Title

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THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC OPINION: A CASE STUDY OF

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON THE

INSURRECTION IN THE U.S. CAPITOL

By

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A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

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ABSTRACT

Former President Donald Trump utilized various sources of media during his presidency to get his ideas across to his followers. His most used media, Twitter, was where he directly connected to his followers, and it was where his followers received most of their news about the 2020 election. In this study, I will be tracking Trump's original tweets that focus on the phrase "election fraud" and various new articles that cover it to show how it had influenced his followers during his 2020 presidential campaign. This will encompass tweets and articles from August 2020 to January 2021. This analysis is done to show how people's constant acquisition of certain strong points of view can create extreme ideologies that can endanger individuals and those around them. It will show the correlation between the idea of election fraud and how it may have led Trump's followers to storm the Capitol during the January 6th insurrection.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Introduction

Media has always been important to politicians and it is widely used to convey their beliefs and to gain more followers. From newspapers to television ads to social media, beliefs and propaganda are becoming even easier and inexpensive to distribute to the people. The Fairness Doctrine was instilled in 1949 to make sure that broadcasting stations were covering important topics in a non-biased manner. They were not allowed to take one side, and had to showcase all the sides when they did broadcast a certain idea or event that would greatly affect the people (Krattenmaker, 1985). With the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, it gave way for broadcasting stations to broadcast what they wanted and not what was good for the general public. Stories were often one sided and the people were not getting full coverage of the issue at hand.

The Fairness Doctrine shows one attempt at controlling the quality of information that goes out to the people. However, since then there has been a rise of a new media powerhouse. Social media is powerful because it is accessible by many and it is accessible with a click of a button. There is no need to wait for the news or to wait for a broadcast. A person just has to open an application and read the latest trends to get information. This quick and inexpensive way turned it into a method to power for present-day politicians. It is now a sector of politics that may need more regulation since it reaches a lot of people, but remains unfiltered on the internet.

This unfiltered information can be detrimental to the people because it does not always let the reader know that it is false or it is just an opinion. Some readers might take it as a fact, which is why there has been an increase in "fake news" going around. This is noticeable in former President Trump's usage of Twitter and his tweets on election fraud. These tweets went around on Twitter without being fact checked and without a disclaimer that it may contain false

news. This could have affected his followers and effectively created the mass mob seen at the Capitol on January 6th. The study I am conducting will showcase that social media is a powerful campaigning tool and its impact is something that should be more closely examined in the future.

Literature Review

The topic of whether or not former President Trump directly incited the insurrection at the Capitol has been newly researched by many. It is important to take note of other research that has been done on this topic in order to improve and to further analyze whether or not Trump was partially responsible for the riot.

In a research paper written by David Van Dijecke and Austin L. Wright titled, "Profiling Insurrection: Characterizing Collective Action Using Mobile Device Data," they analyzed the beginnings of the insurrection through a different viewpoint from my original argument. They conducted research that focused on various subcategories to try to explain the riots at the Capitol. They used mobile device data, given to them by using SafeGraph a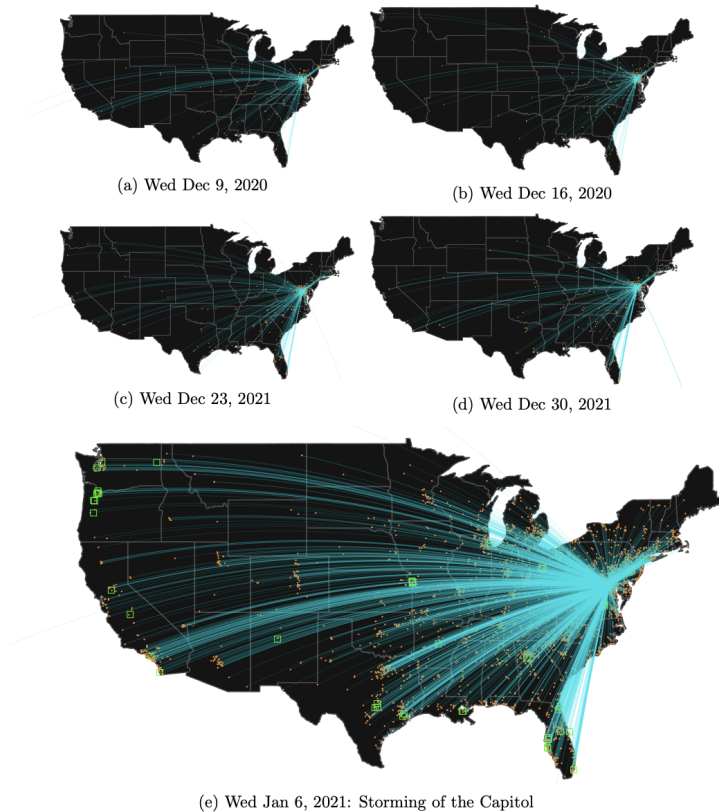nd CBG (Census Block Groups), to help them pinpoint exactly where the protestors traveled from and their travel patterns from the riot at the

