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## **SEEDING DOUBTS ABOUT VOTING: TRUMP AND BIDEN RHETORIC ONLINE IN THE 2020 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

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When rioters attacked the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, they did so mistrusting the electoral process and believing that Donald Trump had been robbed of the presidency. Presidential rhetoric has the power to shape the attitudes of the public and steer the country (Mercieca, 2020). Indeed, presidential rhetoric has the power to shape what Taylor (2004) describes as the *social imaginary* – the rhetorical construction of a version of a shared reality that takes hold in public discourse and public consciousness. Trump's rhetoric in 2020 around the vote continued a narrative that he had started when he took office. His first State of the Union address painted a sinister portrait of the current and potential future state of the nation. In this study, using the framework of social imaginaries, we qualitatively and inductively analyze messaging on campaign social media accounts around the 2020 presidential campaign. We also examine the Facebook advertisements and the targets of those ads specifically around the vote. We compare Trump's rhetoric to that of his opponent Joe Biden to contrast the distinct imaginaries around the vote each political candidate articulated. We find that Trump relied on his social media accounts to sow distrust of the vote process and doubt about the accuracy of the vote count on Election Day. More concerning, we also find that

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Trump attacked the voting process through his paid advertising on Facebook, targeting voters in key battleground states.

We focus on the communication produced on social media because of the nature of digital communication technologies (DCT). Stromer-Galley (2019) argues that the affordances of DCTs enable the candidates to produce rhetoric and to use technologies that makes it seem that they want to converse and get feedback from the public on policy and campaign matters. In truth, the campaigns are producing a simulacrum of interaction. The increasing reliance on microtargeting through digital advertising on social media platforms further challenges scholarly and journalistic efforts at transparency, as campaigns can increasingly communicate and persuade smaller segments of the public that are strategically beneficial to the campaigns in ways that are hidden from the larger public.

It is critical to note that the 2020 presidential election was radically altered because of the COVID-19 global pandemic that swept through the United States starting in late March of 2020. Political campaigns stopped holding in-person events and fundraisers, and state legislatures quickly passed measures to allow for mail-in balloting, to expand absentee balloting, and to position special ballot boxes for voters to drop their ballots in without standing in long lines with other people.

The 2020 U.S. presidential campaign commended within this landscape of: a President whose rhetoric actively sowed distrust of government; a global pandemic; and, a powerful social media communication and advertising apparatus (via Facebook). Starting in mid-May of 2020, as the primary campaign was ending, the Trump questioned the validity of the November election outcome on Twitter. At the same time, his campaign ran a large ad buy on Facebook charging the “radical left” with stuffing ballot boxes with “fake and fraudulent” ballots. During the general election, Trump’s ads and his social media accounts argued that absentee ballots were legitimate but “mail in” ballots were fraudulent. He described mail-in ballots as those automatically sent by state governments to all registered voters, as compared with absentee ballots where voters had to request a ballot to be sent to them. Ads showed Trump signing his absentee ballot while contrasting that with mail in ballots, which he described as “very bad” and “fraudulent.” Trump’s get-out-the-vote ads targeted battleground states, including Florida, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Maine’s Second Congressional District.

Trump’s social media posts on his official campaign accounts similarly emphasized that mail-in ballots would lead to fraudulent vote counts. His Facebook posts falsely alleged that mail-in ballots were easily tampered with, suggesting that Trump votes could be switched to Biden votes. He also explicitly attacked the voting machine company Dominion as being “fraudulent.” His Tweets amplified his attacks on mail-in ballots as “phony,” and leading to “unfixable chaos” for the election. His Tweets argued that liberals would pre-populate mail-in ballots, and his Tweets and Facebook posts constructed the election outcome as one that public should doubt because of mail-in ballots.

Biden’s ads, by contrast, extended his folksy “I’m just like you” persona. His ads used humor to promote voting (for example, an ad showing two dolls that looked like Biden

and his VP nominee, Kamala Harris, standing in front of a stick of butter, with the caption “you butter vote.”), and the ads highlighted the challenges of voting during the Covid-pandemic. Unlike Trump’s ads, Biden’s ads promoted voting by all means and did not make false claims regarding the legitimacy of various balloting approaches. His ads also emphasized that he would be the president for all Americans, and not just those who voted for him – an indirect attack on Trump. His social media posts were equally positive in encouraging voting by any means and as an American right.

The imaginary that Trump constructs in his rhetoric is of chaos on Election Day because of the fallibility of particular voting systems: mail-in balloting as well as electronic in-person ballots through the Dominion system. He constructs and repeats a conspiracy theory whereby mail-in ballots and the Dominion electronic voting systems are easily tampered with to alter the election outcomes. He actively urges his supporters to doubt the election results because of the alleged fallibility of these approaches.

In the full paper, we articulate in more depth the nature, frequency, and reach of the ads, Tweets, and Facebook posts that Trump and Biden produced around voting during the general election. Using thick description we unpack the imaginary that each candidate constructs with regard to the balloting technologies as well as the values that voting and the election mean to the democracy. We further analyze micro-targeting data of the candidates’ ad buys provided to us from Facebook to understand who the primary targets likely were of these ads. With this analysis, we aim to help deconstruct the social imaginaries the candidates, but especially Trump, produced that led to an attempted insurrection on the day when the U.S. Congress was to certify the results of the election.

## References

Stromer-Galley, J. (2019). *Presidential Campaigning in the Internet Age* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Oxford University Press.