



Maria Lindén\*

# Republican Electoral Manipulation After Jan 6

<https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2025-2010>

**Abstract:** This article shows that numerous prominent members of the Republican Party have resorted to the same electoral manipulation tactics that former president Donald Trump utilized in 2020. A case study analyzing acts of electoral manipulation undertaken by members of the Republican party in 2021 and 2022 demonstrates that Republicans have been actively engaging in breaking democratic norms, spreading disinformation, gerrymandering, restricting opportunities for voting, pressuring fellow partisans to participate in electoral manipulation, intimidating those who resist their manipulation efforts, creating an atmosphere accepting of political violence, and corrupting democratic institutions. There are also similarities between Trump and other Republicans in how the tactics are used. Just like Trump in 2020, prominent Republicans have been using different manipulation tools in concert to create a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts. The situation has various implications for the 2024 presidential election, which are discussed in the concluding chapter of this article.

**Keywords:** elections; electoral integrity; electoral manipulation; Donald Trump; Republican party

Donald Trump's attempt to manipulate the 2020 presidential elections was in many ways unprecedented all the while being part of a historical continuum. Although many of his manipulation tactics had been utilized countless times in the past, his particular combination of tactics and their interplay created a whole that was novel and larger than the sum of its parts. This article shows that prominent members of the Republican Party, including the former president himself, have since then continued to utilize almost all of the same tactics and exploit their interplay in a similar manner to 2020. With Trump as the presumptive Republican nominee in the 2024 presidential election, scrutinizing the similarities between his 2020 manipulation attempt and more recent actions taken by prominent members of his party is crucial for better understanding the potential threat to the integrity of the 2024 elections, which many prominent experts have warned about (e.g. Gellman 2021; Levitsky and

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\*Corresponding author: Maria Lindén, PhD Candidate, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland; and Research Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki, Finland, E-mail: maria.linden@tuni.fi

Daniel 2021; Luttig 2022). The article answers the following questions: 1) Did Republican politicians or their supporters undertake acts of electoral manipulation between January 7, 2021, and December 30, 2022, and if so, 2) what tactics did they use, and 3) was there interplay between the tactics?

Previous research on electoral manipulation has tended to examine different manipulation tactics in isolation instead of analyzing their interplay. As interplay of different manipulation tactics was crucially important in Trump's 2020 electoral manipulation attempt, this article takes a different approach and relies upon a contemporary electoral manipulation framework with an explicit focus on the interplay of manipulation tactics. A contemporary framework is preferred also because the present-day context surrounding elections and electoral manipulation is markedly different from that of previous decades (James and Garnett 2023, 10–13), and that context is not reflected in many of the established electoral manipulation frameworks such as the works of Birch (2011, 28–39), Calingaert (2006, 139–149), Cheeseman and Klaas (2018, 31–207), Morgenbesser (2020, 1056) or Schedler (2002, 39–45) (for a more detailed discussion on the need for this novel framework see Lindén 2024).

The argument proceeds in the following manner: First, the framework utilized in the article is introduced. Thereafter, data and methodology are introduced, followed by an analysis of the results. In conclusion, the threat to the integrity of the 2024 election is reflected upon based on the results presented in the article.

## 1 A Framework Focused on the Interplay of Manipulation Tactics

The research presented in this article relies upon an electoral manipulation framework constructed by this author that depicts electoral manipulation in the specific context of the United States in the 2020s. The framework was formulated based on a case study of Trump's attempt to manipulate the 2020 elections (see Lindén 2024), and it emphasizes interplay between different manipulation tactics and the whole they create. The foundation of the framework is a contemporary theory formulated by James and Garnett (2023, 13–19), who take a normative approach to *electoral integrity* based on democratic theory and define it as consisting of five key pillars: equality of contestation, equality of participation, meaningful deliberation, electoral management delivery, and electoral governance. In formulating the electoral manipulation framework utilized in this article, acts undertaken by Trump and his allies were considered electoral manipulation if they undermined one or several of the key pillars of electoral integrity as defined by James and Garnett.

Employing qualitative content analysis as the method, acts that were considered electoral manipulation were sorted into categories on the basis of both deductive and inductive reasoning. The deductive reasoning relied upon previous electoral manipulation frameworks, most notably that of Birch (2011, 28–39), Calingaert (2006, 139–149), Cheeseman and Klaas (2018, 31–207), but also those of Morgenbesser (2020, 1056) and Schedler (2002, 39–45). Inductive reasoning was relied upon as there were numerous acts that were coded as electoral manipulation but did not correspond to categories introduced in previous frameworks, prompting the creation of novel categories.