(a) Wed Dec 9, 2020

(b) Wed Dec 16, 2020

(c) Wed Dec 23, 2021

(d) Wed Dec 30, 2021

(e) Wed Jan 6, 2021: Storming of the Capitol

Figure 1: Travel Network to Protest CBGs, Day of Insurrection (Bottom) vs. Days Before

Capitol to the insurrection at Capitol Hill. They used further metadata from Parler to geotag posts and videos taken at the riots by the mob. In addition, Dijecke and Wright used data from the Southern Poverty Law Center which is an organization that tracks hate groups around the United States. In this case, Southern Poverty Law Center specifically tracked Proud Boys Chapters, which are far-right hate groups known to support Trump, around the country in which they were able to then provide that information to Dijecke and Wright with geolocations for the groups whereabouts. In Figure 1, there is a visualization of the mobile device data that was collected. The orange dots being the origin CBGs and the end of all the blue lines signaling the Capitol CBG location. The green squares are locations of Proud Boys chapters and it is there to showcase how close the orange dots are to a chapter. This correlates with their conclusion that there is evidence that the participation in the riot is positively correlated with local Trump support and is even more polarizing in areas where his supporters are politically isolated. This article also serves an interesting primary research into community involvement in protest events and how to track why certain people are involved.

In the days following the insurrection at the Capitol, there was a survey published by Pew Research that was titled "Republicans who relied on Trump for news more concerned than other Republicans about election fraud". In this study, they gathered information from surveys that were conducted from August 31, 2020 to September 7, 2020, and then from November 12-17 to November 19-29, 2020. In the initial August-September survey, they had a population of 9,220 U.S. adults, and during the mid-November survey, they had a population of 11,818 U.S. adults. The late November survey was done through interviews with a population of 12,658 U.S. adults. The adults who participated in the survey were people who were part of the Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel, which is recruited through national, random sampling of

residential addresses in the United States. This ensures that there is a totally random sample that encompasses different demographics.

In Figure 2, there is a visual representation of what Pew Research concluded from their September survey. It shows that 27% of Republicans had relied on the Trump campaign as a major source of election news. Furthermore, they found that 61% of the 27% population that used the Trump campaign for a major source of election news believed that voter fraud is a major problem when it comes to mail in ballots. This is further explained by how Trump had already begun to tweet about voter fraud in the United States and had been telling his followers that the election will be rigged. This caused many to doubt the 2020 presidential election as early as September.

**About a quarter of Republicans relied heavily on Trump for election news …**

% of Republicans and Republican leaners who said in September 2020 …
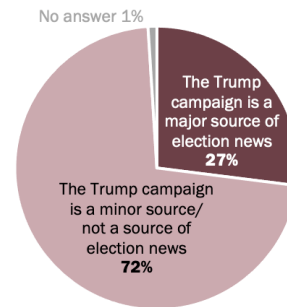
… and they were far more likely to say before the election that fraud is a major problem with mail-in voting

*% who said in September 2020 that voter fraud is a **major problem** when it comes to voting by mail in U.S. presidential elections*

Among Rep/Lean Rep
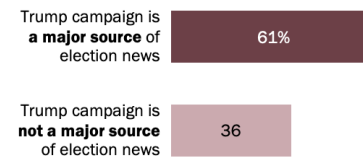
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Aug. 31-Sept. 7, 2020.
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 2: Survey results of U.S. adults conducted in August-September, 2020

Republicans who relied on Trump for news much more likely to say too little attention had been given to voter fraud allegations

% of Republicans and Republican leaners who said there has been _____ given to allegations of voter fraud in the presidential election
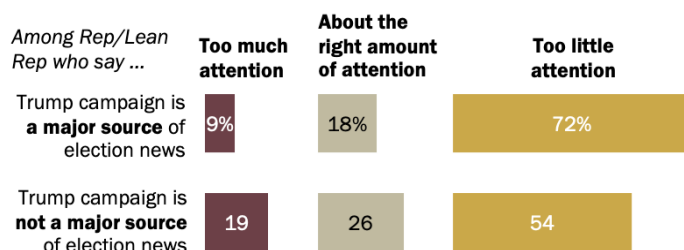
Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.
Figure 3: Results from Pew Research from their survey on U.S. adults conducted in November 12-17, 2020

In Figure 3, there is another visual graph on the opinions of people who relied on the Trump campaign as their major source of election news and those who did not. This figure is from the late November surveys and we can

see that there is still a trend in which people who relied on the Trump campaign for their election news had a much higher worry about voting fraud allegations than those who did not rely on Trump. 72% of Republicans who relied on Trump for election news believed that the fraud allegations were given too little attention, while only 9% of them said that it was getting too much attention. This shows that even after the 2020 presidential elections finished, many people who supported Trump still believed that there was some kind of voter fraud during it. This was also instigated by the increase of Trump's tweets in the months close to the election and in the month of November after the presidential election had finished and he had lost.

