election dispute, and January 6 period. These partisan

differences in framing shaped how their respective audiences interpreted legitimacy, crisis, and democratic stability, reinforcing the central comparative focus of this study. Taken together, the findings demonstrate how elite rhetoric, identity signaling, media amplification, and participatory disinformation jointly contributed to the divergent narratives that defined this period.

Practical Implications

These findings highlight several important implications for journalists, educators, policymakers, and the public. First, the evolution of political language across the election cycle underscores the responsibility political leaders hold during periods of uncertainty. Because many Americans rely on political actors' public communication, especially on platforms like Twitter, to understand unfolding events, shifts from mobilization to contestation can directly influence how citizens interpret electoral legitimacy. When leaders publicly question election results, their followers often adopt those interpretations, reinforcing research showing that elite cues strongly shape public attitudes during contested political moments.

Second, the findings suggest that journalists and media organizations must be attentive to how they report on elite rhetoric during legitimacy crises. The post-election shift toward procedural and outcome-focused messaging demonstrates how easily ambiguous or misleading claims can be amplified when repeated without context. Journalists play a key role in contextualizing such statements, preventing the stabilization of misinformation narratives that can erode trust in democratic institutions.

Finally, the findings have implications for policymakers and social media platforms. The decline in attacks and data use after January 6 suggests that rhetorical patterns can serve as early indicators of escalating tension or declining institutional trust. Monitoring these shifts may help

identify moments when misinformation or legitimacy narratives are likely to intensify. Understanding these rhetorical dynamics can inform strategies for crisis communication, platform governance, and public messaging during future democratic disruptions.

Future Research

Future research should examine how the public interpreted the rhetorical shifts identified in this study, as this project focused exclusively on elite discourse rather than audience reception. Expanding to public responses would help clarify how mobilization, contestation, and crisis-response messaging shape citizens' perceptions of legitimacy and democratic processes.

Because this analysis centered on Twitter to maintain a manageable scope, future work could also explore other platforms where election narratives circulated differently, including Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, or fringe networks. Similarly, this study examined a specific set of political actors, leaving room for research that incorporates a broader communication ecosystem, including state-level officials, media figures, or influential communities.

Methodologically, mixed-methods and computational approaches could complement manual coding by capturing rhetorical patterns at larger scales and identifying how narratives spread across networks. These extensions would deepen understanding of how evolving political language interacts with public interpretation, digital infrastructure, and democratic life in the United States.

Trustworthiness and Validity

To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, multiple strategies were used to enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through intercoder reliability testing, in which 500 Tweets were double-coded using a refined codebook, resulting in strong agreement across all variables. Dependability was supported by maintaining consistent

coding procedures, including standardized data preparation, a fixed coding framework, and the use of randomized Tweets to reduce coder bias. Confirmability was enhanced by clearly defined decision rules, transparent coding categories, and an audit trail documenting how disagreements were resolved. While the findings are specific to the selected political actors and timeframe, the longitudinal design and systematic coding approach supported the transferability of insights to broader discussions of political communication during periods of electoral uncertainty.

Ethical Considerations

All data used in this study were publicly available communications produced by elected officials and political leaders and therefore did not involve private or sensitive information. Because the project relies exclusively on archival, publicly accessible Tweets and speeches, it does not require approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) or from human subjects. No deception, intervention, or interaction with individuals occurred at any stage of the research process. Care was taken to accurately represent each Tweet as originally posted, and all data was handled to preserve the integrity of the public record.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, because this study relies on archival Twitter data, some Tweets may have been deleted or inconsistently timestamped, requiring the use of multiple archives such as the Wayback Machine to reconstruct the dataset as accurately as possible. Second, Twitter represents only one mode of political communication, and therefore does not capture speeches, press releases, interviews, or behind-the-scenes messaging that may also shape public narratives. Third, tweet volume varied substantially across political actors, which may influence the relative prominence of certain patterns. Fourth, although the coding framework was systematically developed, the frame variable includes 16 categories, increasing

the likelihood of coder disagreement and requiring interpretive judgment. Finally, the findings are specific to the selected actors and the October 20 to January 20 timeframe and are not intended to generalize beyond this political moment. These limitations do not undermine the study's value but provide important context for interpreting the results.

Final Takeaway

Taken together, the findings show that political language during the 2020 election and January 6th period evolved rapidly in response to shifting political conditions and escalating uncertainty. Across the three phases, political actors adjusted their messaging strategies, shaping public understanding of legitimacy, democracy, and institutional stability. Democratic institutions continue to face stress, understanding how elite rhetoric constructs meaning, and how those meanings circulate through digital networks, remains essential for navigating political life in an increasingly polarized environment.

Appendix

Appendix A: Codebook

Instructions

- a) *Identify Political Content*
 - a. *Determine whether the Tweet mentions a political issue and/or a policy.*
 - i. *If yes, categorize it using the predefined issue/policy categories.*
- b) *Identify Frames*
 - a. *Review the list of available frames.*
 - i. *Select one frame that appears in the Tweet and record the corresponding frame number.*
- c) *Identify Attacks*
 - a. *Assess whether the Tweet contains an attack.*
 - i. *If an attack is present, specify the type of attack using the provided attack categories.*
- d) *Identify Data*
 - a. *Check whether the Tweet includes any form of data (e.g., statistics, numerical evidence)*
 - i. *Indicate whether data is present.*

1. Political Issues and/or Policy

Select the primary category that best represents the content of the Tweet. The Tweet must either reference a primary category directly (e.g., by mentioning an issue area, topic, or domain) *or* mention a specific policy related to that category.

