TRUMP'S ATTACK ON AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

TOWARDS A NEW MODEL OF ELECTORAL MANIPULATION IN AN ESTABLISHED DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Maria Annala

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In 2020, President of the United States Donald Trump launched an unprecedented electoral manipulation campaign in an attempt to secure himself a second term in office regardless of what voters decided.

This Working Paper seeks to answer three questions: What electoral manipulation methods did Trump use? In what ways were his methods similar to those used previously by other incumbents to interfere with elections in their respective countries? And in what ways did his methods resemble those of election meddling by foreign state actors? To answer the aforesaid questions, this paper seeks to develop a model to describe Trump's electoral manipulation campaign.

The paper finds that Trump used seven different methods: Disinformation, voter suppression, intimidation and violence, intraparty pressure, attacking government institutions, breaking democratic norms, and attempted collusion with one or more foreign states.

While most of the methods were not new, their combination was unique. That was to be expected, as Trump was the first 21st century incumbent in a well-established Western democracy to undertake such a massive electoral manipulation campaign.

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy, as defined by Adam Przeworski in the early 1990s, is a system in which parties lose elections.[1] While many have argued such a definition is insufficient,[2] few would claim it is incorrect. The act of accepting electoral loss is undisputedly crucial to democracy.

Recent events in the United States have shown that politicians' and political parties' willingness to accept such a loss cannot be taken for granted even in the most established, long-standing democracies. President Donald Trump has behaved in ways unprecedented in the history of the nation once considered the model of liberal democracy. His behavior has raised concerns that the present-day United States will serve instead as a model of autocratization: that aspiring autocrats all over the world will draw inspiration from Trump's playbook.

Trump's electoral manipulation campaign was unique in that he tried to apply methods from fragile democracies and autocracies in the context of a strong 21st century Western democracy. This context as well as the particularities of the American electoral system shaped his manipulation campaign, making it a fruitful research topic.

This Working Paper seeks to answer three questions: 1) What methods did Trump use in his attempt to secure himself a second term regardless of the outcome of the 2020 presidential election? 2) In what ways were his methods similar to those used previously by other incumbents to interfere with elections in their respective countries? And 3) In what ways did his methods resemble those of election meddling by foreign state actors?

To answer the aforesaid questions this paper seeks to develop a model to describe Trump's electoral manipulation campaign. Modeling his actions allows not only for documenting and analyzing the recent events in the United States, but also for further research into actions of other incumbents to see if Trump's United States will indeed become a negative role model of antidemocratic behavior.

The argument proceeds in the following manner: The second chapter discusses the state of democracy globally and defines concepts used in this study. The third chapter provides background about the political situation in the United States preceding the 2020 election. The fourth chapter puts forward a new model of electoral manipulation, and its subchapters elaborate on the categories in the model and document the different aspects of Trump's electoral manipulation campaign. The fifth chapter presents concluding remarks.

DEMOCRACY IN DANGER

In the early decades of the 21st century, scholars have grown increasingly concerned about the state of democracy around the world.[3] The reason for their concern has not been a sharp decline in the number of democratic regimes in the world but clear signs of erosion of liberal democracy in countries still classified by many as democracies.[4] Abrupt democratic breakdowns such as military coups have become much less common than in the past. Instead, democracy is gradually being eroded by democratically elected officials, who weaken checks and balances one by one to stifle the opposition and solidify their own power.[5] In new and advanced democracies alike, voters are electing leaders whose commitment to liberal democracy is highly questionable.[6]

This gradual change has been called, inter alia, democratic backsliding,[7] autocratization[8] and democratic erosion[9]. Lührmann and Lindberg make a compelling case for the use of the term autocratization on the basis that it can be applied worldwide to processes ongoing in democracies and autocracies alike.[10] Following their reasoning, the term autocratization is used in this paper when describing global phenomena. However, most of the paper centers around the United States,

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1   Przeworski 1991.
2   The overly simplified definition fails to encompass several important aspects of democracy. Its narrow focus on elections alone omits constitutional rights such as freedom of speech and assembly and freedom from discrimination. See e.g. Wigell 2008 for a more comprehensive definition of democracy, and Ginsburg and Huq 2018 for criticism of Przeworski's definition.

3   E.g. Plattner 2017, Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, and Diamond 2020.
4   Plattner 2017.
5   Bermeo 2016.
6   Plattner 2017.
7   E.g. Bermeo 2016.
8   E.g. Lührmann and Lindberg 2019.
9   E.g. Coppedge 2017.
10   Lührmann and Lindberg 2019.

and in that context a term including a reference to democracy seems more appropriate. Democratic backsliding does not seem fitting, as the United States was founded as a democracy and therefore cannot backslide into a state preceding its democratization. Hence the term democratic erosion is adopted in this paper when describing processes in the United States.

