

# A Three-Dimensional Group Dynamics Framework Behind the U.S. Capitol Hill Insurrection on Jan. 6, 2021

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doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2025.03.03

## Abstract

As a product of deepening economic, social and political polarization in the United States, the Capitol Hill insurrection happened on Jan. 6 has brought unprecedented challenges to American political traditions and institutional operations. Compared to Chinese academia, foreign academics have conducted more systematic research on its background, but the group dynamics underlying the event still needs to be further explored. In this regard, this paper takes Trump's speeches on the day of the Capitol Hill insurrection and the interviews of those arrested as objects, and uses social psychological analysis to explore the group dynamics mechanism behind the 2021 Capitol Hill insurrection. Through the paper, it is found that the discursive interactions between Trump and his supporters embody the group dynamics mechanism of empathic projection and emotional resonance, thus completing the process of contagion of threat perception, mobilization of identity, rationalization of behavior, and ultimately transforming the peaceful protests into a group violence event.

**Keywords:** U.S. presidential election, Capitol Hill Insurrection, empathy projection, emotional resonance, group dynamics theory

## 1. Introduction

Following the announcement of the 2020 presidential election results, Donald Trump refused to concede defeat, persistently claiming to be a victim of widespread electoral fraud. On January 6, 2021, during the congressional certification of the election, a rally organized by Trump supporters escalated into a violent protest targeting the U.S. Capitol. The mob breached heavily guarded police barricades, threatened members of Congress, and even directed threats at former Vice President Mike

Pence, demanding a halt to the formal approval of President-elect Joe Biden's electoral college votes. <sup>1</sup>For a nation like the United States, which has historically demonstrated remarkable resilience and stability through numerous internal crises, the 2021 Capitol riot—though four years past—remains a significant anomaly

<sup>1</sup> Joey Garrison and Deirdre Shesgreen. (January 6, 2021). A Rattled Congress Affirms Joe Biden's Electoral College Victory After Pro-Trump Riot at Capitol, *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2021/01/06/electoral-college-vote-stopped-unclear-when-resume-after-riot/6572441002/>.

in the country's political history, with its underlying causes continuing to draw intense scrutiny.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars widely recognize Donald Trump's role as a central figure in the Capitol riot, with many analyzing his influence through charismatic leadership models that amplify collective aggression. Haslam et al. (2021) propose a dual-agency framework of identity leadership and followership, wherein leaders and followers mutually reinforce shared ideologies without absolute hierarchical control. Through discourse analysis, Trump emerges as an identity entrepreneur who cultivated a cohesive social identity among supporters, framing loyalty to himself as synonymous with defending America.<sup>1</sup>

From a racial perspective, theories like *the Great Replacement Theory*—which posits that non-white minorities are displacing white Americans' economic and cultural dominance—have been pivotal in explaining the riot's motivations. Research by Professor Pape's team at the University of Chicago (2021) revealed that a majority of arrested rioters were middle-class whites from counties experiencing rapid demographic shifts, rendering them susceptible to narratives of racial displacement propagated by political and media figures.<sup>2</sup> Complementing this, Professor Barreto (2023) found that the 2020 *Black Lives Matter* protests and subsequent media coverage exacerbated white anxieties about declining racial privilege, indirectly catalyzing the transition from protest to violence on January 6, 2021.<sup>3</sup>

The role of social media in disseminating misinformation and conspiracy theories has also

drawn significant scholarly attention. Studies by Professor Swol (2022) underscore how platforms like Twitter, Parler, and Telegram enabled real-time radicalization, with algorithmically amplified content normalizing extremist actions as "patriotic resistance."<sup>4</sup> Conversely, some scholars attribute participation in political violence to individual psychopathology. A February 2021 survey of 1,100 U.S. adults by Armaly and Enders (2024) identified systemic victimization (perceived institutional bias) and egocentric victimization (personal grievances) as key correlates of support for violence, alongside authoritarian leanings, populist sympathies, and white identity.<sup>5</sup> These findings suggest that individuals exhibiting such traits were disproportionately likely to engage in the Capitol attack.

