

# Elite Impact on the Capitol Hill Riot: The Straw that Stirs the Drink

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements  
of the Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein Honors Program

Yeshiva College  
Yeshiva University  
January 2022

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## **Elite Impact on the Capitol Hill Riot: The Straw that Stirs the Drink**

**Abstract:** A group of protesters convinced of the illegitimacy of the results of the 2020 presidential election gathered on January 6<sup>th</sup> at an event billed as the “Stop the Steal.” After some boisterous speeches by President Trump and his conservative allies, the situation at The Ellipse in Washington D.C began to deteriorate quickly and rally-goers began to enter the Capitol Building in droves as the confirmation was in progress. Dozens were injured and countless individuals who were present in the building at the time of the attack were traumatized. In this work, I attempt to demonstrate a link between the remarks uttered by President Trump and his allies in the months leading up to the Stop the Steal Rally and the uncharacteristically violent and unpredictable behavior of the protesters who opted to storm the Capitol Building. Contributing to this behavior is the rising polarization amongst America’s political elite as well as their supporters, the rise, spread and impact of fake news media, the results of spontaneous action in protest events and of course the effects of elite rhetoric on a homogeneous and supportive crowd. This work seeks to illustrate the significant danger generated through the proliferation of fake news in a highly polarized society.

### **Introduction:**

Protest movements have been historically comprised of lower income individuals. The prototypical violent protester is a lower income, young, progressive or even radical fighting for a civil rights or environmental cause. (Zaller 1992). Video surveillance of individuals attacking Capitol Police officers with poles, bats, stun guns and bear spray on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 reveals a different kind of protester; the perpetrators of this assault were largely middle-aged, upper class and conservative.

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021 a large conglomerate of conservative protesters took the unprecedented step of trespassing on federal property at the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. These men and women traveled from all across the country to contend with the results of the 2020 presidential election, an election that they viewed as ‘stolen’ from former President Donald Trump. The protest nicknamed “Stop the Steal” was geared towards disrupting the confirmation of President-Elect Joe Biden, taking place through an electoral college vote count, which was in progress when hundreds of protesters violently stormed inside the Capitol Building. These protesters wielded baseball bats, knives and pepper spray. As an additional

group of protesters broke through the Capitol building windows, the Secret Service ushered Congressmen and Congresswomen to safety. Once the House Chamber was cleared, the protesters began to wreak havoc around the Capitol Building; protesters were seen assaulting police officers, illegally entering the offices of elected officials and vandalizing federal property. After the dust had settled, federal police arrested a whopping 675 people in connection to the attack, including 210 accused of assaulting police officers. (McManus 2021).

Amongst the accused are Brad Rukstales who was the CEO of Cogensia, a data analytics firm based in Illinois, Rick Cerrone, a former Pennsylvania representative and now-former professor at Saint Vincent College and Texas-based attorney Paul Davis who was formerly employed as the Associate General Counsel at Goosehead Insurance. (Impelli 2021). People with such backgrounds do not sound like the type of individuals one might find at a violent protest; they are well-off individuals who had everything to lose and little to gain from engaging in destructive and illegal behavior. What provoked their desire to enter the Capitol Building requires significant investigation and could add important nuance to the existing literature on protest and social movements.

President Trump's months of fomenting unrest and casting doubt on the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election ultimately left five people dead, dozens of Capitol police officers and reporters injured and many more politicians and passersby traumatized. The influx of elite-backed falsehoods and questionable data regarding the results of the 2020 presidential election and the inflammatory speech of elite leaders and politicians, compounded by a dramatic increase in polarization led to the unprecedented event of several thousand overwhelmingly, upper-class, conservative protesters storming the Capitol Building. In this thesis, I argue that the mobilization of the participants of the January 6th insurrection would not have been made possible without the

discourse of influential far-right leaders such as President Donald Trump, Rudy Giuliani and Marjorie Taylor-Greene.

President Trump and his followers claimed that their behavior in the events leading to, and the “Stop the Steal” rally itself had nothing to do with the hellacious outcome. Congressman Barry Loudermilk, a Georgia representative, remarked “Trump didn't have anything to do with January 6. I think that's a far-fetched idea.” (Holmes 2021). President Trump even went as far as saying “I wasn't involved in that and if you look at my words and what I said in the speech, they were extremely calming, actually.” (Wade 2021). Clearly, there is a narrative amongst at least the Republican elite that their actions and behavior were independent of the violent trespassing of Capitol Hill.