In 2015 there were still differing opinions amongst scholars as to whether democracy was in decline globally.[11] For decades, many proponents of liberal democracy had been highly optimistic, believing their preferred form of government would keep spreading and consolidating.[12] In their eyes, after the fall of the Soviet Union there did not seem to be any alternative form of government that could challenge liberal democracy globally, and many thought democracy was sure to triumph.[13] Others, however, were less optimistic, and noted that many new democracies were not collapsing nor consolidating[14] but staying in the "grey zone"[15] or "foggy zone"[16] in between, and becoming "hybrid regimes": neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic.[17]

In the latter half of the 2010s a clear consensus emerged that the optimism had been premature, and Lührmann and Lindberg, for example, found empirical evidence to support the claim that a new wave of autocratization had indeed begun.[18] Authoritarian populists rose to power in Brazil, India, Italy and the Philippines, and elected strongmen assaulted liberal democracy in Turkey, Hungary, Venezuela, Russia, and Poland. Donald Trump's presidency proved that not even the firmly established democracies were immune to the concerning developments: suddenly concepts that had originally been developed to describe new and fragile democracies, such as delegative democracy[19] or democratic careening[20], seemed to have potential also for analyzing the United States.

EROSION OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

In the United States, the 2016 election brought to power an outsider who had never held elected office. Donald Trump was openly opposed to the political establishment and indifferent to the traditions of democracy. During his campaign, he attacked the elites of his own party, threatened to lock up his opponent if he won, and refused to commit to accepting defeat if he lost.

Trump's victory and the ensuing presidency dramatically altered the way his country is viewed in the field of democracy research. In the twentieth century, the United States had been the model of a stable constitutional democracy, a country that vowed to advance the cause of democracy throughout the world.[21] After 2016, its name has often been mentioned in articles about autocratization in conjunction with countries such as Turkey, Venezuela, Hungary or Poland.[22]

There had been warning signs of American democracy being in distress well before Trump was sworn in on January 20, 2017. A clearly visible red flag was the steep party polarization that was making basic governing difficult and making some observers wonder whether both major parties were still willing to lose elections.[23] Another bad omen was the decline in public trust in government. In the fall of 2001, soon after the September 11 terrorist attacks, almost 50 percent of Americans said they trusted the government in Washington to do what was right just about always or most of the time.[24] The attacks were followed by the Iraq War and the 2008 financial crisis which, along with growing economic inequality, likely decreased trust in the government among citizens.[25] In 2015 the trust deficit became so severe that the Economist Intelligence Unit downgraded the United States to the category of "flawed democracy" instead of "full democracy".[26] By the time Americans were getting ready to go to the polls to choose between Trump and Hillary Clinton, less than 20 percent of them trusted the politicians in Washington.[27]

It was not just that Americans were unhappy with their elected leaders. There was a notable decline in appreciation of democracy as a system. In a poll

11   Contrasts are clear when comparing the essays in Diamond and Plattner 2015.
12   Mounk 2020.
13   Mounk 2018, 3.
14   Slater 2013.
15   Carothers 2002.
16   Schedler 2002.
17   Diamond 2002.
18   Lührmann and Lindberg 2019.
19   O'Donnell 1994.
20   Slater 2013.

21   Graber, Levinson and Tushnet 2018.
22   E.g. Graber, Levinson and Tushnet 2018, Mounk 2020, Maerz, Lührmann, Hellmeier, Grahn and Lindberg 2020.
23   Elkins 2018.
24   Pew Research Center 2017.
25   Balkin 2018.
26   Economist Intelligence Unit 2016.
27   Pew Research Center 2017.

conducted in 2011, 24 percent of young Americans stated that democracy was a "bad" or "very bad" way of running the country, which is a sharp increase both compared to the same age cohort in prior polls and compared to older respondents in the same poll. Even support for army rule as an alternative to democracy had risen in the United States from 1 in 16 respondents in the World Values survey conducted in 1995 to 1 in 6 in the survey conducted 2010–2014.[28]

The erosion of American democracy was also visible in the classification given to American democracy by the democracy watchdog V-Dem. On a 0–1 scale, the United States slipped from 0.84 in 2006 to 0.78 in 2016, and duly fell from 12th to 17th place among the 52 countries V-Dem classified as liberal democracies.[29] There were several reasons behind the fall. Between 2012 and 2016, the United States had lost points, for example, in the overall freedom and fairness of the electoral process, in freedom of speech. In 2010, V-Dem had chastised the United States for government attacks on the judiciary, likely reflecting President Barack Obama's criticism of the Supreme Court's decision in Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission, which had profound implications for campaign finance.[30]

The democratic erosion continued during the Trump presidency. As a candidate, he had sowed seeds of doubt in the trustworthiness of American elections by claiming the 2016 elections were going to be rigged, and as President he insisted he had only lost the popular vote because millions of people had voted illegally. Obama's criticism of the judiciary soon paled in comparison to the attacks by his successor, who referred to the judge who blocked his first executive order on immigration as a "so-called judge" and got furious when Attorney General Jeff Sessions followed the law and recused himself from the investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election. Trump also continuously attacked the press, calling reporting critical of him "fake news" and revoking several White House correspondents' press credentials following critical reporting. Instead of trying to bring the nation together he deepened divisions further with inflammatory comments about black protesters, Muslim immigrants, Mexicans, certain Democratic Congresswomen and many other groups and individuals.

Trump's first impeachment in 2019 contributed to the partisan polarization and the democratic erosion. Many Republican voters viewed Trump's impeachment by the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives as an unfair attempt by the Democratic Party to unseat the legitimate winner of the 2016 election for their own political benefit, which left these voters feeling that their political opponents have no respect for the democratic process. Many Democratic voters on the other hand felt that the Republican Party placed the president above the law for their own political benefit and feared the acquittal by the Republican-controlled Senate had left President Trump emboldened to interfere in the 2020 election.

