

From election to insurrection

*A Speech Act Theory study of Donald Trump's tweets in the wake of the
2020 election.*

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**English, bachelor's level
2022**

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Abstract

This essay utilizes Speech Act Theory to assess Donald Trump's role in inciting the riot that took place in Washington D.C. on the 6th of January, 2021 and culminated with the attack on the Capitol building. For the purposes of the study a corpus was created with tweets collected from the Trump Twitter Archive. The tweets cover the span between the latest presidential election, on the 3rd of November, 2020, to the day of the attack. The corpus was read manually and sorted into themes. The themes that emerged show that: a) Trump was convinced of his victory, b) felt that the election was rigged, c) accused news networks, the Democrats and even prominent Republicans for his loss, and d) called the people for action. A quantitative method that identified the most common words in the corpus corroborated the identification of the described themes. The themes were compared to Speech Act Theory's felicitous conditions for directive speech acts. The study found that Trump's tweets satisfy the conditions for the successful directive speech acts of *Order* and *Command*, thus providing grounds to make the case that he was responsible for inciting the attack.

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1 Introduction

Online platforms with their global reach, high accessibility, and their even higher speed of information exchange have provided the world with the space and opportunity for global debates on every issue. They have also provided the opportunity for propaganda, disinformation, and tactics of various sorts. Cyber security experts call this phenomenon the *weaponization* of social media (Biały, 2017). A most notable example of this is the former U.S. President Donald Trump.

Trump had an enormous online presence during his presidency, particularly on the social media platform Twitter. Twitter allowed Trump to address his supporters directly and frequently, making him the President that interacted the most closely with his citizens. Twitter also benefited from this, since through Trump it managed to “establish itself as the most important global conduit of political communication in the second decade of the twenty-first century” (Shaw et al., 2021).

This study focuses on the tweets Trumped tweeted between the 3rd of November, 2020, the day of the latest presidential election, to the 6th of January, 2021, the day when Trump supporters attacked the Capitol building in Washington D.C.

1.1 Aim

This essay aims to assess whether Donald Trump’s tweets during the specified period were directive speech acts aimed at his supporters to have them overturn the results of the election.

The following questions are addressed :

- a. What are the main themes in Trump’s tweets?
- b. To what extent do Trump’s tweets satisfy the necessary felicity conditions for being considered successful directive speech acts?
- c. What grounds are there for the claim that Trump incited the attack on the Capitol?
- d. What effect do the 6th of January tweets have as a counterclaim that Trump did not solicit the attack?

2 Background

A historical background of the days from the election and leading up to the 2021 Capitol attack is presented to provide the necessary context for the President's tweets. The section is followed by a review of speech act theory, and related previous research.

2.1 Historical background

The 59th U.S. presidential election took place on the 3rd of November, 2020, with the then incumbent President Donald J. Trump as the Republican candidate, and Joe R. Biden Jr. representing the Democrats. By the 7th of November, 2020, the ballots had shown that Biden had won the election (Siders et al., 2020). However, the Trump presidency continued to dispute the result and did not concede to handing over the office until the 7th of January, 2021, one day after the storming of the Capitol by Trump supporters (Gearan & DeBonis, 2021).

Trump's role in the assault on the Capitol has been under scrutiny by both media and the U.S. government. In the days following the election, Trump used his personal account on the social media platform Twitter to post messages where he disputed the results and called for action against them. Throughout November and December, Trump's lawyers filed a range of lawsuits on the grounds that election fraud had been committed. All the lawsuits were eventually dropped due to lack of evidence (Sherman & Valverde, 2021). Despite that, Trump continued his online claims that the election had been fraudulent. Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, accused the Dominion Systems voting machine of tampering with the votes, an accusation that a state audit discarded as unfounded (Wolfe & Heavey, 2021).

Major online platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, collectively nicknamed the *Big Tech*, had started flagging and fact-checking Trump's posts and tweets already in the months preceding the election (Cohen, 2020; Robertson et al., 2020). This policy led the most extremist groups amongst Trump's followers to use alternative platforms, referred to as the *Alt-tech* (Donovan et al., 2019). When Donald Trump tweeted that a big protest would be held in Washington D.C. on the 6th of January, those groups used Alt-tech platforms to organize and fund the protest (Frenkel, 2021; Kuznia et al., 2021; Lytvynenko & Hensley-Clancy, 2021), something that the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was seemingly aware of (Barrett & Zapotosky, 2021).

On the 6th of January, Trump followers had gathered at the Ellipse where they listened to President Trump's speech, in which he urged them to walk to the Capitol building (Trump, 2021). A group of his supporters breached into the Capitol building. The event resulted in the deaths of five people (Evelyn, 2021; McEvoy, 2021). In the trials that followed, a significant number of arrestees claimed that they had been following Trump's orders (Pape & Ruby, 2021).

Donald Trump's conduct during that period led to his second impeachment trial under the charge of incitement to resurrection (Fandos, 2021). His tweets also led to a permanent suspension of his personal Twitter account "due to the risk of further incitement of violence", as was explained

in the platform's official blog (Twitter, 2021). In the same blog post, Twitter explains the reasons for that decision:

...our determination is that [President Trump's tweets] are likely to inspire others to replicate the violent acts that took place on January 6, 2021, and that there are multiple indicators that they are being received and understood as encouragement to do so.

Donald Trump was eventually acquitted by the U.S. senate with 57 senators voting in favor of his impeachment and 43 against it. A majority of 67 votes would have been needed for the former President to be convicted (Politico, 2021).