- 0) None Present
 - a. Select this category when the Tweet does not reference a primary category or a specific policy related to that category, even implicitly.
- 1) International Relations
 - a. References to relationships, interactions, or tensions between the United States and foreign governments or international organizations without emphasizing a specific U.S. policy decision (e.g., alliances, diplomacy in general, global standing).
- 2) Foreign Policy
 - a. References to specific U.S. government decisions or actions abroad, such as military intervention, sanctions, treaties, or formal diplomatic strategies.
- 3) Healthcare
 - a. Issues and policies related to the medical care system, including insurance coverage, healthcare costs, hospitals, physicians, prescription drugs, and the Affordable Care Act.
- 4) Economics

- a. Issues/Policies involving jobs, economic growth, taxes, government spending, trade, financial markets, and economic relief efforts.
- 5) Abortion
 - a. Debates over access to abortion services, restrictions, reproductive rights, and federal or state policies affecting abortion legality and availability.
- 6) Immigration
 - a. Issues and policies governing entry, residency, asylum, border security, refugee admissions, and enforcement practices.
- 7) Voting
 - a. Issues/Policies related to elections, voting access, mail-in ballots, voter ID laws, election security, and administration of the 2020 election.
- 8) Education
 - a. Issues/Policies affecting K-12 and higher education, including school funding, curriculum, student debt, and pandemic-related school closures or remote learning.
- 9) COVID-19
 - a. Issues and policies specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including vaccines, mask mandates, lockdowns, testing, and federal or state pandemic responses.
 - i. If a Tweet specifically discusses COVID-19, code it as COVID-19 rather than Healthcare.
- 10) Climate/Environmental
 - a. Issues/Policies debates related to climate change, including environmental regulation, carbon emissions, renewable energy, pollution control, and federal or state actions addressing climate impacts.
- 11) Guns
 - a. Issues/Policies related to firearms in the United States, including laws, regulations, ownership, access, background checks, and debates about measures intended to address gun violence.
- 12) Military/National Defense
 - a. Issues/Policies related to the U.S. military, national defense, armed forces, defense spending, military strategy, veterans, or related security issues.
- 13) Other
 - a. Any political issue not captured above, such as policing, criminal justice, civil rights, etc.

2. Frame

Select the theme (s) that best represent the content of the Tweet.

- 0) No Frame
- 1) Democracy - Messages that affirm or criticize democratic governance as a legitimate, valued system, including representation and democratic norms.

- 2) Voting Processes – Messages that focus specifically on the mechanics, fairness, or outcomes of elections or voting procedures, including claims of fraud or irregularities.
- 3) Mobilization - Messages that explicitly urge or encourage action, such as voting, attending rallies, donating, or participating in political activities.
- 4) Election Campaign - Messages that promote or criticize candidate(s), positively or negatively, in any presidential or non-presidential race during the 2020 election cycle.
- 5) Public Health - Messages that address population-level health concerns, systems, or outcomes.
- 6) Media - Messages that discuss content, trust, influence, or distrust in media institutions.
- 7) Partisanship - Messages that affirm political party affiliation as a meaningful social or political identity.
- 8) Patriotism - Messages that show loyalty, pride, or devotion to the nation.
- 9) Unity - Messages that emphasize togetherness, cooperation, or shared purpose among people or groups, without specifying that this unity applies to the nation.
- 10) National Character - Messages that have defined traits or values of the nation and/or its people.
- 11) Constitution - Messages that reference the Constitution and their different understandings.⁵
- 12) Leadership - Messages that evaluate or emphasize the role, quality, or importance of leaders.
- 13) Religion/Faith - Messages that reference religious beliefs or faith-based moral principles.
- 14) Race in the United States - Messages that show fairness, equality, or reform related to race
- 15) Future Plans - Messages that address expectations for the future, either positive or negative.
- 16) Other (Specify)- Used when none of the defined frames apply, but the Tweet still contains a discernible framing or issue emphasis that does not align with any existing frame.

3. Attack Present

Occurs when a Tweet includes a direct, targeted, and negative statement about a policy, a person (whether political or not), the media, or a political party. This includes insults, derogatory language, or explicit criticism. An attack goes beyond expressing a personal view and involves a clear negative jab.

- *Opinion (not an attack): “I disagree with their policy.”*
 - *Attack: “Their policy is poorly designed, and they lack the competence to lead.”*
- 0) No Attack

- a. Select No if the Tweet expresses disagreement or opinion without a targeted negative jab.

- 1) Yes Attack

- a. Select Yes if the Tweet contains a direct and negative statement targeting a person, group, institution, policy, or political party. This includes insults, accusations, or claims of incompetence or wrongdoing.

4. Data Present

Does the Tweet contain Data (Quantitative Data; Percentages, etc.)? Numbers (hundreds or millions) mentioned as approximations, rather than as data points, should not be counted.

- 0) No

- a. Mentions of numbers without evidentiary intent (e.g., “millions of people,” “many times”) should be coded as No.

- 1) Yes

- a. Select Yes if the Tweet includes specific quantitative information, such as statistics, percentages, totals, or numerical comparisons used as evidence.

General Guidance for Coders:

- When in doubt, prioritize the central message of the Tweet over secondary references. Use the most specific applicable category or frame and avoid “Other” unless no defined option reasonably applies.

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