Like the Iraq War and the 2008 financial crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic eroded the American public's trust in their government. As more and more people caught the virus, surveys showed growing dissatisfaction in the way elected officials were handling the situation,[31] and the majority of Americans disapproved of Trump's Covid-19 messaging.[32] The pandemic became a policy disaster, as defined by Jack Balkin: "a serious failure in decision-making by the public's representatives which leads people to feel that their leaders are incompetent, untrustworthy, and unrepresentative and that they've been abandoned by their leaders, who care only for themselves and not the public they represent."[33]

The pandemic affected ethnic minorities more than the white population, making inequalities even more visible than before and stoking racial tensions. The death of George Floyd, a black man, in the hands of white police officers sparked massive protests throughout the country, which brought about a new era of racial reckoning.[34]

It was against this backdrop that Trump launched his attack on the integrity of the 2020 election, to which we now turn.

28   Foa and Mounk 2016; 2017.

29   Mechkova, Lührmann and Lindberg 2017.

30   Lührmann, Lindberg, Mechkova, Olin, Piccinelli Casagrande, Sanhueza Petrarca and Saxer 2017.

31   Gramlich 2020.

32   Jurkowitz 2020.

33   Balkin 2018.

34   The connection between race relations and democratic erosion in the United States, while extremely important, is too complex to discuss in more detail here.

MODELING TRUMP'S ELECTORAL MANIPULATION

This chapter proposes a new model of electoral manipulation to describe and analyze the attempt by President Donald Trump, his campaign and the Republican Party to secure Trump a second term regardless of the results of the 2020 presidential election. The model has been constructed by analyzing information gathered from news reports describing the events before, during and after the election. It is hence driven by observation, not theory.

Trump and his allies utilized seven different electoral manipulation tactics, which are described in more detail in the following subchapters.
1. Disinformation
2. Voter suppression
3. Intimidation and violence
4. Intraparty pressure
5. Attacking government institutions
6. Breaking democratic norms
7. Attempted collusion with one or more foreign states

This strategy combined a) old and familiar election rigging methods commonly used by incumbents and their challengers (1, 2 and 3)[35], b) methods favored in the recent past by democratically elected leaders with authoritarian tendencies (4 and 5)[36], and c) methods taken from the playbook of foreign election meddling (1 and 7)[37].

Trump's electoral manipulation campaign does not fit neatly into other electoral manipulation models that have been presented in previous research[38]. This was to be expected because Trump was the first 21st century incumbent in a well-established Western democracy to undertake such a massive electoral manipulation campaign.

For example, Andreas Schedler's theory-driven model of electoral manipulation[39] fails to predict the use of disinformation, colluding with foreign states, attacks on government institutions and ruptures from democratic norms. Daniel Calingaert's categorization,[40] on the other hand, is far too generic for the purposes of this study, as almost all of Trump's actions fall into his category of skewing electoral competition. Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas' observation-driven book on election rigging[41] describes most – though not all – of the tools used by Trump, but as they try to describe the entire manipulation toolkit available to leaders around the world, their grouping is more generic than the model presented in this paper. Therefore the model presented here is better suited for the purposes of this particular study.

Disinformation

Disinformation as a tool of electoral manipulation is an essential part of foreign election meddling[42] but also commonly used domestically by politicians to improve their chances of winning.[43] In the United States it has been in use since the early days of American democracy [44] Trump took this practice to another level by mounting a sizeable disinformation campaign that began months before Election Day and turned outright outrageous on Election Night. This part of Trump's electoral manipulation campaign was the most multifaceted one, and therefore this subchapter is somewhat longer than the ones that follow.[45]

The onset of the disinformation campaign can be traced back to April 3 2020, when Trump claimed at a press conference that "a lot of people cheat with mail-in voting".[46] Early on, he also made statements that clearly show he believed widespread mail-in voting was bad for his party, hence revealing his true motives. By Election Day, he had repeated some form of the baseless cheating claim dozens of times.[47] Attorney General William Barr and White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany had helped spread the disinformation.[48]

Election Night saw tweets[49] claiming victory and accusations that the other side was trying to steal the election, and culminated in Trump's Election Night speech,[50] in which he relied on the recipe used by the American right-wing media, as identified by Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, Hal Roberts and Ethan Zuckerman: he mixed "verifiable facts, familiar repeated falsehoods, paranoid logic and consistent political orientation" to create a powerful story.[51] As verifiable facts, Trump talked about his victories in Florida and Texas. To that, he added half-truths, such as saying he was

35   Cheeseman and Klaas 2018.

36   Bermeo 2016.

37   Aaltola 2017.

38   See Cheeseman and Klaas 2018, Schedler 2002, and Calingaert 2006.

39   Schedler 2002.

40   Calingaert 2006.

41   Cheeseman and Klaas 2018.

42   Aaltola 2017.

43   Cheeseman and Klaas 2018.

44   Mansky 2018.

45   See Benkler, Tilton, Etling, Roberts, Clark, et al. 2020 for a more detailed description of the first months of the disinformation campaign.

