Maria Lindén
Tampere University
0000-0002-4499-6597

TRUMP'S PLAYBOOK OF ELECTORAL MANIPULATION:

An Interplay of Manipulation Tactics in a Longstanding Democracy

Abstract: The attempt by former President Donald Trump to manipulate the United States' 2020 presidential elections is a salient example of how electoral manipulation has changed to adapt to the new political and societal context that marks present-day elections. This highlights the need for a novel approach to help us better understand electoral manipulation, which is becoming increasingly common all over the world. This article addresses this need by presenting a novel framework for examining electoral manipulation in the United States in the 2020s. A novel feature of the framework is a focus on the interplay between different manipulation tactics. It identifies nine electoral manipulation tactics that interact with and reinforce each other: breaking democratic norms, disinformation, gerrymandering, voter suppression, hacking and leaking, collusion with foreign states, intraparty pressure, intimidation and violence, and corrupting state and government institutions.

Keywords: autocratization, elections, electoral manipulation, political parties, United States

Introduction

On August 1, 2023, Donald Trump became the first former president in the history of the United States to be criminally indicted for an attempt to overturn a presidential election. His attack on American democracy was in some ways unique, and yet in other ways it was a continuation of a long tradition of electoral manipulation in the United States, which has several well-documented issues with electoral integrity (Norris, *Why American* 23–24) and the worst Electoral Integrity Index ranking of all liberal democracies (Garnett et al. 4). Both major political parties in the United States engage in some forms of electoral manipulation such as gerrymandering (Chen and Cottrell 335–36), and the country lacks uniform professional standards of electoral management and independent, nonpartisan election authorities (Norris, *Why American* 56–58). The Constitution is insufficient as a safeguard against electoral manipulation, and the overall electoral regulation landscape allows ample possibilities for making small changes that gradually tilt the electoral playing field in favor of those in power (Huq and Ginsburg 158). State legislatures are the predominant source of electoral legislation and administration, making each state unique in its laws and regulations (Norris, *Why American* 62–63). In 2000, an exceptionally tight presidential contest highlighted some of the issues and sowed serious doubt in the electoral system, but improving electoral integrity has become an extremely polarized issue, with the Republican and Democratic parties in profound disagreement over crucial vulnerabilities and potential remedies (Norris, *Why American* 27–41).

The 2020 elections took place under the unique circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic. The desire to keep voters safe from the virus resulted in changes in electoral rules in numerous states, such as expanding the opportunities to vote by mail and organizing drive-in or drop-box voting. This resulted in partisan feuds over the rules, litigation, and confusion, and provided ample opportunity for Trump to denigrate the integrity of the election Almost half of voters voted by mail or absentee ballot, but, since Trump had been casting vote-by-mail in a negative light, it was mostly Biden voters who chose this voting method, whereas the votes cast in person on Election Day were disproportionally cast to Trump (Pew Research Center 4). Since many states count election day votes first, this voting pattern created a so-called red mirage, which made some of the first preliminary results appear as though Trump was performing much better than he actually was—a phenomenon Trump appears to have consciously taken advantage of as part of his disinformation campaign, as explained in more detail in a later section of this article.

While much has been written regarding Trump's actions surrounding the 2020 elections, little attention has been paid to the multitude of manipulation tactics he used and the interplay between different tactics, a central feature of Trump's attempt to overturn the election. This article addresses the gap by presenting a new framework that offers a comprehensive account of Trump's tactics with a special focus on their interplay. The article seeks to answer the following questions: 1) Which electoral manipulation tactics did Trump use in connection with the 2020 United States presidential elections? and 2) How did the manipulation tactics interact?

The framework this article presents has been constructed inductively from a case study of Trump's 2020 manipulation attempt while also relying on existing research insofar as previous frameworks were applicable. The novel framework was created via qualitative content analysis, a common method in studies that aim to examine social reality in a subjective but scientific manner. This method also produces descriptions or typologies, thus making it well suited for theory building (Zhang and Wildemuth 1–2).

