United States of America: The land of threat and opportunity

A qualitative study of democratic autoimmunity in the Capitol attack on January 6, 2021

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to address and problematize how an undemocratic event like the Capitol riot on January 6th, 2021 could occur in the United States, the nation that for so long has been perceived to be the world’s leading democracy. The thesis takes a point of departure in French philosopher Jaques Derrida’s theory of autoimmunity, which is a theory aiming to explain how democracies are at constant risk of developing autoimmune reactions within their institutions, causing them to undermine their own values and principles. Three theoretical areas were derived from the theory: Hospitality, Ipseity, and Democracy to come, and through an interpretive content analysis of the nine public committee hearings taking place after the riot, these areas could detect symptoms of democratic autoimmunity in the event. The findings of the research thus shed light on the autoimmune tendencies that exist within the very core of democracy, and that was brought to the forefront on January 6th, 2021. Further, the results point to the fact that because of these autoimmune tendencies, the democratic institutions in the United States are still - after this event - exposed to simultaneous threats and opportunities that can come to change the course of democracy in the nation.

Keywords: Capitol riot, Autoimmunity, Derrida, Democracy, United States
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1. Introduction

On January 6th, 2021, the US Congress gathered in the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. to certify the democratic election of Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States. In 2020, Biden defeated the incumbent republican president Donald Trump in an election that saw the highest voter turnout since 1900. Both candidates received well over 74 million votes each (Reuters Graphics, 2021), and considering that political participation in the United States normally is relatively low, the fact that so many turned up at the polls at this election is by many considered a win for the democratic process in the nation (Jackson & Hinsz, 2022:170). However, after all the ballots had been counted and numerous news sources had declared Biden to have won the election, Trump started to voice his objections against the result and refused to consider himself to have lost. He claimed that the election was stolen - an allegation that had been very much at the forefront of his entire campaign leading up to the election (Pennycook, 2020:2). His continuous accusations led several other republican officials to question the results, and among Trump supporters, various conspiracy theories developed - which only strengthened the belief that Biden and the democratic party had cheated, and that the election was stolen (Jackson & Hinsz, 2022: 170-171).

On January 6th, 2021, these allegations ultimately culminated into action, when a large mob of Trump supporters conducted a violent attack on the Capitol building in an attempt to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden as president. The rioters broke through barricades, brutally attacked police officers, and - once inside the Capitol building - severely vandalized the interior and threatened several elected representatives. In all, the riot caused millions of dollars in damage, several injuries, and even a number of deaths (Duignan, 2021). The world watched with horror as these events unfolded, and many argue that what we witnessed on January 6th, 2021 was a brutal attack on democracy and the democratic institutions in the United States; Joe Biden was democratically elected by the people, and the mob of people who stormed the Capitol on that day was trying to undermine the democratic process (Fukuyama, 2021; Morabia, 2021). In the aftermath of the attack, American researcher Robert Pape published an analysis examining the rioters who were arrested and charged at the Capitol, in order to determine the risk for similar violence going forward. The findings showed that the violent insurrectionist movement in the United States is both larger and more dangerous than what Pape and his research team originally thought it to be. And rather than declining after the Capitol riot, it is instead rapidly increasing, and, in addition, becoming
more mainstream. Five percent - equivalent to approximately 13 million people - of the American population state that they would be willing to stage a similar violent rebellion again if they believed it to be necessary in order to restore Donald Trump to the presidency (Steimer, 2021). This research points to the fact that although many see the Capitol riot as an attack on the very heart of democracy in the United States, there is another side to the debate. Just hours before the attack, Trump held an hour-long speech near the capitol stating that "We're gathered together in the heart of our nation's capital for one very, very basic and simple reason: To save our democracy" (Rev, 2021). This caused his loyal supporters to march toward the Capitol building to demand that justice would be served - and that democracy would be restored (Duignan, 2021). Looking at this contradiction, one can see that there is a visible aporetic structure of democracy embedded in the US society where democracy - in order to be protected - was being attacked.

1.1 Aim and research problem

The United States has for decades been perceived to be the world’s leading democratic nation (Denton & Voth, 2016:1-2), but despite this, the very pinnacle of the democratic process, namely the peaceful transfer of power, was attacked on January 6th, 2021 during the Capitol riot. So how come the United States - the biggest democracy in the world - was faced with such a severe undemocratic threat committed by its own citizens? Whilst this event was seen as a dangerous threat against the democratic institutions and processes in the nation, there is - as mentioned above - also a large part of the population that argues that it was not, as they believe the claims that former President Trump made about the presidential election of 2020 being fraudulent (Duignan, 2021). The Capitol riot thus sheds light on a dichotomy within the state of democracy in the United States, and the aim of this study is to address and problematize this contradiction. In other words, to examine how an undemocratic event like the Capitol riot could occur in the world’s leading democratic nation. This, I argue, is something that the contemporary research of the democratic decline in the United States does not sufficiently address.

In order to achieve this aim, Jaques Derrida’s theory of autoimmunity will be applied to the case of the Capitol riot. Seeing that autoimmunity explains the odd behavior of when an individual, a society, or a nation adopts the very characteristics of the threat that they're
trying to protect itself from, I will with the use of this theory attempt to problematize the opposite relationship between the democratic, and the anti-democratic that is visible in the case of the Capitol riot. Within the theory, Derrida argues that it is difficult to differentiate between the good and evil parts of democracy, and it thus provides a good way of exploring whether the undemocratic events taking place in the United States today are not actually the opposite of democracy, but rather an inherent part of the system itself. With an eye on the 2024 election, this is highly relevant to examine.

In relation to the wider field of political science and security studies - the concept of autoimmune democracy is also an important area to research for a number of reasons. It does, for example, help to shed light on the complex nature of the democratic system. It shows how it can both simultaneously sustain and undermine itself, and this is important to research in order to gain a deeper understanding of it, so any potential threats or opportunities to democracy can be detected and faced more effectively. Seeing that it examines the system’s vulnerabilities, it can help the field of research to develop potential strategies to combat these threats and in that way strengthen democratic values and institutions. When looking at the state of the world today - where democracy is in regression in many nations - this is arguably important (Waldner & Lust, 2018:94-95). There is previous research done on the theory of autoimmunity and how it relates to democracy, but considering that the attack on the Capitol is a recent event, there is a lack of research conducted on this specific connection, and this thesis thus aims to fill this gap. With autoimmunity as the theoretical lens and content analysis as the method, I seek to contribute to the field of autoimmunity as well as - as mentioned - examine how an undemocratic event like the Capitol riot could occur in the world’s leading democratic nation.

1.2 Research question

With this aim in mind, the research question this study intends to answer is:

1. How can the Capitol riot on January 6th, 2021 be explained using Derrida’s theory of autoimmunity?

In order to answer this research question, I will analyze the nine committee hearings taking place after the riot. These hearings were conducted by a selected committee put in place in
order to investigate the attack, and they provide a good basis of information about what led up to the attack, the actual attack, as well as the aftermath of it. However, the most prominent limitation of this study is the fact that the Capitol riot happened so recently, meaning that the implications and repercussions following it are still ongoing. To conduct this study, I need to set temporal boundaries there could hence be aspects of the case that occurred before or after the timespan that will not be included. There was, for example, an update in the case while writing this thesis that will not be included in the analysis: on December 19th, 2022, the committee held a tenth and final committee hearing where they voted whether or not to make criminal referrals for former president Trump for his involvement in the attack (Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the U.S. Capitol, n.d.-b). Considering the time this was announced, it will not - as mentioned - fit within the timeframe of this study.

1.3 Disposition

The structure of the thesis is as follows: first, there will be an overview of the previous research on the state of democracy in the United States, and the different drivers of political violence that are argued to cause the democratic erosion in the nation today. This will be followed by an introduction to this thesis's theoretical framework, which is Jaques Derrida’s idea of autoimmunity. Next, I will go over the chosen method as well as the material used within the study, followed by the analysis. The analysis is divided into three different theoretical areas, which are derived from aspects found within the theoretical framework. Lastly, results, conclusions, and future research will be discussed.
2. Previous Research

This section of the thesis covers the research conducted on the state of democracy in the United States. It goes over the fundamental basis on which democracy in the United States is built, followed by a presentation of the three main drivers of political violence and democratic erosion. These are discussed as they - within the contemporary research on the subject - arguably played a role in what led to the Capitol riot on January 6th, 2021.

2.1 The state of democracy in the United States

The United States of America has for many decades been the world’s leading democracy; perceived as the sole hegemon, the emblem of heroism, and the provider of peace, liberty and democracy on the international arena. For hundreds of years, the nation has prided itself with being the greatest nation on earth, with a vibrant political system, a strong rule of law, and by being the forerunner of freedom of expression, religion as well as several other civil liberties (Denton & Voth, 2016:1-2). Liberal democracy has always been central within this perception, recognized within the US constitution as the main pillar the nation is built upon (Singh, 2003:34-35). However, democracy is a complex concept. One of the most prominent scholars who has researched its meaning and definition is American political scientist Robert Dahl, who stipulates that it is ”a political system characterized by the quality of being completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens” (Dahl, 1971). Although democracy’s definition can be stretched in several different directions, the core of the concept - several scholars agree - refers to ‘rule by the people’, which is institutionalized in free and fair multiparty elections, as well as in civic rights protected by the law (Fukuyama, 2022:3). It is further argued that a functioning democracy requires transparency so any potential abuse of power by political elites can be detected, and accountability can be demanded (Keohane, Macedo & Moravcsik, 2009:5-6). The values guiding democracy in the United States are thus those of individual freedom, sovereignty, equality, and the requirements of civic accountability, and social responsibility (Denton & Voth, 2016:1). Furthermore, liberalism is a concept incorporated in the definition of democracy, and its supporters are advocates for open societies where freedom and justice are valued greatly (Fukuyama, 2022:2). American political scientist Francis Fukuyama stipulates that:
Liberal societies confer rights on individuals, the most fundamental of which is the right to autonomy, that is, the ability to make choices with regard to speech, association, belief, and ultimately political life (...). Over time, autonomy would also come to include the right to a share of political power through the right to vote (Fukuyama, 2022:1-2).