## 3. Research Question

Collectively, existing academic studies highlight the interplay of leadership cultism, racial anxiety, digital radicalization, and psychological predispositions in driving collective violence. Researchers interpreting the riot often attempt to construct generalized criminological frameworks to explain its origins and consequences, effectively proposing "grand theories" of mass disorder. In contrast, there remains a relative gap of scholarship examining the collective behavioral patterns of the crowd on January 6, 2021, or the specific socio-psychological mechanisms underlying their actions. Most empirically driven studies have yet to systematically investigate how collective behavior transitioned from peaceful protest to politically motivated violence targeting the Capitol.

Meanwhile, U.S. media coverage tends to focus on individuals with alleged affiliations to far-right anti-government groups such as *the Oath Keepers*, *the Proud Boys*, and *the Three Percenters*.<sup>6</sup> These organizations—often

<sup>1</sup> S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher, Hema Preya Selvanathan, Amber M. Gaffney, Niklas K. Steffens, Dominic Packer, Jay J. Van Bavel, Evangelos Ntontis, Fergus Neville, Sara Vestergren, Klara Jurstakova and Michael J. Platow. (2023). Examining the Role of Donald Trump and His Supporters in the 2021 Assault on the U.S. Capitol: A Dual-Agency Model of Identity Leadership and Engaged Followership. *Leadership Quarterly*, 34(2), Article 101622.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Pape. (2021). What an Analysis of 377 Americans Arrested or Charged in the Capitol Insurrection Tells Us. *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/06/capitol-insurrection-arrests-cpost-analysis/>.

<sup>3</sup> Matt A. Barreto, Claudia Alegre, J. Isaiah Bailey, Alexandria Davis, Joshua Ferrer, Joyce Nguy, Christopher Palmisano, and Crystal Robertson. (2023). Black Lives Matter and the Racialized Support for the January 6th Insurrection. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 708(1), pp. 64-82.

<sup>4</sup> Lyn Van Swol, Sangwon Lee and Rachel Hutchins. (2022). The Banality of Extremism: The Role of Group Dynamics and Communication of Norms in Polarization on January 6. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 26(3), pp. 239–251.

<sup>5</sup> Miles T. Armaly and Adam M. Enders. (2024). Who Supports Political Violence?" *Perspectives on Politics*, 22(2), pp. 427–44.

<sup>6</sup> Alanna Durkin Richer and Michael Kunzelman. (January 9, 2021). Explainer: A Look at Far-Right Extremists in Jan. 6 Riot. *AP News*, 2022; Dan Barry, Mike McIntire and Matthew Rosenberg, Our President Wants Us Here: The Mob That Stormed the Capitol. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/us/capitol-rioters.html>.

characterized as white nationalist or neo-fascist collectives—are portrayed in news reports as highly structured entities that allegedly spent months devising detailed plans to obstruct President Biden's 2020 electoral victory through force if necessary.<sup>1</sup> Mainstream media footage and self-recorded videos from the riot indeed show individuals bearing group insignia leading assaults on barricades and engaging in hand-to-hand combat with police. However, according to a database compiled by Professor Pape's team at the University of Chicago, the Capitol rioters diverged starkly from traditional profiles of right-wing violent extremists across nearly all socioeconomic metrics, instead aligning closely with mainstream American demographics. Compared to typical far-right offenders, these individuals were older, included more women, had higher educational attainment, were disproportionately employed in white-collar professions or business ownership, and largely lacked criminal records. Among the 716 individuals charged, only 14% had verifiable ties to right-wing militias or violent organizations, while 86% were effectively "unaffiliated actors" with no prior organizational commitments.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding motivations, according to Pape's research, of the 716 charged as of January 1, 2022, 398 individuals (56% of those surveyed) made public statements on a motive for entering the Capitol. Although 24% assert various versions of they were "swept up in the crowd", the overwhelming majority (about 80%) assert one of five political motives: patriotic duty (41%), closely followed by anti-government animus (38%) and stolen election (36%), then loyalty to Trump (23%) and fear of losing rights (12%).<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, the largest percentage was for "patriotic duty", which even surpassed the usual news references to "stolen election" and "loyalty to Trump".