The research data used in this study consists of news reporting and the final report of The Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol (later referred to as "the Select Committee"). The newspaper material used in this case study is comprised of news articles from the *Washington Post* print newspaper between March 30, 2020, when Trump began spreading disinformation about the upcoming election (Benkler et al., "Mail-In" 6), and January 20, 2021, when Trump's term in office came to an end. Potentially relevant articles were retrieved from the paper's archive using the search parameters "Trump" and "election" or "voting." In total, the search yielded 3751 results, of which 853 articles were chosen for a closer examination based on their headlines.

The *Washington Post* was chosen as a source of research material due to its status as the dominant newspaper in the nation's capital, its detailed coverage of American politics, and its long history of unearthing political scandals ("The Washington," Britannica). The paper leans somewhat to the political left ("The Washington," All-Sides), but this does not compromise the integrity of the study because the left-leaning newspapers in the United States have been shown to adhere to professional journalistic norms and to belong to a network of politically and ideologically diverse media outlets that fact check each other, correct their mistakes, and build their reputations on truthseeking (Benkler et al., *Network Propaganda* 73–74). The Select Committee report (2022), in turn, is unique in its thorough examination of the events that are this case study's focus. The report can be considered reliable despite the partisan fighting that complicated the founding of the committee and the criticism towards the committee by some prominent Republicans. Although most committee members were Democrats, two were Republicans, and most of the committee's witnesses were Republicans (Select Committee xvi). Televised hearings

of key witnesses added transparency to the work of the committee.

In my analysis of the data, I relied upon both inductive and deductive reasoning, which is in keeping with the tradition of qualitative content analysis. In inductive reasoning, "themes and categories emerge from the data through the researcher's careful examination and constant comparison" (Zhang and Wildemuth 2). In this study, I relied upon inductive reasoning for condensing the research data into categories, whereas I applied a deductive approach when I consulted previous research as a guide for formulating some of the categories in the novel framework. This ensured that new categories were created only when necessary and all other categories were in keeping with previous studies. Of the existing frameworks, the work of Cheeseman and Klaas depicted the case better than most, and therefore it had the biggest impact on the novel framework.

Subjectivity can be both a strength and a limitation of qualitative content analysis. In this article, subjectivity plays an important role because of the way the notion of electoral manipulation is conceptualized; when a conceptualization of electoral manipulation relies upon international conventions or national laws, electoral manipulation is perceived as a *social fact*, that is, a fact whose existence derives from human agreement and relies on human institutions (Ruggie 856; Searle 2). However, when democratic norms and principles form the foundation of the study, as in this article, the conceptualization becomes more subjective. In the present-day United States, electoral integrity is a heavily polarized concept that can mean very different things to different people depending on their political leanings (Norris, *Why American* 27–41), which makes the social fact approach unfeasible. Hence, this article adopts a constructivist approach and contributes to knowledge creation

by defining, classifying, and modelling the object of the study ("Konstruktivismi").

The novel framework I present in this article addresses gaps in previous research by highlighting electoral manipulation tactics that have risen to salience or taken on new forms in recent years. In addition, it contributes to scholarship on electoral manipulation by highlighting the interplay between different manipulation tactics and the emergence of a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts, whereas previous studies have considered each tactic separately instead of considering how they might impact one another. The framework I present in this article does not seek to be a comprehensive account of all electoral manipulation tactics used in all democracies. Instead, it focuses on the specific context of the United States in the 2020s. However, it also highlights present-day phenomena that have larger implications outside of this context and seeks to raise the question of whether such phenomena are sufficiently accounted for in existing frameworks and codebooks that are used to compile large databases such as V-Dem, a prominent dataset designed to conceptualize and measure democracy. Scrutiny of the latter is especially significant, as these databases are frequently relied upon in quantitative studies on autocratization, which means that the conceptualizations behind them have a substantial influence over the field of democracy studies. In the first section of this article, I conceptualize electoral manipulation and electoral integrity. In the next section, I discuss the need for a new electoral manipulation framework, and subsequently I present the novel framework. Finally, I offer concluding remarks. The research I present in this paper shows that Trump used nine different electoral manipulation tactics, some of which are not accounted for in previous frameworks, and many of which have novel aspects to them. I also find that interplay between tactics is crucial in that manipulation tactics that may seem harmless on their own but take on new meaning because they lay the groundwork for the use of more serious tactics. This article highlights that Trump's electoral manipulation attempt exemplifies many interesting phenomena that are characteristic of the age we live in, such as social media providing a megaphone for spreading misinformation and affective polarization, which makes citizens more inclined to believe political lies.