Another article that studied social media and its impact on the insurrection was curated by the Atlantic Council's DFRLab. The organization was created to bring light to misinformation on public platforms and to bring the truth to the people. The data set for their study centered around the #stopthesteal movement, which was first coined in the 2016 election by the Trump campaign and eventually brought back in the 2020 presidential election. This article consisted of various tweets and media posts across multiple platforms, such as Parler, Twitter, and Facebook. It also had screenshots of tweets made by Donald Trump himself. Their research was done to prove that if Trump had not explicitly encouraged the stop the steal movement, then the insurrection at the Capitol would not have occurred.

The Atlantic DFRLab utilized a social media search tool named BuzzSumo to track the keywords "Stop the Steal" and "#Stopthesteal". They found that between September 1, 2020 to February 2, 2021, there were more than 8,200 online news articles that contained these keywords. Those articles had an engagement of more than 70,000,000 and more than 43.5 million of those engagements were made in December 2020. This was tracked through large

social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Reddit, and Youtube. In figure 4, we can see the trend line of interactions leading up to the insurrection.

Figure 4: Graph by BuzzSumo on total mentions across websites of the phrase Stop the Steal or #stopthesteal

This study gave us evidence that showed an evident spike of the tags usage during election season, particularly the times where Trump tried to stop the count and during various MAGA rallies. It also confirmed that right before the riots had happened, there was a significant increase in interactions and posts regarding the stop the steal movement. The researchers were able to gather data across many different public platforms to come to the conclusion that Trump was indirectly the cause of the riots at the Capitol, due to his encouragement for the stop the steal movement.

Although there has been an increase in the amount of research done in this field, there are still limitations in the current literature. Since the insurrection at the Capitol had caught most people by surprise, there have been questions of what had caused these mass amounts of people to start a riot. There are many avenues which people could point out as the cause, and much of the current literature focuses on specific causes, and not a holistic overview. There is also the limitation of time passed. Since this event is so recent in our history, there is still data being collected. The literature discussed above was all published within a month of the insurrection. With my paper, I analyzed one aspect that may have led to the insurrection. I will be looking at

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the impact of social media and how it could have inspired the rioters to storm the Capitol on January 6th. I will specifically be analyzing Donald Trump's tweets since he was a prominent figure in the event and many of the people that stormed the Capitol were his supporters. In this paper, I argue that there should be closer scrutiny on Trump's increase in tweets about election fraud and the election being rigged close to and following the election. This increase when the topic was so prominent would sow doubts about the election process in the minds of his supporters, which will then make them more likely to believe that the election was a fraud.

Method

The main material that I used in my study was an archive of former President Trump's tweets. The archive was created by a programmer during the 2016 Trump Campaign to document all of Trump's tweets. Any tweet before September 2016 is not documented in the archive, as well as any tweets after Trump's permanent ban from Twitter on January 8th, 2021. The archive is viewed as a neutral source, and many major news sources and sites, such as FactCheck.org, Politifact, and more, have referenced it. It was necessary to draw from this site because Twitter did not keep a public archive of Donald Trump's tweets after his ban, and there were no other sites that had all of his tweets and its interactions.

Using the archive, I was able to pull the phrases: "rigged election", "election fraud", and "fake news". I researched within a specific time frame, from May 2020 to January 2021. This time frame was chosen because it gives us a snapshot of his twitter before, during, and after his presidential campaign and his subsequent loss in the 2020 elections. I was not able to pull much data from after the date of the insurrection because of his Twitter ban.

From May 1, 2020 to January 8th, 2021, former President Trump had a total of 8,707 tweets. This number includes both retweets and deleted tweets. However, the threshold for deleted tweets to count in this study is if the tweets had interactions. This could be both retweets and quote retweets as well as favorites. This was counted because the tweet was still shared out by his account and people were able to see it and interact with it even if he deleted it at a later time. Retweets and quote retweets were counted as well because they were showcased on his main twitter page for his followers to view. The only aspect of his Twitter account that was not counted within this study are his "favorited" tweets as there is no documentation of that information.