46   Benkler, Tilton, Etling, Roberts, Clark, et al. 2020, and Washington Post 2020.

47   According to the Washington Post Fact Checker, Trump had repeated the claim at least 83 times by September 11 2020. See Washington Post 2020.

48   See, for example, White House 2020.

49   Trump's tweets were available at the time of writing, but by the time of publishing, his Twitter account had been removed. Hence links to tweets are not provided.

50   ABC News 2020.

51   Benkler, Faris, Roberts, and Zuckerman 2017.

ahead in Pennsylvania and that it would be almost impossible for his opponent Joe Biden to catch him, when the fact of the matter was that although Trump was indeed ahead in Pennsylvania at the time of his speech, the uncounted ballots were big city mail-in votes likely to go to Biden. Familiar repeated falsehoods were of course present. The months-long disinformation campaign had been leading up to this moment, and when Trump said "This is a fraud on the American public", it was as if his predictions had come true.

As this was a defining moment, new falsehoods were also introduced, most importantly the claim "we were winning everything and all of a sudden it was just called off". It is important to stress here that at no point during the vote-count had Trump been in the lead and that nothing had been called off. As Trump spoke, ballots were being counted, and the counting continued in the days that followed – despite Trump's own efforts to call things off. Apparently Trump was referring to the fact that by then, the news media's decision desks hadn't called any more states in a while – simply because the remaining states were still counting ballots and the race was too close to call. To an objective observer that was a sign of the system functioning as it should, but Trump invited his listeners to use paranoid logic and see it as a sign of something sinister going on. Using a well-honed recipe perfected by Breitbart news and other right-wing propaganda websites, Trump had created an emotionally appealing story that he knew his supporters wanted to believe.

One more snippet of the speech is worth a closer look here: "Millions and millions of people voted for us tonight. And a very sad group of people is trying to disenfranchise that group of people and we won't stand for it." These two sentences purposely portray a fundamentally flawed picture of how elections are supposed to work. It overlooks the fact that when a country has a population of hundreds of millions, you can easily lose an election legitimately even if millions and millions of people vote for you. More importantly, it overlooks the fact that "democracy is a system in which parties lose elections":[52] that voters are not disenfranchised simply because their candidate lost, but on the contrary the system is designed to produce not just a winner but also a loser.

In the days that followed, Trump continued to spread disinformation in numerous tweets[53] and in a primetime press conference.[54] He had timed his appearance to coincide with the three big broadcast networks' evening newscasts to maximize his audience, but all three cut away soon after the beginning and instead began fact-checking the claims he had made thus far.[55]

After the race had been called for Biden, Trump added new fraudulent claims to his campaign. He tweeted that he had evidence of 20,000 dead people having voted in Pennsylvania and insisted voting machines had deleted millions of his votes. At this stage, Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, was very active in helping the President spread disinformation. Giuliani went as far as to claim a nationwide conspiracy to commit election fraud. Another Trump lawyer, Sidney Powell, also made outlandish claims, such as that American votes were being counted in Germany and Spain, that there was a "massive influence of communist money through Venezuela, Cuba and likely China", and that the voting machines Trump was trying to discredit carried software that had originally been designed for the deceased Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez for election-rigging purposes.[56]

Major broadcast networks had cut Trump off, but cable news channel Fox News let him repeat his baseless claims in a 45-minute interview.[57] In early December, Trump circumvented the gatekeepers and published a 46-minute speech full of familiar disinformation as a video on Facebook. One of his advisers wrote a 30-page report[58] replete with unfounded, misrepresented and inconsequential claims.[59]

Research has shown that before the election the massive disinformation campaign was consistently led by Trump himself and most importantly played out in the mass media, whereas social media (outside of Trump's own tweets) only played a secondary and supportive role.[60] After the election, social media's role may have grown somewhat, but even so Trump and a small number of his supporters were in the driver's seat. Researchers have identified 26 social media accounts they call superspreaders because of their outsize role in spreading Trump's story about voter fraud in the 2020 election.

52   Przeworski 1991.

53   Kessler and Rizzo 2020.
54   White House 2020b.
55   Grynbaum and Hsu 2020.
56   C-Span 2020.
57   Factbase 2020.
58   Navarro 2020.
59   Bump 2020.
60   Benkler, Tilton, Etling, Roberts, Clark, et al. 2020.

They found Trump himself to be the most influential. In a four-week period starting in mid-October, Trump and the other 25 superspreaders accounted for roughly 29 percent of social media interactions related to posts claiming election fraud.[61] After social media companies suspended Trump's accounts, online conversations about election fraud plummeted by 73 percent.[62]

The disinformation campaign was quite successful: In a Pew Research poll conducted 8–12 January 2021 three quarters of Trump voters said he had "definitely" or "probably" won the election. Seventy percent of Trump voters said there had been widespread illegal voting and fraud. However, Trump did not succeed in convincing Biden voters, who almost unanimously said their candidate had won and rejected claims of fraud.[63]

Voter suppression

Voter suppression in its many forms is widely used around the world to interfere with domestic elections. In the United States, the practice has a long history. The post-Civil War United States witnessed extreme voter suppression in the form of lynching and other forms of associated violence. Later on, voter suppression became more institutionalized in the form of Jim Crow laws. In the present-day United States, the Republican Party stands to benefit from disenfranchising minority voters, and the party has been using the method consistently from one election to the next.[64]