2.2 Theoretical background

In the following sections, the term Speaker is used as a shorthand for the sender of a message, whether that message is an utterance or in a written form. Likewise, the term Hearer signifies the recipient of a message. The choice of the terms was based on the terminology found in Searle (1975).

2.2.1 Speech act theory

In the 1960s, John L. Austin, a philosopher of language, argued that language is more than describing the world or evaluating information. It is also the performing of actions. Austin called those actions *speech acts* and distinguished three main kinds of them: locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts (Austin, 1962). A speaker's utterance is a locutionary act per se, as it has a certain sense and reference. It can also perform an illocutionary act, such as commands, promises, questions, apologies (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). When the utterance has an effect on the recipient, for example it pleases, amuses, embarrasses or scares them, then a perlocutionary act is also performed.

Speech act theory was further established and expanded by John R. Searle, who created a typology of illocutionary acts. According to Searle, illocutionary speech acts are "the minimal units of human communication" (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985, p. 1). An illocutionary act is composed of an illocutionary force F and a propositional content P. In the following examples, the two sentences have the same propositional content P, but different illocutionary forces F:

Could you hand me the book? (F = request)
Hand me the book. (F = command)

In contrast, the following examples have the same force (F = question), but different contents:

When is your exam?
 Who is making breakfast?

Natural languages have a variety of ways for expressing illocutionary forces (F). Those ways can be word order, the verb's mood, intonation, but also punctuation and graphic elements in written language (Searle & Vandervecken, 1985).

It is of importance to note that Speech Act Theory is influenced by Grice's *cooperative principle*, according to which the participants in any form of conversation aim to "make [their] conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which [they] are engaged" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). Thus, as a post-Gricean theory, Speech Act theory assumes cooperation between Speaker and Hearer (Dominicy & Franken, 2002). Therefore, speech acts can be performed both directly and indirectly as the following examples show:

I apologize for making you wait. (F = apology; direct speech act using the verb *apologize*)

It was wrong of me not to call you. (F = apology; indirect speech act)

Searle systematized and categorized speech acts into five types: *assertives*, *commissives*, *directives*, *declaratives* and *expressives* (Searle, 1969, 1975). Examples of the assertive type are to deny, remind, complain or suggest. Commissives are speech acts where the speaker commits to something, by promising, vowing, pledging or threatening. Directives include acts such as to recommend, direct, urge, demand or command. Examples of declaratives are to approve, nominate, endorse or appoint. Lastly, to thank, congratulate or complain are instances of expressives (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). Each type of speech act has its own set of conditions for the successful, or in Searle's terminology *felicitous*, realization of the act.

For the successful performance of a commissive speech act, such as a promise, the felicity conditions are described and presented in Table 1.

Table 1 The felicity conditions for the commissive speech act of a promise (Searle, 1969, 1975)

<i>Felicity Conditions</i>	<i>Commissive (promise)</i>
preparatory conditions	The Speaker is able to perform the Act. The Hearer wants the Speaker to perform the Act.
sincerity condition	The Speaker intends to do the Act.
propositional content condition	The Speaker predicates a future Act of the Speaker.
essential condition	Counts as an undertaking by the Speaker of an obligation to do the Act.

For a directive, such as a request, order, or command, to be performed successfully, the conditions in Table 2 need to be met.

Table 2 The felicity conditions for the directive speech act of a request (Searle, 1969, 1975)

<i>Felicity Conditions</i>	<i>Directive (request)</i>
preparatory condition	The Hearer is able to perform the Act. Additionally, for <i>Order</i> and <i>Command</i> : The Speaker must be in a position of authority over the Hearer.
sincerity condition	The Speaker wants the Hearer to perform the Act.
propositional content condition	The Speaker predicates a future Act of the Hearer.
essential condition	Counts as an attempt by the Speaker to get the Hearer to do the Act.

All successful directive speech acts meet the above four conditions. An additional preparatory condition for the directives of *Order* and *Command* is that the Speaker must be in a position of authority over the Hearer (Searle, 1969).

Speech acts per se are neither benign nor malignant. However, just like physical acts, some speech acts can be illegal when performed in certain contexts or with a specific intent.

2.2.2 Illegal Speech acts

Illegal speech acts could be described as speech acts that involve using language to perform criminal activity. Illegal speech acts have been the topic of both scientific discussion, and of courtroom-related, real cases, thus establishing forensic linguistics as a method of assessing and determining culpability (Kaplan, 2016). As mentioned previously, “speech acts can also be accomplished indirectly” (Tiersma & Solan, 2012, p. 341). The forensic linguist Roger Shuy uses the term *language crimes* (Shuy, 1993) and gives as examples crimes such as bribery, solicitation, business fraud, perjury and threatening, among others (Shuy, 2005). Trump was accused of incitement, a crime that is frequently linked to solicitation and is defined as *the act or an instance of provoking, urging on, or stirring up... The act of persuading another person to commit a crime* (Garner, 2019).

2.2.3 Previous research on Trump’s discourse

Trump’s rhetoric style has been the focus of many studies. Sclafani (2017) notes what she calls his use of *epistrophic punctuation*, that is his deliberate repetition of certain phrases such as ‘Believe me’ and ‘so sad’. Stange (2020) investigates Trump’s use of intensifiers such as *very*, *totally*, *so*, and confirms that he uses them more frequently than other political speakers. As Sorlin (2021)

explains, Trump's rhetoric style with its use of imprecise quantifications, semantically vacuous intensifiers, impersonal stances and asking questions with seemingly obvious answers, has the effect of obscuring the lack of tangible evidence. Sorlin adds to the list his use of pronouns to implicate his supporters in his own thoughts, and what she calls Trump's *iceberg rhetoric*, a technique of implying that he knows more than he lets on.