The data sets were organized by month and focused on the frequency of which the key phrases were sent out during that month. There were a total of five graphs created. Three of the five graphs concentrated solely on a certain key phrase and its usage across the months leading up to the insurrection. The fourth graph gave a visualization of how often the phrases "rigged election" and "election fraud" were used together. The last graph gave a visual representation of all three phases and their frequency of usage during the time frame. I expected that all these graphs would show an upward trend towards November and December when Trump had lost the presidential election.

My own data set was then compared to the data set procured by Pew Research gathered during the 2020 presidential campaign. These statistical numbers gave more insight to how many people were actually relying on Trump for their election news and how many of them believed that the election was fraudulent. It also gives the study a greater reach because the data was taken from randomized people from all over the United States.

Results and Discussion

"Rigged Election"   Pulling the phrase "Rigged Election" from the time frame given, I found that there were a total of 75 tweets and retweets that had mentioned it. There is also a sharp increase of usage by Trump during the months of November and December. This is because the election results had already been announced and he was tweeting about how he should have won the presidential election. The month of November, when the election was conducted, he had the highest number of mentions of "rigged elections" out of all the months, with 28 out of the 871 tweets tweeted in the month of November mentioning the phrase. (Figure 5)

"Election Fraud"   The phrase "Election Fraud" was another frequently used phrase by Donald Trump during his campaign and then the time after. In the time frame given, he had tweeted the phrase 53 times, with yet another sharp increase in the months of November and December, following his loss in the election. (Figure 6)

"Rigged Election" and "Election Fraud"   Comparing the two phrases alone, we can see that before the November election, he had used both, but did not use either one of them extensively. However, both phrases had a sudden jump in usage in the month of November. From tweeting "Rigged Election" a total of 6 times in October and "Election Fraud" once, it had then jumped to 28 times and 19 times respectively. In December, he had mentioned it 22 and 17 times. Together, the phrases have been used a total of 128 times within the span of 9 months. Tweeting the phrases together at such a high frequency gives us an overview of what his followers would have believed after the election. Donald Trump had repeatedly emphasized that the election was stolen from him and this increase in mentions contributed to the insurrection. (Figure 7)

We also need to take into account that there were still tweets mentioning these phrases before November, although he did not use them at a high frequency. As seen in the Pew Research

study, those tweets before the election still made an impact because 27% of his followers, surveyed in September, had already begun to believe that the upcoming election will be subjected to fraud. This adamant tweeting about how the election was stolen and rigged caused many of his followers to agree and led many of them to support the riots at the Capitol. In the same research study done by Pew Research, they had conducted a survey in late November after the election. It showed that 72% of Trump supporters that relied on the Trump Campaign for news still believed that there was not enough coverage on the fraud allegations that had been brought up during the election season. This shows that there was still a high level of distrust in the results of the 2020 election and many of his followers thought they were not being heard. This made them more likely to believe the information that Trump sent out to them. In addition, this would have caused them to be inspired to storm the Capitol to stop the vote count if they had already believed that it was fraudulent.

"Fake News"   The phrase "fake news" was also pulled from his tweets because it would have impacted the mindset of his followers. In my research, I found that he used the phrase "fake news" extensively during his presidency, and in the time frame given, had tweeted the phrase 226 times. This is important data because his followers are often seeking information from his Twitter account and his campaign. So, since he had been tweeting about fake news for months before the election date, it could've caused major distrust in verifiable news sources for his followers, which then led to them relying more heavily on Trump as their main source of election news. (Figure 8)

"Rigged Election" and "Election Fraud" vs. "Fake News"   There was an interesting trend in how he used the phrase "fake news". The trend lines for the phrases "fake news" vs. "Rigged election" and "election fraud" are opposite, meaning there was a dip in the phrase "fake news" in

the month of November and December, in comparison to the sharp increase of the phrase "rigged election" and "election fraud". While looking at his tweets, it is seen that this trend is because he was discrediting news reports that either predicted him losing the presidential election or news reports that did not support his campaign. After his campaign was over and he lost, he switched to being more aggressive about the election being fraudulent, which would explain the opposing trendlines. (Figure 9)

Supporters of President Trump have stormed the US Capitol to protest lawmakers certifying Joe Biden's election victory. Based on what you have read or heard about this, do you support or oppose these actions? (%)
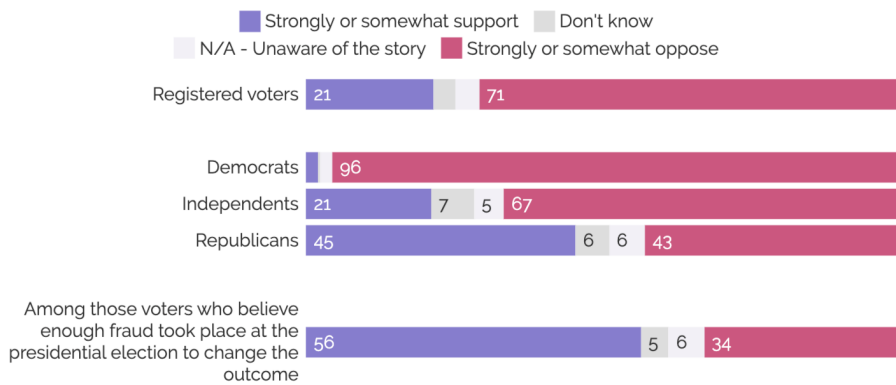
Figure 10: Figure showing how certain types of voters with different Party affiliations thought of the Insurrection