Fukuyama further argues that another main principle of liberalism is that of tolerance. By this he means that the people within a nation do not necessarily have to agree with each other on fundamental issues, but each individual should, however, have the opportunity to decide who they are without any interference from another person and/or the state as a whole. In other words: you are free to believe what you want, but you should not seek to impose these beliefs on anyone else. Human dignity stems from individual freedom, and this autonomy is protected by the law. As it stretches further to include the right to participate in political processes such as voting, liberalism becomes tied with democracy (Fukuyama, 2022:7-9).

However, whilst liberal democracy in the United States creates the foundation upon which the nation is built, it is also the concept of democracy that - simultaneously - is argued to pose a growing threat to the nation. Today, there is an ongoing debate about the state of democracy in the United States, where researchers are split into two different camps. On one side of the debate there are scholars who believe that American democracy is still consolidated and strong, whereas the scholars on the other side claim that there are now reasons to doubt its effectiveness and strength (Foa & Mounk, 2021:454). These scholars have for a long time witnessed and researched the widespread erosion of America’s democratic institutions, where various challenges towards it more and more frequently emerge. This erosion, the scholars further argue, was only made worse by the presidential election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Mickey, Levitsky & Way, 2017:20). Throughout both his 2016 and 2020 campaigns, as well as during his time as president, Trump held strong anti-establishment beliefs, and went against some of the core democratic norms that have existed in the US for years. These included the rejection of violence against political opponents and the promise to respect the outcome of the election, even in the case he would lose (Foa & Mounk, 2021:455). Trump continuously accused his opponents of being crooked, and the media - reporting to his disadvantage - of being fake. His tweets were full of insults, nick-naming, and other forms of degrading rhetoric that had never before been used by a president in office (Ross & Rivers, 2020:2). Apart from the president’s refusal to follow democratic rules and norms, much of the
existing research points to three additional drivers of the democratic erosion and increase in political violence we can see today: *political polarization, toxic ideology-based identities* and *disinformation and conspiracy theories* (Mickey, Levitsky & Way, 2017:24; Piazza, 2022:1-2). These three drivers will now be discussed below, as they provide a basis for what arguably caused the attack on the Capitol on January 6th, 2021.

### 2.2 Political polarization

Political polarization has been a prominent feature of the 21st century in the United States and is defined as “the simultaneous presence of opposing or conflicting principles, tendencies, or points of view” (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008:566). The United States has always struggled to create a common and shared sense of ‘nationhood’. Different sources of identity - such as race, ethnicity, or national background - have instead created cleavages and greatly divided the nation (Singh, 2003:40). The two main political parties in the United States, the Republican party and the Democratic party, have in recent years grown even more polarized, where the Republican party is taking a more conservative route, whilst the Democrats base their decisions of public policy on a more liberal ground (Layman, Carsey & Horowitz, 2006:84). The vastly different values that the parties, and hence also their supporters, hold creates fertile ground for political polarization, where questions of race, abortion, and gay rights are just some of the issues creating divisions within the nation today (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008:569).

Recent technological developments, as well as the rise of social media, have created space for this polarization to take an even more defining role in society, where partisan content is exacerbating so-called filter bubbles and echo chambers (Beam, Hutchens & Hmielowski, 2018:1). Filter bubbles refer to how the use of social media forums, such as Facebook or Twitter, risk isolating people from different worldviews, and similarly; an echo chamber is an information environment where news and social recommendations only stem from like-minded people, which, in turn, affect the health of democracy within the nation (ibid:4). Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign, as well as his four years in office, exposed and reinforced many of the social and cultural divisions that exist in American society, as he used a rhetoric that was both polarizing and based on anti-establishment ideas and values. It divided the country between ‘us’ and ‘them’, where ‘us’ referred to the ‘real hard-working, white Americans’, and ‘them’ were immigrants, minorities, and liberal elites (ibid:138-139).
Throughout his entire time in office, Trump - often via his social media platforms - continued his strategy of polarization, and painted ‘the others’ as enemies and a threat to the nation’s security - a threat that only he could reverse (ibid:151). This inspired the formation and growth of several right-wing extremist groups in America who believe that ‘white identity’ is under severe attack by multicultural groups who are using liberal ideas and values in order to undermine white people and their way of life (Piazza, 2022:2).

2.3 Toxic, identity-based ideologies

American scholar James Piazza argues that closely intertwined with the more radical political polarization that can be witnessed in the United States today is the rise of toxic identity-based ideologies (Piazza, 2022:2). Other scholars have also noticed that whilst the ideological gap between the two parties is growing further apart, both parties - although mainly the republican party - are also becoming more ideologically extreme (Beam, Hutchens & Hmielowski, 2018:2). Many republicans have to a higher degree chosen to abandon many established democratic norms of cooperation and instead opted for tactics that severely damage democratic institutions and traditions which simultaneously increase the likelihood for violent political conflict (Mickey, Levitsky, & Way, 2017:26-27). The extreme ideologies that arise are a reflection of the growing anxiety many white Americans feel today about what they believe is a potential social decline and subordination within society. Ideologies such as Christian nationalism - which entails the notion that the United States is supposed to be a white nation - have become a big part of the mainstream political discourse. The fear of losing white privilege is a huge driver within this, and many other, extremist ideologies, which in turn is making the supporters more prone to resort to political violence and undemocratic measures in order to maintain their social superiority (Piazza, 2022:2).

The toxic identity-based ideologies have paved the way for several far-right extremist groups such as The Proud Boys and The Oath Keepers to grow stronger. These two groups in general, and the Proud Boys in particular, are considered to be both a manifestation and a driver for the increasing political violence in the United States. Created in 2016, the Proud Boys emerged because they argued that American society did not allow men to be proud of Western culture, and this was something they wanted to change. They frequently participate in politically motivated violence in order to defend Western society from various forces that the organization considers pose a threat to Western values. Heavily supportive of Donald
Trump, the Proud Boys endorsed his 'Make America Great Again' political agenda, and when they heard his allegations about the stolen election of 2020, they once again deemed it necessary to resort to violence (Kriner & Lewis, 2021:27-28).

2.4 Disinformation and conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories have existed for decades within American society. The theories often emerge as a way for people to deal with chaos or unexpected events, as they can help individuals to comprehend these difficult and complex events - in many cases by singling out an enemy or scapegoat (Garry, Walther, Mohamed & Mohammed, 2021:154). Research has shown that people who seek a sense of belonging, and experience a lack of identity in their everyday lives, are more prone to seek it elsewhere; for example within conspiracy theory groups (ibid:155). The advancement of technology and the growth of social media have paved the way for these theories, as well as for other forms of disinformation, to spread more quickly within societies. This can then be utilized by political leaders to mobilize supporters, something that Donald Trump’s claim about the stolen election of 2020 is a clear example of (Piazza, 2022:2). Several scholars argue that disinformation being spread online increases the likelihood of political violence mainly because it fuels numerous conspiracy theories that can encourage people to take part in violent behavior. One example of such a violent conspiracy theory in the United States today is the QAnon conspiracy, which emerged in 2017. In short, followers of the QAnon conspiracy believe that a group of satan-worshiping pedophiles and cannibals control the government as well as the media, and the only person believed to be able to put an end to it is Donald Trump (Garry et al., 2021:155-157). Strong feelings of discontent towards the government, and prompted by the rhetoric of President Trump about electoral fraud, the supporters of the QAnon conspiracy planned and participated in the riot on January 6th (ibid:160).

Taken together, these factors have taken their toll on the democratic institutions, creating a dangerous society where many Americans believe that the use of violence against the other party - or any other individual who disagree with one's own beliefs - in order to achieve political goals is not only justified but also, in many cases, necessary. So when Trump continually proclaimed that the ‘others’ were evil, or that the liberal elites had stolen the election, skepticism, fear, and anger were bound to quickly arise, creating even deeper divides in society. With the two major parties growing more hostile towards each other,
whilst also receiving confirmation from respective political leaders that they are in the right, and it is the others who are ‘the bad guys’, discontent is bound to occur and, eventually, spiral out of control. As professor Robert Pape concludes his analysis of the insurrection movement in America:

The bottom lines are that we face not just a political threat to our democracy, but a violent political threat to our democracy. This is coming mainly not from a foreign actor. (...) Rather this is coming from millions of Americans in the mainstream who believe that their political goals are so important that they take precedence over the outcome in our elections (CBS news, 2022).

The three factors discussed above are argued to be causing the democratic erosion in the United States and have all been acknowledged as visible drivers for the attack on the Capitol. However, the rioters on January 6th did - in their own opinion - commit the attack with the intention to protect democracy, which once again leads to the core of this thesis, namely to explore an inherent autoimmune tendency within democracy.
3. Democracy as an autoimmune practice

This section of the thesis will introduce the theoretical framework of the study, which is Derrida’s idea of autoimmunity. There will be a general discussion of the concept of autoimmunity, and how Derrida links it to democracy. This will then be followed by a description of three key concepts of autoimmunity that will be used in the analysis. Lastly, a few examples of democracy as an autoimmune process, as found within Derrida’s own work, will be brought up to illuminate how the theory is applicable to various cases.

In the biomedical field of study, immunity refers to our immune system’s way of protecting our body from infectious diseases. It is a complex biological system that is able to distinguish between whatever belongs to the self, which is tolerated, and whatever is foreign (non-self) and thus rejected. The role of our immune system is to protect the body from all types of external aggression, such as bacteria or viruses. As mentioned, the body normally tolerates its own constituents, but sometimes this tolerance can break down resulting in the immune system itself becoming the source of the disease. When this happens, certain white blood cells known as 'self-reactive lymphocytes’ attack organs and tissues, and instead of antibodies in the body working to protect it from the attack and neutralize the ‘enemy’, they too start to attack the immune system in an almost suicidal fashion. This phenomenon is referred to as autoimmunity. It is an odd behavior where a living being works to destroy its own immunity by immunizing itself against its very own protection (Institut Pasteur, 2018; Naas, 2006:24). French philosopher Jacques Derrida links this biological concept of autoimmunity to the political domain, and conceptualizes his idea of 'autoimmunity’ (Derrida, 2005:21). One of the reasons for doing this is because Derrida argues that there has been a shift as to where the biggest threat towards a nation-state originates from. He claims that it is no longer 'out-law-regimes’, or other sovereign states that pose the biggest threat to another nation, but rather non-state entities that - by turning the state’s resources against itself - work to undermine its own immune system (Derrida, 2005:40-41). The enemy is internal and arises out of the very same system that it is supposed to protect (Vardoulakis, 2018:30).