Trump's habit of comparing politics to war is illustrated in Koch (2020), whose description of the former President's zero-sum thinking further supports the claim that Trump attempts to construct a moral binary between Democrats and Republicans (Schertzer & Woods, 2021). This artificially exaggerated polarization between the *Us*, faithful Republicans and the People, on one hand and *Them*, Democrats, RINOs (Republicans In Name Only), Fake News, could fall into the definition that Roberts-Miller gives for demagoguery:

a polarizing discourse that promises stability, certainty, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric through framing public policy in terms of the degree to which and means by which (not whether) the out-group should be punished/scapagoated for the current problems of the in-group (Roberts-Miller, 2019, p. 16, italics in original)

Several researchers and journalists have noted a similarity between Trump's style and populism (Gerbaudo, 2018; Mercieca, 2016; Kentish, 2017), and some have even compared it to fascist rhetoric (Shaw et al., 2021).

The following part reviews the methods used to examine Trump's tweets.

3 Material and Methodology

3.1 Selection of the material

An analysis of Trump's tweets was made using texts from his personal account on the social media platform Twitter (@realDonaldTrump). Since Twitter has suspended Trump's accounts and those tweets are no longer available via the platform, the source material was drawn from an independent project called the Trump Twitter Archive, also referred to as the TTA (Trump Twitter Archive, 2022). The project has used an openly available code to scrape tweets from Twitter (Brown, 2021). The TTA has established itself as a reliable source, referenced in both major media (Van Syckle, 2019) and research articles (Meeks, 2019).

The tweets used in this essay form a corpus that spans the period between the 3rd of November, 2020, which is the date of the latest presidential election, to the 8th of January, 2021, two days after the assault on the Capitol. That marks the day that Trump's account was suspended from Twitter, thus starting a *deplatforming* of the former President and his suspension on several online sites (Thierer, 2021). The last recorded tweet from that account was tweeted on the 6th of January. The President's retweets were removed from the sample, bringing the total amount of tweets to 989. Although retweets are undoubtedly a source of useful information, the choice to remove retweets was justified by the intent to focus on the former President's own text production.

To create the corpus for this study, the data was downloaded from the TTA webpage and saved as a .json file using the site's in-built export function. The .json format of the file is optimal for storing and transmitting simple data structures, making it an obvious choice for building small corpora. The downloaded corpus was then turned into a list of strings saved as a simple text file. The strings were tokenized using the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK), an open source Python library for Natural Language Processing. Although punctuation and uppercase letters give information on a writer's stylistic choices and are therefore relevant in assessing a text's illocutionary force, they are irrelevant for measuring the frequency distribution of single words. Punctuation was therefore removed, and all tokens were turned into lowercase. High occurrence words, termed *stopwords* in NLTK, such as *I, we, are, and*, etc. were removed from the list. This step removed the words with a grammatical function, such as pronouns and articles, leaving lexical terms in the corpus. A frequency distribution table was then made with the remaining tokens.

3.2 Methodology

To provide a solid basis for interpreting the corpus, two methods of analysis were chosen. First a qualitative approach where the corpus was read as a text and the themes were identified manually. The tweets were categorized in broad subjects, with an overlap between themes occurring naturally. The identified themes had a two-fold function. Firstly, they provided context that shed

light on Trump's claims and urges aimed at other Republicans as well as the American people. Additionally, they were compared to the necessary felicity conditions for directive speech acts.

This approach was combined with a quantitative and replicable method to corroborate the results. A frequency distribution of the words in the corpus attested that the most common lexical items correspond to the themes identified in the manual analysis. Additionally, the frequency of certain phrases that function as, what Sclafani (2017) calls epistrophic punctuation, was also documented.

4 Results

This section presents the results of the two methods. Throughout the period under study, some themes remain constant whereas new topics appear towards the end. The main themes are Trump's claims to have won and his accusations that the election was fraudulent. Fake news and its association to the Radical Left is also a frequent topic in his tweets. Lastly, a call to action along with a tendency to present the electoral proceedings as a fight is a theme that becomes more prominent as the 6th of January approaches. These themes were identified manually, but an automated approach showed correspondence between the themes and the most frequent words in the corpus. Table 3 shows the number of instances of the twenty most common content words.

Table 3 The 20 most common content words in Trump's tweets

<i>Word</i>	<i>Counts</i>	<i>Word</i>	<i>Counts</i>
election	220	win	67
votes	113	trump	62
great	107	country	61
people	97	fake	57
big	88	ballots	56
georgia	88	many	55
states	79	news	55
state	74	get	52
won	74	biden	50
fraud	68	rigged	50

In the following section, bold font is used to highlight phrases and words deemed important in the context.

4.1 The Big WIN

The first theme in the tweets of the selected period is Trump claiming victory. The frequency of the terms won and win in the corpus support the decision to see this as a recurring theme. The word won appears 74 times and the term win, as a verb and a noun, appears 67 times, making them the 9th and 11th most common words respectively in the corpus.

The temporal aspect of the win is elusive. In some of the tweets it is presented as a fact that has taken place.