However, the damage is already done. With Trump always tweeting about the dishonest media, many of his passionate followers, many of whom were the same people who stormed the U.S. Capitol had already lost trust in normal media and turned to him fully for news. This caused an increase of polarizing news which may have influenced the riots on January 6th, where they had thought that they were saving America. In Figure 10, it shows the results of a poll of 1,448 registered voters, 1,397 of which knew what had occurred at the Capitol. The voters had been asked about the supporters of Trump storming the Capitol to protest lawmakers certifying Joe Biden's win and if they supported the actions or opposed them. In the results, we can see that among the Republicans and the voters who believe that enough fraud had taken place, there was a high amount of supporters of the riots, as opposed to the Democrats and people who did not believe

there was enough fraud. We can conclude from this study that the news that these people probably received were from the Trump campaign because they believed so strongly that there had been rampant fraud in the election.

Further Considerations

This study was limited to the 2020 presidential elections in the United States to showcase how social media can make a large impact in important situations in a country. It was not the first election that social media was utilized- the previous in the country being the 2016 presidential election. However, this one had large-scale consequences. In the future, there could be more studies done with different countries and different governmental campaigns. It can also further research into how social media can play a role in mass riots and protests that happen around the world. There might also be an additional study done on Trump's tweets if Twitter decides to bring his account back now that Twitter has been bought by Elon Musk. It would be interesting to see the replies that certain tweets had, and whether or not it had a majority of negative or positive responses. This can tie into the question of if any interactions, positive or negative, can have an impact on boosting the original content.

Conclusion

This paper was done to initiate the research into the impact and importance that social media can have on large-scaled political events such as the presidential elections. It solely covers the 2020 Presidential Election and the subsequent insurrection at the Capitol because it is the most prominent event in recent years that affected the entire country. The cause of the January 6th insurrection, now called the 'March to Save America', was heavily debated and even brought

to trial, and this paper introduces one potential actor in the grand scheme. This paper found that Donald Trump's consistent use of his Twitter account throughout his presidency, and even after, to discredit the 2020 election results may have contributed to a large group of his passionate followers to storm the Capitol to protest the results. Within his tweets, Donald Trump had created a call of action for his supporters, and many believed that they had to storm the Capitol to protest the election results in order to save America. It is my hope that in the future, there will be more studies done on the influence of social media and stronger guidelines are put into place for polarizing figures that have the ability to cause mass chaos on a country-wide scale.