It is fair to make the case that the speeches of Trump and Giuliani did nothing more than further enrage an already unruly crowd. This crowd assembled with the intention of “Stopping the Steal” of the 2020 presidential election (Grayer 2021). Amongst those involved in the rally were those who one might expect would precipitate such a violent assault on the Capitol. Over 200 members of the violent “Proud Boys” white-nationalist group were present at the rally. (Ben 2021). The conservative “Women for America First” organization applied for and received the permit for the rally. (Lardner 2021). At first glance, one could have made the case that what unfolded on January 6th was a bottom-up operation whose violent end was inevitable because of the confrontational nature of the participants of the rally.

Although one may posit that the events that transpired on January 6<sup>th</sup> were a result of independent frustration amongst radical fringe groups, I will demonstrate in this work through a series of journalistic accounts, recorded data and scholarly data that the protesters who opted to trespass the Capitol Building during the “Stop the Steal” protest would not have taken the drastic

step to put their futures in doubt if not for the fomentation of elite leaders and their proliferation of misinformation.

To assert the link between the elite discourse in the months leading up to the January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol Riot and the violent and unprecedented actions that transpired that day, I focus on five lines of research that link elite discourse and violent and unpredictable action within a protest movement: the formation and activity of social movements, the effects of emotion on protest movements, spontaneity in protest movements, the effects of misinformation on citizens, and finally, party and elite polarization.

I begin by providing an overview of the formation and behavior of social movements and touch upon the effects of emotions on a protest movement. This leads to my discussion of the emotional nature of violent protest and the tremendous impact that spontaneous action could have on an otherwise standard protest movement. I then give an overview of misinformation in today's political climate and how fake news has dramatically altered how the Republican and Democratic parties view one another. I then study the effects of increasing polarization in our country today and present relevant research that asserts that elite polarization and ultimately elite discourse and action have led to a fringe group on the right adopting extreme and absolutist views.

After providing this scholarly background, I then shift my focus to a series of recorded interviews of individuals who openly admitted to their participation in the protest, which links their motivation to storm the Capitol Hill Building, to the combative rhetoric of President Trump. Next, I include testimony from individuals who are accused of participating in the protest. These trial proceedings paint a picture of the naïve and obedient supporters of President Trump who were willing to go to great lengths to fulfill the desires of their leader. Finally, I provide

information that was uncovered through the 2021 Congressional Select Committee which substantiates the notion that not only were members of President Trump's inner circle aware of what was happening in and around the Capitol Building, but they may have also been responsible for a portion of the financing of the "Stop the Steal" rally.

### **The Typical Protester:**

The protester of the Capitol Hill "Stop the Steal" protest was markedly different from the average protester. Historically, mass-protest movements have consisted mostly of young people, poor people, and people of color who have used large public gatherings as a last resort to voice their frustration with the status quo. Protesting is seen as the only option for people who do not have the means to participate politically on a grander scale. (Piven and Cloward 1979). That is why it is so fascinating that wealthy and politically well-connected individuals felt compelled to participate in the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection.

The proliferation of the election misinformation had a profound effect on supporters of many different socioeconomic statuses. It was not exclusively working-class white people that came out in droves to protest the results of the presidential election, as one may associate with Trump's primary voter base. President Trump is seen by many political pundits to have been successful in the 2016 election as a result of his overwhelming support amongst rural white voters without college degrees in the rust belt (Pacewicz 2021). These are the types of individuals we would expect to amount a violent uprising and display reckless abandon. (Harris and Kearney 2016). Instead, real estate brokers, CEO's, elected officials and lawyers stole Capitol Police officer shields, destroyed government property with baseball bats and were seen posing for photographs in Nancy Pelosi's office. (Pallini 2021) This is why we require

alternative explanations to explain these protestors, including the possibility of external influences that typically are not present in social movements.