Nov 5th 2020 - 11:07:27 AM EST
Big legal **win** in Pennsylvania!

Whereas in other tweets, it is in the future.

Nov 15th 2020 - 9:16:11 AM EST
RIGGED ELECTION. **WE WILL WIN!**

There are tweets where the win is presented in a conditional way, hinging on the actions of other figures, such as former Vice President Mike Pence whom Trump wants to overturn the election results, or the governor of Georgia Brian Kemp who refused to recount the cast votes despite Trump's claims that there was fraud. This can be seen in the use of modal verbs, such as *would*.

Dec 7th 2020 - 10:37:34 AM EST
The Republican Governor of Georgia refuses to do signature verification, **which would give us an easy win**. What's wrong with this guy? What is he hiding?

Another way in which this is achieved is with the use of if-clauses, as in the example:

Nov 12th 2020 - 8:20:18 AM EST
From 200,000 votes to less than 10,000 votes. **If we can audit the total votes cast, we will easily win Arizona** also! <https://t.co/3eZHjdZL98>

Jan 6th 2021 - 1:00:50 AM EST
If Vice President @Mike_Pence comes through for us, we will win the Presidency. Many States want to decertify the mistake they made in certifying incorrect & even fraudulent numbers in a process NOT approved by their State Legislatures (which it must be). Mike can send it back!

The *win* can also refer to different things. In the beginning of the selected period, the win is about the presidential elections.

Nov 7th 2020 - 10:36:36 AM EST
I WON THIS ELECTION, BY A LOT!

As the poll results started to shift in favor of Joe Biden, winning started to focus more on the separate states, and particularly on the State of Georgia, even though Pennsylvania, Michigan, Arizona and a few others are also mentioned. Those states correspond well to the so called *swing states* of the election, states where neither party has a stronghold so they could be won by either representative.

Nov 9th 2020 - 3:21:43 PM EST
Georgia will be a big presidential win, as it was the night of the Election!

Nov 18th 2020 - 11:04:29 AM EST
The Great State of **Michigan**, with votes being far greater than the number of people who voted, cannot certify the election. The Democrats cheated big time, and got caught. A Republican **WIN!**

Dec 30th 2020 - 9:26:16 AM EST

Hearings from Atlanta on the **Georgia Election** overturn now being broadcast. Check it out. @OANN @newsmax and many more. @BrianKempGA should resign from office. He is an obstructionist who refuses to admit that we won Georgia, BIG! **Also won the other Swing States.**

Another characteristic of the win is how *big* and *easy* it is. The word win as a noun is paired with *big*, *landslide* and *easy*. As a verb, Trump will win or has won *easily* and *quickly*.

Dec 3rd 2020 - 2:01:39 PM EST

Wow! Blockbuster testimony taking place right now in Georgia. Ballot stuffing by Dems when Republicans were forced to leave the large counting room. Plenty more coming, but this alone leads to **an easy win** of the State!

Dec 17th 2020 - 9:28:00 PM EST

We **won** Wisconsin **big**. They rigged the vote! <https://t.co/TRBRmBiMtv>

Dec 21st 2020 - 10:30:09 AM EST

Governor @BrianKempGA and his puppet @GeoffDuncanGA, together with the Secretary of State of Georgia, are very slow on Signature Verification, and won't allow Fulton County to be examined. What are these RINOS hiding? **We will easily win** Presidential State race. @KLoeffler and....

Trump uses logical fallacies to create arguments that support his win. His arguments being in essence that, if proof of fraud is found, then Trump has won, and therefore makes a beforehand claim to the specific state.

Nov 4th 2020 - 4:56:10 PM EST

We have claimed, for Electoral Vote purposes, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (which won't allow legal observers) the State of Georgia, and the State of North Carolina, each one of which has a BIG Trump lead. Additionally, **we hereby claim the State of Michigan if, in fact,.....**

Nov 4th 2020 - 4:56:11 PM EST

.....there was a large number of secretly dumped ballots as has been widely reported!

Another of Trump's claims is that Republican Poll Watchers were not allowed to be present during the counting process, a claim that was the basis for the lawsuits that his lawyers filed and that were later dropped due to lack of evidence. Still, in his tweets Trump uses that as an argument to prove his victory.

Nov 11th 2020 - 7:13:08 PM EST

Nobody wants to report that **Pennsylvania and Michigan didn't allow our Poll Watchers and/or Vote Observers to Watch or Observe**. This is responsible for hundreds of thousands of votes that should not be allowed to count. **Therefore, I easily win both states**. Report the News!

Nov 14th 2020 - 3:57:08 PM EST

They wouldn't let our Poll Watchers and Observers into the Counting Rooms. We win on that alone!

Nov 6th 2020 - 2:22:47 AM EST

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

In his tweets Trump expresses certainty that he has won the election with a good margin. However, that was not what the polls were showing. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 present two themes that relate to what Trump pointed out as reasons for the discrepancy between his perceived victory and the official result of the election.

4.2 The rigged election

A second theme that appears early in Trump's tweets is that of a fraudulent election. Looking at pure numbers, the terms VOTES (113 counts), FRAUD (58 counts), FAKE (57 counts), BALLOTS (56 counts), and RIGGED (50 counts), all appear in the top 30 most frequently used words of the corpus. Even though this was considered to be the most secure presidential election to date, Trump appears to dispute that. Starting on the 4th of November, Trump begins to doubt the validity of mail-in ballots.