Data Sets and Graphs

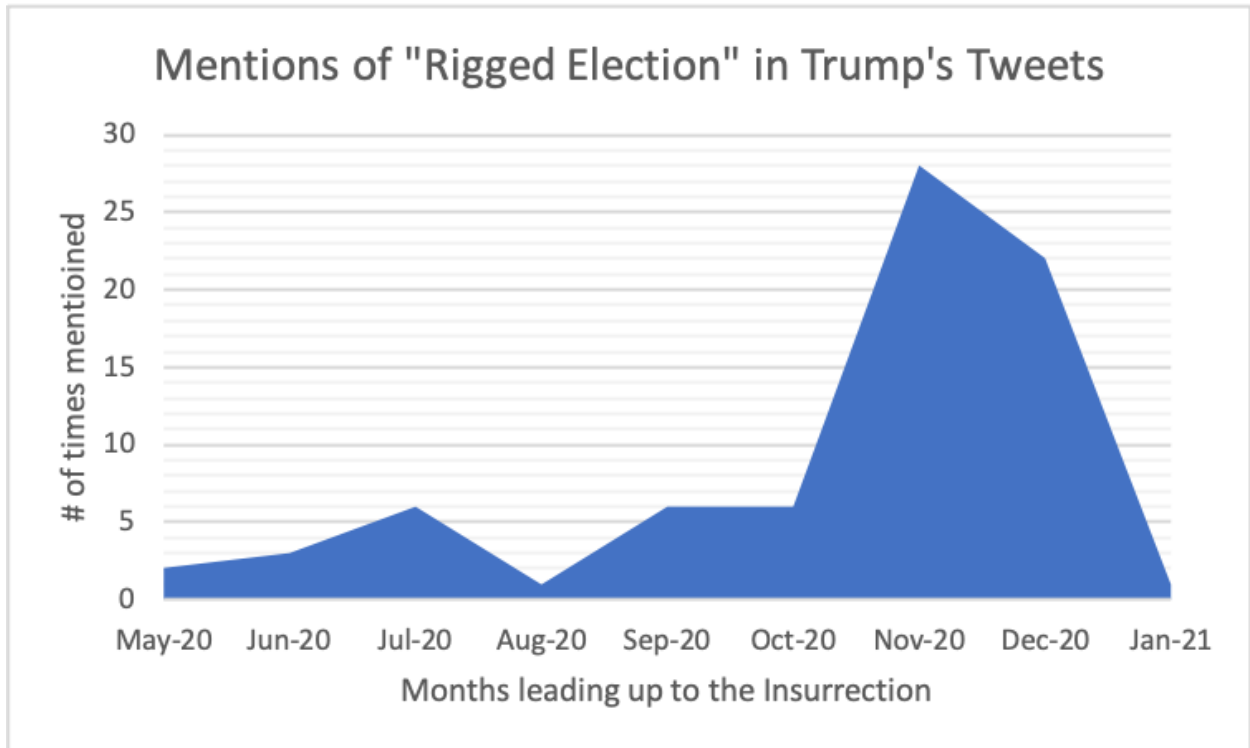| Month	Mentions of "Rigged Election" in Trump's Tweets	Mentions of "Election Fraud" in Trump's Tweets	Mentions of "Fake News" in Trump's Tweets
May 2020	2	3	36
June 2020	3	2	28
July 2020	6	4	26
August 2020	1	4	27
September 2020	6	1	34
October 2020	6	1	37
November 2020	28	19	18
December 2020	22	17	18
January 2021	1	2	2
Total:	75	53	226

Figure 5. Graph created based on data retrieved on Trump's tweets that mention rigged elections
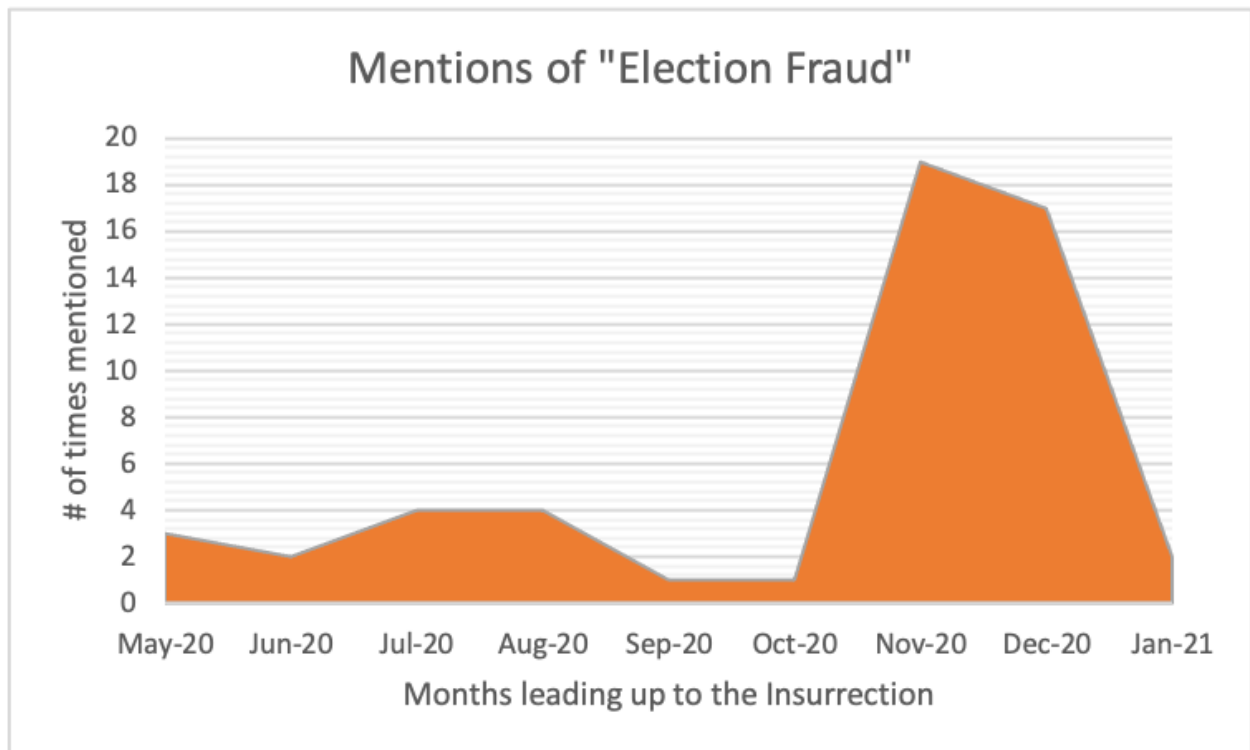