Shortly after storming The Capitol, Leo Christopher Kelly gave an eye-opening interview that may shed light on the catalyst of the protest at hand. In an interview with far-right news site LifeSiteNews, Kelly described his mindset: "This is a moment in U.S. history, unlike the beginning dates of the country. At some point, there's enough illegal behavior and there are enough crimes against the Constitution being committed by officials that, you know, what are you supposed to do?" (Iasi and Firozi 2021).

Mr. Kelly's rationale needs to be analyzed in light of my purported thesis: Protesters, like Leo Kelly, would not have put their futures at risk by entering the Capitol if not significantly impacted by the elite rhetoric of conservative leaders like President Trump. Firstly, it is clear that he has heard and has been convinced by the Republican elite that the results of the election had been compromised. Secondly, Kelly felt that there was no alternative option rather than engaging in violent and illegal behavior in response. Lastly, a clear sense of partisanship and allegiance to the goals of the political elite is evident in his account of his purported personal obligation to enter the Capitol Building. I will demonstrate that President Trump and his allies' rhetoric not only convinced individuals like Mr. Kelly that the results of the 2020 presidential election were illegitimate, but I will also create a link between this belief and the action taken by Mr. Kelly and his fellow protesters.

### **Social Movements:**

Before I address the abnormality of the events of January 6<sup>th</sup>, it is important to describe the nature of a standard protest movement and how it usually plays out. It has been demonstrated that elites have a tremendous role in influencing revolutionary action. (Piven and Cloward 1979).

Trump, Giuliani, and Taylor-Greene could very well have given just the right round of motivation to provoke action amongst the protesters.

In the 2020 presidential election, an estimated 74 million people voted for Donald Trump. (Dunn 2020). The larger a group is, the larger the likelihood that a member of the group is to display grievances. (Zald and Berger 1978). We can see that with January 6th, within such a large group of Trump voters, a group that was coping with an electoral defeat, a subgroup within were motivated enough to take aggressive and illegal activities to further their goals.

Furthermore, the greater the homogeneity within the subordinate group, the more likely it is that subordinates will challenge superiors. Within the protest group on Capitol Hill, the composition of the protesters were almost all right-leaning people, not to mention, they all had a unified and homogenous goal of overturning the results of the 2020 presidential election. Therefore according to Zald and Berger's argument, it would be more likely for protesters to "challenge their superior" and storm the Capitol. (Zald and Berger 1978)

### **Spontaneity in Protest Movements:**

If a group has less formal leadership and lacks an established hierarchy, it is more likely to promote spontaneous actions within the context of a protest or political movement or organization. When there is an unplanned action or "script shift" there is often a completely new ultimate goal of the protest and a greater likelihood of violence. This can easily be connected to how quickly the situation and end goal of protesters escalated on January 6th. (Snow and Moss 2014).

History has provided demarking factors of successful and unsuccessful protests and social movements. It has been demonstrated that mass media is decisive in the success of protest movements because it informs the public and the elites about the activities of social movements.



(Jenkins 1983). The formation of a "crisis" is only made possible through the resources and organizational power of elites. This may indicate that a large protest like what occurred on January 6th and the election fraud that triggered such a protest may have only been made possible through elite assistance. (Jenkins 1983).

The unprecedented nature of such an assault of the Capitol Building certainly played a role in the decision of countless protesters to follow suit and get involved in the criminal activity. An example documenting the tremendous impact that protest action amongst uncertainty could bring is illustrated by the actions of Wilhelmina Jakes and Carrie Patterson, two students who catalyzed the Tallahassee Bus Boycott of 1956. After refusing to sit on the back of the segregated bus, these two black Florida A & M students were not only arrested but were met in a Tallahassee Police Station with dozens of police officers and were ultimately arrested for inciting a riot.

Although these two women must have been aware that there would be consequences for disobeying the then established Jim Crow Laws of the South, they must have been shocked at the outsized police reaction their peaceful protest had garnered. Shortly thereafter, the most influential black leaders of the day congregated and organized the total boycott of the Tallahassee bus system and made a tremendous impact on the civil rights movement. This is a reflection of the outsized impact that action without foreknowledge of consequences can have on a protest movement. (Killian 1984).