Nov 4th 2020 - 12:49:04 AM EST

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

The word *dumps* in his tweets refers to what is otherwise called *drops*, the reporting periods between the counting of ballots. They are described as *surprise dumps* that made the Republican lead *magically disappear*.

Nov 4th 2020 - 10:04:04 AM EST

Last night I was leading, often solidly, in many key States, in almost all instances Democrat run & controlled. Then, one by one, they started to magically disappear as **surprise ballot dumps** were counted. VERY STRANGE, and the "pollsters" got it completely & historically wrong!

Nov 4th 2020 - 10:17:14 AM EST

How come every time they count **Mail-In ballot dumps** they are so devastating in their percentage and power of destruction?

The word fraud appears first on the 5th of November, while the catchphrase rigged election makes its appearance five days later. That phrase appears a total of 47 times, three of which as a tweet on its own, and it is often capitalized. Nearly every mention of VOTES and BALLOTS is in connection to fraud.

Nov 15th 2020 - 9:16:11 AM EST

RIGGED ELECTION. WE WILL WIN!

Dec 4th 2020 - 8:55:25 AM EST
RIGGED ELECTION!

It is occasionally implied that Trump is in possession of more information than he lets his supporters know and that this information will be released at some unspecified point in the future.

Nov 9th 2020 - 2:54:33 PM EST
Nevada is turning out to be a cesspool of **Fake Votes**. @mschlapp & @AdamLaxalt **are finding things that, when released, will be absolutely shocking!**

Intertwined with the theme of a rigged election is the comparison of the electoral process to a war and a fight. Fighting metaphors abound, with the word FIGHT occurring in 18 tweets, FIGHTING in ten (one being about Idlib province in Syria), FOUGHT in two.

Nov 22nd 2020 - 7:24:13 AM EST
It's all about the signatures on the envelopes. Why are the Democrats **fighting** so hard to hide them. We will find massive numbers of fraudulent ballots. The signatures won't match. **Fight hard Republicans**. Don't let them destroy the evidence! <https://t.co/qN2jHGeWEN>

Nov 30th 2020 - 8:41:43 AM EST
I'm not fighting for me, I'm fighting for the 74,000,000 million people (not including the many Trump ballots that were "tossed"), a record for a sitting President, who voted for me!

The word WAR in reference to the Democrats appears once, in a hypothetical scenario where the Democrats had an election stolen from them.

Dec 26th 2020 - 8:00:14 AM EST
If a Democrat Presidential Candidate had an Election Rigged & Stolen, with proof of such acts at a level never seen before, the Democrat Senators would consider it **an act of war, and fight to the death**. Mitch & the Republicans do NOTHING, just want to let it pass. NO FIGHT!

In another tweet, Trump asserts that feeling is knowing, and consequently presents feelings as evidence that the election was rigged.

Dec 10th 2020 - 9:24:04 AM EST
The Supreme Court has a chance to save our Country from the greatest Election abuse in the history of the United States. **78% of the people feel (know!) the Election was RIGGED.**

The validity of the Dominion voting system and of the security of the elections is brought into question by the former President, at times in self-contradictory ways. One such example is the former President implying that China might have interfered with the elections. Modals such as 'may' and 'could', and adverbs like 'perhaps' are used to hint at the implication of China.

Dec 19th 2020 - 11:30:11 AM EST

The Cyber Hack is far greater in the Fake News Media than in actuality. I have been fully briefed and everything is well under control. Russia, Russia, Russia is the priority chant when anything happens because Lamestream is, for mostly financial reasons, **petrified of...**

Dec 19th 2020 - 11:30:11 AM EST

...discussing the possibility that it may be China (it may!). There **could** also have been a hit on our ridiculous voting machines during the election, which is now obvious that I won big, making it an even more corrupted embarrassment for the USA. @DNI_Ratcliffe @SecPompeo

Those tweets contrast with Trump's earlier tweet on how the 2020 election was *impenetrable by foreign powers*.

Nov 17th 2020 - 7:25:56 PM EST

The only thing secure about our 2020 Election was that it was **virtually impenetrable by foreign powers**. On that, the Trump Administration takes great credit. Unfortunately, the Radical Left Democrats, Dominion, and others, were perhaps more successful!

These tweets indicate that Trump believed himself to be cheated of an electoral victory and blamed the poll results to fraudulent methods. The tweets further show that Trump challenged the results, something that is also shown by the lawsuits filed by his lawyers, and viewed the process as a fight that he intended to keep fighting.

4.3 FAKE NEWS! and the Radical Left

The third theme that appears in the corpus is the one about the *fake news networks*, also described as the *Lamestream Media*. The phrase FAKE NEWS appears 35 times in the corpus, in a way that fits Sclafani's description of Trump's use of catchphrases as epistrophic punctuation (2017). The first instance of this phrase in relation to the election is on the 11th of November and it makes frequent appearances until the 3rd of January.

Nov 15th 2020 - 9:19:51 AM EST

He only won in the eyes of the **FAKE NEWS MEDIA**. I concede NOTHING! We have a long way to go. This was a RIGGED ELECTION!

Social media is also accused of suppressing the truth about the election.

Dec 24th 2020 - 5:59:54 PM EST

Twitter is going wild with their flags, trying hard to **suppress even the truth**. Just shows how dangerous they are, **purposely stifling free speech**. Very dangerous for our Country. Does Congress know that this is how Communism starts? Cancel Culture at its worst. End Section 230!