Therefore, it can be concluded that the arrested participants in the Capitol riot were

predominantly "ordinary citizens" with minimal histories of violence or legal infractions. Yet, on January 6, they collectively breached security perimeters, assaulted police officers, stormed the Capitol building, issued threats against legislators and Vice President Pence, and vandalized public property. This paradox raises several questions:

- a. Why did these ostensibly mainstream individuals engage in political violence?
- b. How did "patriotic duty" become the primary justification for their actions?

#### **4. The Group Dynamics Analysis of the Event on Jan. 6, 2021**

This paper argues that the group dynamics between political leaders and the public during the January 6 Capitol riot unfolded across three interconnected dimensions, facilitating a progression from empathetic projection and emotional resonance to collective mobilization.

##### *4.1 Group Identity and Threat Perception*

Before delving deeper, it is essential to define the concept of "patriotism" and "patriotic duty" within Trump and the rioters' rhetoric. In traditional American discourse, "patriotism" denotes devotion to the nation's culture, values, institutions, historical narratives, and its people.<sup>4</sup> However, Trump's narrative only positions his followers as the "real" Americans, "patriots" who are strong and justified in acting in defense of what is rightfully theirs. Beyond reinforcing their identity as "American patriots," Trump's rhetoric systematically invoked external threats, constructing a cohesive oppositional category "them".

Within Trumpism discourse, America's "membership" has been reserved for a narrowly defined in-group, often delineated by those excluded from it. These can be, the "left-wing menace", "illegal immigrants", "weak Republicans", "the fake media" "big tech corporations", "China", etc. The term "they" functioned as a placeholder, a container that can be filled with varying groups, individuals, characteristics, and specifics depending on the context. For instance, during Trump's 1 hour, 12 minutes and 21 seconds long speech on January 6, Trump used "we" 224 times and "they" 245

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Kriner and Jon Lewis. (2021). The Oath Keepers and Their Role in the January 6 Insurrection. *Combating Terrorism Center*, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-oath-keepers-and-their-role-in-the-january-6-insurrection/>.

<sup>2</sup> Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST). (2022). *American Face of Insurrection: Analysis of Individuals Charged for Storming the US Capitol on January 6, 2021*, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST). (2022). "Patriotic Counter-Revolution": *The Political Mindset That Stormed the Capitol*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Theiss-Morse. (2009). *Who Counts as an American? The Boundaries of National Identity*. Cambridge University Press, p. 23.

times.<sup>1</sup> The “us” vs “them” dynamic that Trump has cultivated is problematic because it denies the possibility of dialog with anyone who is not “us”. “They” are the “other”, the anti-American. According to Self-Categorization Theory, such relentless othering amplifies the salience and distinctiveness of in-group identity, catalyzing the adoption of extremist in-group positions.<sup>2</sup> Through this discursive dichotomy, audiences gradually internalized a polarized worldview: a virtuous self-image against a demonized out-group.

However, Social Identity Theory also emphasizes that ingroup favoritism does not inherently translate into outgroup hostility unless the ingroup perceives tangible threats or challenges to its status.<sup>3</sup> This means that violence is more likely to emerge when external groups are framed as existential rivals competing for resources or political power. Political scientist Claassen (2016) posits those intergroup violent sentiments stem from the dissonance between perceived resource distributions and idealized entitlements.<sup>4</sup> When a group’s actual endowments (e.g., economic standing, political influence) fall short of its perceived entitlements, resentment toward outgroups will be intensified. Either because outgroups are seen as “undeservingly privileged” or because the ingroup feels deprived of its “rightful share.” This grievance-asymmetry fuels collective willingness to engage in intergroup violence. In the context of America, as wealth inequality and unemployment rates continue to rise, a growing number of citizens are having deepening dissatisfaction with their current living

conditions. Especially for the Rust Belt group who once had a stable income and a comfortable life, their dissatisfaction with the endless demands for benefits from immigrants, their anxiety about their own survival and their anger at the current policies have all exacerbated their hatred of the out-groups.

