

UNVEILING THE DISCOURSE OF FRAUD IN THE UNITED STATES PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 2020 WITH NORMAL FAIRCLOUGH CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The political rise of Donald Trump in the United States was unprecedented, characterized by his deviation from traditional political norms and his use of divisive rhetoric against minorities, Muslims, China, and immigrants. Trump's strategy of galvanizing conservative white Evangelicals led to his unexpected victory in the 2016 presidential election. During his 2020 reelection campaign, Trump employed similar tactics; however, his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting economic downturn eroded his support compared to his Democratic rival, Joe Biden. Anticipating electoral defeat, Trump preemptively alleged widespread electoral fraud, specifically targeting mail-in voting policies. After losing the election, with an electoral count of 232 to Biden's 306, Trump continued to claim the election was "rigged," asserting voter fraud via Twitter. Despite numerous court dismissals of these claims, a significant portion of the Republican base accepted Trump's narrative, which culminated in the January 6 Capitol riot intended to obstruct the certification of Biden's victory. This study aims to analyze the impact of Trump's rhetoric on his supporters' beliefs and actions. The research employs qualitative methods, including content analysis of Trump's tweets and media coverage, alongside quantitative analysis of public opinion polls, to examine the correlation between Trump's fraud claims and the Capitol riot. The findings indicate a strong influence of Trump's rhetoric on his supporters, underscoring the profound effect of political discourse on public perception and behavior. The conclusion highlights the critical need for responsible political communication to uphold democratic integrity.

Keywords: Trump, Biden, Voter Fraud, Twitter, Capitol, Discourse, Fairclough

Introduction

Today, Trump is the defendant in the District of Columbia (DC) with four criminal indictments for agitating the storming of the Capitol Building on January 6, 2020. He, along with 18 co-conspirators, is also a defendant in Fulton County in the State of Georgia, facing 13 criminal indictments for attempting to overturn the result of the 2020 presidential elections in the Peach State (Abioye, 2011).

Trump's legal cases originated in the 2020 presidential election that pit him as the Republican Party's incumbent President with his rival from the Democratic Party, Joe Biden. More than 155 million people voted in the elections, where turnout reached 66.8%, one of the highest in the US political history (Berlinski et al., 2023; Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

When the final vote calculations showed that Trump lost the election to Biden with 232 vs. 306 electoral votes, Trump started accusing Democrats of stealing the presidential election. Trump baselessly alleged that hundreds of thousands of Democratic Party supporters voted illegally, especially in the areas where non-white populations dominated the electorates (Parlapiano, 2020).

Trump's team followed up the accusations with over 30 legal filings in nine states: Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan, Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and the District of Columbia. However, all the legal efforts failed in different levels of courts, from state county courts to the Supreme Court, for the need for valid evidence.

However, Trump did not accept the courts' decisions and kept spreading false accusations of massive fraud in the 2020 presidential election that made him lose to Biden. Trump and his team then launched various efforts to prevent Biden from winning the White House, such as lobbying Republican governors in Georgia and Arizona not to certify Biden's victory in the states and urging Georgia's Secretary of State to manipulate the results (Hemphill et al., 2013). All of Trump's efforts failed.

When the US Congress (House of Representatives and Senate) held plenary sessions on January 5 and 6, 2021, for the final certification of the presidential election results, Trump urged his militant supporters to come to Capitol Hill to intimidate the members of the US Congress and Vice President Mike Pence to reject Biden's victory (Froehlich, 2020).

Trump's continuous agitation drove his supporters to run wild and storm the Capitol Building. Five people died, and 140 security team members were wounded because of the incident (Gould, 2021).

The irony of the 2020 presidential election was that although the courts had rejected all of Trump's election regularity accusations, and the US Congress had certified Biden's victory, a Quinnipiac University poll published on February 4, 2021, revealed that 76% of Republican voters believed that there were massive frauds on the 2020 presidential election and 45% of Republican voters supported the storming of Capitol Building by Trump's fervent supporters (Dunning, 2018). This study aims to analyze the impact of Trump's rhetoric on his supporters' beliefs and actions.

Research Method

The research used a qualitative analytics method with a descriptive approach and critical paradigm (Nurodin & Minhajul K, 2019). The theory used is the Norman Fairclough Critical Discourse Analysis, which integrates linguistic-based discourse analysis with social and political thoughts that, in general, are integrated into social changes. Fairclough focuses his discourse on the linguistic aspect by referring to the use of language as a social practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009).