Defining Electoral Manipulation

There is no universally accepted conceptualization or definition of *electoral manipulation*. Several starting points for conceptualization have been proposed, such as international conventions, national laws, citizens' perceptions, administrative effectiveness, and democratic norms, values, and principles (Birch 11–13; Norris, *Why Electoral* 21, 35). This article takes democratic norms as the starting point and defines electoral manipulation as both legal and illegal actions that a candidate or a political party undertakes before, during, or after an election to manipulate the elections in their favor that undermine electoral integrity. Meanwhile, I conceptualize *electoral integrity* following James and Garnett, who also take a normative approach based on democratic theory (13–15). As they point out, a normative approach provides a moral compass, allows recommendations for improvements, and enables timeless comparative yardsticks for research purposes. They define democracy as "a political system in which power resides equally with members of the population of a polity rather than a narrow political or sectional elite" and conclude that the "role of elections is therefore to *provide a mechanism to ensure that power is evenly distributed across a polity*" (James and Garnett 14; emphasis in original).

James and Garnett define electoral integrity as consisting of five key principles or pillars: equality of contestation, equality of participation, meaningful deliberation, electoral management delivery, and electoral governance (15–19). Equality of contestation refers to all parties and candidates being able to meaningfully contest the election and to a level playing field. Equality of participation entails universal suffrage, accessible mechanisms of registration and voting, high turnout, equal levels of participation across different groups in a society, all votes having equal weight, and votes actually representing the will of the voters. Meaningful deliberation is accomplished when voters have all the fundamental freedoms necessary for formulating an informed opinion and the society at large engages in high-quality debates based on truthful information, a diversity of viewpoints, and a rational and equal consideration of the arguments. Electoral management fulfills its function when electoral officials are impartial and do their work professionally and transparently while upholding the security and accuracy of the process. Electoral governance encompasses certainty over electoral rules, a fair process for changing the rules, obedience to the rules, an effective system of accountability, and acceptance of results. Later in this article, I reflect upon this conceptualization of electoral integrity in light of the novel electoral manipulation framework presented in this article.

Electoral manipulation can take place at any point in the *electoral cycle*, which, following Norris, is understood in this article as comprising all aspects relevant to a particular election, for example drafting and passing electoral laws, candidate and voter registration, and vote count (*Why Electoral* 33–34). When election results are certified, one electoral cycle ends and another one begins. Electoral manipulation is generally done in secret, making it a difficult field of study (Lehoucq 233–34). However, the United States has very strong diagonal accountability mechanisms, making it an ideal subject for an electoral manipulation case study. Large newsrooms and non-governmental organizations have the resources to unearth undemocratic behavior, and the First Amendment of the United States Constitution guarantees them the freedom to publish their findings.

The Need for a New Electoral Manipulation Framework

Present-day elections are taking place in a context that differs substantially from that of previous decades, one that James and Garnett call the age of uncertainty (10–13). Many of the phenomena characteristic of the age of uncertainty that have piqued the interest of electoral integrity researchers in recent years have originated or are otherwise clearly visible in the United States: democracy is eroding, and social media has changed the use and impact potential of disinformation. Mistrust in election management has been on the rise since the United States presidential election of 2000 brought management issues such as butterfly ballots and hanging chads to the world's attention. Advances in voting and electoral management technology have intertwined cybersecurity issues with electoral integrity while affective polarization has made citizens dehumanize each other based on political disagreement and appreciation of democracy and trust in elections have been declining. Donald Trump's electoral manipulation attempt in connection with the 2020 presidential elections in the United States exemplifies electoral manipulation taking place in this new context. The empirical analysis of this attempt that I present later in this article highlights the need for a new framework on electoral manipulation.