The framework consists of nine electoral manipulation tactics, which build upon and reinforce each other:

- Breaking democratic norms
- Disinformation
- Gerrymandering
- Voter suppression
- Hacking and leaking
- Collusion with one or more foreign states
- Intraparty pressure
- Intimidation and violence
- Corrupting state and government institutions

Although some of the labels such as breaking democratic norms or intraparty pressure can also be used to depict acts that are not electoral manipulation, in the framework the labels only refer to acts that fall into the umbrella category of electoral manipulation. All tactics undermine one or several principles of electoral integrity as defined by James and Garnett (2023, 15–19; see Lindén 2024 for a more detailed analysis), but they are not equally harmful to electoral integrity. Tactics at the beginning of the list may seem minor or insignificant, but they play an important role in laying the groundwork for the use of the more pernicious tactics at the end of the list. Interplay between the tactics is described in more detail in Table 1 (reproduced from Lindén 2024): for example, intimidation and violence can be justified with breaches of democratic norms and disinformation, they can rely upon gerrymandering, and they can help execute voter suppression, intraparty pressure and corruption of democratic institutions.

*Disinformation, gerrymandering, voter suppression, and intimidation and violence* are commonly used terms depicting manipulation tactics that have been common in the United States over the course of history (Chervinsky 2021; Cheeseman and Klaas 2018, 34–46; Epperly et al. 2020, 758–764). *Hacking and leaking* and *collusion* have been the focus of attention in the 2010s and 2020s in the context of foreign election meddling (see e.g. Aaltola 2021, 133–136). The terms *intraparty pressure* and

Table 1: Reproduced from Lindén 2024.

	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	

*corrupting state and government institutions*, finally, have been coined for the purposes of the novel framework, as the types of actions they depict are absent from previous electoral manipulation frameworks. Despite their absence from the other frameworks, the phenomena in question are well established in previous literature as serious threats to democracy. Svolik (2019, 21), for example, speaks of executive takeovers requiring the complicity of the legislature, which needs to be in the hands of fellow partisans of the executive, and Bermeo (2016, 10–11) describes executive aggrandizement, which can rely in part on legislatures or courts, if supporters of the executive have control of those bodies. In the framework, intraparty pressure refers to attempts by then-executive Trump to gain such complicity of his fellow partisans, and corrupting state and government institutions depicts his actions that attempted to accomplish executive aggrandizement or an executive takeover. Taking such acts

into consideration as part of an electoral manipulation attempt is a key strength of the novel framework because executive takeovers have for decades been the leading cause of democratic breakdown (Svolik 2019, 20–21), which makes their scrutiny vital.

## 2 Data and Methodology

To determine whether Republicans undertook acts of electoral manipulation in 2021 or 2022 and to analyze their manipulation tactics and their interplay, a case study was conducted. The study relies mainly on documents containing information unearthed by two important institutions of diagonal accountability: the news media and non-governmental organizations, both powerful agents in the United States. As additional sources of information it utilizes academic pursuits such as the Princeton gerrymandering project, and press releases by authorities such as the Department of Homeland Security.

The main body of newspaper data consists of news reporting and opinion columns by the *Washington Post*, but reporting and opinion columns by the *Wall Street Journal* were also consulted. Reports by non-governmental organizations were instrumental in providing more in-depth information than newspaper reports. The *Washington Post* was chosen 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 (Britannica 2023). As the paper leans somewhat to the political left (AllSides 2021; Media Bias/Fact Check 2022b), the *Wall Street Journal* was relied upon to provide a center or right-leaning perspective (AllSides 2022, 2023; Media Bias/Fact Check 2022a).

News articles and opinion columns were retrieved from the digital archives of the *Washington Post* using search parameters “Republican” and “election”, spanning the period between Jan 7, 2021, and Dec 31, 2022.<sup>1</sup> The generic search terms were chosen in order to compile a large collection of news articles to form a comprehensive picture of election-related actions taken by members of the Republican Party. This allowed the researcher to undertake the coding of the data instead of relying on categorizations done by journalists. An identical collection of newspaper data was compiled from the archives of the *Wall Street Journal*,<sup>2</sup> and it was analyzed in search of differences in how electoral manipulation was depicted. The differences between the manipulation acts described in the *Post* data and the *Journal* data

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1 The search yielded 5,547 articles, out of which 1,574 were chosen for further analysis based on their headlines.