Furthermore, the perception of outgroup threats often triggers dehumanizing cognitive frameworks, manifesting emotionally as *schadenfreude*, and behaviorally as hostility.<sup>5</sup> When intergroup divisions escalate under perceived existential threats, ingroup members frequently employ moral absolutism to demonize political adversaries. By framing opponents as inherently “evil”, dissent becomes intolerable, compelling adherence to polarized group norms to secure ingroup validation. This pattern is supported by court documents, interview transcripts, social media posts, and speech records of individuals arrested during the Capitol riot. When describing Trump and his supporters, which is the “ingroup”, they consistently employed laudatory descriptions such as “brave”, “honorable,” “true patriots”, “real Americans” and “defenders of the Constitution.” Conversely, those opposing Trump and associated groups were systematically branded with dehumanizing labels: “weak”, “frauds”, “liars”, “criminals”, “intent on destroying America”, “traitors” and “deserving execution by hanging.”<sup>6</sup> This reveals that, in the minds of these arrestees, the relationship between the opposing groups had shifted from one of relative competition to an existential struggle between allies and adversaries. Such a cognitive framework not only facilitates the ingroup’s self-justification for acts of violence but also serves as a strategic tool to imbue participants with moral legitimacy and a sense of heroic purpose. While their conduct was undeniably destructive and violent, the perpetrators rationalized such actions as targeted and intentional—rather than arbitrary

<sup>1</sup> Donald Trump, “Donald Trump Speech ‘Save America’ Rally Transcript January 6,” January 6, 2021. Typical sentences include: “We will never give up. We will never concede, it doesn’t happen. You don’t concede when there’s theft involved.” “We will not be intimidated into accepting the hoaxes and the lies that we’ve been forced to believe over the past several weeks. But it’s never going to be the end of us, never. Let them get out. Let the weak ones get out. This is a time for strength.” “Together we are determined to defend and preserve government of the people, by the people and for the people.”

<sup>2</sup> John C. Turner and S. Alexander Haslam. (2001). Social Identity, Organizations and Leadership, in *Groups at Work: Advances in Theory and Research*, edited by Michael E. Turner. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, pp. 25-65.

<sup>3</sup> Judith A. Howard. (2000). Social Psychology of Identities. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26(1), pp. 367–393.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Claassen. (2016). Group Entitlement, Anger and Participation in Intergroup Violence. *British Journal of Political Science*, 46(1), pp. 127–148.

<sup>5</sup> Walter G. Stephan, Oscar Ybarra, and Kimberly Rios Morrison. (2009). Intergroup Threat Theory, in *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*, edited by Todd D. Nelson. Psychology Press, pp. 43–60.

<sup>6</sup> Shirin Ghaffary and Rebecca Heilweil, “How Trump’s Internet Built and Broadcast the Capitol Insurrection: Online Extremists Started Planning the Chaos of January 6 Months Ago,” *Vox*, January 9, 2021; Aymann Ismail, “We Know Exactly Who the Capitol Rioters Were: A Year Later, a Fuller Picture of Who Really Drove the Riot Is Clear. The Lessons for 2022 and Beyond Are Sobering,” *Slate*, January 6, 2022.



or senseless—aimed at defending a besieged ingroup identity they perceived as under existential threat.

#### 4.2 Empathetic Projection and Emotional Resonance

Emotional contagion serves as a critical mechanism in driving collective behavior, functioning as both a personal affective experience and a mediator of sociopolitical processes through which individual subjectivities are expressed.<sup>1</sup> Emotions not only arise from interpersonal interactions but also act as catalysts for the mobilization of political engagement.<sup>2</sup> Individuals often become politically active due to deeply felt emotional investments, which translate into concrete actions such as participation in public protests. Jasper (1998) points out that the non-rational elements embedded in collective emotions serve as both the driving force behind protest movements and a critical catalyst for their escalation. Protest activities, functioning as performative rituals, operate through the strategic transformation of emotions. Within these dynamics, the primary affective states that precipitate violent responses are grief, moral anger and righteous indignation.<sup>3</sup>

American psychoanalyst Schoenewolf (1990) defined “emotional contagion” as a process wherein an individual or group influences the emotions or behaviors of others through the conscious or unconscious induction of emotional states and behavioral attitudes.<sup>4</sup> In response to such contagion, individuals exhibit synchronization in behavior, attention and affect. Shared physical and emotional experiences—such as collective excitement, fear, or euphoria—forge communal memories and narratives around protest events, while catalyzing the emergence of unified strategic agendas within crowds. Furthermore, emotions generate a cyclical emotional reinforcement loop between emotional “transmitters” (e.g., protest

leaders) and group members. This phenomenon operates as a recursive, interactive process: the positive or negative emotions of one member infect others, creating cascading emotional amplification. Through repeated cycles of this contagion, group members gradually develop homogenized emotional states and value systems.<sup>5</sup> When collective emotional intensity reaches a critical threshold, it triggers large-scale affective synchronization — a phenomenon termed emotional resonance.