Previous research on electoral manipulation has often focused on only one manipulation tactic

instead of considering the whole range of available tactics (Cheeseman and Klaas 7). Some authors, however, have constructed comprehensive manipulation frameworks. The frameworks of Schedler (39–45), Calingaert (139–49), Birch (28–39), Cheeseman and Klaas (31–207), and Morgenbesser (1056) each introduce three to seven broad categories, which encompass several different manipulation tactics. Birch and Morgenbesser name several subcategories for each category, while Schedler and Calingaert do not. Schedler (38–41) and Birch (16–26) arrive at their frameworks deductively, by theorizing a framework of electoral integrity that then functions as a foundation for their electoral manipulation frameworks. Calingaert, Cheeseman and Klaas, and Morgenbesser, in contrast, take an inductive approach and categorize and analyze real-world examples of electoral manipulation.

The electoral manipulation attempt of former President Trump is also interesting because it took place in a longstanding democracy. Previous electoral manipulation frameworks have typically focused on authoritarian regimes (e.g., Calingaert; Morgenbesser), so-called hybrid regimes that are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic (e.g., Schedler), or both (Cheeseman and Klaas 12–13).[1] Some of the key components of Trump's manipulation attempt were specific to the democratic context or manifest themselves differently due to this context, which is another testament to the need for a new framework specific to the United States.

Since the Cold War, incumbent-driven subversions of democracy have been the leading cause of democratic death (Svolik 20–21). Since a growing number of democracies are undergoing autocratization (Wiebrecht et al. 770), it is important to pay scholarly attention to electoral manipulation tactics that seek to corrupt democratic institutions to help an incumbent stay in power. As I will show in the empirical analysis presented later in this article, such tactics were

an important part of Trump's 2020 manipulation attempt. However, since many previous electoral manipulation frameworks have described autocracies (e.g., Calingaert; Morgenbesser) or hybrid regimes (e.g., Schedler), they have not included corruption of government institutions. The issue is also not identified as a separate manipulation tactic in Cheeseman and Klaas's or Birch's comprehensive electoral manipulation frameworks. The risk of corruption of democratic institutions is also often not included in conceptualizations of electoral integrity, such as Elklit and Reynolds's election quality framework, or codebooks designed for the purpose of data collection for compiling large electoral integrity-related datasets, which are used in quantitative research, such as the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) codebook, the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI) index core questions, and the National Elections across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) codebook (Coppedge et al.; Electoral Integrity Project; Hyde and Marinov).

Disinformation is an example of a topical electoral manipulation tactic that featured prominently in Trump's manipulation attempt but has not always received attention from scholars. There is no mention of disinformation in Schedler's, Calingaert's, or Morgenbesser's electoral manipulation frameworks. Similarly, the concepts of truthful information and disinformation have often been absent from conceptualizations of electoral integrity such as Elklit and Reynolds's framework and the V-Dem, PEI, and NELDA codebooks (Coppedge et al.; Electoral Integrity Project; Hyde and Marinov).

Yet another electoral manipulation tool that has been salient in public discussion in recent years but has often been overlooked in electoral manipulation frameworks is co-operation between a political candidate and a foreign power seeking to influence an election, often referred to as collusion in the American context. There is evidence to suggest that non-democratic states

such as Russia have attempted collusion to meddle in elections abroad (Cheeseman and Klaas 129; Mueller 110–14), which prompts an interest in political candidates' potential use of collusion as an electoral manipulation tool, such as Trump's 2019 collusion attempt, which is discussed in more detail in the following section. However, collusion is not considered in Schedler's or Calingaert's frameworks. Morgenbesser mentions transnational alliances between ruling parties to uphold autocratic rule (1057), but since his focus is on autocracies, the phenomenon is somewhat different from the one described in this article. The possibility of foreign influence is also absent from Elklit and Reynolds and the V-Dem, PEI, and NELDA codebooks (Coppedge et al.; Electoral Integrity Project; Hyde and Marinov).