To draw on an example, Derrida uses the relation between religion and technological modernity. Technological modernity is argued to undermine religion, but even so, religious communities make use of television and other media outlets to spread their message. In this way, religion uses the thing that threatens it in order to develop and survive, which ultimately
means that the very thing that keeps it alive is simultaneously what risks its destruction (Derrida, 1998:46).

Derrida dedicates a big part of his work on the concept of autoimmunity by linking it to democracy. He argues that democracy is subjected to autoimmunity and therefore always at risk of undermining its own foundations and values. Within various books and articles, Derrida - and other scholars analyzing his work - shed light on different aspects of the theory that helps explain the autoimmune tendencies he argues are an inherent part of the very concept that is democracy (Derrida, 2005:21). Derrida’s arguments and concepts presented below will make up the framework of this thesis, which will be used in the forthcoming analysis. The few key concepts of autoimmunity that have been selected in order to structure the analysis include ‘Hospitality’, ‘Ipseity’, and ‘Democracy to come. These three concepts are chosen because they are prominent within Derrida’s own work, and used by him when detecting autoimmune tendencies in other cases - such as 9/11 and the 1992 election in Algeria, both of which will be discussed in a section below. All themes will be explained below, and then further explored within the empirical material during the analysis. This will help to illuminate a bigger picture of the interconnected actions during the event that is the Capitol riot of January 6th. Using this guiding framework, this thesis can unveil patterns within the empirical material that can help explore and explain this complex event further.

3.1 Hospitality

In order to understand Derrida’s idea of democracy and how autoimmunity is inevitably a part of it, one must first visit his concept of ‘hospitality’. Hospitality, in the democratic sense, deals with the question of the foreigner, or the stranger. According to Derrida, a home - whether it be a society, a community, or a nation-state - needs to have a sense of openness in order for it to classify as a home, and for the host to maintain his identity as the host (Derrida, 2005:4-5). Hospitality must be “(...) rigorously distinguished from any relation of reciprocity or exchange between two parties, whether we are talking about an exchange of goods and services, or a more symbolic exchange of words and assurances, or simply an exchange of names” (Naas, 2008:22). Derrida therefore argues that hospitality is an ethical principle that is fundamental to any democratic system. Because in order for a nation to be truly democratic, it must be willing to open itself up to others, and to expand the democratic rights - for example freedom - that we want for ourselves to them. Derrida thus claims that there can
be no hospitality without an unconditional welcoming of the ‘other’, even before knowing anything about this individual’s identity or character. Because as soon as one starts to question another’s identity the true essence of the concept of hospitality ceases to be, and the host loses his or her identity as the host (Derrida, 2005:148-149). One can say, then, that the concept of hospitality is shaping communality whilst it simultaneously is shattering individuality. However, by unconditionally welcoming the other without knowing anything about their identity or intentions, this hospitality always simultaneously invites the possibility of the ‘other’ being a threat to ‘us’ and ‘our home’ (Naas, 2008:22-23). This is what Derrida refers to as democracy’s ‘constitutive autoimmunity’. It entails the notion that democracy, in essence, wants two incompatible things. One is the desire to only welcome those who are recognized as citizens, brothers, or friends - and the other is to open itself up to all those who are not, to all those who are excluded from the first desire; because in order for a democracy to be a democracy, it has to include this sense of openness to everyone (Derrida, 2005:63). In other words, for a society to make sense as a society, one has to be able to distinguish between who belongs and who does not - but dividing society in this way goes against the very fundamental basis of democracy, which is the unconditional openness to everyone.

3.2 Ipseity

To fully understand the concept of autoimmunity, one must also understand the concepts and values that Derrida refers to as ipseity and autos. Autos refer to the power and stability of the self, whilst autoimmunity, then, expresses the simultaneous powerlessness and instability of the self - or of the autos. Although Derrida argues that the concept of democracy is difficult to define, he claims that it is nevertheless impossible to think about democracy without thinking about the values of freedom, equality, and sovereignty. Seeing that these concepts are closely intertwined within the concept of democracy, Derrida argues that they are also intertwined with the concept of the autos which sustains them. Philosophy professor Michael Naas, who has dedicated a lot of time researching Derrida’s work, states that:

(...) freedom (...) is traditionally grounded upon a notion of sovereignty that is itself grounded in the autos, that is, in the self or the selfsame, in the sovereignty of self-positioning, self-asserting, and deciding self that has the capacity in an of itself to choose something for itself, to vote one way or another by itself, to affirm or deny from out of itself in order to sustain itself and assert its sovereignty as a self. There would be
no freedom (...) without the authority or capacity of some sovereign self (Naas, 2008:125-126).

This coexistence between sovereignty and the self is what Derrida calls *ipseity*. Ipseity can thus be understood as a power that provides ‘the self’ with its own laws, and self-representation. The opposite of ipseity, then, is any foreign power forcing itself upon this notion of selfhood, and ultimately denying the self its ‘self-possession’. Therefore, Derrida argues that there can be no freedom without ipseity, and likewise, no ipseity without freedom - and thus also sovereignty (Derrida, 2005:23). Democracy, Derrida continues, is not possible without this notion of ipseity, i.e the freedom of the sovereign self and the right to individual identity. However, whilst democracy is inevitably linked to this sovereignty and homogeneity of the self, another fundamental value of democracy is multiplicity and the ‘truth of the other’. Democracy is based on *all* freedoms, and this inevitably clashes with ipseity, which refers to *one* freedom - the freedom of the self (ibid:14). This is where autoimmunity comes into play within the concept of sovereignty: In order for sovereignty to exist, it must be non-shareable and non-transferable. It cannot be distributed in either time or space, for as soon as it is - as soon as sovereignty tries to expand itself - it opens itself up to ‘counter-sovereignty’ of the other, and thus inevitably begins to undermine itself; to autoimmunize itself (ibid:101). Democracy is dependent on sovereignty, but sovereignty, then, continually undercuts democracy. Derrida writes:

To confer sense or meaning on sovereignty, to justify it, to find a reason for it, is already to compromise its deciding exceptionality, (...) It is thus to divide it, to subject it to partitioning, to participation, to being shared. It is to (...) compromise its immunity. This happens as soon as one speaks of it in order to give it or find in it some sense or meaning. But since this happens all the time, pure sovereignty does not exist; it is always in the process of positioning itself by refuting itself, by denying or disavowing itself; it is always in the process of autoimmunizing itself, of betraying itself by betraying the democracy that nonetheless can never do without it (Derrida, 2005:101).

### 3.3 Democracy to come

Although closely related to the concepts of freedom, openness, and sovereignty - democracy, Derrida argues, lacks any actual content or meaning outside of the very context in which it is
located (Derrida, 2005:72). Democracy is by many scholars perceived as a peaceful form of government, where the idea of ‘the democratic peace’ is prominent (Owen, 2014:292). Despite this, democracy is involved in violence; from the political upheavals that create it, to wars that try to extend it. But this violence is almost always considered to be accidental or in other ways imposed upon democracy (Mansfield, 2011:231). Derrida however, makes a point to show that the violence of democracy cannot be perceived as a series of historical accidents, or unfortunate events, but rather, as a necessary and inherent part of the very concept of it. He describes democracy as a political system that continuously regards itself as a problem that needs to be solved - and thus in every democratic act, democracy always returns to itself and problematizes its own basic premises. The commitment democracy has to freedom and openness can never be fulfilled. Our present life, then, is never enough and thus demands that we continually go beyond democracy in order to find a better life for ourselves than the one we are currently living. Derrida, therefore, argues that democracy is a fragile form of government because it is the only regime that is open to its own historicity. Because of the openness of democracy - because of the inherent right to self-critique everything about the concept, including its name, idea, and meaning - it is always open to reconceptualization and reiteration (Derrida, 2005:71-774). Democracy is, Derrida stipulates, therefore always still to come. And by this he does not mean that the world awaits an entirely new form of democracy that we have not yet witnessed, but rather that it has, through its structure and through the autoimmune process of self-critique, the ability to completely change meaning - for worse or for better (ibid:86-87). As mentioned, democracy is never measured against its already established institutions, but rather towards the idea that democracy can always be made better; more open, more just, more free et cetera (Mansfield, 2011:238). This leads Derrida to argue that because democracy is ‘undecidable’ - and thus always still to come - there is a suicidal tendency inherent within the concept because it has the ability to kill itself by working against itself (Derrida, 2005:36-37).

Despite this suicidal tendency, Derrida does make a point of arguing that the concept of autoimmunity is not an absolute evil. Rather, what it does is simply open up - for example a nation-state - to ‘another’. Hence, if there was no autoimmunity, but only absolute immunity, there would never be anything neither happening nor arriving, and a nation-state would have no relation to anything or anyone but ‘the self’ (Derrida, 2005:152). By exposing the self to ‘the outside’, autoimmunity, then, offers both a threat and opportunity. The threat arises because when allowing the self - regardless of whether the self refers to an individual, a
society, or a nation-state - to open itself up to another, it can never be sure whether this ‘other’ will bring something with it that ultimately will come to compromise or destroy the self. The opportunity, then, of course arises because the other could instead arrive with something that further reinforces the existing ideals or values that the self already holds (Naas, 2008:165).

3.4 Examples of democracy as an autoimmune practice

Democracy, according to Derrida, protects itself by simultaneously imposing limitations and threats upon itself. One prominent example of when we could see the effects of this autoimmune process, Derrida writes, was during the 1992 elections in Algeria: As it became clear that a party that had authoritarian motives was likely to win the election, the democratically elected government decided to - in order to prevent the foreseeable end of democracy - suspend the upcoming democratic election (Derrida, 2005:31). This autoimmune tendency - where something undemocratic is done in the name of democracy - is what Derrida argues exists as a constitutive and inherent part of democracy itself. Derrida proceeds to support his idea of autoimmune democracy by drawing parallels to the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. He argues that the event of 9/11 was an autoimmune action of democracy, where the democratic system in the United States was attacked from the inside. This, he claims, is because in the aftermath of the attack, then incumbent president George W. Bush declared a ’war on terror’, which was perceived by the western world as a war against the axis of evil; the enemies of freedom and democracy. However, in order to fight this war, the United States - and their western allies - themselves had to restrict certain democratic rights. This included for example an individual’s right to privacy, as there was a big increase in surveillance cameras in public areas such as airports. The perceived threat to democracy following the attack on 9/11, then, led to the United States attacking itself by limiting the democratic rights and freedoms of its citizens in order to protect their security. Furthermore, Derrida argues that it is, partly, the very characteristics of the democratic system that enabled the attack to happen in the first place: its openness - its hospitality - enabled the attackers to use American airplanes and train on American soil, only to then turn around and attack them (ibid:40-41). In sum, Derrida’s arguments about the event of 9/11 point to the notion that the western liberal democracies, in the name of democracy and the international ’War on terror’, embraced force as a fundamental course of action in order to defend democracy and the
liberal order. It is thus a form of autoimmunity, where a state adopts the characteristics of the threat that they are trying to protect themselves from.
4. Method and material

This section of the thesis will discuss the method and material that will be used in order to answer the research question. I will go through the criteria for an interpretivist research design followed by the selection of the case within this study. Further, I will go over the methodological tool ‘content analysis’ that will be used in order to analyze the chosen material, followed by the operationalizations of the three theoretical areas that are deemed to be of importance within autoimmunity, and that will guide the analysis. Lastly, the theoretical and empirical material of this study will be presented.