2 The search yielded 2,400 articles. Articles were only chosen for further analysis if they appeared to contain new information, and therefore they were not counted.

proved minor, and most of the material from the latter was deemed redundant. The main body of newspaper data was complemented with individual journalistic articles and blog posts from sources such as the *New York Times* and *FiveThirtyEight*.

The entirety of the *Washington Post* data, the non-redundant sections of the *Wall Street Journal* data and the supplementary materials such as reports and press releases were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, a method suitable for a systematic and rigorous analysis of data that requires a degree of interpretation on the part of the researcher (Schreier 2012, chapter 1). Interpretation is an inevitable part of any study of present-day electoral manipulation in the United States, as the conversation around electoral integrity and electoral manipulation is heavily polarized, and these concepts can have very different or even opposite meanings to Republicans and Democrats (Norris 2017, 27–41). This makes it unfeasible to regard electoral manipulation as a *social fact*, whose existence derives from human agreement and relies on human institutions (Ruggie 1998, 856; Searle 1995, 2), as has been done in the past for example by Norris (2014). In the present-day United States, the concept of electoral manipulation lacks a highly standardized meaning that everyone with a shared cultural background can agree upon and effortlessly decipher, making it a research topic requiring a qualitative approach (Schreier 2012, chapter 1).

In qualitative content analysis, a coding frame is created to focus the analysis on selected aspects of the object of the study (Schreier 2012, chapter 1). In this study, the coding frame was built deductively based on the electoral manipulation framework that was discussed in an earlier section of this article (for the full coding frame and the definitions of the codes, see Appendix 1 and 2). Actions described in the research material were first coded as either electoral manipulation or anything other than electoral manipulation, and the actions coded as the latter were discarded. Thereafter, the remaining actions were coded as having been undertaken by one or several Republicans or by someone else, and the actions undertaken by someone else were discarded. Subsequently, the remaining actions were coded as having taken place after January 6, 2021, or earlier, and again, the actions coded as the latter were discarded. Finally, the remaining actions were coded as breaking democratic norms, disinformation, gerrymandering, voter suppression, hacking and leaking, collusion with one or more foreign states, intraparty pressure, intimidation and violence, corrupting state and government institutions, or other. For example, information unearthed by the House Select Committee investigating the attack on the Capitol prompted numerous news articles describing actions that were coded as electoral manipulation, as having been undertaken by a Republican, and finally, as having taken place before January 6, 2021, and hence discarded after the third step. In a contrasting example, an explicitly violent campaign ad targeting political opponents by a Republican candidate for office in the 2022 midterm elections was coded as

electoral manipulation, as having been undertaken by a Republican, as having taken place after January 6, 2021, and finally, as belonging to the category of intimidation and violence.

To evaluate the reliability of the study, the consistency of the coding process was controlled for by recoding a randomly selected selection of the research data a year after the original coding had been completed (see Schreier 2012, chapters 2 and 9, for discussion on assessing reliability in qualitative content analysis). Five percent of the *Washington Post* articles (277 articles in total) and samples of the supplementary data were recoded, and the results were compared with the original coding. The recoded materials were chosen using a random number generator. With regard to actions that were coded as being electoral manipulation undertaken by Republicans during the time period of interest, the recoding matched the original 100 percent. However, there were inconsistencies in how many *Washington Post* articles were chosen for closer analysis in the first stage of coding. This is natural, as the researcher's familiarity with the material had increased since conducting the original coding, making it easier to recognize the relevant articles. Most importantly, the recoding did not bring to light any relevant new information to indicate that something was missing from the results of the case study.

To evaluate the validity of the coding frame utilized in the study, the residual category 'other' was scrutinized. No acts of electoral manipulation described in the research data had been coded as other, which indicates that the coding frame has high face validity, meaning that the codes that had been chosen provide an comprehensive and accurate description of the object of the study (see Schreier 2012, chapter 9). In addition, the validity of the coding frame was analyzed with regard to the extent that the categories adequately capture the concepts in the theoretical framework the coding frame was based on. This form of validity, known as content validity (Schreier 2012, chapter 9), was also high, because the categories and their descriptions were identical to those in the framework.