A Novel Electoral Manipulation Framework
The framework presented in this article consists of nine electoral manipulation tactics, which act in concert to build upon each other and reinforce each other. The tactics are as follows, described in more detail below:

(1) Breaking democratic norms
(2) Disinformation
(3) Gerrymandering
(4) Voter suppression
(5) Hacking and leaking
(6) Collusion with one or more foreign states
(7) Intraparty pressure
(8) Intimidation and violence
(9) Corrupting state and government institutions

The tactics at the beginning of the list may seem minor in comparison to the ones towards the end, and some of the tactics, such as gerrymandering, are regularly used by both parties. Nevertheless, all are relevant to the framework because of how Trump used them to create a whole that was larger than the sum of its parts.

The framework contains a) old but still common tactics (2, 3, 4, and 8) (Cheeseman and Klaas 26, 35–49, 93–114); b) tactics popular with present-day authoritarians (2, 7, and 9) (Bermeo 10–11; Boese et al. 984; Svolik 21); and c) foreign election meddling tactics (2, 5, and 6) (Aaltola 133–36). Many, but not all, of the tactics discussed by Cheeseman and Klaas are present. Two tactics are unique to the framework presented in this paper: breaking democratic norms and intraparty pressure.

Breaking democratic norms is understood as a breach of societal soft norms that contributes the groundwork for the use of more serious electoral manipulation tactics. Breaking democratic norms is not generally considered an electoral manipulation tool, perhaps because it requires the existence of strong democratic norms, and thus does not apply to autocracies or hybrid regimes. In 2020, notable breeches of democratic norms were Trump's noncommitment to a peaceful transition of power and his refusal to attend his successor's inauguration (Gearan; Select Committee 202). In James and Garnett's framework, such behavior shakes the pillar of electoral governance, as it creates uncertainty over electoral rules, obedience to the rules, and acceptance of results.

Disinformation is defined as false information that is spread deliberately to deceive people. It undermines meaningful deliberation by making it harder, if not impossible, for a given society to debate issues based on truthful information (James and Garnett 17). It is a common tool used by politicians to improve their chances of winning an election (Cheeseman and Klaas 26, 127–28, 134–41). Autocratic governments are increasingly using disinformation to shape both domestic and international opinion (Boese et al.

984), and it has become an essential part of foreign election meddling (Aaltola 133–34). In the United States, it has been in use since the early days of American democracy (Mansky). Trump began spreading disinformation eight months before Election Day, baselessly sowing distrust in electoral integrity and eroding his supporters' confidence in elections (Clayton et al. 5). After the election, he insisted on having won, even though his own cabinet and advisors had refuted the claim (Select Committee 204–07, 214–15, 376–79). It appears he had a premeditated plan to claim victory on Election Night regardless of the election results and followed through with his plan (Select Committee 8–26, 196–97, 195–203).

Gerrymandering refers to drawing voting district maps unfairly to gain partisan advantage or to suppress the votes of some subgroup of voters. It sabotages equal participation by diluting the power of some voters or amplifying the power of others (James and Garnett 16). Partisan gerrymandering originated in the United States in the early nineteenth century (Cheeseman and Klaas 34–46), and at present both Republicans and Democrats gerrymander to make the races for the House and the state legislatures less competitive to their own advantage (Chen and Cottrell 335–36). There is no universally accepted way to draw voting districts (Simpser 174), but in recent years political scientists have developed robust methods to assess whether gerrymandering has taken place (e.g., Magleby et al. 87–89; McCartan et al.). On the state level, gerrymandering can have a substantial impact on the composition of state legislatures (Krasno et al. 1190).

In the contest for the White House, gerrymandering has very limited direct impact, since—with the sole exceptions of Maine and Nebraska—each state comprises one electoral district. However, in the 2020 presidential elections,

the use of some of the other manipulation tactics built upon state-level gerrymandering. Trump tried to exert intraparty pressure on state legislatures and to corrupt state institutions, targeting, among others, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan (Select Committee 266–67), all of which were in Republican control due to gerrymandering (Grose et al. 2).