On the day of the Capitol Hill riot, video evidence from *The New York Times* documented that Trump’s speech was frequently interrupted by chants of “Stop the Steal!” and “We love Trump!” by the assembled crowd. Video recordings also captured specific individuals urging more concrete actions “Storm the Capitol!”, “Fight, fight, fight!”, and “Let’s take the Capitol now!”<sup>6</sup> The large gathering scale of protesters, heightened emotional expressions, coordinated collective actions, and responsiveness to leadership rhetoric all contributed to achieving emotional resonance within the assembled group. Dominant narratives within the crowd, amplified by their sheer volume and intensity, were likely to influence bystanders. It then encouraged them to adopt the prevailing views about the situation and act on Trump’s claims of “election fraud”.

On one hand, interactions with fellow Trump supporters fostered mutual support, generating positive emotional reinforcement. On the other hand, the shared perception of a common “enemy” facilitated the spread of negative emotions like anger. Individuals who initially leaned toward supporting Trump or believing the election was “stolen” often adopted more extreme views after discussing with like-minded peers. The rapid escalation of collective emotional intensity acted as a motivational force, restricting self-awareness and careful assessment of consequences, thereby making individuals more prone to destructive actions inconsistent with their usual values. When anger

<sup>1</sup> Liz Bondi. (2005). Making Connections and Thinking Through Emotions: Between Geography and Psychotherapy. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30(4), pp. 433–448.

<sup>2</sup> David Matsumoto, Seung Hee Yoo, and Sanae Nakagawa. (2008). Culture, Emotion Regulation, and Adjustment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94(6), pp. 925–937.

<sup>3</sup> James M. Jasper. (1998). The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions in and Around Social Movements. *Sociological Forum*, 13(3), pp. 397–424.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Schoenewolf. (1990). Emotional Contagion: Behavioral Induction in Individuals and Groups. *Modern Psychoanalysis*, 15(1), pp. 49–61.

<sup>5</sup> Eliot R Smith and Frederica R Conrey. (2007). Agent-Based Modeling: A New Approach for Theory Building in Social Psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 11(1), pp. 87–104.

<sup>6</sup> New York Times Video Investigation. Inside the Capitol riot: An exclusive video investigation; Day of rage: How Trump supporters took the U.S. Capitol. *New York Times*, June 30, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/30/us/jan-6-capitol-at-tack-takeaways.html>

became the dominant emotion among the majority of the crowd, this shared affective state merged with collective cognitive frameworks, driving group members to decisively retaliate against perceived sources of their outrage.

Another facilitator of group emotional resonance during the capitol riot is the ease of exit.

Experimental studies on intergroup conflict reveal that in information transition, early actors within an ingroup can establish behavioral norms for those uncertain about how to proceed. Simultaneously, ease of exit—the ability for dissenters to freely disengage—reduces internal opposition, leaving hesitant individuals with fewer alternatives and increasing their likelihood of conforming to the early actors' actions.<sup>1</sup>

For participants in the January 6 Capitol protest, as events escalated toward violence, those uncomfortable with this trace could physically exit or withdraw to the periphery easily. As one protester said, *"My group decided to leave at that point because what had started as a rally to support Trump had turned into a riot attacking the Capitol and the police."*<sup>2</sup> This dynamic implies that participants ambivalent about violent actions were less likely to voice their reservations to the group and more inclined to depart quietly. Consequently, the remaining crowd became increasingly homogeneous in its willingness to escalate aggression.

#### 4.3 Identity Mobilization and Self-Rationalization

Media coverage of the Capitol riot invariably emphasized the crowd's apparent diversity. A superficial analysis might conclude that participants shared little beyond their preference for Trump over Biden, given their varied identities and ideologies. However, Trump's rhetoric tapped into a broader mechanism of identity-based grievance mobilization that transcended surface differences.