In the research, the author searched Trump's tweets that contained discourses of fraud in the 2020 presidential election using three keywords: *rigged election*, *stolen election*, and *voter fraud* in the period of January 1, 2020 – January 6, 2021. Since a direct search on Trump's Twitter account produced limited results due to Twitter's policy, the author collected the data from the search at www.thetrumparchive.com, which archived 56,571 Trump tweets from May 4, 2009, to January 8, 2021.

The author uses Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, which combines a linguistic-based discourse analysis with social and political thoughts that are generally integrated with social changes.

Fairclough model's three dimensions comprise text analysis (micro-level), discursive practice (meso level), and social practice (macro-level). The text analysis relates to the result of the production process. The discursive practices relate to the interaction of texts with individuals or communities through production processes and interpretations. The social practice or context includes sociocultural practices in which the production process and interpretation occur.

Results and Discussion

The search found 80 tweets that contained *rigged election* keywords, 30 tweets with *election stolen* keywords, and 62 tweets with *voter fraud* keywords.

Text Analysis

In the analysis, the author analyzed the texts linguistically by, among other things, analyzing their vocabularies, semantics, and structures. The author also analyzed **representations** in sentences, which were relationships between Trump as the discourse maker with his audiences on Twitter and other participants, such as commentators in conservative media such as Fox News (Jungherr, 2016). Analyzes were also conducted to find **relationships** between Trump as the discourse maker and the participants, such as information sources mentioned or retweeted in Trump's tweets and the targeted audiences. Also analyzed was the **identity**, where Trump, as the discourse maker, had had a clear identity as the presidential candidate of the conservative-leaning Republican Party. Fairclough also identifies the presence of metaphors in all types of discourses and believes that the use of metaphors specifically represents ideology (Luguri & Napier, 2013).

The text analysis found that Trump accused various aspects of the 2020 presidential election as the sources of fraud, such as state-wide mail-in-voting, ballot harvesting, ballot printing, the use of mail drop boxes, vote counting halted late evening to continue the next day, the use of fraudulent Dominion voting machines, Republican witnesses blocked from witnessing vote counting, irregularities in major swing states cities such as Detroit, Atlanta, Philadelphia & Milwaukee, and the dump of hundreds of thousands of illegal ballots in swing states (Suwendra, 2018).

The text analysis also found that Trump accused the FBI and the Department of Justice of not making efforts to trace the evidence of widespread fraud as claimed by Trump. In addition, Trump blamed the Supreme Court, which has a conservative majority with the three Supreme Court Justices he appointed, for not supporting the election fraud disputes he submitted to the court so that out of the 62 election legal disputes, Trump lost in 61 cases (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

More than that, the text analysis found that Trump surreptitiously urged his supporters to act aggressively through his words, "*...why aren't the Republicans up in arms & fighting...*" and suggested that they launched a big demonstration at the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021—the day when the US Congress certified Joe Biden as the winner of the 2020 presidential election—through an explicit tweet "*Never give up. See everyone in DC on January 6.*"

The following is the text analysis of some of Trump's selected tweets that can illustrate how the discourse of fraud that Trump echoed in the 2020 US election led to the storming of the Capitol Building. This act was later categorized as sedition.



Figure 1. Trump's short three-sentence tweet (April 8, 2020)

Republicans should fight very hard when it comes to state-wide mail-in voting. Democrats are clamoring for it. There is tremendous potential for voter fraud, and for whatever reason, it does not work out well for Republicans. @foxandfriends

Trump's short three-sentence tweet sourcing Foxandfriend, a popular Fox News talk show, linked *state-wide mail-in-voting to voter fraud*, which widely **represented** widespread *voting by mail* as a source of election fraud.

The use of program material from Fox News, which is the primary reference media for conservatives and the most popular TV in the US, as a source of the tweet displayed the **relationship** between Fox News as a source of information and Trump as a conveyer of information to his audiences, whose identities are Republican Party supporters who watched Fox News and followed him on Twitter.

In fact, the continued increase of deaths from COVID-19 also disrupted the primary or the competition to choose the Democratic Party's presidential candidate, so mail-in voting was a realistic solution.