There are even direct addresses to Twitter, asking it not to flag the tweets. Twitter had started fact checking Trump's tweets and flagging them as unsupported claims something that Trump occasionally remarks on.

Dec 6th 2020 - 7:14:00 PM EST

A MUST WATCH! Hope the lawyers are all taking notes. All FACTS, **do not flag this Twitter!**

<https://t.co/5vWbEfKRf7>

Dec 30th 2020 - 2:05:45 PM EST

Twitter is shadow banning like never before. A disgrace that our weak and ineffective political leadership refuses to do anything about Big Tech. They're either afraid or stupid, nobody really knows!

News networks and social media are accused of working for the radical left and paving the way for communism.

Nov 16th 2020 - 10:37:04 AM EST

The **Radical Left Democrats**, working **with their partner**, the **Fake News Media**, are trying to STEAL this Election. We won't let them!

Dec 24th 2020 - 5:59:54 PM EST

Twitter is going wild with their flags, trying hard to suppress even the truth. Just shows how dangerous they are, purposely stifling free speech. Very dangerous for our Country. **Does Congress know that this is how Communism starts?** Cancel Culture at its worst. End Section 230!

The radical left is further mentioned 13 times in Trump's tweets. In eight occurrences, the radical left is coupled with the Democrat party, twice with the voting system company Dominion, and once with both Democrats and Dominion.

Nov 6th 2020 - 11:37:01 AM EST

With the attack by the **Radical Left Dems** on the Republican Senate, the Presidency becomes even more important!

Nov 14th 2020 - 3:07:56 PM EST

People are not going to stand for having this Election stolen from them by a privately owned **Radical Left company, Dominion**, and many other reasons! <https://t.co/RMOa4jKZwA>

Nov 17th 2020 - 7:25:56 PM EST

The only thing secure about our 2020 Election was that it was virtually impenetrable by foreign powers. On that, the Trump Administration takes great credit. Unfortunately, the **Radical Left Democrats, Dominion**, and others, were perhaps more successful!

The picture that Trump paints in his tweets is that of a conspiracy where news networks and the Left attempted to rig the election results and cover up the fraud.

4.4 The people

The last major theme that arises in the tweets of this period is the former President talking on behalf of “the people”. The term PEOPLE appears a total of 97 times in the corpus. Trump states that *the people* are angry, and that they will not stand for a rigged election.

Nov 10th 2020 - 9:37:06 PM EST

People will not accept this Rigged Election! <https://t.co/XQAOIt5ZwU>

Nov 14th 2020 - 3:07:56 PM EST

People are not going to stand for having this Election stolen from them by a privately owned Radical Left company, Dominion, and many other reasons! <https://t.co/RMOa4jKZwA>

Dec 7th 2020 - 7:50:44 PM EST

RINOS @BrianKempGA, @GeoffDuncanGA, & Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, will be solely responsible for the potential loss of our two GREAT Senators from Georgia, @sendavidperdue & @KLoeffler. Won't call a Special Session or check for Signature Verification! **People are ANGRY!**

By making statements where Trump claims to know what the people feel and plan to do, he effectively presents himself as the voice of the people. On the 16th of December, an exasperated Trump wonders if people will make a stand.

Dec 16th 2020 - 7:32:47 AM EST

So ridiculous and unfair. **Will people never make a stand!** <https://t.co/rO3EkzzkVA>

On the 19th of December the President tweets about the protest in Washington D.C that is to take place on the 6th of January. Trump asks the nation to be there, telling them that it *will be wild*.

Dec 19th 2020 - 1:42:42 AM EST

Peter Navarro releases 36-page report alleging election fraud 'more than sufficient' to swing victory to Trump <https://t.co/D8KrMHnFdK>. A great report by Peter. Statistically impossible to have lost the 2020 Election. **Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!**

Dec 26th 2020 - 8:14:54 AM EST

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

The tweets where Trump is the voice of the nation intertwine with tweets where he addresses the people or Republican politicians and asks them to fight.

Dec 19th 2020 - 9:41:03 AM EST

He didn't win the Election. He lost all 6 Swing States, by a lot. They then dumped hundreds of thousands of votes in each one, and got caught. **Now Republican politicians have to fight** so that their great victory is not stolen. **Don't be weak fools!** <https://t.co/d9Bgu8XPIj>

Jan 6th 2021 - 12:43:42 AM EST

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

As can be seen, Trump posted several tweets where he stated that the people were angry and urged them to join him in Washington. Individuals who were later put on trial for the events that took place in the Capitol claimed that they were following the former president's orders that he had issued in those tweets.

4.5 The 6th of January tweets

A special mention needs to be made to the tweets sent on the day the Capitol was stormed. The majority of the tweets from the 6th of January are in the same spirit as the tweets of the preceding months. However, after the events at the Capitol and when global outcry had broken out, Trump tweeted the following series of tweets.

Jan 6th 2021 - 2:24:22 PM EST

Deleted

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

Jan 6th 2021 - 2:38:58 PM EST

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

Jan 6th 2021 - 3:13:26 PM EST

I am asking for everyone at the U.S. Capitol to remain peaceful. No violence! Remember, WE are the Party of Law & Order – respect the Law and our great men and women in Blue. Thank you!