4.1 Interpretivist research design

When conducting research, we can look at our results as an exact reflection of the social-political world, or we can understand “(...) research findings as resulting from intersubjective, meaning-focused processes that themselves interact with and potentially shape the worlds we study” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012:40). The purpose of this thesis is to explore the aporetic structure of democracy in the United States, and to unpack how the Capitol riot can be understood and explored through the theory of autoimmunity as theorized by Derrida. Following this purpose, I want to detect the meaning of a phenomenon, and will therefore conduct a qualitative interpretivist case study (ibid:4). Rather than finding a singular truth, which is more in line with positivist research, an interpretivist approach allows me to gain an understanding of a multi-perceived reality that is intersubjectively constructed. In short, this entails that I can attempt to understand reality as constructed by the human perspective. The central position of interpretivism is that the world must be understood from within the social world, rather than from outside of it. The focus is therefore on the meaning behind actions, and how they influence them; the reason for an act is not always conscious or rational, and interpretivism, therefore, puts a lot of emphasis on meanings and discourses rather than beliefs and reasons (ibid:46-47). As such, interpretivism is a suitable method not only for gaining an understanding of the meaning behind a particular action, but also for being able to explain and explore that action further.

Within interpretivist research, there are some implications that are necessary to consider throughout the entire research process. One of these implications involves how the material is being interpreted. The question arises as it is impossible to assume that there is only one...
correct interpretation of an event or text - because we as researchers and observers are a part of the world we study, and cannot step outside of our own experience of it in order to gain an objective view. Therefore, there can be several different valid interpretations of a text or an event coming from several different perspectives (Huberman & Miles, 2002:41). However, in interpretivist studies, the goal is not to provide a single valid description of an event, but rather to provide an interpretation of what this event means to the people involved in it. By applying this interpretive approach to validity, the issue of the matter will be reduced, and the trustworthiness of the study enhanced (ibid:47-48). To further convey this point, one can turn to philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, who argues that each individual who reads a text or engages with any sort of material, does so with a prefixed understanding or preconception. Our individual experiences, our language as well as our conception of the world, society, and the people around us are all things that affect and contribute to our specific understanding of the material. This, Gadamer argues, is an inevitable part of interpretivism. Seeing that the meaning of a text will differ in different historical or cultural settings, it is impossible to retell exactly what the author wanted to convey in a text, as well as how other people have interpreted it before or will interpret it in the future. The most important part is, therefore, how I as a researcher interpret the material within my own, current social context. I am thus not seeking to recreate what the author said, but rather to use their meaning and add it to my own contemporary knowledge and experiences (Boréus & Bergström, 2012:31-32). To increase the trustworthiness of the study, I therefore also have to take reflexivity into account. Reflexivity refers to the researcher’s “(...) active consideration of and engagement with the ways in which his own sense-making (...) relate to the knowledge claims he ultimately advances in written form” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012:19). Self-understanding and reflexivity have to be an essential part of the research design, and must further be made explicit, and transparent. By being aware of one’s own preconceptions of the subject, the reflexivity in the study can be enhanced, and thus also the trustworthiness.

In this thesis, the theory of autoimmunity is the point of departure, however, the empirical material is of course vital to carry out the analysis. This entails that the theoretical framework will be combined with the empirical material when interpreting the case. Therefore the research will follow an abductive logic. Abduction is a concept within methodology that puts its focus on gaining an understanding of the surrounding world in order to explain it. It draws from the things we know and can observe, and through this presents a recognizable pattern that can help us in interpreting things that are foreign to us (Bevir & Rhodes 2016:94-95).
According to US pragmatist Charles Peirce, abductive logic starts with a puzzle or a tension, and the aim of the research is to identify conditions or explanations that make that puzzle less perplexing (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012:27). In this process, then, the researcher goes back and forth between what’s puzzling, and the potential explanations for it. The abductive reasoning, thus, emanates from empirical facts but does not dismiss the importance of theoretical understanding in order to reach various conclusions in the interpretative process (ibid:27).

4.1.1 Single-Case Study

Case study research can be defined as a process that examines a phenomenon - or case - in its real-life context when the boundaries between the case and context are not immediately apparent (Chetty, 2013:41). This thesis is a single case study, as it allows for the investigation and understanding of a particular complex issue; the Capitol riot of January 6th, 2021. Researcher Gary Thomas emphasizes the difference between the subject and the object of a case, where the former is the event - or case - of interest, and the latter is the theory or analytical framework in which one can study and explore the chosen subject. Without the combination of both subject and object, the research becomes descriptive as opposed to explanatory (Thomas, 2011:512-513). Following Thomas’ claim, the subject of this thesis is the Capitol riot. The case is not chosen because it is a case that necessarily represents other events affecting democracy within the wider society, but rather because it is a critical case that can particularly well show the paradoxical logic of democracy that this thesis aims to uncover. The object, then, is the theory of autoimmunity as theorized by Derrida.

When choosing the Capitol riot as the case, a number of other choices also have to be made. These choices include the purpose of the study. Seeing that the aim of the research is to be guided by theory, and not by descriptive or illustrative means, this thesis has a theory-consuming approach. The aim is not to falsify the theory of autoimmunity, but rather to explore it further by applying it to a new case. Further, it is a single case study, which entails that it - as opposed to a multiple case study - does not have a comparative aspect. The only case covered is the Capitol riot (Thomas, 2011:516-517). Interpretivist single case studies have received criticism for their inability to provide scientific generalizations. To mitigate this issue, one can argue that the goal of single case studies is not to generalize to a
larger population, but rather only to a particular theoretical proposition. The aim is thus to expand the theory and theoretical concepts, and not to represent a particular sample or enumerate frequencies - which is more a goal of quantitative generalization (Yin, 2009:15).

4.2 Content Analysis

Content analysis is a technique used within research that makes “replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use” (Bengtsson, 2016:8). There is a difference between qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The qualitative approach, which will be applied in this study, puts emphasis on interpreting a text rather than - as one does in quantitative content analysis - measuring or counting concepts that appear within it (Boréus & Bergström, 2012:50). Further, the researcher also has to distinguish between a manifest analysis and a latent analysis. The former entails a process where the researcher describes what the material actually states - in other words, what is visible and obvious, whereas the latent analysis goes beyond that and extends the process to include a more interpretative approach, where one searches for underlying meanings of the chosen material (Bengtsson, 2016:10). It is the latter which will be used in this study. Further, content analysis can contain different kinds of material, including visual images such as documentaries, as well as written material such as documents, news articles or political statements. For the purpose of this thesis, mainly written documentation in the form of transcripts from the nine committee hearings that were held in the aftermath of the riot will be used. Within these hearings there are, however, also video clips from the riot shown, and I will thus also interpret visual material, which will help me to get a full description of what occurred. This will be discussed further in the material section below. Content analysis is a method suitable for finding patterns within the empirical material that can help explain a complicated phenomenon. It does, of course, show the actual content of a text, but it can also help to unpack any possible hidden meaning that is not explicitly stated (ibid:51). When conducting a qualitative content analysis, there are no decided criteria for the size of the case nor the number of material one intends to study (ibid:10). It is hence an appropriate method for examining patterns within great amounts of material, and will be a good way for me to explore and interpret the case of the Capitol riot effectively.
4.3 Operationalizations

In order to analyze the empirical material it is necessary to present certain aspects of autoimmunity that will guide the content analysis. This will provide a systematic approach that ensures that the material is organized as well as interpreted in a comprehensive manner. The aspects of autoimmunity have been chosen after a thorough reading of the theoretical literature, which I then divided into three key concepts: Hospitality, Ipseity and Democracy to come. These concepts have all been emphasized by Derrida as initiating the autoimmune process in various ways - which have been previously explained in the theoretical section of this thesis. In order for the study to be as transparent and trustworthy as possible, I will show what phenomena will be included under each concept, which are also the explanations I will search for within the empirical material.

1. **Hospitality**: is here defined as the unconditional openness to ‘others’ that democracy entails. However, when a nation is completely open to everyone there is always a possibility that ‘the others’ can enter and bring something with them to ‘us’ that challenges the democratic principles that ‘our’ society is built on. This tension can create a notion of ‘us’ and ‘them’ which initiates the autoimmune process, and it is this pattern that I will try to identify within the empirical material.

2. **Ipseity**: Ipseity is a fundamental concept for a functional democracy, as it refers to the freedom and sovereignty of the self. It does, however, challenge another equally important value of democracy, which is that of multiplicity. Therefore, what I will try to identify within the empirical material is claims of freedom of the sovereign self, as it is ultimately what throws democracy - when it collides with others' equal claim of sovereignty - into an autoimmune process.

