



January 6 arrests and media coverage do not remobilize conservatives on social media

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Social media's pivotal role in catalyzing social movements is widely acknowledged across scientific disciplines. Past research has predominantly explored social media's ability to instigate initial mobilization while leaving the question of its capacity to sustain these movements relatively uncharted. This study investigates the persistence of movement activity on Twitter and Gab following a substantial on-the-ground mobilization event catalyzed by social media—the StoptheSteal movement culminating in the January 6th Capitol attack. Our findings indicate that the online communities active in the January 6 mobilization did not display substantial remobilization in the subsequent year. These results highlight the fact that further exploration is needed to understand the factors shaping how and when movements are sustained by social media. In this regard, our study provides valuable insights for scientists across diverse disciplines, on how certain social media platforms may contribute to the evolving dynamics of collective action.

social media | online mobilization | connective action | social movements | collective action

From the Arab Spring to Black Lives Matter, research consistently shows that social media facilitates protest and social mobilization (1–4). However, comparatively few studies have examined movement activity on social media after large on-the-ground mobilization events. There are divergent theoretical expectations about the potential effects of social media on sustaining movements. Many scholars argue that social media can help sustain movements without traditional social movement organizations because they enable connective action, personalized mobilization, and decentralized coordination (5, 6). However, others argue that social media are unlikely to be able to replace traditional social movement organizations in sustaining movements (7) and may instead enable ephemeral bursts of mobilization (2).

We bring empirical evidence to this theoretical debate by studying movement activity on Twitter and Gab after the large, on-the-ground mobilization of the January 6 U.S. Capitol attack, which was part of a movement called “StoptheSteal” by its adherents. This movement's reliance on social media for initial mobilization (8–10) combined with evidence that social media was used for recruitment in the immediate aftermath of January 6 US Capitol attack (11) as well as for fundraising and publicity in the following years makes the StoptheSteal movement an important case for examining the theoretical debate about the role of social media in sustaining social movements. We conduct three analyses to examine whether mainstream and alternative social media platforms were used to help recruit and coordinate the movement, centered around whether we can observe continued discussions of the political objective of the StoptheSteal movement—to keep Donald Trump in power after January 6, 2021.

First, we examined activity on a mainstream social media platform, Twitter* ($N_{\text{TotalTweets}} = 13,186,395$, $N_{\text{J6Tweets}} = 169,832$). We focus on the most visibly active conservative online activists (12) during the StoptheSteal movement and events of January 6 ($N_{\text{EliteActivists}} = 1,852$),[†] and measured whether they continued to mobilize in the following year around the issues of whether the election was stolen. Second, we examined the activity of elite activists, as well as members of the public, on the alt-tech platform Gab, a social networking site favored by conservatives (13, 14) ($N_{\text{TotalGab}} = 4,670,176$, $N_{\text{J6Gab}} = 29,357$). We analyze this platform because Twitter changed its content moderation policies about the StoptheSteal movement following the events of January 6, 2021 (15), including deplatforming users, which led to an increase in engagement on alternative social media platforms such as Gab (16). We again measure whether online communities active in the Capitol attack continued

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*All data used in this paper are before Twitter was rebranded to “X” after being acquired by Elon Musk.

[†]In the analysis of tweets from January 6, 2021, to April 30, 2022, 78.6% of the elite activists sent at least one tweet related to the StoptheSteal movement and 70.6% tweeted on January 6, 2021. See *SI Appendix, section S1* for more information.

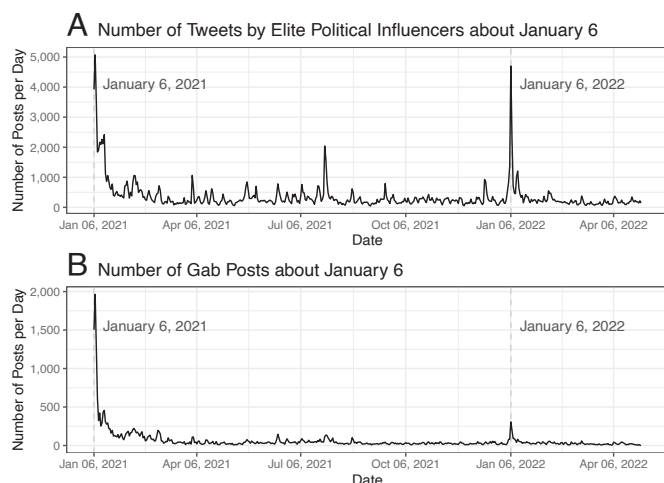


Fig. 1. Number of collected (A) tweets made by elite political influencers and (B) Gab posts made by elite political influencers and January-6-related nonelites about January 6 per day in our dataset, January 6, 2021, to April 30, 2022.

to mobilize around the issues of the StoptheSteal movement. Last, we test whether focal points related to StoptheSteal movement issues—i.e., arrests of those who organized and participated in the January 6 attack (January 6 defendants) and media coverage about the events of January 6—invigorated communities on either Twitter or Gab (17, 18).