Voter suppression is understood as a legal or illegal measure whose purpose or practical effect is to reduce voting by members of a targeted subgroup of voters. It threatens to undermine equal participation, which encompasses equal levels of participation across different groups in society (James and Garnett 16). It is a tactic both the Democratic and Republican parties have resorted to over the course of history (Epperly et al. 758–64). In the present-day United States, the Republican Party stands to benefit from disenfranchising minority voters, and in the twenty-first century, the party has been increasingly passing laws that restrict voting in a suppressive way (Hasen 57–59). In 2020, the Trump campaign and Republican entities were engaged in more than forty pre-electoral lawsuits related to voting amidst the pandemic, attempting to restrict access to the ballot box (Ginsberg).

The act of *hacking and leaking* is understood as stealing potentially damaging information about a political opponent and publicizing it anonymously via a third party such as a newspaper or a website. It can jeopardize equal contestation by tilting the playing field unfairly (James and Garnett 16). Usually done via digital tools, hacking and leaking is the modern-day version of the attempt by President Richard Nixon's campaign staff to steal damaging information about political rivals that resulted in the Watergate scandal in the United States in the 1970s (Cheeseman and Klaas 127). A well-known example of hacking and leaking is the publication of emails related to Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign in the 2016 United States presidential elections

(Cheeseman and Klaas 141–43). This particular operation was conducted by Russia, but hacking and leaking can also be commissioned or conducted by a candidate or their campaign (Cheeseman and Klaas 126, 142). In 2020, the Trump campaign obtained and leaked emails allegedly belonging to Trump's opponent Joe Biden's son Hunter Biden.

Attempted collusion is understood as attempting to make a secret pact with a foreign entity to manipulate an election. Similarly to hacking and leaking, it undermines equal contestation (James and Garnett 16). Early in the 2020 electoral cycle, Trump pressured Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to help him denigrate Joe Biden, who was campaigning to be the Democratic presidential candidate in the 2020 elections ("President Donald Trump Impeached"; White House).[2] In addition, Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani defamed Biden in collaboration with a Ukrainian politician who was later declared a Russian intelligence asset (Lucas).

Intraparty pressure, a term coined by this author for the purposes of the framework, refers to pressuring members of one's own political party to break democratic norms or the law to help manipulate an election. If successful, it prevents equal contestation (James and Garnett 16). When the pressure is directed at election officials, the tactic can also erode electoral management delivery, which relies upon impartiality, professionalism, and transparency of electoral management (James and Garnett 17). Present-day autocrats often rely on the complicity of their parties to corrupt governmental institutions to consolidate their power (Svolik 21). Trump and his allies attempted to convince numerous Republicans to help overturn the 2020 election (Select Committee 264–66, 270–75, 282–93). For example, Trump pressured Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensberger to "find" him enough votes to change the result in Georgia (Select Committee 263–64). When all else

failed, he tried to convince his Vice President Mike Pence not to certify the election results (Select Committee 4, 32–41, 233, 428–67).

Intimidation and violence are defined, respectively, as the action of frightening or threatening someone to persuade them to do something, and as the use of physical force to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy. These electoral manipulation tactics can shake several pillars of electoral integrity: threatening or being violent towards voters can undermine equal participation, whereas targeting election officials can have an impact on electoral management delivery. If a candidate or their supporters choose violence instead of acceptance of an unfavorable outcome, it also undercuts electoral governance, which entails, amongst other things, obedience to electoral rules and acceptance of results (James and Garnett 16–18). Intimidation and violence are used in many countries all over the world (Cheeseman and Klaas 93–114), and their use has a long history in the United States (Epperly et al. 758–64). In 2020, Trump publicly verbally attacked election officials and elected officials who had refused to help him overturn the election. These attacks prompted some of his supporters to threaten the officials and their families with physical violence, but the president did not condemn the threats or attempt to quell them (Select Committee 300–17). Instead, he urged his supporters to protest in Washington, DC, on the day Congress was to certify the election results. Leading up to the protest, Trump's staff received reports warning of potential violence, but the White House made no effort to mitigate the risk (Select Committee 63–75, 591). Knowing many protesters were armed, Trump told his supporters to "fight like hell" and march to the Capitol, apparently intending to join them (Select Committee 69–71, 72–73, 75, 585, 587–92). The crowd attacked the Capitol violently. Aware of the violence, Trump allowed three hours to pass before making any attempt to end