The accusation of *mail-in voting* being a source of election fraud is unfounded. According to an analysis conducted by The Washington Post, double voting cases in three states that implemented 100% *voting-by-mail* in the 2016 and 2018 elections were only 0.0025%. So, the fraud rate was minimal.

However, Fox News, Trump's primary megaphone for his followers and Republican Party supporters in general, has created a negative image of mail-in-voting, making it synonymous with voter fraud or election fraud.

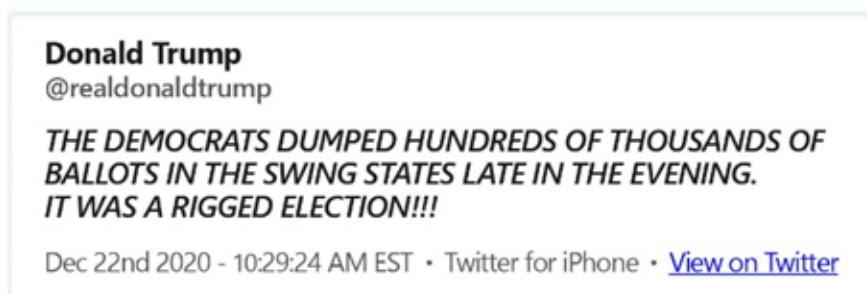


Figure 2. Trump's tweet (December 22, 2020)

*THE DEMOCRATS DUMPED HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF BALLOTS IN
THE SWING STATES LATE IN THE EVENING. IT WAS A RIGGED ELECTION!!!*

The **representation** displayed in the all-capitalized, two-short-sentence twee was Trump's emphasis to his followers on Twitter that the presidential election had been manipulated because the Democrats dumped hundreds of thousands of ballots in swing states in the middle of the night on election day.

Trump used the word 'DUMP,' which the Cambridge Dictionary interprets as "to throw something away in a place that is not suitable or allowed by law," or to throw or place something in a place that is inappropriate or not legally permitted. So, it already had a negative connotation.

There was no **relations** element displayed explicitly in the text. However, the discourse in the text saying Democrats added votes illegally was aimed at the Republican Party's voters who were disappointed with Trump's loss. The **identity** displayed in the text was the Democratic Party as the actor who cheated by dumping illegal votes in swing states.

In this context, the information shared by Trump was baseless and misleading, especially if it was considered that (1) Trump was the incumbent President who had control of the bureaucracy when the election was held; (2) At the state level, the election is under the secretary of state's jurisdiction and in the 2020 presidential election the secretary of states in crucial states such as Georgia, Arizona and Florida were from the Republican Party; (3) Mail-in-ballots were counted after going through a rigorous screening process, starting from sorting, signature verification, envelope opening, scanning for machine counting and review to ensure that the voters were registered on the voter list.

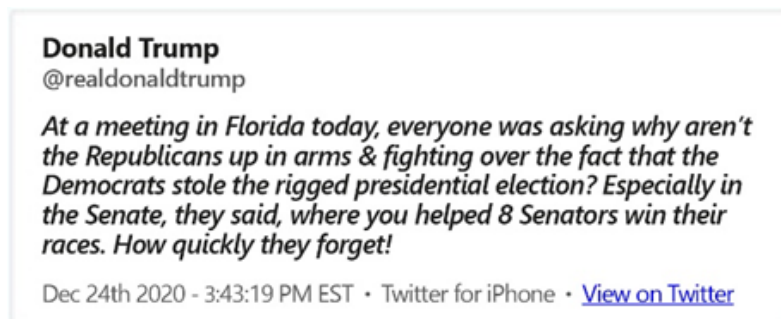


Figure 3. Trump's tweet (December 24, 2020)

At a meeting in Florida today, everyone was asking why the Republicans aren't up in arms & fighting over the fact that the Democrats stole the rigged presidential election. Especially in the Senate, they said, where you helped 8 Senators win their races. How quickly they forget!

The three-sentence tweet carried two different messages. The first message contained a rhetorical clause: "...everyone was asking why aren't the Republicans up in arms & fighting over the fact that the Democrats stole the rigged presidential election?" which subtly insinuated an idea of why Republicans did not "pick their arms and fight" "up in arms & fighting." In the Longman Dictionary, "be up in arms" means "very angry and ready to argue or fight."

Rhetorical questions (Abioye: 2011) have illocutionary power for a claim contrary to the one being asked. The purpose of rhetorical sentences is not to get a response but to

assert or deny something by implicitly and subtly insinuating an idea that would be rejected if enforced directly.