Results

We collected tweets from elite activists identified in past work such as “#MAGA,” “Christian Constitutionalists,” “Conservative Media,” “Tea Party Conservatives,” and “White Nationalists” between January 6, 2021, to April 30, 2022 (see *SI Appendix, section S1* for more information). These groups represent the most visible online activists in different subgroups of conservative activists. We then trained a RoBERTa-based classifier to identify January-6-related tweets made by these groups (see *SI Appendix, section S1* for more information). As Panel A of Fig. 1 shows, elite activists were highly active on January 6, but the volume of tweets related to the StoptheSteal movement and the events of January 6 declined precipitously after January 6, with the next highest peak emerging on the one-year anniversary of the protests (January 6, 2022).

On Gab, we also collected posts by elite activists, the same group of users as in the first Twitter analysis (see *SI Appendix, section S1* for more information). In addition, we collected posts by ordinary Gab users, including those who created a Gab account on January 6, 2021 (i.e., likely migrated from mainstream social media platforms), and those who posted about January 6 between January 6, 2021, and April 30, 2022. We trained a second RoBERTa-based classifier to identify January-6-related Gab posts. Similar to the Twitter results, Panel B of Fig. 1 shows a high level of Gab activity on January 6 followed by a dramatic decline thereafter. The results for Gab are even more pronounced than for Twitter, with the volume of Gab posts related to issues animating the StoptheSteal movement diminishing to negligible levels after January 6, 2021.

Finally, we analyzed whether the elite actors and ordinary users active around the StoptheSteal movement continued to use social media to discuss topics surrounding the movement or the

events of January 6 (e.g., how to keep/return Trump to power, to criticize the work of the January 6 congressional investigatory committee) after focal points, which past research finds can act as a mobilizing force: arrests of January 6 defendants and media coverage of January 6. First, we identified dates with bursts of arrests of January 6 defendants ($N_{\text{defendants}} = 340$) or bursts of media coverage about January 6 ($N_{\text{stories}} = 23,155$; see *SI Appendix, section S3* for more information) between May 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022 (Fig. 2). For each focal point (arrests or media coverage), we conducted nonparametric hypothesis tests to examine whether the volume of social media posts (using data from April 2, 2021, to April 30, 2022) made by each group changed in the 30 d after compared to the 30 d before the focal point (see *SI Appendix, section S4* for more information).

As Fig. 3 shows, across the seven groups (five groups of previously identified elite conservative activists on Twitter and Gab and two groups of Gab users who created their accounts on January 6 or posted about January 6) and twenty-three focal points, we find no significant changes in the volume of posts made by individuals on Twitter or Gab as a result of the focal points. As follow-up analyses, we also tested smaller time windows (from 5 d pre/post up to 29; *SI Appendix, section S6*) and conducted parametric interrupted time series analyses (*SI Appendix, section S7*). In both cases, we still found no consistent evidence of mobilization.

Discussion

These results show that significant on-the-ground mobilization efforts on January 6, 2021, driven by social media, did not translate into sustained movement activity on Twitter or Gab, social media platforms with different moderation policies and audiences, nor across different focal points, which are typically expected to re-energize the movement. In other words, even when we take into account the possibility of users migrating to niche social media platforms sympathetic to their cause and focus on a time period when the January 6 defendants actively attempted to sustain their movement through fundraising[‡] and publicity

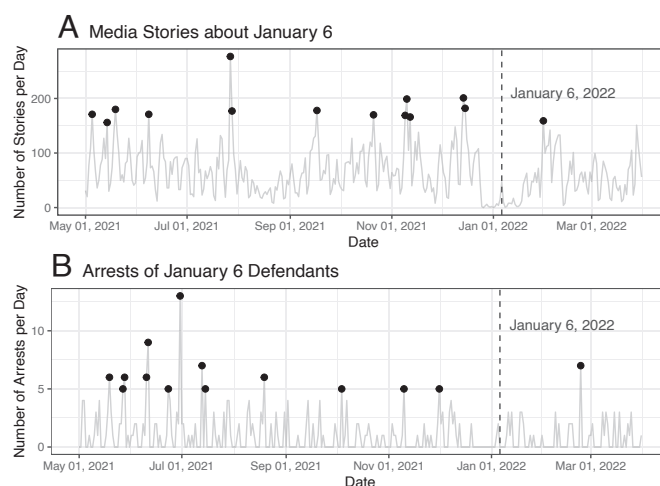


Fig. 2. Number of (A) media stories about January 6 and (B) arrests of January 6 defendants per day. Black dots represent dates that are two SD or more above the mean number per day.