Like the Tallahassee Bus Riot, the actions of a few protesters who did not know the full scope of the consequences of their actions amounted to quite the outsized impact. Due to its duration and aggressive nature, it is clear that out of the three options of insurgency, mass movement, or coup, the January 6<sup>th</sup> protest most closely resembled a coup. To mount a

successful coup there needs to be an organizational elite to provide key finances and a monumental event following months of conspiracy brewing. President Trump's continual push of election fraud, public lawsuits against the election committee of many swing states and maintaining that he was the legitimate winner allowed for election fraud to become the majority view held by Republicans. (Agiesta 2021).

A seemingly peaceful protest can diverge into utter chaos. The shift from peaceful protest to violent insurrection was quite sudden, but upon further analysis of interviews and data, it was not surprising that individuals were willing to enter the Capitol Building. One confirmed rioter told an interviewer "There's a lot of people here willing to take orders," If the orders are given, the people will rise up." Another protester was even more forward with where his allegiances lie. Over a live stream filmed within the Capitol Building, he shouted the following over a loudspeaker: "Our president wants us here; we wait and take orders from our president." (Barry, McIntyre, Rosenberg 2021). Protestors were so amped up by the speeches of Trump and his supporters that they viewed themselves as soldiers under his direction. They were willing to go to great lengths to fulfil what they felt were his wishes.

Such a sentiment is a clear indication that the protesters were motivated by the aggressive and suggestive speech of the Republican leadership. The participants of the "Bloody Sunday" tragedy are an archetype for spontaneity within a protest catalyzing further violent spontaneous action. On that fateful day, 13 protesters in Northern Ireland were killed by the British police force. When some unruly protesters began to throw stones at the police officers, fellow protesters stepped in front of the offenders which created a stoppage along the planned march. This stoppage led the British police force to lose control of the march and chaos ensued. The police officers opted to use tear gas and a water cannon on the protesters which led to violent clashing

on both sides. When all was said in done, 13 protesters were killed, and dozens were injured in a day that will forever live in infamy. (Snow and Moss 2014).

The tragic events that transpired in Derry, Northern Ireland have been described as a “script breakdown”. A “script breakdown” is defined as the unplanned event that triggers a major cataclysm at an event or protest. In the case of Bloody Sunday, the script breakdown was the protesters attempting to protect their fellow protesters which caused a major stoppage along the path of the planned protest march. On January 6<sup>th</sup>, the utter confusion caused by members of the “Stop the Steal” rally entering the building led to countless followers who were at that point willing to do whatever they could to please their president. In cases of script breakdown, like the initial protesters that stormed the Capitol Building, there will be an increased probability of violent and spontaneous collective action, particularly over actions that are driven by emotion. The direct call to action from a beloved president calling his supporters to action certainly fits this bill as emotionally charged.

### **Emotional Factors in Protest Movements:**

In response to literature that has tried to minimize the impact of emotions in protests, Jasper argues that the irrationality embedded within emotion is what drives protests and what drives their escalation. This may give credence to the notion that protesters inspired by a fiery speech by Rudy Giuliani or Donald Trump could give all the motivation necessary to push protesters over the edge and into the Capitol Building. (Jasper 1998) Although organization and planning are key to a successful protest, what is intrinsic to any social movement is spontaneous action and willingness to act in manners in which the consequences are unknown. This may explain how a standard rally on Capitol Hill escalated to one of the most troubling sequences in recent memory. (Killian 1984).

Regarding the actual substance of the protest, Eder explains the various motivating factors of protest. That highest level of protest is a moral crusade, which is a protest against cultural imperialism, whether imagined or real. The protest becomes irrational when (as is shown, for example, in the Moral Majority or other new religious movements) the ideal against which reality is measured is the morality of the movement, which is assumed and claimed to be right. (Eder 1984) There is a strong argument to be made that the participants of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection viewed their contention with the results of the 2020 presidential election as a moral crusade against the imperial force of the Democratic Party. (Morrison 2021).