Jan 6th 2021 - 4:17:24 PM EST

Deleted

<https://t.co/Pm2PKV0Fp3>

Jan 6th 2021 - 6:01:04 PM EST

Deleted

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

The tweet posted at 4:17 PM EST was a video of Donald Trump making a statement after the events. The text of the statement was:

I know your pain. I know you're hurt. I know you're hurt, I know your pain. I know **you're hurt. We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election and everyone knows it, especially the other side.** But you have to go home now. We have to have peace. We have to have law and order. We have to

respect our great people in law and order. We **don't want anybody hurt**. It's a very tough period of time. **There's never been a time like this where such a thing happened where they could take it away from all of us, from me, from you, from our country. This was a fraudulent election.** But we can't play into the hands of these **people**. **We have to have peace. So go home, we love you.** You're very special. You've seen what happens. You see the way others are treated that are so bad and so evil. I know how you feel, but go home and go home at peace.

In the second and third tweets Trump appears to make an attempt at peace by asking his followers to stay peaceful and respect the law. However, in the rest of the tweets Trump continues to maintain that he and the people were treated unfairly. The claim is still made that it was a landslide victory that was taken from him. Those tweets were later deleted.

5 Discussion

5.1 Discussion of methodology. Reliability and validity

This essay touches on a subject that inhabits a polarized position in the U.S. This makes it difficult to avoid some bias in the interpretation of the data. To increase the study's reliability, two approaches were employed to verify the results presented. Firstly, a qualitative approach which aimed at identifying overt themes in the sample. Secondly, a quantitative method with replicable results that was used to find frequency of terms and thus identify recurring topics. The findings of the two methods were combined, resulting in a complementary picture that strengthened the identification of themes taken up by Trump during the period under discussion.

A short summary was presented of the historical events that took place between the latest presidential election and the storming of the Capitol. Reading the same tweets against the backdrop of those events provides a more nuanced reading of the results. As this study's theoretical basis is Speech Act Theory, the tweets need to be viewed against those events as the historical background provides an extra evidentiary source that helps to interpret the texts. However, it is outside the scope of this essay to do a closer, day-to-day mapping of tweets to events. The study is therefore limited to presenting a broad correspondence of Trump's texts to the events of that period.

A further limitation is the sampling approach. The current sample of tweets is limited to a narrow period of time and to direct tweets only. A future study could be made on a longer period, providing a diachronic view on the character of Trump's tweets before and after the election date. Further studies could also be made on Trump's retweeted texts and the information that those provide.

5.2 Applying Searle's felicity conditions on Trump's tweets

As shown in the results, there are four main emerging themes in Trump's tweets, namely that he won the election, that the election was rigged, that the news networks collaborated with the radical left to cover up the fraudulent election, and that the people were angry and both would, but also had to, fight. Those themes overlap and help create a context that aids in better understanding Trump.

To assess whether Trump's tweets constituted directive speech acts aimed to get the people to overturn the results of the election, the four themes will be reviewed against the necessary felicity conditions. For ease of reading, the conditions are shown here again.

Table 2 The felicity conditions for the directive speech act of a request (Searle, 1969, 1975)

<i>Felicity Conditions</i>	<i>Directive (request)</i>
preparatory condition	The Hearer is able to perform the Act. Additionally, for <i>Order</i> and <i>Command</i> : The Speaker must be in a position of authority over the Hearer.
sincerity condition	The Speaker wants the Hearer to perform the Act.
propositional content condition	The Speaker predicates a future Act of the Hearer.
essential condition	Counts as an attempt by the Speaker to get the Hearer to do the Act.

The first condition is the preparatory condition. In this case it is whether the followers of Donald Trump were in a position to overturn the result of the election. News reports and political actions in the aftermath of the Capitol attack suggest that the protesters posed a genuine threat (Brinkley, 2022) and in effect attempted a coup d'état (Cowan, 2022). FBI classified their actions as domestic terrorism (Barrett & Zapotosky, 2021), while key political figures such as Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi described the riot as 'one of the darkest chapters in American history' (Fandos, 2021). Furthermore, the attack on the Capitol led to Donald Trump's second impeachment trial under the charge of incitement to insurrection. These reactions point to the severity of the event, and suggest that the crowd that entered the Capitol indeed had the power to harm the electoral process.

For the sincerity condition to be fulfilled, one needs indications that Trump sincerely intended for people to overturn the result of the election. The themes presented in the results show that Trump expressed that an injustice had taken place, and that it had to be acted upon. The recurring theme of a fraudulent election supports the claim that Trump believed himself wronged by the results of the ballots. The more than sixty lawsuits that Trump's legal team filed signal that the President was willing to go through a costly and lengthy process to challenge the results. He was also seemingly willing to see the people question the results. To support his claims he uses logical fallacies and conditionals. Sorlin's *iceberg rhetoric* (2021) is also evidenced in his claims of having more evidence than he lets on, evidence that will be revealed at an unspecified point in the future. As Koch (2020) describes, Trump has the tendency to apply war metaphors on politics, something that can be seen in his urges for Republicans and the people to *fight* and *make a stand*. These urges constitute one of the main themes in his tweets, as shown in the results' section. There is therefore enough to suggest that the President was sincere in wanting the people and the Republicans to react in some way that brought about a change in the voting results.

Trump also predicates in his tweets that the people will not stand for this result and that they will make a stand. His epistrophic use of catchphrases like *rigged election* and *fake media* along with the capitalization of words and phrases such as *RIGGED*, *FAKE*, *I WON*, *ILLEGAL VOTES*, emphasize his message that the people neither should nor will stand for the result of the election. Statements like these satisfy the third felicity condition, that of propositional content.