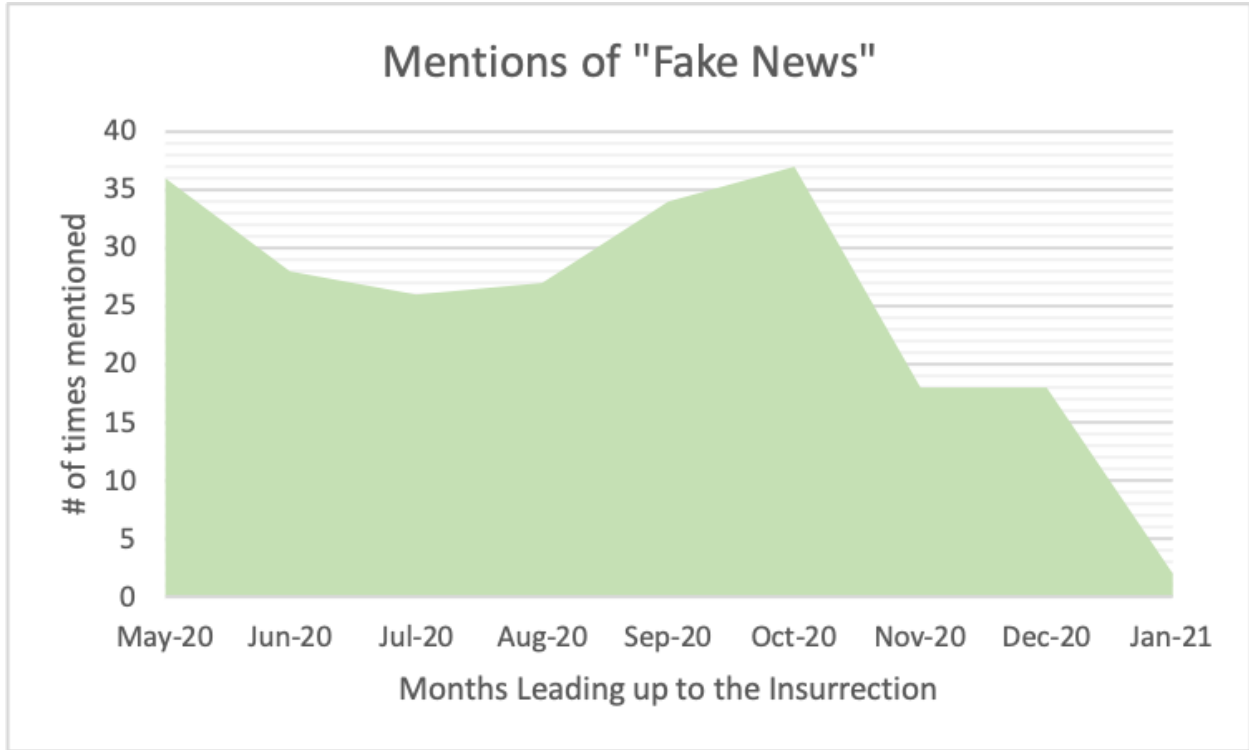**Figure 6.** graph created based on data retrieved on Trump's tweets that mention election fraud

Figure 7. graph created based on data retrieved on Trump's tweets that mention fake news
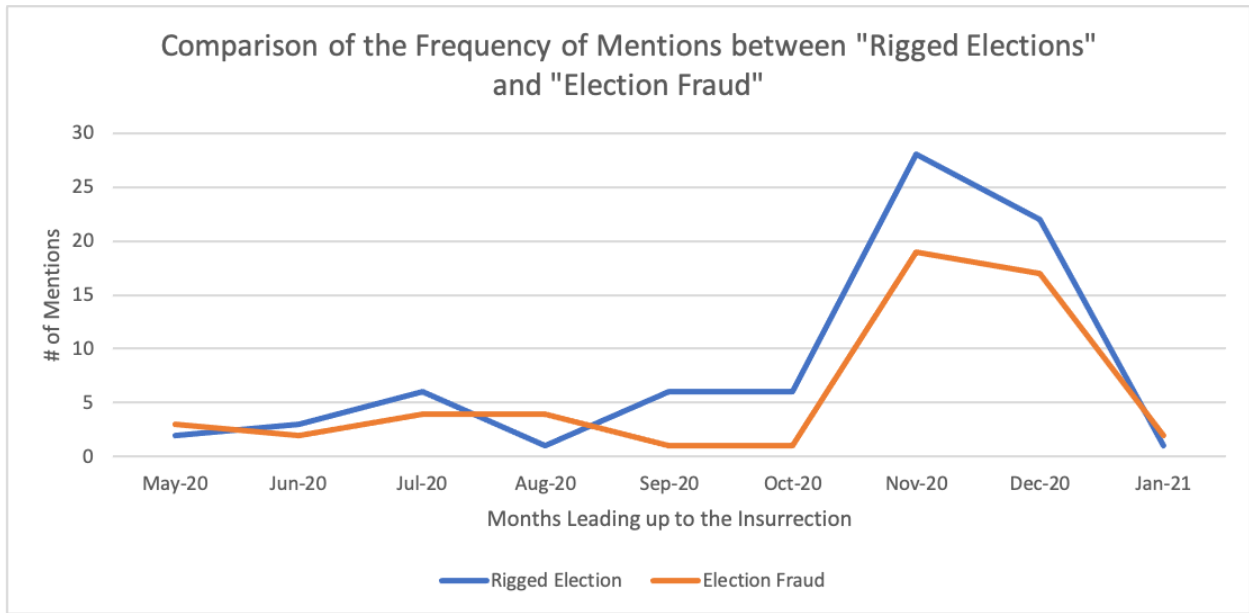