It has been hypothesized that the primary emotions that prompt violent reactions within protest are grief, anger and outrage. These feelings were clearly implanted in the speeches of President Trump and his colleagues during their proliferation of election conspiracy theory in the months leading up to the January 6<sup>th</sup> rally as well as the speeches given at the rally itself. The specification of the blame for injustice is extremely important in catalyzing reaction within a protest because it generates villains. (Jasper 1998) The creation of villains has been analyzed by Vanderford, who demonstrated through the newsletter of pro-life advocacy organizations that these letters "identify concrete and specific adversaries, characterize enemy action in an entirely negative light, attribute corrupt motives to the foe, and magnify the opponents' power" (Vanderford 1989). Similar to these pro-life organizations' demonization of those in favor of abortion is President Trump's demonization of the Democratic party following the 2020 presidential election.

In the months leading up to January 6th, the inflammatory remarks of the Conservative elite made the Democratic party a villain that had stolen the election from the Republicans. President Trump without a doubt played an active role in creating this villain. Trump pitted the

Democrats as “robbing the election” and “taking the country away from us.” (Barabek 2021).

Armed with this sentiment from their trusted president, protesters felt that the America that they knew and loved was at risk and the soul of their nation was in the balance. Therefore, the protesters felt as though they had no choice but to contend with the results of the 2020 presidential election and do what they could to take back what was rightfully theirs.

### **The Dissemination of Fake News Media:**

Elite discourse increases the dissemination of false information (Van Duyn and Collier 2019). This may provide a link between Trump’s continued assertion that the election had been stolen to an increase in articles that posited this claim. The logic is that the more often a particular issue is discussed by the media, the more likely it is to become diffused among the public. It very well could have been that in the months preceding January 6th, the elite discourse and fake news led to so much discussion among Trump's base that it precipitated the violent action that ultimately occurred at the protest. (Van Duyn & Collier 2019).

Misinformation and fake news in the media in the weeks leading up to the Capitol Hill insurrection certainly played a role. Elite resistance to denounce conspiracy theories and elite support of such theories is unsurprisingly a driving factor behind the mass belief in such theories. Uscinski, Klofstad, & Atkinson predict that the likelihood of the increased conspiracy theories would be commensurate to the increase in partisan divide. (Uscinski, Klofstad, & Atkinson 2016). This may point to elite support of election fraud theory causing the partisan extremism that was so clearly present on January 6th.

### **Reaction to Viral Fake News:**

The next factor to address is who is swept up by such theories. Notably, the greater degree of political involvement and participation is correlated with the propensity to become

influenced by the elite members of their political party. (Zaller 1992). Therefore, the more invested one is in the election cycle and news coverage, like those who are willing to take the time and effort to attend a mass protest, the more likely they are to consume and believe conspiracy theories and fake news. As we will see, many of those who opted to attend the “Stop the Steal” rally were lifelong and committed Republicans. This can be a partial explanation for how seemingly well-off people were impacted by President Trump and his allies to the point where they participated in the “Stop the Steal” protest in a violent and destructive manner.

Historically, major news outlets have refrained from challenging the claims of elites. (Iyengar and Hahn 2009). As a result of this lack of accountability, there has been little incentive for elite leaders like President Trump to curb their peddling of false claims about election fraud. Notably, President Trump did not face immediate backlash after his misleading claims about election fraud, and therefore as demonstrated above, did not have a legitimate incentive to halt his spread of misinformation. This may have been a result of President Trump's supporters forming a web of misinformation propaganda machines on social media sites like Reddit, Facebook and Twitter. (Gounari 2018). This propaganda machine is so widespread that it has come to be regarded as a legitimate news source. This web of misinformation is potentially what allowed ideas about a stolen election to take place and played a role in the January 6th insurrection.

From the outset, it was clear that Trump agreed with the "Stop the Steal" premise of the rally. In the months leading up to the protest, the president and his lawyers filed 60 lawsuits to attempt to overturn vote tallies in key swing states. Trump was so committed to contending the election results that he even pleaded with Georgia Chief Election Officer, Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, to “find 11,780 votes.” Raffensperger promptly refused, as he saw

this as an ethically questionable request. (McManus 2021.) It was clear that Trump was willing to go to great lengths to contend with the results of the election. Trump spent the ensuing months declaring that the vote counts of each swing state were illegitimate. After losing one of the aforementioned lawsuits, Trump confidently told supporters “We won on the Arizona forensic audit, [Biden] didn’t win in Arizona; he lost.” (Funke 2021).