	Breaking norms	Disinformation	Gerrymandering	Voter suppression	Hacking and leaking	Collusion	Intraparty pressure	Intimidation and violence	Corrupting institutions
Breaking norms		Reinforces						Helps justify	Helps justify
Disinformation	Reinforces		Helps justify	Helps justify, is reinforced by	Reinforces	Is reinforced by	Helps justify	Helps justify	Helps justify, is reinforced by
Gerrymandering		Is justified with, reinforces		Helps execute			Helps execute	Helps execute	Helps execute
Voter suppression		Is justified with, reinforces	Relies upon			Relies upon		Can rely upon	Helps execute
Hacking and leaking		Reinforces				Relies upon			
Collusion		Reinforces		Helps execute	Helps execute				
Intraparty pressure		Is justified with	Relies upon					Relies upon	Helps execute
Intimidation and violence	Is justified with	Is justified with	Relies upon	Helps execute			Helps execute		Helps execute
Corrupting institutions	Is justified with	Is justified with, reinforces	Relies upon	Relies upon			Relies upon	Relies upon	

Table 1: Interplay between manipulation tactics.

the attack (Select Committee 5, 76–98, 577–79, 592–606).

Corrupting state or government institutions is defined in this framework as a deliberate act to undermine, alter, or abuse political or judicial institutions for political gain. It sabotages electoral governance, which entails certainty over electoral rules and a fair process for changing them (James and Garnett 18). For decades, such corruption of institutions has been the leading cause of democratic death (Svolik 20–22), making it the most dangerous tactic in the framework. Before the 2020 election, the Trump campaign appears to have sought Supreme Court validation for a legal theory known as the Independent State Legislature Theory, which could have given state legislatures the power to overturn election results (Luttig). After the election, Trump and his supporters filed sixty-one baseless lawsuits in state and federal courts to challenge the election results (Select Committee 210). When the lawsuits were rejected by courts, Trump instructed the Justice Department to declare the election as corrupt even though Justice Department investigations had only produced evidence to the contrary, and when the acting Attorney General refused, Trump attempted to replace him with someone willing to do his bidding (Select Committee 49–54, 386, 389–93, 397–

401). Trump and his allies also organized slates of fake electors to meet and to submit false certifications of Trump victories to give Vice President Pence a pretext not to certify Biden's victory (Select Committee 41–48, 341–54).

As displayed in table 1, interplay between the tactics is crucial. When Trump refused to concede and claimed the election had been rigged, he was using the mutually reinforcing power of breeches of democratic norms and disinformation to create, sustain, and amplify a backstory that played a crucial role in his manipulation attempt. With this backstory, he justified intraparty pressure, intimidation and violence, and corruption of institutions, and provided his party a useful tool for justifying gerrymandering and voter suppression in the future. When he ordered the Justice Department to declare the election corrupt without evidence, he was attempting to use corruption of institutions in turn to reinforce his most crucial piece of disinformation about the elections. In addition, when his campaign collaborated with a Russian asset to denigrate Biden, they were using collusion to reinforce disinformation about Trump's political opponent.

Gerrymandering had given Republicans control in several swing states, and this helped Trump find useful partisans to exert intraparty pressure on. Control of swing states was also crucial in the fake electors scheme, which was one of Trump's attempts to corrupt institutions. Events in the United States since 2020 have shown that gerrymandering can also pave the way to passing laws that suppress the vote and laws that help intimidate election workers, and helps elect candidates that campaign on disinformation, thus reinforcing said disinformation.