It seems that some Trump supporters took the "up in arms and fight" idea literally since some carried guns when storming the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021.

In the second message, Trump questioned Republican Senators who tended not to support the election fraud discourse he echoed, even though, he claimed, eight senators won in the Senate elections, including Republican Senate chairman Mitch McConnell, because of Trump's support.

The **representation** displayed in the text is Trump's surreptitiously urging his fervent followers to be "up in arms & fighting," which literally means "holding the arms & fighting" to respond to the alleged election frauds as discoursed by Trump. Trump also expressed his disappointment with the eight Republican Senators he supported since they did not do anything for him. The **relation** displayed in the text is "Republicans," or voters of the Republican Party, as the party harmed by the election fraud, so they were provoked to really up in arms. The **identity** displayed in the text besides Trump as a discourse maker was that of Republicans and the eight Republican senators who had won the elections thanks to Trump's endorsement but did not support Trump's election fraud discourse.

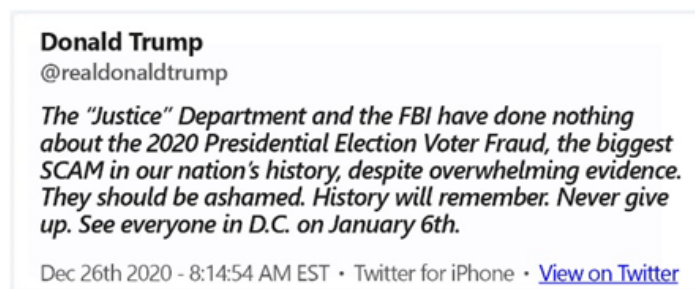


Figure 4. Trump's tweet (December 26, 2020)

The "Justice" Department and the FBI have done nothing about the 2020 Presidential Election Voter fraud, the biggest SCAM in our nation's history, despite overwhelming evidence. They should be ashamed. History will be remembered. Never give up. See everyone in DC on January 6.

In this three-sentence tweet, Trump said that the Justice Department and the FBI "have done nothing" to the occurrence of voter fraud, which he called "the biggest SCAM in our nation's history," even though there was a lot of evidence. Trump used bombastic words, "done nothing," "The biggest SCAM," and "overwhelming evidence" to convince followers, although the Trump-appointed Attorney General, Bill Barr, said there was no widespread voter fraud and the FBI Director, Christopher A. Wray, a Republican, also said the FBI did not evidence of a coordinated national voter fraud effort.

In the last sentence, Trump said, "Never give up. See everyone in DC on January 6," which urged his followers not to give up and explicitly urged them to gather in DC on January 6, 2021. On that date, the US Congress voted for the final certification of Biden's victory, and tens of thousands of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol Building.

The **representation** displayed in the text was Trump's disappointment with his government's apparatus, which in this case were the Justice Department and FBI since they did not support Trump's election fraud discourse. Also displayed in the text was Trump's urging his followers not to give up and to come to DC on January 6, 2021, the

day of the final certification of the 2020 election results. The **relation** displayed in the text was the inharmonious relationship between Trump and his cabinet members, i.e., the Justice Department and FBI, for they did not support his election fraud discourse. The **identity** displayed in the text was “everyone” in the sentence "See everyone in DC on January 6," which referred to Trump’s fanatic followers, who responded to Trump’s call to come to Capitol Hill and stormed the plenary session of the US Congress to hinder the election result certification.

Discourse Practice

Fairclough's discourse practice focuses on the production and consumption of texts. Here, the texts produced were Trump's Twitter tweets, which Trump's over 80 million followers consumed (Eriyanto, 2006; Wang, 2022).