In contemporary America, identities have become increasingly rigid along with the deepening political polarization. Prior to the 1990s, many Americans held cross-cutting identities. For instance, a union member with

conservative leanings and devout Southern roots might still vote Democratic. However, as political polarization intensified, such intersectional voters have largely disappeared. Currently, Americans increasingly self-sort into two monolithic identity blocs: Democrats (urban-dwelling, ethnically diverse, secular, and female-dominated) and Republicans (rural/suburban, predominantly white, Christian, male, and conservative). As a result, political campaigns now tend to prioritize emotional appeals to shared identity over policy debates that might expose intra-group divisions. Both parties recognize this strategic shift, yet their capacities to leverage it differ starkly. The Democratic coalition, encompassing Gen Z, LGBTQ+ communities, immigrants, and other factions, faces constant pressure to balance competing demands across fragmented constituencies. In contrast, the Republican base has grown markedly homogeneous, enabling campaigns to unambiguously target white Christian male identity and nostalgia for traditional hierarchies.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, political psychologists Kalmoe and Mason (2022) argues that high levels of homogeneity within one party often lay the groundwork for conflict. The reason behind this is when individuals hold multiple overlapping identities, denigration by outgroups toward any one of these identities can trigger widespread clashes. Such escalations arise not from policy disagreements but from personal emotions, rendering them more volatile and destructive.<sup>4</sup> When homogeneous groups with strongly overlapping identities confronted by perceived group-based threats, they frequently respond with profound anger. This anger transcends mere emotional expression, often manifesting as concrete actions aimed at restoring collective self-esteem and identity coherence. In contexts where violent behavior is socially legitimized or normalized—such as environments where "defending tradition" or "patriotic resistance" is valorized—these actions may even gain societal

<sup>1</sup> Cass R. Sunstein. (2009). *Going to Extremes*. Oxford University Press, pp. 24–40.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Schiller. "Inside of a Dark Day in American History: An Eyewitness Shares His Account of the Madness on Capitol Hill." *International Policy Digest*, January 10, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Kleinfeld. (October 2021). The Rise of Political Violence in the United States. *Journal of Democracy*, 32(4), pp. 160–176.

<sup>4</sup> Nathan P. Kalmoe and Lilliana Mason. (2022). *Radical American Partisanship: Mapping Violent Hostility, Its Causes, and the Consequences for Democracy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), pp. 105, 109.

endorsement.<sup>1</sup>

This is why Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) has effectively resonated with white conservatives by evoking nostalgia for a mythologized "American way of life." Historically, whiteness, patriarchy and Christianity dominated U.S. cultural narratives until the 1960s, with its adherents long positioned as the nation's primary stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> However, it is now greatly challenged by diverse activities like "Black Life Matters", "LGBTQ+ Proud Month" and "Me Too". Surveys conducted by academic studies reveal that a majority of Republicans agree "the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it."<sup>3</sup> This existential anxiety for conservatives, fueled by perceived threats of DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) crystallized into a belief that only Trump's re-election could reverse their decline. Such psychology fostered a "salvific" complex among Capitol riot participants. For example, Guy Reffitt, a prominent defendant in the U.S. Capitol riot, epitomizes this ideological framework. In letters written from prison, he asserted that his actions on January 6 constituted a critical step to "protect [his] wife and kids" from what he perceived as America's decades-long descent into "tyranny."<sup>4</sup> As a self-styled "patriot," Reffitt framed his participation in the insurrection not as lawlessness but as a moral obligation to "save the nation"—a narrative that mirrors broader far-right discourses equating political dissent with existential defense.

Moreover, historical analogies also play an important role in rioters' self-legitimization.