Figure 8. graph created to showcase the frequency of mentions between the phrases "rigged elections" and "election fraud" in Trump's tweets
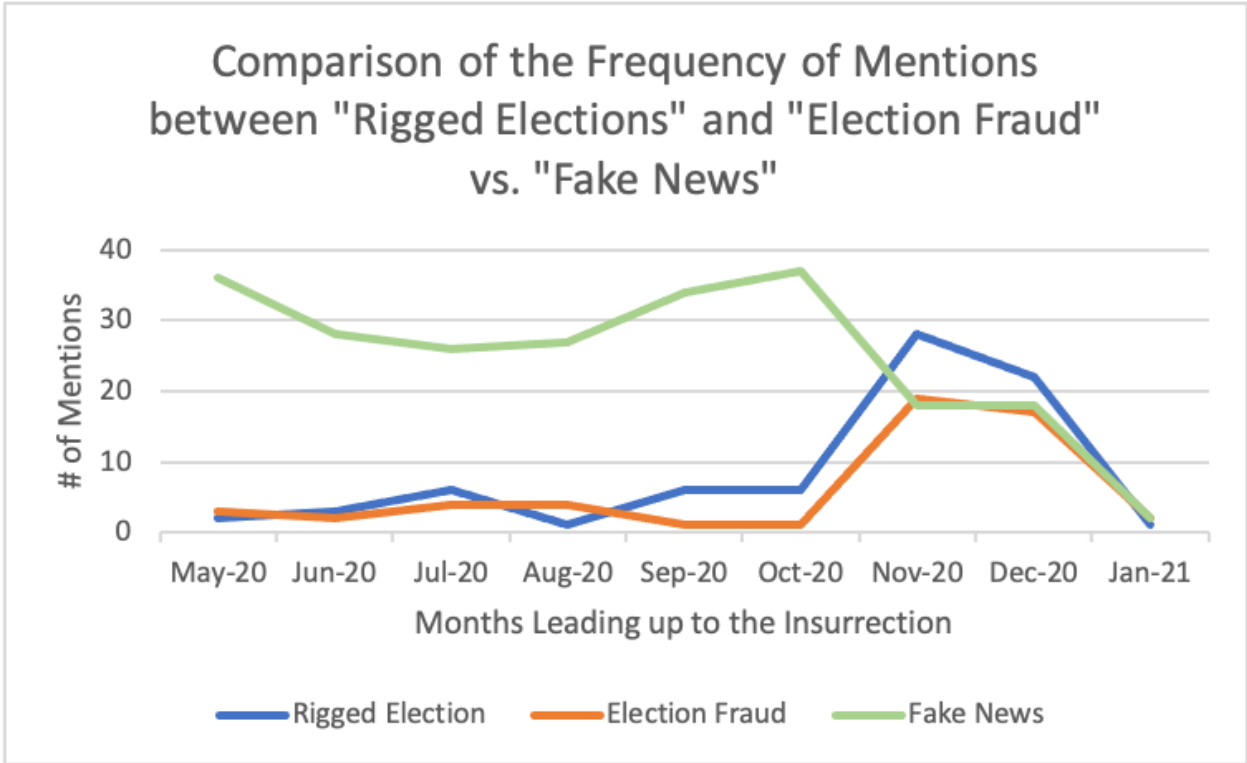
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Figure 9. graph created to showcase the frequency of mentions between "rigged elections", "election fraud" and "fake news" in Trump's tweets

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news-more-concerned-than-other-republicans-about-election-fraud/

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