[‡]<https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/23/politics/trump-fundraiser-january-6-defendants/index.html>.

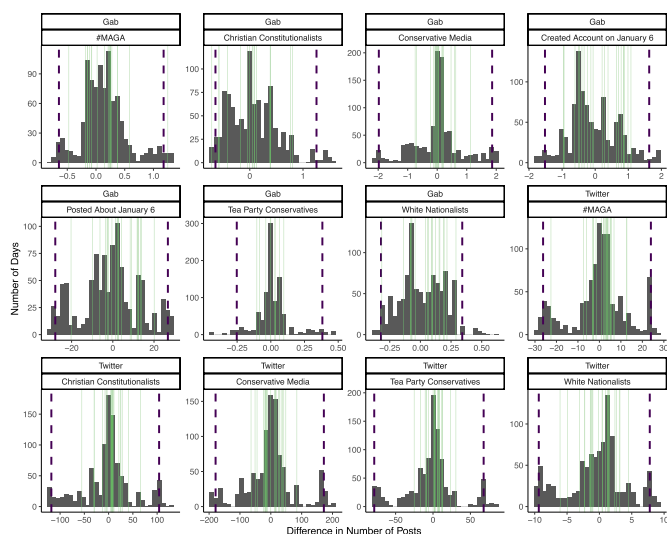


Fig. 3. Histogram of the null distribution of nonparametric testing of change in volume of posts with a 30-d window before and after the focal point. The x-axis represents the change in the number of posts. The y-axis represents the number of days that demonstrated that change. The purple dashed lines represent the 95% CI. The solid, small green lines represent the change in the volume of posts for a given focal point and are sometimes overlapping. Each panel represents a platform (e.g., Twitter or Gab) and a group (e.g., White Nationalists) combination.

efforts,[§] we do not observe social media platforms being used to sustain the movement.

Why were social media not used to sustain the movement in this case? One possibility is that people are moving to more discrete communication channels, such as encrypted messaging applications like WhatsApp, Telegram, or Signal. Whether such a migration happened is beyond the scope of this report; however, even if such a migration did occur, messaging applications are not public social media platforms and do not have the same affordances as social media for movement recruitment and coordination. A second possibility is that people moved to visually oriented platforms such as YouTube and Rumble, which represents a limitation of the scope of this study. A third possibility is that only much more narrow communities, or even just specific individuals, continue to support the cause. A final reason we may not see sustained movement activity on

social media relates to resource mobilization theory, whereby the movement is not sustained due to resource constraints (19). This possibility is bolstered by the January 6 defendants' attempts to raise funds for basic movement needs like legal fees.

In sum, we do not find evidence of sustained mobilization of the January 6 movement in online spaces where we most expect it. This finding suggests that more research is needed to examine what factors do and do not lead to sustained movements on social media.

Materials and Methods

First, we identified communities of elite right-wing Twitter users found by past research (12), namely the #MAGA, Christian Constitutionalists, Conservative Media, Tea Party Conservatives, and White Nationalists groups. We also analyzed two communities of Gab users who may remobilize: individuals who created a Gab account on January 6 or posted about January 6 between January 6, 2021, and April 30, 2022 (posts with the keywords "January 6," "Jan 6," or "J6"), and collected their posts from January 6, 2021, to April 30, 2022. In total, we analyzed 13.2 million tweets and 4.7 million Gab posts. To classify posts as related to StoptheSteal and January 6, we used hand-coded data by independent coders (Cohen's kappa = 0.84) to train two RoBERTa-based classifiers, achieving high accuracy in distinguishing StoptheSteal and January-6-related content (see *SI Appendix, section S2* for more details on coding criteria). We identified focal points for potential remobilization by analyzing arrest data from the United States Department of Justice's official list of "Capitol Breach Cases"[¶] and media coverage data from MediaCloud,[#] using outlier days with the number of arrests or stories that were two standard deviations above the means. Nonparametric testing was used to compare changes in post volumes around these focal points against a null distribution created from placebo dates, to assess the significance of any changes in social media activity. See *SI Appendix, section S4* for more details. This study was approved by the Stanford IRB (protocol # 74533).

Data, Materials, and Software Availability. Anonymized data (Social Media Data) have been deposited in J6 Mobilization (<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GUYXUC>) (20).

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[§]<https://apnews.com/article/j6-choir-trump-national-anthem-capitol-riot-79618f1f2a689c308dfdc34d54d327ea>.

[¶]justice.gov/usao-dc/capitol-breach-cases.

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