The primary method of voter suppression chosen by Trump and the Republican Party specifically for the 2020 election was litigation. Before the election, the Trump campaign and Republican entities were engaged in more than 40 lawsuits related to voting amidst the pandemic. All of them included some sort of a claim of election fraud and many of them sought to make voting harder, for example by imposing stricter regulations on absentee ballots or banning drop boxes or curbside voting. Almost all of them concerned areas that tend to vote Democratic.[65]

After the election, litigation continued. Trump had said on Election Night that a "sad group of people" was "trying to disenfranchise" his voters. In reality, it was Trump himself who was engaged in an effort to disenfranchise voters to change the election outcome. Trump and his supporters filed 62 lawsuits in state and federal courts to challenge the election results, mostly in states Biden had won by a narrow margin.[66] The intent to disenfranchise voters was clear, for example in the case Kelly v. Pennsylvania, in which a Republican congressman from Pennsylvania requested all mail-in ballots cast in Pennsylvania be thrown out or the entire Pennsylvania presidential election be invalidated in order to allow the state legislature to choose Pennsylvanian electors.[67] Trump also resorted to litigation in an attempt to stop ballot counting.[68] Out of the 62 lawsuits, 61 failed. The only successful one was insignificant.[69]

The ultimate goal of the litigation, as stated by Trump in his Election Night speech, was to have the election decided by the Supreme Court.[70] This effort had little success. Two Trump-endorsed post-election lawsuits ended up at the Supreme Court's doorstep, and the court rejected both.[71]

Intimidation and violence

In many countries all over the world, authoritarian leaders resort to intimidation and violence as a tool of electoral manipulation.[72] In the United States, political violence has over the course of history been brutal. In the 19th century, voters were attacked or even killed in the vicinity of polling places and citizens clashed violently on the streets over elections.[73]

During the 2020 campaign, Trump made several comments that, while not explicitly violent in nature, had a threatening undertone. After the election, he made comments that inspired some of his supporters to turn outright violent. In the first presidential debate between Trump and Biden, Trump was asked to condemn white supremacist groups. Instead, he ended up telling white extremist group the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by".[74] "Stand by" is a military command that is used to alert a unit that it will be receiving marching orders.[75] Hence, Trump's comment was easily interpreted to mean he would later command a white extremist militia to action.

61   Frenkel 2020.
62   Dwoskin and Timberg 2021.
63   Pew Research Center 2021.
64   Cheeseman and Klaas 2018; Epperly, Witko, Strickler and White 2020.
65   Ginsberg 2020.
66   Cummings, Garrison and Sergent 2021.
67   Barnes and Viebeck 2020.
68   Finnegan 2020.
69   Cummings, Garrison and Sergent 2021.
70   ABC News 2020.
71   Cummings, Garrison and Sergent 2021.
72   Cheeseman and Klaas 2018.
73   Cobb 2020.
74   Nagourney 2020.
75   Ingersoll 2014.

In the same debate, Trump also urged his supporters "to go into the polls and watch very carefully". The comment could be interpreted as an innocent, law-abiding request or a call to intimidate likely Biden voters such as ethnic minorities. Many black voters found the combination of the two debate comments intimidating.[76]

On the eve of Election Day, Trump took to Twitter to bash a Supreme Court decision allowing Pennsylvania to accept mail-in votes for a few days after the election, as long as they were postmarked before or on Election Day. He wrote that the decision would "induce violence in the streets" and added "Something must be done!". On the surface, he was simply expressing concern, but the tweet could also be interpreted as a suggestion to his followers.

After the election, some Trump supporters began issuing death threats to public officials who had rejected Trump's claims of election fraud. The president did not condemn the violence or attempt to quell it. Instead, he urged his supporters to protest in Washington D.C. on the day Congress was to certify the Electoral College results. "Big protest in D.C. on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!" he tweeted on December 19.[77]

When protesters indeed gathered in the nation's capital on January 6, Trump gave a speech. He claimed that the Vice President had the "absolute right" to refuse to certify the election results. Later on, he said "we're going to walk down to the Capitol, and we're going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women, and we're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them. Because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong" and "if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore".[78] After hearing this speech, an angry armed mob stormed the Capitol, forcing lawmakers to shelter in the House debating chamber or their offices. The police later found two pipe bombs on the Capitol grounds.[79] Trump did not comment on the events right away as they were unfolding. Eventually, he released a video message calling for peace and urging the people to go home, while also telling them "We love you, you're very special".[80] He condemned the violence only a week later.[81]

Intraparty pressure

Trump's use of intraparty pressure to attempt to alter the election outcome appears to have been somewhat unique. Intraparty pressure is not commonly featured in electoral manipulation models[82] nor mentioned in electoral manipulation coding questionnaires such as the Electoral Integrity Project's PEI questionnaire,[83] or the Codebook for National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy dataset.[84]

Present-day autocrats have been known to rely on the complicity of their party in their attempts to attack governmental institutions in order to consolidate their power.[85] However, it is highly unusual, if not unprecedented, for a leader of a strong democracy such as the United States to attempt to pressure members of their party into bending the law or committing outright unlawful acts to alter election outcomes. It seems likely that this part of Trump's electoral manipulation campaign was shaped by the exceptional partisan nature of American electoral administrative arrangements.[86]

It was not inconceivable that Trump might have succeeded in his pressure campaign, given the level of political polarization in the United States in 2020. Svolik has shown that in a politically polarized environment "voters are willing to trade off democratic principles for partisan interests".[87] It seems likely the same applies all the more to politicians, whose self-interest aligns strongly with their partisan interests. This may explain why throughout his presidency Trump received remarkable support from the Republican Party even when engaging in antidemocratic behavior.