President Trump had considerable help in his disingenuous plot to cast doubt on the results of the election. Republican lawmakers such as Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor-Greene shared dozens of conspiracy theories claiming election fraud in the weeks preceding The “Stop the Steal” protest. On January 1st, Greene tweeted “As if that's not enough, there was MASS voter fraud on a scale that should terrify every American regardless of which political party" (Dale 2021). The tweets and sentiment put forth by Greene and some of her colleagues in Congress gained considerable media attention and according to riot participants, played a role in their decision to stage a protest. (Associated Press 2021).

In his address to the rally-goers, just before they walked down Pennsylvania Avenue, Trump declared "We must stop the steal, and then we must ensure that such outrageous election fraud never happens again, can never be allowed to happen again!" Former New York City Mayor, and formerly President Trump’s lawyer, Rudy Giuliani was even more forward with his suggestion of what the protesters should do next. Giuliani proclaimed that if the investigation to overturn the results of the presidential election was not successful in the legal courts, then we will “have trial by combat”(Jacobso 2021).

Although Trump has not achieved any tangible success in overturning the results of the election, he has been remarkably successful in convincing his party and followers that the election was fraudulent and that Joe Biden was not the legitimate winner of the 2020 presidential

election. According to a CNN poll, an astonishing 78% of Republicans believe that Trump was the winner, 75% of Republicans feel that democracy is under attack, while 54% believe there is hard proof that Biden did not win the election. (Agiesta 2021).

This CNN poll was taken in September of 2021, seven months after the chaos that categorized the Capitol Hill insurrection unfolded. If such a significant percentage of Republican voters believed this misinformation so long after the fact, it is possible that in the months leading up to January 6<sup>th</sup>, when President Trump was at the peak of his election legal battle crusade, an even larger percentage of Republicans believed in the validity of Former President Trump's claims. Wilsnack's study regarding prison riots found that the larger a group was, the more likely a group would foment resistance. (Zald and Berger 1978). Trump had created a narrative that millions of his followers believed and were evidently willing to do something about.

When there is a view that is agreed upon by such a significant amount of people, there is bound to be significant consequences. Following the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, counterterrorism efforts in the United States grew exponentially. The usage of drone strikes, which have been documented to result in thousands of civilian casualties in areas hosting perceived terrorist threats, became a widespread military tactic in areas deemed terroristic threats. Despite this carnage, however, there has been little backlash from the American electorate on both sides of the political aisle. In fact, according to a 2012 PBS Poll, a whopping 83% of Americans endorse the use of drone strikes. This is because Americans have come to such an agreement about the perils of terrorism, that violence has become justified in counterterrorism measures, even if that violence has led to a tremendous loss in innocent life. (Saas 2012). Therefore, it is not out of the question that the protesters of the "Stop the Steal"



rally were so convinced that the election was stolen from them that they felt justified in their violent and illegal action.

### **Party and Elite Polarization:**

The driving force behind the polarization of the general populace is the rapidly increasing polarization of members of the elite political class. The extreme political behavior of Former President Trump and other prominent Republicans had a pertinent impact on the political behavior of the would-be rioters. (McCarty 2019.)

Over the last twenty years, political elites have gotten more polarized and as they have polarized, citizens on each side of the aisle have needed to take similar stands to their elected officials that are identifiable as Republican or Democrat. Clear data has been presented that suggests that partisanship amongst members of the political elite have skyrocketed in recent years. To support this claim, Hetherington utilizes Poole and Rosenthal's DW Nominate scores for members of Congress. He then separates members of Congress by party, calculates their mean DW-Nominate score and the weighted Euclidian distance between an average member of the respective opposing parties. The result of these calculations points to a steady rise in ideological polarization between the Republican and Democratic parties starting in the 1970s. (Hetherington 2001).

This increase in ideological polarization has significantly impacted the general electorate. (Carmines and Stimson 1989). Hetherington's tested the degree of impact this elite polarization had on the electorate and found that respondents are progressively much more likely today to think positively about their own party and negatively about the opposing party than they were beforehand. From this result, we can see how a staunch Trump supporter developed such an "us vs. them" mentality.