3. **Democracy to come**: The undecided nature and definition of democracy are what create the possibility that it can always be challenged by another form of democracy, which in turn initiates an autoimmune process. In order to explore this concept within the empirical material, I will look for various claims of a ‘better’ democracy, or differentiating views between the people involved in the attack on the ‘correct’ meaning of democracy.
4.4 Material

In interpretative research, both empirical material as well as theoretical literature is required (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012:34). The material used to conduct this study is therefore divided into two parts. One part consists of the theory of autoimmunity, as theorized by Jaques Derrida, as well as the research that has been done on it. The main part of the theoretical material will be derived from Derrida’s book ‘Rogues’ published in 2005. Although his idea of autoimmunity has been mentioned and explored in his other works, Rogues is the book where he goes into great detail about it, and provides multiple examples of the autoimmune process. The other part is the empirical material collected about the event on January 6th. This part of the material consists of the nine public committee hearings that took place in 2022 on June 9th, June 13th, June 16th, June 21st, June 23rd, June 28th, July 12th, July 21st, and October 13th (Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the U.S. Capitol, n.d.-b). The hearings were conducted by a bipartisan committee put in place solely to investigate this attack, and it consists of a majority of seven democrats, and a minority of two republicans. In these hearings, a variety of people testifies, including rioters and police officers, as well as Capitol personnel and people within the Trump administration (Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the U.S. Capitol, n.d.-a). Taken together the hearings provide a thorough understanding of what led up to the event as well as what happened during the day of January 6th, and are therefore analyzed in order to get a comprehensive view of the event. Further, it is a good source of material because there are several video clips from the riot included in the hearings, which gives me as an interpreter a more vivid picture of what occurred.

Transcripts of all hearings are available on the website ‘npr.org’. To ensure that the site is reliable - as it is not the official website for the selected January 6th committee - I have also watched the hearings on the official website ‘january6th.house.gov’, to ensure that the transcripts are correct. Within the hearings, certain speeches and other aspects of the event are brought up and explained to have played a key role in the riot, and these will therefore be looked at closer and in their entirety. This includes Trump’s ‘Save America’ speech that was held at the Ellipse on January 6th, just a couple of hours before the attack commenced. While reading through this empirical material, I will go back to the theoretical material of Derrida’s autoimmunity and interpret it in accordance with the chosen key concepts presented and operationalized above.
When conducting interpretive research, the data collection ought to have temporal boundaries. In this study, the empirical material’s temporal boundaries will stretch between the day of the riot, January 6th, 2021, up until the 13th of October of 2022, which marks the day that the last committee hearing took place. The case is still very much ongoing, but for the purpose of this thesis, this date provides a good ending point. The starting date of January 6th is chosen because it is the day of the riot and the day that Trump held his speech at the Ellipse.

On the morning of January 6th, 2021 the US Congress assembled in the Capitol building in Washington D.C to certify the election of Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States. In the 2020 election, Biden received 51.3 percent of the votes, and hence defeated the incumbent republican president Donald Trump, who received 46.8 percent (Reuters Graphics, 2021). The peaceful transfer of power, from one democratically elected president to another, is something that has been a part of the nation’s governmental system since its independence in 1776 (MacDonald, 2000). It was on January 6th, 2021 that this long tradition came to an abrupt end.

As soon as the election was over, and numerous news sources had declared Biden as the new president of the United States, Trump started to voice his objections against the result. He refused to admit himself to have been defeated, and instead loudly proclaimed his discontent with the election - claiming that it was rigged and stolen by radical-left democrats (Fukuyama, 2021:4). These allegations were not new. Trump had on numerous occasions during his presidential campaign argued that the widespread in-mail voting, that a record number of Americans resorted to due to the Covid-19 pandemic, would not generate a fair and correct result. For example, on June 22nd, 2020 - five months before the election - he tweeted:

Because of MAIL-IN BALLOTS, 2020 will be the most RIGGED Election in our nations history - unless this stupidity is ended. We voted during World War One & World War Two with no problem, but now they are using Covid in order to cheat by using Mail-Ins! (Trump, 2020).

These allegations only grew louder on the night of the election as the mail-in ballots started to be counted, and Trump’s initial lead decreased and eventually led to his defeat (Pennycook, 2020:2). As Trump continued to voice his allegations even after the election, the accusations led to conspiracy theories about electoral fraud developing amongst his supporters, and on January 6th, 2021 these allegations culminated into action. Not far from the Capitol Building - where the congressional session was in progress to begin the certification of Joe Biden as
president - thousands of supporters of the defeated President Trump assembled to once again protest against the election results (Jackson & Hinsz, 2022:170). Around noon, Trump held a speech on the Ellipse near the White House. In this speech, he loudly repeated his claims that there had been widespread election-fraud, and thus a severe attack on democracy. He urged his supporters to “fight like hell” in order to help him “take back the country”, and “save America”, because if they didn’t, America as they know it - with free and fair democratic elections - would cease to exist (Rev, 2021). His loyal followers complied and began the march toward the Capitol building. At the same time, thousands of other Trump supporters had already gathered outside of the Capitol and started to move towards the entrance, intending to fight their way inside the building. Amongst them were many well-known right-winged extremist groups operating in the United States, including ’the Proud Boys’, the 'Oath Keepers’, and the 'Boogaloo Movement’. There is evidence that the Proud Boys, as well as many other extremist groups, planned to conduct this violent attack on January 6th weeks in advance on various social media forums (Jackson & Hinsz, 2022:172). In these forums, one could read comments such as “Bring guns. It’s now or never” and “If a million patriots show up bristling with AR’s, just how brave do you think they’ll be when it comes to enforcing their unconstitutional laws? (...)” (The Guardian, 2021). However, many of the people breaching the Capitol on that day were not part of an organized extremist group but were rather ‘ordinary American citizens’ who had decided to rally behind their president to fight for their democratic rights. The Capitol police, which was largely outnumbered, did not manage to keep the mob away, and were brutally beaten with various kinds of weapons, sprayed with chemical sprays, and trampled on by the ever-growing crowd of angry rioters (Duignan, 2021). The mob of people succeeded getting inside the building by breaking through barricades, smashing windows, and climbing up walls. Once the rioters managed to breach the Capitol, they began what would come to be hours of vandalizing offices, stealing property, destroying official documents, and threatening any guard or elected official who tried to stop them (Conklin, 2021:483-484).

The Congress, who was informed about the break-in just minutes after it happened, quickly realized their lives were in danger and were forced to temporarily adjourn the election certification and evacuate as the rioters continued to loot around the building (Duignan, 2021). Both democratic and republican politicians pleaded to Trump to tell his supporters to leave the Capitol, but despite this, it took several hours before Trump made any sort of statement about the events unfolding. Eventually, after numerous people had been injured and
some had even lost their lives, Trump urged his followers to go home by putting out a video statement saying:

I know your pain. I know you’re hurt. We had an election that was stolen from us. It was a landslide election, and everyone knows it, especially the other side, but you have to go home now. We love you. You’re very special (Jackson & Hinsz, 2022:173).

Following this statement, the rioters left the Capitol. The Congress proceeded with their certification, and on January 20th, 14 days after the riot, Joe Biden was inaugurated and assumed office as the 46th president of the United States (Jackson & Hinsz, 2022:173). In the aftermath of the attack, a number of social, political, and legal repercussions followed. Within days, the FBI opened hundreds of case files and issued hundreds of search warrants, resulting in more than 600 people being arrested and faced with criminal charges. As of December 30th, 2021, almost one year after the attack, more than 700 people have been charged (United States Department of Justice, 2021). In addition to this, President Trump was impeached for a second time on the grounds of initiating an insurrection. He was, however, later released on all charges. His Twitter account, which was his main communication channel, was however suspended (Conklin, 2021:485). Further, a bipartisan committee - commonly known as the ‘January 6th committee’ - was put in place in order to investigate the attack based on facts and witness testimonies. The committee held nine public hearings stretching from June 9th, 2022 to October 13th, 2022, where rioters, police officers, and several other people involved in the attack have testified (The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the U.S. Capitol, n.d.-a).
6. Analysis

In this section of the thesis, I will analyze the empirical material consisting of the nine public committee hearings that took place more than a year after the attack on January 6th, 2021. The analysis is divided into three theoretical areas - Hospitality, Ipseity, and Democracy to come - which have all been explained and operationalized in previous chapters. In the analysis, I will support my interpretations with quotes and passages of text, and following the latent analysis within content analysis, I will search for underlying meanings in these quotes that I interpret align with the theory of autoimmunity. This will be done in an attempt to answer my research question, which is how the Capitol riot can be explained through Derrida’s theory of autoimmunity.

6.1 Hospitality

6.1.1 ‘Us’ and ‘them’

The autoimmune tendencies within the concept of hospitality emerge when a society starts to distinguish between ‘us’ and ‘them’, because this division goes against the fundamental basis of democracy which is the unconditional inclusiveness of all. In the case of the Capitol riot, this division is first and most prominently seen within Donald Trump’s widespread conspiracy theory about the stolen election of 2020. In the first hearing taking place on June 9th, 2022, the committee argues that Trump conducted a seven-month plan to overturn the presidential election in order to hinder the peaceful transfer of power, and this, the committee claims, is the main reason why the riot took place (NPR, 2022a). Vice chairman Liz Cheney later states in the second hearing that: “The Trump campaign legal team knew there was no legitimate argument, fraud, irregularities, or anything, to overturn the election, and yet President Trump went ahead with his plans for January 6th anyway” (NPR, 2022b). So, it is argued here that even though Trump knew that he had lost the election, he continued to spread this conspiracy theory about electoral fraud to his supporters. This ultimately led them to commit the attack on January 6th, as they believed that ‘their’ democracy was threatened.

What can be interpreted from the first and second hearings, then, is that the conspiracy about the stolen election created a notion of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in American society, where ‘us’ were the people believing in the conspiracy, and ‘them’ were the ones who did not. This division
increased the tension in society, which is visible in the second hearing when committee member Adam Schiff describes how election workers were threatened by the President and his supporters for simply working at the polling stations. In the same hearing, an election worker from Georgia - Ruby Freeman - is testifying, stating that:

There is nowhere I feel safe. Nowhere. Do you know how it feels to have the President of the United States to target you? The President of the United States is supposed to represent every American, not to target one (...) (NPR, 2022b).