In this research, the author wanted to focus on how many tweets with the keywords *rigged election*, *stolen election*, and *voter fraud* Trump made each month from January 2020 to January 2021:

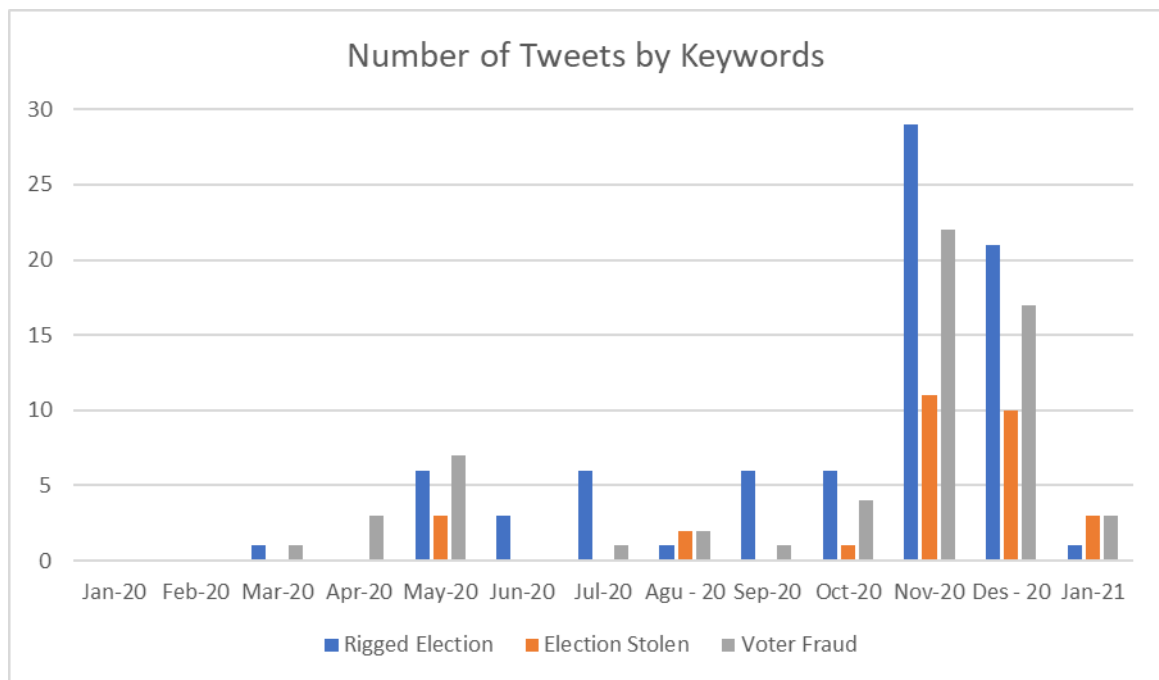


Figure 5. Number of Trump's Tweets Per Month by Keyword

Tweets with the keywords *rigged election* and *voter fraud* started appearing in April and May 2020 when there was talk of widespread *mail-in voting* in several states due to the pandemic. In the 2020 US election, nine states and Washington DC enforced rules that all registered voters would receive ballots by post, 34 states allowed mail-in-voting for pandemic reasons or no reason, and seven states allowed mail-in-voting for strong reasons other than the pandemic.

Tweets with the keyword *rigged election* increased in July, September, and October when Trump attacked the mail-in-voting policy indiscriminately because he feared the policy would significantly increase Democratic Party turnout rates.

In November 2020, Trump's tweets containing the keywords *rigged election*, *election stolen*, and *voter fraud* peaked because Trump intensified the discourse of election fraud, election manipulation, and the stealing of Trump's victory when the vote count results showed that Trump (unofficially) lost to Biden by 232 vs. 306 electoral votes and US states began certifying Biden's victory.

In December 2020, Trump's election fraud campaign continued, marked by tweets with the keywords *rigged election*, *election stolen*, and *voter fraud*, which were still high. That month, on December 14, 2020, the electoral college will vote to confirm Biden's victory.

Trump's tweets containing the keywords *rigged election*, *election stolen*, and *voter fraud* intensified from December 24 to December 30, 2020, because the US Congress on January 6, 2021, would hold a plenary session for the final certification of Biden's victory in the presidential election, making him the 46th US president (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018).

Sociocultural Practice

The third dimension, sociocultural practices, is a micro-analysis based on the theory that the social context influences discourse. Sociocultural practices analyze economics, politics (especially related to issues of power and ideology), and culture (primarily related to values and identity) (Gokcesu, 2009).

From the economic context, Trump's tweets alleging the election fraud targeted financial gains. In the two years since announcing his reelection in 2020, Trump raised US\$1.6 billion or Rp 24 trillion. Of these funds, hundreds of thousands of dollars went into Trump's business, such as buying the books "Triggered" and "Liberal Privilege" by his son, Donald Trump Jr., to be distributed as souvenirs to donors. US\$ 5 million was spent on Trump's hotels, resorts, and other buildings. Besides, donors also spent US\$900,000 on Trump properties and catering (Feezell, 2018).