To be a valued member of any "team", members are expected to adopt a laundry list of issues that are identifiably Republican or Democratic. Layman and Carsey examined the relationship between attitudes on the several cultural issues that were found in all election year NES surveys from 1988 through 2000. The surveys found that the more politically aware an individual is, the more likely they are to align with the views put forward by their respective party. (Layman and Carsey 2002). Therefore, elites like President Trump, Mr. Giuliani and Representative Taylor-Greene peddling the election-conspiracy theory likely made it a moral imperative for like-minded Republicans to align with their belief that the election was rigged.

This concept, known as "conflict extension", may have led to large groups of people belonging to the Republican party adopting "Election Fraud "as identifiably Republican and uniting behind it at the behest of their Republican elected officials. This conflict extension behavior presented itself in the weeks leading up to January 6th, as supporters of President Trump widely accepted his stance on election fraud as an extension of their Democrat versus Republican conflict. (Layman & Carsey 2002). This polarization amongst elites has likely led to a resurgence of partisanship. This is a clear link to party behavior and electorate action. (Hetherington 2001).

The elite polarization that has dramatically increased in recent years is directly linked to citizen polarization. The extreme attitudes of both sides of the political aisle may have precipitated the issue of polarization, as people are pushed so far to the left and right that they can begin to act irrationally. In general, strong opinions are seen as more desirable. Therefore, bold claims and absolutes, like a claim of election fraud, can become a very attractive notion to believe if coming from the mouth of the president of the United States. (Druckman, Pederson and Slothuus 2013).

The divergence in opinion amongst elites can raise the stakes of the election with the most politically engaged paying the closest attention to the results of an election. This may be why there was a strong reaction to a Democratic Party victory in the 2020 presidential election. Those leaning furthest to the right were terrified of what could be if the "evil and corrupt" Left would seize the Executive branch of the legislature. (Lee 2013).

Now that it is understood why "Stop the Steal" protesters were able to adopt such extreme positions as a result of identifying with the political elite who have become more polarized and extreme as time has gone, it is time to hear explanations from confirmed protesters themselves.

### **Evidence from Trial Proceedings:**

In the aftermath of the attack on the Capitol, we have seen some of the perpetrators of the crime face prosecution. In an analysis of some post-facto interviews with January 6<sup>th</sup> protestors, it is clear that this was not a group of anarchic, violent outlaws who were looking to get their kicks. As noted above, these were people who had stable jobs and devoted families. Out of the dozens of trial proceedings I have gone through, almost every participant has displayed tremendous remorse for his or her actions, while implicating the former president in one way or another.

Jennifer Leigh Ryan, a former real estate broker, was sentenced to 60 days in prison for her participation in the January 6<sup>th</sup> protest. After pleading guilty to one count of "parading, demonstrating, or picketing in the Capitol Building." She stated in court that "this is not anything that remotely resembles who I am." This is a clear indication that Ms. Ryan was completely overwhelmed with the emotions of a protest. (Jasper 1998). She went on to say what many of her co-protesters alluded to: "I feel like I was basically following my president," Ryan

said in an interview with CBS Dallas-Fort Worth. "I was following what we were called to do. He asked us to fly there. He asked us to be there." Again, we see an individual squaring the blame on President Trump for their violent and illegal action. (Jones 2021).

Another glaring example of a participant passing the blame onto the president is the court proceedings of Thomas Sibick. Sibick wrote the following to a federal judge in a request to be released from prison: Trump's "words and actions are nefarious causing pain and harm to the world, and January 6<sup>th</sup> was a disgrace to our nation that left a scar Trump is ultimately responsible for, but we are strong and will heal from it," It is clear that Sibick, someone who openly admitted to breaking into the Capitol Building, felt that what went on around him was a result of the words and actions of the 45<sup>th</sup> President. He is clearly not proud of the actions that he took that day and did not seem to go into that day with a premeditated plan to terrorize members of Congress. Rather, as he put it, the "Stop the Steal Rally" was Sibick's "first and last" political protest, and he claims he was overcome with the mob mentality, which was "undoubtedly out of character". (Lakamp 2021).

Clearly, there is a trend of remorse for the violent action taken by the perpetrators of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection. Individuals cited to federal judges that they were egged on by President Trump to take drastic measures and were ashamed of their actions. I have not found any sources on the internet that demonstrated that the storming of the Capitol was a premeditated act. The encouragement and motivation given by the Republican leaders seem to be the underlying cause cited by the accused in recent trial proceedings.