The fact that Freeman states that the president is supposed to represent every American, and not target them, points to a symptom of autoimmunity where the president - who has said an oath to protect all American citizens and their democratic rights - ended up attacking them instead. The hospitality that democracy entails allows for all people to be included in a society or nation, but as Derrida argues, democracy simultaneously wants to welcome only those considered to be ‘brothers or companions’ (Derrida, 2005:63). This paradoxical logic is visible here, where the president is only protecting those he deems are on his side. Further, the state of Georgia was one of the most contested states within Trump’s conspiracy of electoral fraud, mainly because they used so-called ‘Dominion voting machines’. These machines, Trump claimed, automatically switched out votes for him to Biden. The committee argues in the fifth hearing that in order for these machines to stop counting votes, Trump tried to demand the Department of Justice to seize them from state governments. Appointed leader of the Department of Justice Jeffery A. Rosen testifies in the same hearing and says that when he told President Trump he would not seize the machines - due to the fact that there seemingly was nothing wrong with them - Trump got angry and threatened to remove him from his post (NPR, 2022e). This chain of events once again points to an autoimmune symptom, where the democratically elected leader abuses his power to undermine the democratic process. Similar to Derrida’s argument about the case in Algeria, it can be interpreted here that Trump - in the name of democracy - tried to interfere in the democratic process in order to prevent what he claimed would lead to an even more undemocratic future. In addition, through his threats of firing people as soon as they question his false claim of electoral fraud, Trump continued to create a strong sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’, where hospitality was only offered to them on his side, undermining the fundamental value of democracy which is an unconditional openness to everyone.
The committee continues to testify how Trump’s conspiracy about the stolen election eventually culminated into action on January 6th, and several hearings provide information about who the rioters participating in the attack were. Whilst many of them were ‘ordinary American citizens’, there were also organized far-right extremist groups such as the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys at the scene (NPR, 2022g). In the seventh hearing, we learn from committee member Jamie Raskin that these groups worked together to coordinate and conduct the attack. What motivated them to do so in the first place, Raskin claims, was a tweet that Trump sent out on December 19th, 2020 where he urged his followers to come to Washington D.C on January 6th to protest against the election result. These two extremist groups usually do not cooperate, but felt the need to do so now simply because President Trump encouraged them to. Later, during the same hearing, a ‘mainstream’ rioter named Stephen Ayres who was arrested after the attack is asked whether he had any problems with marching - and later breaching the Capitol - alongside these far-right extremist groups. Ayres answered that he did not and that it rather was a good thing that he had them on “his team” (NPR, 2022g). In this case, the people on the other team, then, can be interpreted to be the Capitol police officers whom the rioters violently fought against both outside and inside the Capitol building. In a video clip shown in the first hearing, one can see how police officers are being beaten with various kinds of weapons, including confederate flags and Blue lives matter flags (NPR, 2022a). The latter is a symbol of solidarity with law enforcement, which makes the use of it in order to hurt them another symptom of autoimmunity; as the rioters were ultimately hurting what they were supposed to protect and support. Further, Capitol police officer Caroline Edwards testifies in the first committee hearing and describes what she saw that day as “a war scene. (...) There were officers on the ground. You know, they were bleeding. They were throwing up. (...) it was carnage. It was chaos” (NPR, 2022a). Edwards also describes how she was called many different names during the riot: a hero, a villain, and a traitor, just to mention a few. She goes on to say that, in reality, she “was none of those things. I was an American standing face to face with other Americans asking myself how many times — many, many times how we had gotten here” (NPR, 2022a).

Taken together, this again paints a stark picture of the sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ that was present at the scene. Extremist groups and ‘mainstream’ individuals worked together towards the common goal of hindering the transfer of power because they believed that their rights - and their idea of democracy - were under attack. The interpretation here would be that the American rioters considered themselves to have no obligation to the ‘American others’
because they did not consider them to be part of their community; they are not ’us’ but rather a threat to ’our community’ and ‘our democracy’. But as Derrida mentions, democracy, in essence, wants two incompatible things: to welcome only those who are like-minded but simultaneously have an equal openness towards everyone (Derrida, 2005:63). Therefore, by trying to protect themselves against ‘the others’- whether it be democrats or other republicans and individuals that they deemed not brave enough to fight for what was right - they underwent an autoimmune process. Because without this separation of ‘us’ and ‘them’, the democratic system cannot stay alive, and so paradoxically, the exclusion of the others done by the rioters, keeps the idea of the autoimmune American democracy alive. This is further shown in the seventh hearing when committee member Stephanie Murphy delivers a closing statement where she stipulates that:

My patriotism is rooted in my gratitude for America's grace and generosity. I love this country. On January 6th (...) I was in the United States Capitol fleeing my fellow Americans (NPR, 2022g).

As Derrida argues, for a democracy to be truly democratic, it needs to have an openness - a hospitality - that ensures that all individuals are treated with equal respect, regardless of their background or status. He claims that within a democracy, all citizens are to be treated as potential guests - whether they are citizens, foreigners, friends, or strangers. Due to the fact that hospitality further requires that this openness applies even before we know the guest's identity, it is also impossible to know whether this guest will bring a threat or an opportunity with them (Derrida, 2005:36-40;63). Murphy states that her patriotism is rooted in America’s generosity, which can be interpreted to be the openness the nation has to everyone, but in the next sentence, she describes how she is forced to flee from her fellow citizens. The openness that the United States’ democratic society offered, then, means that anyone can enter, and in the case of the Capitol riot, what was brought along was a threat to the current values of the American democracy - the same values that enabled this threat to enter in the first place.
6.2 Ipseity

6.2.1 Claims of freedom of the sovereign self

Freedom and sovereignty have, ever since the United States’ independence in 1776, been pivotal in the nation, and are two of the pillars on which democracy is built. The symbol for this sense of freedom is in many ways the American flag - which often after severe crises in the United States has worked to provide a beacon of hope for the citizens, and produced a strong sense of patriotism (NPR, 2022a). However, in the first committee hearing, chairman Bennie Thompson describes how this image - because of the riot - has now been shattered, as the attack was seen as a severe assault on democracy, and accordingly also the notion of freedom and sovereignty. Later on in the first hearing, there is a video showing how police officers are being beaten by rioters with American flags, meaning that the previous symbol of sovereignty and freedom (and thus the sense of democracy) has instead become a weapon used to attack it (ibid). The same logic can be detected in a statement by vice chairman Liz Cheney in the eighth committee hearing where she proclaims that:

They would put their lives and their freedom at stake to protect her [The United States]. And he [Donald Trump] is preying on their patriotism. He is preying on their sense of justice. And on January 6th, Donald Trump turned their love of country into a weapon against our Capitol and our Constitution (...) (NPR, 2022h).

As freedom is at the core of the democratic institutions in the United States, it comes as no surprise that the people would get upset and worried when the president himself constantly claims it to be under severe threat. The main thing that can be interpreted from the quote stated above, that Trump “turned their love of country into a weapon against our capitol and constitituation”, once again entails the notion that the threat the United States now is facing is coming from within, where the love the American citizens have for their right to freedom led them to attack the institution that ultimately provides them with it. As mentioned, ipseity in Derrida's words is what provides ‘the self” with freedom and sovereignty. It is what gives each individual the right to decide for themselves - for example - how they want to live, what they want to say, or how they want to vote (Derrida, 2005:23). It is, therefore, an unconditional part of democracy as one of its core principles is the ‘rule of people’. In the case of the Capitol riot, then, it can be interpreted that the
rioters arguably had the sovereign right to protest against something that they believed to be undemocratic. However, the autoimmune logic is that this sovereign voice has the potential to end democracy through the very democratic right to voice it - which is what occurred on January 6th, where the sovereignty of the self among the rioters, clashed with the sovereignty of ‘the others’, which were the people not agreeing with Trump’s claims of a fraudulent election. It aligns with Derrida’s claim that as soon as one speaks of sovereignty it automatically compromises its immunity - as it has to be non-sharable and non-transferable in order to exist; the sovereignty that democracy promises ‘the self’ thus undermines itself when faced with counter-sovereignty of ‘the other’ (Derrida, 2005:101).

Democracy, then, underwent an autoimmune process in which the rioters used the democratic right of sovereignty to attack the democracy that ultimately cannot do without it. Support for this argument is further shown in the ninth hearing, where committee member Jamie Raskin reminds the viewers what former president Abraham Lincoln stated back in 1886: “Insurrection, he said, is a war upon the first principle of popular government, the rights of the people. American democracy belongs to all the American people, not to a single man” (NPR, 2022i). This statement - that arguably is brought up to point towards a fundamental value within the American democracy: the rule of people - goes against another equally important value within a democracy, namely the sovereignty of the self, and the notion of self-identity. Because, as Derrida argues, democracy is dependent on sovereignty, but sovereignty constantly undercuts democracy, it is thrown into an autoimmune process where it starts working against itself. Seeing that self-identity really only can be created through a relationship with another, it is also constantly faced with the ‘truth of the other’. This, in turn, presents the sovereignty of the self with the counter-sovereignty of an ‘other’ and it inevitably begins to undo itself; to autoimmunize itself (Derrida, 2005:14).

Further, in the first hearing, the committee discusses a tweet that Donald Trump sent out on December 19th, 2020, where he hinted that there would be a big protest happening in Washington D.C. on January 6th. This tweet, the committee argues, was viewed by extremist groups such as the Proud Boys as a call to arms. They organized themselves online, and a document called ‘1776 returns’ began to circulate amongst the members. This document entailed descriptions of how key buildings around the Capitol could be occupied (NPR, 2022a). In the first committee hearing, there is also a video clip showing the rioters chanting
“1776” as they are marching down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the Capitol (NPR, 2022a). The year 1776 is, as mentioned, when the United States gained its independence, and it is thus a year that can evoke strong feelings of freedom, sovereignty, and patriotism amongst many Americans. The document’s name, ‘1776 returns’, can thus be interpreted to be an attempt for the Proud Boys to take back this sovereignty - this ipseity that they felt was stolen from them with Trump’s loss in the election - by returning to the year that it was first given to America. However, the autoimmune tendencies that are created within the concept of sovereignty as soon as it faces the counter-sovereignty of others do, as previously stated, inevitably work to undermine democracy. The rioters’ attempt to take back their sovereignty and freedom, i.e their democratic rights, thus led them to commit an attack on the institutions that provide them with it.

Further, the idea of self-identity and sovereignty that ipseity entails also creates implications for democracy in so much that it reinforces a hierarchical and estranged understanding of social relations, where the self is seen as separate and clearly distinct from others. Similar to the concept of hospitality, then, this can lead to focus being placed on individual rights and interests rather than on the common good and communality. In the fifth hearing, committee member Adam Kinzinger states:

It was about protecting his [Donald Trump] very real power and very fragile ego, even if it required recklessly undermining our (...) entire electoral system by wildly casting baseless doubt upon it. In short, he was willing to sacrifice our republic to prolong his presidency (NPR, 2022e).