Moreover, reports said Trump's business reaped no less than US \$ 2.4 billion during his four years in power, with the most significant amount going to Trump's golf clubs and properties. Government contractors and lobbyists also visited Trump's golf clubs and properties from within and outside the country.

The President's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, also reaped enormous benefits from Trump's presidency. For example, he received US \$ 2 billion or Rp 30 trillion in investment funds from an investment institution led by the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), through Kushner's investment firm, Kushner Affinity Partners.

From the observation of the political context, Trump's purpose in the discourse of fraud in the 2020 presidential election via Twitter was to extend his power grip over the US and the Republican Party. Many Republican politicians supported Trump's election fraud discourse and attempts to overturn Joe Biden's victory because they regarded him as a very effective vote-getter. Trump's victory would contribute to the triumph of the Republican Party in various political races.

More importantly, Republicans strongly supported Trump's 2020 election fraud discourse because Trump had succeeded in passing conservative agendas popular among Republican voters, such as the overturning of the abortion law (Roe v. Wade) after Trump appointed three conservative-leaning Justices on the US Supreme Court, making conservative justices control the majority of seats in the Supreme Court with a ratio of 6:3.

From the cultural aspect, Trump's election fraud discourse was blindly accepted by many Republican politicians in the US Congress and the majority of their supporters because Trump understood the anxieties in the subconscious of the Republican Party base. These conservative white Evangelicals believed Trump was fighting for their most fundamental interests.

The white Evangelicals' primary concern was the decline in their racial dominance. In 1980, white people in the US reached 80% of the total population, but in 2045, white people would become a minority group in the US, with only 49.7% of the total population.

However, the 2020 US Census data gave surprising findings for Trump supporters. Whites already comprised only 52.8% of the US population, while the remaining 47.2% are non-whites, including Hispanics, blacks, and Asians. For the US citizens aged 18 and below, white people have even become a minority group with 47.3% of the population, and the remaining 52.7% are non-white citizens.

Religious factors and traditional values were also critical factors that made Republican Party supporters unquestioningly believe in the discourse of election fraud in the 2020 US presidential election. Protestant Christianity, the main religion of Trump's and the Republican Party's supporters, continues to decline in the US. In 2007, Christians comprised more than half (52%) of the US population. In 2021, they were only 40% of the population. On the other hand, the number of people who did not affiliate with a particular religion (religiously unaffiliated) had increased rapidly, from 16% of the US population in 2007 to almost a third (29%) in 2021.

The decline of Christians may continue because, according to sociologists Isabella Kasselstrand, Phil Zuckerman, and Ryan Cragun, 6,000-10,000 churches close each year in the US, and these days only 39% of Americans consider religion necessary, down from 62% in 1998.

The decline in the number of religious people in the US and the higher diversity of US citizens has made American society increasingly permissive towards life aspects that violate traditional values. For example, 61% of US adults now think same-sex marriage is good, and 36% say it is very good. Besides, 61% of US adults support the legalization of abortion in some or all cases that trigger it.

So, with Trump playing the role of the conservative white groups' defender who tried hard to support the upholding of their traditional values, such as prohibiting abortion and same-sex marriage, conservative whites believed Trump's election fraud discourse even though the courts dismissed almost all of the claims due to the insufficient supporting evidence.

Conclusion

This research revealed that Trump had campaigned for election fraud discourse via Twitter during the 2020 presidential election, alleging widespread mail-in-voting, ballot harvesting, voting irregularities in Democratic-dominated cities, the use of Dominion vote counting machines, and others as the sources of the election fraud. Courts refuted all these allegations, but many Republican members of the US Congress and the majority of Republicans still believed in the fraud discourse. Some Trump supporters were even agitated to storm the Capitol Building to thwart the certification of Biden's victory. These happened because there was a mutual relationship between Trump and the Republican Party's politicians and supporters. By becoming President for two terms, Trump could reap economic benefits and extend his power grip over the US and the Republican Party. On the other hand, with Trump's winning the reelection, Republican politicians' seats in

the House, Senate, or Governorship would increase, and Republican Party's supporters would benefit from Trump's political agenda, such as the overturning of the abortion law (Roe v. Wade) and restrictions on LGBTQ community's rights.

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