As noted by Samuelson, a psychology professor

at the University of Oslo, the pervasive display of American flags and the iconic backdrop of the Capitol building during the January 6 rally created a visually charged narrative that allowed participants to assume a self-righteous identity as "patriots". These symbols helped to frame their actions as urgent civic duties to "save democracy" by aiding Trump's return to power.<sup>5</sup> This self-mythologization was further reinforced through deliberate historical analogies. Many arrestees explicitly equated the Capitol riot with the 1776 Revolutionary War, casting themselves as modern counterparts to the Founding Fathers. Video evidence from the event corroborates that the chants of "Patriots!" and "1776!" echoed repeatedly as the crowd advanced toward the Capitol.<sup>6</sup>

Edward Jacob Lang, a January 6 Capitol riot participant facing multiple federal charges, exemplified this narrative strategy. During the attack, he livestreamed videos from inside the Capitol declaring "1776 has commenced!" and "Today I am a leader of freedom—arresting me means you're on the wrong side of history." After leaving the building, he continued urging followers to join a "patriotic movement," proclaiming "Give me liberty, or give me death!".<sup>7</sup> By anchoring their actions in founding-era historical analogies, Capitol rioters recast themselves as modern-day counterparts to the U.S. founding fathers. This deliberate mythopoeic framing allowed them to situate acts of insurrection within a broader ideological lineage of "resisting tyranny", thereby legitimizing violence as a defense of constitutional principles.

## 5. Conclusion

Close analysis of Trump's rhetoric and interviews with arrested participants reveals that the January 6, 2021, Capitol attack was not spontaneous. When individuals perceive existential threats from an "outgroup", violence becomes rationalized as a means of self-defense and group preservation. For many participants,

<sup>1</sup> Rachel Kleinfeld. (October 2021). The Rise of Political Violence in the United States. *Journal of Democracy*, 32(4), pp. 160–176.

<sup>2</sup> Lauren R. Kerby. (2020). *Saving History: How White Evangelicals Tour the Nation's Capital and Redeem a Christian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel A. Cox. *After the Ballots Are Counted: Conspiracies, Political Violence, and American Exceptionalism*. Survey Center on American Life, 2021; Larry M. Bartels. (September 2020). Ethnic Antagonism Erodes Republicans' Commitment to Democracy, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 117, pp. 22752–22759.

<sup>4</sup> Joshua Kaplan and Joaquin Sapient. (2021). In Exclusive Jailhouse Letter, Capitol Riot Defendant Explains Motives, Remains Boastful. *ProPublica*. <https://www.propublica.org/article/in-exclusive-jailhouse-letter-capitol-riot-defendant-explains-motives-remains-boastful>.

<sup>5</sup> Charles D. Samuelson. (2022). Why Were the Police Attacked on January 6th? Emergent Norms, Focus Theory, and Invisible Expectations. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 26(3), pp. 8–98.

<sup>6</sup> New York Times Video Investigation. (June 30, 2021). Inside the Capitol Riot: An Exclusive Video Investigation; Day of Rage: How Trump Supporters Took the U.S. Capitol. *New York Times*.

<sup>7</sup> Blake Ellis and Melanie Hicken. (February 1, 2021). They Stormed the Capitol to Overturn the Results of an Election They Didn't Vote In. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/01/us/capitol-riot-voters-who-didnt-vote/index.html>.

the day was framed not as one of infamy but as a moment of vindication, empowerment and honor. The event underscores the critical importance of dissecting the group dynamics behind political violence in democracies like the United States, demonstrating how specific narratives can mobilize wartime-like aggression even in systems theoretically anchored in rule of law.

Public discourse often underestimates extremist movements by dismissing their ideologies as marginal. Yet the Capitol riot illustrates how ordinary citizens, galvanized by incendiary leadership and intense identity polarization, can rapidly radicalize. It is worth noting that this phenomenon is not isolated. On January 8, 2023, thousands of supporters of Brazil's former President Bolsonaro stormed government buildings in Brasília, replicating the Capitol riot's tactics and rhetoric. Such parallels signal a global pattern where identity-driven political violence can metastasize across democracies under similar conditions of polarization.

## 6. Future Research

While this study provides an exploration of narrative-identity dynamics in the Capitol riot, its reliance on U.S. media framing and the Chicago Project on Security and Threats (CPOST) database inherently constrains the scope of its analysis. Notably, not all attendees of Trump's rally engaged in violence—many protesters remained outside the Capitol or withdrew as tensions escalated. Future research needs to incorporate broader empirical methodologies, including cross-national comparisons and first-handed interviews to unravel the interplay of narrative, identity, and collective action in modern political violence.

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