It can be interpreted here that Trump sacrificed the good of the American people in order to pursue his own, individual, goals. In order to achieve this, he was willing to compromise the democratic institutions - and in an autoimmune fashion - use the very democratic process in order to attack it.
6.3 Democracy to come

6.3.1 Claims of a better democracy

Evidence of the undecidable nature of democracy that corresponds with Derrida’s claims of ‘Democracy to come’ can prominently be found within the so-called ‘Save America’-rally that Donald Trump held near the Capitol in front of thousands of his supporters on January 6th - just hours before the attack on the Capitol commenced. The name, ‘Save America’, right away proposes the idea that America - and by extension also American democracy - is under attack and needs to be saved from an ominous ‘other’. This is further enhanced in the speech when Trump states that “We’re gathered together in the heart of our nation’s Capitol for one very, very basic and simple reason, to save our democracy” (Rev, 2021). He then proceeds to address the widespread electoral fraud, and how the only way for the United States to survive as a country is if he is elected president - and this, he stipulates - requires force and he thus urges his followers to “fight like hell” (ibid). The encouragement to “fight like hell” invites Derrida’s autoimmune idea that in order to reach the ‘better’ democracy Trump and his supporters strive for, they have to go beyond and attack the democracy they currently live in - or rather, the democracy that Trump warns that they will live in once the congress certifies the election of Joe Biden as president. Throughout the speech, Trump continuously warns about the dystopian future that awaits once Biden is elected, and makes several critical remarks about the way he believes the democrats intend to rule the country. He claims that they will get rid of the ‘America First’ policy, which - he argues - is unpatriotic and will have detrimental consequences. Toward the end of the speech, Trump addresses the much brighter and better future he envisions for America, would he be elected instead:

We love our country. (...) Together we are determined to defend and preserve government of the people, by the people and for the people. Our brightest days are before us, our greatest achievements still wait. I think one of our great achievements will be election security because nobody until I came along, had any idea how corrupt our elections were (Rev, 2021).

1 ‘America First’ was the Trump administration's official foreign policy doctrine - which emphasized nationalism and non-intervention, and always put American interests first (Stephens, 2017:553-554).
Within this claim of ‘election security’ there is the notion that Trump, and only Trump, can ultimately protect democracy against all its ‘enemies’, which in his opinion mainly is the fraudulent democratic party and corrupt media (Rev, 2021). However, as the committee has concluded in several hearings, there is no real evidence of this electoral fraud that Trump speaks of. They instead say that his speech on the Ellipse that day - and all the claims he previously made - were just a desperate attempt to cling to power (NPR, 2022a). In the seventh hearing, committee member Jamie Raskin talks about how history has warned about the risk of politicians attempting to mobilize violent groups in order to pursue their own personal agendas:

(...) history teaches that opportunistic politicians who desire to rule at all costs will begin first as demagogues, pandering to the angry and malignant passions of the crowd, but then end up as tyrants, trampling the freedoms and the rights of the people (NPR, 2022g).

This statement shares similarities with Derrida’s argument that the biggest threat to a nation-state comes from within when a state is turning its own resources against itself and thus working to undermine its own immune system (Derrida, 2005:40-41). The interpretation here is that Trump used his supporters as ‘weapons’ in order to - in the name of democracy - attack the pinnacle of the democratic process in the nation, namely the peaceful transfer of presidential power. Similar to the case in Algeria, it can be argued that the rioters on January 6th disturbed the democratic process in order to prevent what they believed would lead to an even more undemocratic future. Trump concludes the speech with the words “today is not the end, it is just the beginning”, and argues that this protest against the election result is something that needs to be done in order to save America for themselves and for their children (Rev, 2021), which once again points to the undecided futurity that is embedded in Derrida’s concept of democracy to come. Democracy, as it is, will never be enough, because someone - in this case Trump - can always claim that it can be made more open and more free. It is an unreachable ideal that demands that we go beyond it in order to find new and more powerful ways to enact it.
6.3.2 Conflicting views on the meaning of democracy

As Derrida argues, democracy is the only form of government that is open to its own historicity. By this he means that the openness of the system entails the right for anyone to critique anything about the concept - including its very meaning (Derrida, 2005:72). This opens the concept of democracy up to welcoming any form of regime to take its place, whether it be a completely new and better form of democracy (an opportunity), or an entirely undemocratic regime (a threat). We can see an example of this phenomenon in the seventh committee hearing when chairman Bennie Thompson is interrogating Jason Van Tatenhove - a former spokesman of the right-wing extremist group Oath Keepers - about why he believed the Oath Keepers participated in storming the Capitol that day, to which Tatenhove responds:

I think we saw a glimpse of what the vision of the Oath Keepers is on January 6th. It doesn't necessarily include the rule of law. (...) it includes violence. It includes trying to — to get their way through lies, through deceit, through intimidation, and through the perpetration of violence, the swaying (...) of people who may not know better through lies and rhetoric and propaganda that can get swept up in these moments (NPR, 2022g).

Due to the lack of definition on the actual meaning of democracy, the autoimmune tendency here points to how Trump, a democratically elected leader, encouraged a group of people with non-democratic intentions to - in the name of democracy - attack what is perceived to be another meaning of democracy in order to reiterate and reconceptualize it. It can thus be argued to have been done to install a new form of regime, one that did not necessarily include what right now is perceived as the values guiding democracy. The sentence “It doesn't necessarily include the rule of law” stated by Tatenhove provides a good example of this, as the rule of law is one of the fundamental ideals guiding democracy today. This is stated in a previous hearing by former judge J. Michael Luttig when he expresses that in America, “the foundational truth is the rule of law” (NPR, 2022c). Although it can be argued that Trump might not have known the intentions of the Oath Keepers on that particular day, it is widely known that they had been involved in several violent events prior to January 6th (NPR, 2022i), and despite this, he encouraged them to “fight like hell” (Rev, 2021). It is this autoimmune idea - that a democratic regime can invite, and in some cases even encourage, attacks against itself in order to avert these threats - that is clearly visible in this case.
Further, in the third hearing, there are discussions regarding Trump’s vice president Mike Pence and the role he played in the riot. The committee describes how Trump, after the election night of November 3rd, 2020, continuously tried to convince Pence to not accept the certification of Joe Biden’s victory in congress, due to the alleged electoral fraud. Because if he did this, Trump argued, he would be reelected as president instead. Trump said this although he had on numerous occasions been told by several of his advisors that Pence had neither the constitutional, nor the legal authority to do so (NPR, 2022c). In the same hearing, there is also a video shown of Pence himself where he states:

This week that President Trump said I had the right to overturn the election. But President Trump is wrong. I had no right to overturn the election. The presidency belongs to the American people and the American people alone. And frankly, there is no idea more un-American than the notion that any one person could choose the American president (NPR, 2022c)

Even so, this argument - that all it would take for Trump to be reelected as president is for Pence not to certify Biden - is uttered by Trump on nine different occasions throughout his ‘Save America’ speech on January 6th (Rev, 2021). And when Pence still refused to do so, it led Trump to tweet (a now-deleted tweet) at 2:24 PM on January 6th which stated that “Mike Pence didn’t have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution” (NPR, 2022c). According to rioter Stephen Ayres - who was interrogated in the seventh hearing - his anger towards Pence is one of the reasons why he, and many others, marched towards the Capitol on that day (NPR, 2022g). At the Capitol, an ever-growing angry mob of Trump supporters built gallows and chanted things such as “traitor” and “hang Mike Pence” (NPR, 2022c). The fact that Trump continually argued it to be ‘undemocratic’ or ‘unconstitutional’ for Pence to certify Biden, and instead encouraged him to - alone - use his authority to determine the outcome of the election went against the fundamental basis on which American democracy is built upon: the rule of the people. This again provides an example of how there is an autoimmune tendency within democracy that constantly and inevitably has the ability to undermine itself.

Taken together, these three theoretical areas have demonstrated various ways in which autoimmunity can explain the attack on the United States Capitol on January 6th. The event
can be seen as a clear example of the way in which a democratic system, following the logic of autoimmunity, turned against itself and undermined its own foundations. Fueled by president Trump’s conspiracy theories and disinformation, the rioters carried out the violent attack on democracy that day with the belief that they were acting in the name of protecting it. The event thus sheds light on how easily democracy - due to its openness, lack of definition, and incompatible desires - can be manipulated and exploited by undemocratic forces, but also how these traits are necessary in order for democracy to survive as a system. The results of the analysis will now be presented in the section below.
7. Conclusions

7.1 Results

The analysis set off to explore the Capitol riot of January 6th through three areas found within the theory of autoimmunity: (1) Hospitality, (2) Ipseity, and (3) Democracy to come. This was done in order to answer the research question “How can the Capitol Riot on January 6th, 2021 be explained using Derrida’s theory of autoimmunity?” By analyzing the empirical material through all three areas, this thesis aimed to help problematize and explain the dichotomy that is visible within democracy in the United States today, where the nation is perceived to be the world’s leading democracy but is despite this exposed to undemocratic events like the Capitol riot. What the analysis of democratic autoimmunity in the case of the Capitol riot has helped us to understand is how the very concept of democracy is constantly threatened of being exposed to structural vulnerabilities that exist within its very own core, and this was brought to the forefront on January 6th during the riot. The violence we witnessed that day, then, was not the opposite of democracy, but rather a threat inherent in its own system. I will now go through the key results found in each theoretical area, starting with hospitality.

Derrida’s idea of hospitality entails that democracy wants two irreconcilable things: to welcome only those who are like-minded into a society, but simultaneously also have an unconditional openness towards everyone - even before knowing anything about their identity or intentions. In the case of the Capitol riot, the analysis has identified that there was a strong sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ present at the scene, caused by conspiracy theories about the stolen election of 2020. Rioters, which in this case constituted ‘us’, fought violently against ‘them’, which were the people not supporting President Trump’s claims about a fraudulent election. When a society is split and polarized in this way, the basis of democracy is being compromised, and following the logic of Derrida; it is generating an autoimmune process, where democracy is inevitably undermining its own basic principles and values. Because without the separation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ the democratic system cannot stay alive, but it is also this division that, simultaneously, is compromising democracy - as an unconditional openness is required in order for a society to be truly democratic. The rioters on January 6th, then, believed that by conducting this attack they were saving ‘their’ country and ‘their’
democracy when in actuality, they were destroying it. By the process of excluding ‘others’, the democratic system was attacking itself from the inside, which aligns with Derrida’s claim that the biggest threat towards a nation-state today is coming from within.