In his electoral manipulation campaign Trump openly pressured members of the Republican Party to support his effort to overturn the election results. A few days before Michigan was due to certify its election results in favor of Biden, Trump made direct contact with Republican legislators from the state and invited them to the White House. Whatever transpired in the meeting prompted the lawmakers to put out a statement stressing that "Michigan's certification process should be a deliberate process free from threats and intimidation".[88] Earlier, Trump had called

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76   See, for example, Jarvie and Mejia 2020 and Stafford, Reeves and Fernando 2020.
77   Barry and Frenkel 2021.
78   Associated Press 2021.
79   Dozier and Bergengruen 2021.
80   Liptak 2021.
81   Breuninger 2021.

82   See, for example, Cheeseman and Klaas 2018, Schedler 2002, Calingaert 2006, and Saeed et al. 2017.
83   Norris 2020.
84   Hyde and Marinov 2012.
85   Svolik 2019.
86   See Norris 2017.
87   Ibid.
88   Haberman et al. 2020, Grayer, Kelly and Vazquez 2020, and Naylor 2020.

two Republican vote certification panel members of Michigan's Wayne County, and the day after the call they had both tried – without success – to rescind certification votes they had already given.[89]

In the case of Georgia, a typically red state Biden won narrowly, Trump made several attempts to pressure local election officials and even an election investigator. He made phone calls to Governor Brian Kemp, Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and an election investigations chief from Raffensperger's office, who was at Raffensperger's request conducting an investigation into allegations of ballot fraud.[90] In the hour-long phone call to Raffensperger, Trump asked the Secretary of State to "find" him votes and to deploy investigators who "want to find answers". He also warned Raffensperger that he could face criminal liability if he did not comply.[91] On Twitter, Trump berated Kemp and Raffensperger for not ordering an audit of absentee ballot signatures – disregarding the fact that for practical reasons such an audit would have been impossible to conduct.[92]

Trump also made two calls to the speaker of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives to request help in his attempts to overturn the election results.[93] Arizona Governor Doug Ducey got a call from Trump as he was in the middle of certifying his state's votes, but he muted the call and carried on.[94] When all the states had sent their Electoral College results to Congress, Trump turned to his Vice President Mike Pence and pressured him to delay or obstruct the congressional Electoral College certification. The constitutionally prescribed role of Vice President in the proceedings is strictly pro forma, but Trump insisted Pence could force the question of who won the election to either the House of Representatives, the Supreme Court[95] or the individual states.[96]

With the exception of the two panel members in Wayne County, none of Trump's attempts to pressure state election officials or the Vice President to do questionable, illegal or outright impossible things yielded results. In Congress, however, he was more successful. Under pressure from Trump, 106 of the 196 House Republicans signed an amicus brief expressing support for a last-minute lawsuit filed by the Texas attorney general

to overturn the election results[97] even though the lawsuit only consisted of claims already rebuffed by lower courts.[98] A Texas congressman, together with a number of Republicans from Arizona, sued the Vice President to pressure him to overturn the election results.[99] When Congress convened to certify the Electoral College results, Republican lawmakers raised objections to Arizona's and Pennsylvania's results, and eight senators and 139 representatives ended up voting to sustain one or both of them. Had it not been for the Capitol attack, which interrupted the Congress session and made some lawmakers change their mind about supporting the objections, there would have been more objections and more votes in favor.[100]

It is worth noting, however, that in all of these instances the Republican lawmakers were acting within their rights. Also, their show of support for Trump was symbolic with no chance of affecting the election outcome.

Attacking government institutions

Attacking government institutions in order to consolidate power is a common feature of the ongoing global wave of autocratization, which is characterized by democratically elected leaders resorting to undemocratic means to hold onto power.[101] Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa are examples of democratically elected leaders who have undertaken a series of institutional changes to hamper the power of the opposition to challenge them.[102]

In his electoral manipulation campaign, Trump tried to undermine the Justice Department, the Department of Homeland Security and possibly the United States Postal Service. In addition to that, his administration interfered with the transition of his successor.

On October 20 2020, Trump publicly called on his Attorney General, William Barr, to launch an investigation into Biden before Election Day. Historically, the U.S. Justice Department has had a policy of not getting involved in elections, and Trump's attempt at politicizing the justice system was unprecedented.[103] After the election, Trump openly criticized Barr for his

89   Bump 2021.
90   Lozano 2020, Gardner 2020a, and Gardner 2020b.
91   A recording of this call was leaked to the Washington Post. See Gardner 2020a.
92   Qiu 2020.
93   Gardner, Dawsey and Bade 2020.
94   Bump 2021.
95   Liptak 2020.
96   Associated Press 2021.