### **Help from the Inside:**

In a late 2021 House Select Committee investigation, Taylor Budowitch, a spokesperson for Former President Trump, has been accused of providing funding to the Stop the Steal Rally.

The committee, through a subpoena, is seeking the financial records from J.P. Morgan Chase, that they claim belong to Budowitch. If this is true, not only is President Trump and his elite allies guilty of stoking tensions through their speech, but they are also financially responsible for the gravity of the rally. If this funding is directly tied to President Trump and those closest to him, there is further reason to believe that members of the Republican elite are responsible for the events that unfolded that day. (Grager 2021).

Also cited in the Select Committee subpoena is Former White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, who was held in contempt of Congress for defying a subpoena to hand records that allege the White House's connection to the events of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection and refusing to sit for a deposition in Congress. In the limited records that have been released to the public, it is clear that members of Trump's inner circle were aware that the events of the Stop the Steal rally were likely to get out of hand quickly. One alleged email sent by Meadows includes Meadows claiming the National Guard would be deployed on January 6<sup>th</sup> to "protect pro-Trump people." It has also become clear that Meadows was in favor of the election conspiracy theories peddled by Trump, with the report alleging that Meadows sent claims about election fraud to active leadership in the Department of Justice. (Williams 2021).

Although the full scope of President Trump's cabinet's involvement with the planning and configuring of the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection remains to be seen, what is clear, however, is that members of Trump's inner circle were involved in the spread of misinformation regarding the results of the election as well of knowledge of the potentially violent nature of such an emotionally fueled rally. Not only did they not attempt to prevent the event from occurring, but they may have been guilty of financing the event, and at the very least, were excited of the very thought of its existence.

## **Conclusion:**

The participants of the January 6<sup>th</sup> Capitol Hill insurrection did not resemble the prototypical protester historically. White Collar, Conservative, middle-aged adults with the limited prior criminal activity carried out an event that will go down in history as a significant threat to democracy in this country. On the heels of rising polarization amongst the political elite on both sides of the political aisle, dedicated supporters of each major political party adopted their leaders increasing extremism. As President Trump developed an extreme loyalty amongst his followers, he, and other members of the Conservative elite, were able to construct a narrative of election fraud in the 2020 presidential election without facing significant backlash. This lack of backlash allowed his misinformation about vote counts nationwide to be received by the vast majority of Republicans as cold hard fact.

Along the way, President Trump was able to successfully paint the Democratic party and those confirming the results of the presidential election, as the primary enemies of the Republican party and the greatest threats to the future of Democracy. With this sentiment in hand, President Trump's followers registered for the infamous "Stop the Steal" rally in droves. Once present in Washington D.C, the protesters were egged on by the fiery words of President Trump and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani. When asked what prompted them to trespass on government property and risk incarceration, protesters candidly revealed in a series of interviews that their actions were taken to fulfill what they perceived as orders from "their president."

Their violent actions were sparked by their "us vs. them" mentality and their certainty that storming the Capitol Building was their only way to receive justice for the crime of "stealing" the election from President Trump. The utter chaos of the day provoked a few

individuals to storm the Capitol, which led to a “script breakdown” of the planned protesters, which prompted hundreds, if not thousands, of ‘peaceful protesters’ to illegally enter the Capitol Building as the Electoral College confirmation of the presidential election was taking place.

After the Capitol had been cleared, and hundreds were arrested for their connection to the mayhem that unfolded on January 6th, it has become clear that protesters wholeheartedly believed they were in Washington D.C on that day in order to carry out the orders of President Trump and to assist in ensuring that the true winner of the 2020 presidential election would take his rightful position in office.

What has also emerged in the months following the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection is the amount of knowledge that insiders in the White House held of the gravity of the situation as well as their potential financial contributions to the “Stop the Steal” protest. This, compounded with President Trump’s refusal to publicly denounce the violence, allowed the terror to escalate and continue for as long as it did. Therefore, it is clear that President Trump was not only implicit and supportive of the criminal activity that occurred on January 6<sup>th</sup>, but his actions, sentiment and speech prompted the Stop the Steal rally to play out as it did.

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