What can be concluded after analyzing Derrida’s concept of ipseity is prominently that the sense of freedom and sovereignty that democracy promises each and every individual inevitably collides with the same freedom and sovereignty given to others. The democratic core value which is the ‘rule of the people’ is difficult to maintain when the society is greatly polarized, and some individuals' ideas of democracy do not correspond with others’ ideas of it. It is an autoimmune process where each individual’s claim of sovereignty clashes with another’s equal claim. In the case of the Capitol riot, the rioters had the sovereign right to protest against what they believed was a threat to them and their democracy in order to protect ‘their truth’, but this ultimately collided with counter-sovereignty and the ‘truth of the others’. Further, the analysis shows that individuals can become excessively focused on protecting and maintaining their own stability and individuality, which then affects the stability and individuality of others. The interests of the self become more important than the interests of others, which in turn compromises the communality and common good that democracy is built on. This was the case with President Trump during the Capitol riot, where he prioritized his hold on power above the current democratic norms and values. However, as seen in the section on democracy to come, the values guiding democracy can easily be exchanged for something else claiming to be an alternative to democracy.

Lastly, the undecided future of democracy which is embedded in Derrida’s idea of democracy to come was also visible during the Capitol riot and helps to explain the event. Differentiating views on the meaning of democracy are arguably what enabled both the rioters to conduct the attack, and President Trump to initiate the claims of a fraudulent election in the first place. Due to the lack of its definition, it lies within the very nature of the democratic system that it can change meaning and quickly be replaced by an entirely new form of democracy (or any other type of regime). Following Trump’s endless critique about the current democracy, the rioters on January 6th attacked the Capitol in order to fight for what they believed was a more correct meaning of democracy, inevitably causing them to - in an autoimmune fashion - attack the very system that could provide them with it.
To sum it up, these three theoretical areas of autoimmunity have helped to explore the Capitol riot, and provided insights as to how such an undemocratic event could happen in the world’s leading democracy. The conclusions reached in each section point to that the answer to this lies in the inherent autoimmune tendencies that exists within the American nation’s democratic core, causing democracy to always be exposed to a simultaneous threat and opportunity.

7.2 Discussion

In this section follows a discussion on the results concluded within this thesis, and further interpretations on the implications they have on the state of democracy. The discussion is followed by a section dedicated to final conclusions and suggested future research.

What happened on January 6th, 2021 at the Capitol will go down in history. Determined to protect democracy, the Trump-supporting rioters ended up attacking it instead - and whilst democracy seemingly survived the attack this time, the possibility of a similar event happening again remains. I would like to start this discussion of by addressing the the drivers of political violence - polarization, toxic identity-based ideologies, and disinformation - that were brought up in the contemporary research on democratic erosion in the United States. In the case of Capitol riot, all three of these drivers are covered within the theory of autoimmunity. Hospitality can explain how disinformation about the stolen election divided American society into ‘us’ and ‘them’, which is further increasing the polarization and toxic ideologies in the country. Ipseity, then, explains how the claims of sovereignty each individual has can lead to a hierarchical society, where ‘my’ or ‘our’ freedom is valued higher than ‘yours’ or ‘theirs’, also further increasing the divisions in society. When it comes to the widespread polarization in the nation, I do not disagree with the previous claims made that the different values and political views the two parties hold contribute to the tensions that exists in the American society. Nor do I disagree with the claim that with the assistance of social media and encouraging presidential rhetoric, this tension eventually erupted at the Capitol on January 6th. However, what the theory of autoimmunity has helped us understand in this case is that this polarization is no longer only about party politics, or questions of race or abortion. It has also reached democracy; The very meaning of democracy has become

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polarized, where different groups within the American society have completely different views of what a democracy is or should be.

This fact is not least seen in the autoimmune idea of ‘Democracy to come’, which suggests that the alternative to democracy can always be made out as a new, democratic alternative. Donald Trump has, ever since the start of his presidential candidacy back in 2016, held very strong anti-establishment beliefs, and during his presidency, he went against many of the political norms existing in the United States (Foa & Mounk, 2021:455). Therefore, one can argue that Trump’s view of democracy never really aligned with the established, conventional view of democracy, but he was despite this democratically elected by the people back in 2016. The openness of the democratic system, then, invited this new form of democracy to enter. Of course, no one could have predicted then that Trump’s presidency would culminate in the violent attack on January 6th, but because of the openness of the democratic system, this was - and still is - always a possibility. It has been brought up within this thesis that democracy is an ideal that can never quite be reached, but is instead constantly reinterpreted and recontextualized when faced with new circumstances or challenges. It is exactly this undecieievness that invites the possibility of undemocratic ideas - such as Trump’s anti-establishment ideology - to manifest themselves in the political landscape. Trump can be argued to have harnessed these anti-establishment beliefs in an attempt to reinterpret the democratic process to align more with his own idea of it. To rewrite the definition of democracy in this way is an option open to anyone, and just because anti-establishment ideologies might not be at the forefront of a presidential campaign does not mean that they have disappeared or are irrelevant. There is always a possibility that another politician can pick them up and incorporate them into their political agenda. This politician could, then, convince the people that he or she is the only one that can be trusted within the political world and, ultimately, use the anti-establishment ideas to enable people to fight for them - just as Trump did.

Another point worthy of discussing further is the way we can clearly see that the autoimmune tendencies within American democracy are interconnected in various events. The discussion Derrida has in ‘Rouges’ about the autoimmunity detected in the case of 9/11 sheds some important light on the case of the Capitol riot. The attack on 9/11 and the following ‘War on terror’ initiated a toxic right-wing nationalist ideology to take hold of parts of American society (Miller-Idriss, 2021). The hatered towards the ‘axis of evil’ grew stronger, resulting in
then incumbent president George W. Bush making his famous statement that the nations of the world had to take a stance: either they were with the United States, or they were with the terrorists (The Washington Post, 2001). The notion of ‘us’ and ‘them’ was strong, and as Derrida argues, this eventually led to an autoimmune response where the democratic freedoms of the western world were reduced in order for security to be protected. With the foreign threat of the ‘others’ and the political rhetoric around it, white supremacy grew in the United States, strengthening the belief that ‘us Americans’ are better than ‘them’. These sentiments ultimately paved the way for far-right extremist groups to form, and - as has been mentioned in this thesis - these groups played a key role in the Capitol riot. What I argue the riot of January 6th can show, then, is that this extremist ideology traveled from foreign battlefields back home to America, where it manifested itself and then eventually would come to attack its own society - and the democracy that it for so many years had been trying to protect.

It is, however, difficult to mitigate this issue. The initial reaction after the January 6th attack could be for the United States to - in fear - close themselves off in order to protect their democracy. But by doing so, they would, as been demonstrated, still compromise it. Because in order for democracy to be truly democratic, it demands the nation to have an unconditional openness - even if it means that it constantly exposes itself to danger by inviting potential undemocratic forces. Attempting to close these alternatives off from entering the system would be equally as undemocratic, and could also prevent the possibility of any potential improvement for democracy to enter. Democracy is thus always balancing on a fine line between threat and opportunity, and the case of the Capitol riot sheds even more light on this. The solution, then, is not for the United States to close themselves off and discard everything that does not align with the own values or ways of thinking, but rather to be aware of this simultaneous threat and opportunity that democracy inevitably offers and find ways to balance it; To negotiate between the better and worse forms of autoimmunity and to stop and critically reflect upon the own democratic system, and question whether it is indeed fullfilling the need and interests of all its citizens. The openness of democracy - and the right to self-critique that it entails - can and should be utilized in ways that improve the system, rather than in ways that undermine it.

To conclude this discussion, I want to bring up the the research conducted by American scholar Robert Pape on the growing insurrectionist movement in the United States. Pape’s
research points to the fact that after the attack on the Capitol, people’s will to take violent measures in an attempt to get their way is increasing, rather than decreasing (Steimer, 2021). The fact that this undemocratic event took place in United States - the world’s leading democratic nation - could point to a bigger international trend, where other democratic nations also experience the rapid rise of political violence. For example, in Brazil, President Bolosrano’s defeat in the 2022 democratic election resulted in his supporters conducting what has been described as a similar attack to the one we witnessed on January 6th. The Brazilian rioters set fire to cars and buses and attempted to storm the police headquarters in Brasília, all in an attempt to overturn the result of the election (The Guardian, 2022). Although Brazil is a younger democracy than the United States, democracy is still consolidated, and the fact that a similar riot occurred just provides stronger evidence that what happened on January 6th, 2021 was not a one-time thing but rather a part of a bigger international trend. It is an outcome of the democratic system itself, and this needs to be recognized in order to save democracy from itself. These arguments open up a possibility for further research, which will be discussed below together with the final conclusions of the thesis.

7.3 Conclusion and further research

This thesis have explored the Capitol riot in the United States on January 6th through the theory of autoimmunity. This was done in order to try to understand and explain how such an undemocratic event could occur in the world’s leading democratic nation. After conducting a content analysis of the nine committee hearings taking place after the attack, the results reached in this study have helped to explain how the Capitol riot was a result caused by inherent autoimmune tendencies existing within the American democratic institutions and processes. The three theoretical concepts of autoimmunity used to analyze the case - hospitality, ipseity and democracy to come - provided explanations on the ways in which democracy is constantly subjected to autoimmunity. Because of this, democracy - due to its openness, lack of definition, and incompatible desires - can easily be manipulated and exploited by undemocratic forces. But it is also these very same traits that are necessary in order for a democracy to remain a democracy, and thus survive as a system. The autoimmunity inflicted on democracy, then, is constantly causing it to be simultaneously exposed to both a threat and an opportunity - and in the case of the Capitol riot, the threat was prominent.
There are several avenues for further research within the field of democratic autoimmunity. Following what was just discussed above, with growing international fear that similar violent protests seems to be on the rise, there is a need to research how the Capitol riot is pointing towards something bigger and more ominous than just a violent one-time event. Future research could thus investigate other similar cases - such as the violent riot in Brasília - through the same lens of autoimmunity to ensure that the theoretical claims of Derrida hold. Further, due to the quick developments of technology, it could be interesting to examine the different ways in which media and communication technologies operate in autoimmune democracies, and how they can be used to shape democratic processes in order to either strengthen or undermine them. This was touched upon in this thesis when discussing the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories throughout both social - and traditional media, but requires more research. Lastly, closely intertwined with both of these examples of future research, another suggestion is to more thoroughly explore the relationship between autoimmunity and globalization. By examining how these two interact, research could detect possible implications that the relationship could have for the strength and stability of democracies all over the world.
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