Voter suppression has a two-way relationship with disinformation: it is often justified with disinformation, but it can also tighten the competition between candidates and lessen winning margins, making disinformation spread by the losing party seem more credible. It can help authoritarian-minded candidates rise to power, enabling them to corrupt institutions.

Hacking and leaking can also reinforce disinformation, as mixing misleading slivers of truth with counterfactual claims is often the best recipe for creating impactful disinformation, and hacking can provide useful material for doing so. Collusion, in turn, can be an intrinsic enabler of hacking and leaking, as foreign actors have shown their interest in hacking operations, as witnessed in the United States in connection with the 2016 presidential election. The colluding foreign power can also help spread disinformation, or even suppress the vote, as Russia did in connection with the 2016 presidential election, even though it appears Russia acted alone that time and did not collude with any political campaign (Senate Committee on Intelligence 35).

Intraparty pressure usually requires some form of intimidation. It can also rely upon gerrymandering, and even outright violence, as was the case on January 6, when a crowd of Trump supporters chanted, "Hang Mike Pence." The goal of intraparty pressure is to corrupt state and government institutions. Intimidation and violence can also be tools of voter suppression or corruption of institutions, such as when Trump suggested that Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensberger might face criminal charges if he did not "find" Trump the votes he needed to win. Corrupting state and government institutions relies on all other manipulation tactics except for hacking and leaking and collusion.

Conclusion

This article has introduced a novel framework for analyzing present-day electoral manipulation tactics and their interplay in the context of

the United States. The framework was constructed inductively, based on a case study of the United States 2020 presidential election, while also relying on deductive reasoning and consulting previous studies. The framework consists of nine electoral manipulation tactics: 1. Breaking democratic norms; 2. Disinformation; 3. Gerrymandering; 4. Voter suppression; 5. Hacking and leaking; 6. Collusion with one or more foreign states; 7. Intraparty pressure; 8. Intimidation and violence; and 9. Corrupting state and government institutions. The framework is a combination of old and familiar manipulation tactics, tactics that are popular with present-day authoritarians, and tactics used in foreign election meddling. The tactics build upon and amplify one another, creating a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts.

Trump's attempt to overturn the 2020 election tested the American electoral system in an unprecedented way, and there has been concern that similar scenarios will play out in connection with the 2024 presidential election or other future elections. From following the news, it is clear that Trump has continued to use many of his 2020 tactics, and that many prominent Republicans are following in his footsteps, which does not bode well for the 2024 election. Trump and many of his fellow partisans continue to spread disinformation about the integrity and results of the 2020 election, and in the 2022 midterm elections, numerous key Republican candidates appeared uncommitted to accepting a potential electoral loss. In the latest redistricting, gerrymandering gave Republicans control of Georgia and Wisconsin, two 2024 swing states. In Republican-controlled states, legislatures have used disinformation as a pretext to pass an exceptional number of new laws that restrict voting, prompting accusations of voter suppression from those opposed to the laws. The Republican party no longer seems to have any room for Trump opponents, and those who dare criticize him face severe pressure to change

their stance or leave the party. Prominent Republicans have downplayed the violence that took place on January 6, been silent instead of condemning other violent acts, or discussed political violence in a joking manner that can be interpreted to signal acceptance. Republican-controlled state legislatures have passed laws that transfer power over electoral responsibilities from electoral administrators to partisan legislators. The framework presented in this paper provides an avenue to scrutinize these and other actions that signal danger to the integrity of future elections, and to analyze actions by prominent Democrats to see if they are engaging in similar behavior. It can also be utilized to identify and assess actions taken to strengthen the American electoral system and to protect it from manipulation.

Notes

1. In Cheeseman and Klaas, the focus is not absolute, and their examples include phenomena taking place in democratic contexts.

2. A transcript of Trump's telephone conversation with President Zelensky was originally published on the White House website, and this original transcript is part of the research material utilized in this study. However, it has since been removed. Therefore, the list of references contains instead a link to the *New York Times* website, where the transcript is still available.

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