97   Sonmez 2020.
98   Phillips 2020.
99   Berman 2020.
100 Yourish, Buchanan and Lu 2020.
101 Svolik 2019.
102 Bermeo 2016.
103 Madhani and Long 2020.

announcement that the Justice Department had found no evidence of widespread voter fraud. He also voiced displeasure when the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Barr had known about investigations into Hunter Biden's business and financial dealings for several months before the election and worked to avoid their public disclosure before Election Day.[104] From Trump's disappointment it is clear to see that he expected his Attorney General to support his electoral manipulation campaign. Barr's refusal to do so eventually led to his resignation.[105] After Barr's departure, Trump allegedly pressured his successor, acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen, to use the Justice Department's power to overturn the election results in Georgia and to appoint special counsels to investigate baseless claims of electoral fraud. When Rosen refused to comply, Trump allegedly considered replacing him with a different Justice Department lawyer more likely to follow his lead.[106]

A similar dynamic seems to have led to Trump's decision to fire the Director of the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), Christopher Krebs, soon after the CISA released a statement calling the 2020 election the most secure in American history. Trump terminated Krebs' contract through Twitter, citing the election security statement as the reason for the termination. One of the lawyers for the Trump campaign, Joseph DiGenova, went much further and suggested in an interview on the far-right television network Newsmax that Krebs should be executed like those convicted of treason.[107]

There is suspicion that Trump may have also tried to undermine the United States Postal Service's ability to deliver mail in order to interfere with mail-in voting. He expressed the desire to do so in an interview with the Fox Business Network in August, when speaking of negotiations for a coronavirus relief bill. He criticized the Democrats' proposal to give billions of dollars of aid to the Postal Service and said, "Now, they need that money in order to make the post office work, so it can take all of these millions and millions of ballots. Now, if we don't make a deal, that means they don't get the money. That means they can't have universal mail-in voting, they just can't have it."[108] The comments came less than two weeks after news

media reported that the Postal Service was experiencing long delays due to new cost-cutting efforts put in place by the new Postmaster General, Louis DeJoy, a Trump appointee and a major Trump campaign donor.[109] It remains unclear, however, whether Trump played a role in the decision to cut costs and whether the changes were implemented with the intention of interfering with mail-in voting.

Trump also tried to interfere with the act of ballot-counting in key swing states, both via litigation and by publicly pressuring local election officials to stop the vote count.[110] After Joe Biden had been declared the winner of the election, the Trump administration blocked his formal transition for over two weeks. The formal transition begins when the General Services Administration ascertains the president-elect, which is usually a perfunctory process that begins on Election Night. In 2020, Administrator Emily Murphy did not begin the process until the day that Trump encouraged her to do so on Twitter. In her letter of ascertainment, Murphy insisted she had not been pressured by any Executive Branch official to delay the process but came to the decision independently.[111]

Breaking democratic norms

Breaking democratic norms is not generally considered an electoral manipulation tool.[112] This may be because it is not a tool that incumbents in fragile democracies or autocracies have at their disposal, as it is only powerful when the country in question has strong, well-established democratic norms to begin with. For Trump, breaking unspoken rules and traditions of American democracy had been a trademark, a steady feature of his political life ever since the 2016 campaign. In 2020 such behavior blended seamlessly with his other election-meddling tactics.

Before the election, Trump was repeatedly asked to commit to a peaceful transition of power if he were to lose, but he remained noncommittal.[113] After weeks of demurring, he eventually said, "Yes, I will, but I want it to be an honest election and so does everybody else." By then, he had already made it clear that he would not consider the election honest because of the widespread use of mail-in ballots.

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104   Chalfant 2020, Gurman and Davis O'Brien 2020.

105   Zapotosky, Dawsey and Barrett 2020.

106   The source of this claim are four former Trump administration officials who described the events anonymously to the New York Times. See Benner 2021.

107   Hsu and Morse 2020.

108   Khan 2020.

109   Ye He Lee and Bogage 2020.

110   Cathey 2020.

111   Holmes and Herb 2020, and Naylor 2020b.

112   For example, Cheeseman and Klaas 2018, Schedler 2002 and Calingaert 2006 make no reference to it, nor do Norris 2020, nor Hyde and Marinov 2012.

113   BBC 2020.

Traditionally, the American presidential race is considered over when one candidate concedes and calls the other to congratulate them on their victory. Every losing candidate before Trump has done so since 1896.[114] Trump's speech on Election Night made it clear he wasn't planning on conceding, and when Biden was declared the winner a few days later, Trump issued a statement saying the race was far from over.[115] As could be expected, he didn't give a concession speech either.

Not only did Trump refuse to concede, he also chose not to attend Biden's inauguration. While the move was not unconstitutional or even unprecedented, it was the first time since 1865 that the outgoing president was absent from the inauguration of his successor.[116]

The traditions associated with the peaceful transition of power have an important symbolic meaning and breaking with them sends a strong message of disunity. For Trump, they served as a tool to undermine the election.