Lastly, the essential condition is that the act should count as an attempt by the Speaker to get the Hearer to do the Act. In this particular case, one needs to examine whether Trump attempted to convince the people that an action had to be taken by them. To clarify that, one can compare it to telling a friend that they have a nice car. It is unlikely that that utterance would count as an attempt to ask for permission to borrow the car. However, saying that one would like to drive their friend’s car some day is an indirect way of asking for permission. Similarly, if Trump had only commented on the perceived unfairness of the elections, that would not have necessarily been interpreted as a call to action. On the other hand, calling people to the 6th of January rally by writing that it *will be wild* and that they *can’t let a landslide win* to be stolen, are more direct in their intent and count as attempts to tell his supporters to fight against the election of Biden.

An additional preparatory condition will be reviewed, to establish whether Trump’s tweets can be seen as only a request, or if they constituted an order. For the directive speech act of *command* or *order*, the Speaker needs to be in a position of authority over the Hearer. Seeing as the President of the U.S. is considered one of the most powerful people globally, it is evident that the position bears authority over the citizens of the country. Trump was more than just a person tweeting. He was the leader of the country and thus held the highest position in American society. One can therefore see how a request from the President could be interpreted as a command or an order from an Authority.

Table 4 presents a summary of how the felicity conditions for a directive speech act of command or order are fulfilled in the discussed case.

Table 4 Felicity conditions applied on Trump’s tweets

<i>Felicity Conditions</i>	<i>Directive (request)</i>
preparatory condition	The people posed a genuine threat. Additionally, for <i>Order</i> and <i>Command</i> : The President has authority over his citizens.
sincerity condition	Trump’s tweets urged people to take action and fight.
propositional content condition	Trump asserts in his tweets that people will make a stand.
essential condition	Trump calls people to make a stand on the 6 th of January in a protest that ‘will be wild’.

The findings of this essay support the claim that Trump paved the way for his supporters’ violent behavior by painting the picture of a stolen election that was not reported by media, by casting doubts on the validity of the electoral process, and by insisting on his victory despite the results of what was deemed the country’s most secure election to date. Trump’s claims appear to have given his supporters the moral justification they needed for their actions. That his tweets were interpreted as a call to act is evidenced even by the fact that his supporters interpreted them as such (Pape & Ruby, 2021). As Sorlin (2021) points out, Trump uses the iceberg technique to imply that he has

more information than he lets out. That creates the impression that there is a solid basis of evidence for Trump's claims, which in turn makes his supporters feel even more justified in their actions. Furthermore, in the speech that Trump gave on the 6th of January, he urged people to walk to the Capitol and 'stop the steal' (Trump, 2021).

The former President's tweets satisfy the felicity conditions to be considered a successful directive speech act that urged his followers to take action against the results of the election. This speech act can be considered morally condemnable, but for it to qualify as criminal, it needs to be considered illegal. The next part examines whether Trump's tweets can be considered solicitation.

5.3 Do Trump's tweets constitute incitement?

Tiersma and Solan (2012) point out that crimes such as incitement and solicitation are often performed via the speech act of requesting. However, it is important to establish that the solicitor is sincere in their intention for the crime to take place. As Tiersma and Solan state, American law requires proof of intention for a person to be convicted of inciting a crime. A very interesting point made by them is that "recognition of the power relationships among the players converts acquiescence into solicitation" (p. 6). In the case presented in the present study, the potential inciter is the President of the United States. There is little doubt that the post holds so much power over citizens that any message from the President would be received as coming from a high authority.

If the receiver of the message agrees to committing the crime, then a new crime takes place, that of conspiracy. Tacit agreement and an overt act are the two requirements by American law for being convicted of conspiracy. In the case of Trump, there was both overt agreement, with thousands of messages from his supporters about storming the Capitol, as well as the overt act of the attack on the 6th of January, 2021.

Having established that the former President's tweets could have been and indeed were interpreted as a directive speech act to overturn the election, the case can be made that Trump was guilty of inciting the attack, and furthermore guilty of conspiring to overturn the new government. However, there is a series of tweets that one could use in an attempt to argue that the former President did not intend for his supporters to riot, namely the tweets sent on the evening of the 6th of January.

The 6th of January tweets can be seen as an attempt to pacify the rioters. However, there is no evidence of remorse for the actions of the protesters. Donald Trump did not concede that he had lost to Biden. In the video of himself and the following tweet, he justifies the actions of his supporters, claiming that victory was stolen from them. Both tweets were later deleted. It is difficult to see this as a genuine attempt to calm down the nation, or as a show of remorse for the events that transpired, and the lives lost because of them.

6 Conclusion

This essay has looked at Donald Trump's tweets through the lens of Speech Act Theory. A qualitative approach was used whereby the tweets were manually sorted into recurring themes. To corroborate the result and increase the study's reliability a quantitative method was also employed, where the tweets were turned into a corpus of text and a frequency distribution of the most common words was automatically created.

Applying the felicity conditions for a directive speech act showed that Donald Trump's tweets constituted directive speech acts aimed at his followers. The power dynamic between Trump and his citizens effectively turned those speech acts into what could have been and indeed was interpreted as orders from the President to overturn the presidential election. Although the second impeachment trial acquitted Trump, this study shows that there is evidence that he was responsible for creating a highly polarized political climate that posed a real threat to the electoral process. Therefore, the case can be made that Trump was guilty of inciting the events of the 6th of January, 2021.

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