Attempted collusion with foreign states

This page of Trump's playbook seems to have been ripped right out of the playbook of foreign election meddling. As non-democratic states such as Russia have begun meddling in elections abroad, seeking collusion with a foreign state has become an option for political candidates willing to engage in illegal behavior to improve their chances of winning an election.[117]

In 2019, a phone call between Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky led to Trump's first impeachment. According to notes of the September phone call released by the White House amidst the controversy, Trump directly asked Zelensky for a favor and then went on to list several different things he wanted his counterpart to look into. Some were related to the 2016 election but others revolved around conspiracy theories about Joe Biden, Trump's potential opponent in the 2020 presidential election.[118]

According to a whistleblower complaint, which was corroborated by the acting U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Trump had also threatened to withhold U.S. aid money until Zelensky promised to launch an investigation into Biden's son Hunter.[119] Less than two hours after the phone call, White House officials requested that Congress-approved aid to Ukraine be withheld.[120]

For the purposes of this paper, it is irrelevant whether Trump broke any laws and whether he committed an impeachable offence. Collusion is not a legal term in the United States, and here it is used simply to denote making a secret pact with a foreign entity in order to affect an election outcome.

A less clear-cut case is whether the Trump campaign was also colluding with Russia. In late 2019 Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, appeared on television with Ukrainian Member of Parliament Andrii Derkach to push unsubstantiated corruption allegations against Joe Biden. Giuliani had met Derkach earlier when he traveled to Ukraine in search of compromising material on Biden. Derkach was later sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department, who said he had had close ties to Russian intelligence for over a decade. The Treasury Department accused Derkach of waging a covert influence campaign by promoting false and unsubstantiated narratives concerning U.S. officials in the 2020 election. Giuliani had helped give Derkach's narratives visibility not only by supporting his story on television but also by using a clip of their television appearance on his podcast several months later. Giuliani denies trying to influence the election and having known Derkach was a Russian intelligence asset.[121]

Both cases show Trump and his allies welcomed foreign help in their efforts to discredit Joe Biden, who was Trump's potential opponent in the 2020 election. It is worth bearing in mind that in 2016 Trump publicly requested Russians help him find his opponent Hillary Clinton's scandalous emails.[122] His behavior seems to form a consistent pattern.

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114 McKeever 2020.

115 Associated Press 2020.

116 Waxman 2021.

117 Aaltola 2017.

118 White House 2019.

119 History.com editors 2020.

120 Rubin 2019.

121 Lucas 2020, and Harris, Nakashima, Miller and Dawsey 2019.

122 Schmidt 2018.

CONCLUSION

Donald Trump mounted a months-long multifaceted electoral manipulation campaign in an attempt to secure himself a second term in office regardless of what the voters decided. This attack on democracy was unprecedented in the history of the United States. As Trump was the first 21ˢᵗ century incumbent to embark on such an endeavor in a long-standing, well-established Western democracy, the campaign was also somewhat unique globally, although most of the methods Trump relied on were not in and of themselves anything new.

Ultimately, Trump's attempt failed. The institutions of American democracy showed their strength when tested by Trump and his party. The judiciary showed its independence when judge after judge (including those appointed by Trump) dismissed baseless lawsuits filed by the Trump team. Election officials continued their work of counting the ballots despite pressure to stop from Trump and his supporters. State lawmakers, Congress and the Vice President respected the will of the people and certified the election results. On Inauguration Day, power changed hands without bloodshed.

Trump's failed attempt shed light on the importance of constitutionalism and horizontal accountability: the rule of law and so-called checks and balances that constrain the ruler's power. American democratic institutions were strong enough to resist a multifaceted attack. However, if Trump's electoral manipulation campaign ends up serving as inspiration for would-be autocrats in more fragile democracies with weaker democratic institutions, they may well succeed using Trump's playbook.

It is also important to note that even though Trump failed to hold onto power, he was successful in creating an alternative reality for his supporters to believe in. When polled soon after the Capitol attack, which served as the culmination point in Trump's electoral manipulation campaign, a vast majority of Trump voters said they believed the election had been fraudulent. The number of voters saying so was far too large to consist entirely of fervent Trump supporters; it would appear more moderate Republican voters were also willing to believe their candidate or at least give him the benefit of the doubt. It is of course unclear how many of those polled actually believed Trump's counterfactual claims, and how many only pretended to do so as a show of support for their party or candidate. Nevertheless, the situation does not bode well for Biden's presidency nor the future of American democracy. Americans' realities are diverging, making the federation more unstable and more difficult to sustain in the future.

Trump's electoral manipulation campaign both fortified and weakened American democracy. It showed the American people and the world that despite the profound political polarization and the political nature of the appointments to the federal judiciary, American democratic institutions are still strong enough to withstand an attack from within, coming from the highest office in the land. However, it also left the American people more fragmented than ever before in modern history and a large part of the population without faith in their electoral system.

At the time of writing it remains to be seen what repercussions – if any – Trump will face for his attempted electoral manipulation. Although impeached over the events at the Capitol and charged with incitement of insurrection, he has been acquitted by the Senate. Criminal charges against him are possible, but for the time being it seems likely he will remain influential in the Republican Party and may even run for president again in 2024.

If Trump is not held accountable for his actions, his electoral manipulation campaign will set a dangerous precedent, changing perceptions of what is acceptable in American electoral politics. /

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