Qualitative content analysis often includes a quantitative element based on counting the frequency at which each category or subcategory was coded (Schreier 2012, chapter 11). However, in the case study presented in this article, such calculations risk being misleading due to the nature of the research material in relation to the research questions. Counting acts of electoral manipulation that are mentioned in news articles or reports by non-governmental organizations uncovers information about the portrayal of electoral manipulation in these publications, which is influenced by numerous factors such as priorities and resources. As the research questions of this study, in contrast, concern actual acts of electoral manipulation instead of their portrayal, counting relevant frequencies would require creating a comprehensive database containing all acts of electoral manipulation undertaken during the chosen time period. Constructing such a database would allow for

drawing meaningful quantitative comparisons, such as to determine differences in the frequency of different types of manipulative acts, or the frequency of manipulative acts between different time periods or between political parties. Lamentably, however, creating such a database is impossible due to the inherent secrecy of electoral manipulation (Lehoucq 2003, 233–34) and the immense amount of resources it would require because of the number of relevant actors and their potentially relevant actions. Focusing on one type of manipulation such as gerrymandering might allow for creating quite a comprehensive database, but as the focus of this study is on the interplay between manipulation tactics and the whole their use creates, such an approach is not supported by the research questions.

### 3 Active Electoral Manipulation on Almost all Fronts

The results in the case study show that in 2021 and 2022, prominent members of the Republican Party used almost all of Trump's electoral manipulation tactics. There was evidence of use of all the tactics other than hacking and leaking or attempted collusion. Like in 2020, some of the tactics were used to facilitate the use of others, and some were used to amplify the impact of other tactics or to improve the likelihood of success of other tactics. Examples of the use of each tactic and their interplay are presented below. Unless otherwise specified, the newspaper material collected from the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* is the source of the information. For the purposes of readability, articles from the two main newspaper sources are not quoted individually, as this would dramatically increase the number of quotations. With the exception of voter suppression, there were no controversies between the two newspapers in how each manipulation tactic was discussed. The controversy regarding voter suppression is discussed in more detail later in this article.

*Breaking democratic norms* manifested itself in Republican candidates' unwillingness to commit to accepting their potential loss ahead of the 2022 midterms. Even when directly confronted by journalists, many prominent candidates declined to promise to accept the election results. This lack of commitment both relied upon and supported disinformation regarding electoral integrity. After the elections, however, most of the losing candidates conceded or at least refrained from spreading disinformation regarding their loss. On the campaign trail, explicitly promised to try to change the outcome the 2024 elections if a Democrat won the presidential contest. Several candidates made campaign promises to give state legislatures control of certifying election results (Kamarck and Eisen 2022). Such transfer of control to the

hands of the legislature could potentially lead to the legislature refusing to certify valid results for political reasons, which would be an electoral manipulation act of corrupting state and government institutions. Many promised to limit absentee or early voting, often justifying their proposals with disinformation concerning electoral integrity (Kamarck and Eisen 2022), all the while making said disinformation seem more credible.

In Congress, Republicans repeatedly showed silent acceptance of political extremism and undemocratic behavior by prominent members of their party. For example, when the Democratic majority removed congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene from all committees and censured congressman Paul Gosar for encouraging political violence, few Republicans voted in favor of the measures. Most Republicans were silent even when Trump suggested terminating the Constitution. These breaches of democratic norms laid the foundation for the use of other electoral manipulation tactics such as intimidation and violence.

While campaigning for the 2022 midterms, several Republican candidates attempted to avoid critical questions and scrutiny by only speaking with Republican-friendly media and skipping televised debates. In preparation for the 2024 presidential election, the Republican National Committee unanimously decided to pull out of the Commission on Presidential Debates, the organization that has arranged televised general election debates between presidential candidates for more than three decades. This avoidance of scrutiny lends credence to disinformation. In addition, it is in itself a form of electoral manipulation, as liberal democracy relies on voters' ability to receive adequate information to guide their choices. As Birch (2011, 22, italics added) notes, for this to happen, the "(c)ontestants must have an equal opportunity to convey relevant information to the electorate, and *they must take advantage of this opportunity*".

*Disinformation* about the 2020 elections was embraced by numerous Republicans and used to lend support to many other manipulative actions. In January 2021, as Congress reconvened at the Capitol immediately after the violent attack on the premises, eight Republican senators and 139 Republican House members voted in support of groundless objections to the 2020 election results. Since then, numerous national and state lawmakers have been vocal supporters of Trump's unfounded fraud claims, and many more have been careful not to denounce them. In 2021, there were almost six hundred election deniers in state legislatures (the term *election denier* is used in this article as a shorthand for someone who denies or questions the legitimacy of the 2020 election results). The Texas Republican party passed a resolution that rejects the outcome of the 2020 presidential election and refers to Joe Biden as an illegitimate president.

Election denialism continued throughout 2021 and 2022. In the California gubernatorial recall election of 2021, Republican challenger Larry Elder declined to

commit to accepting the results, and a website affiliated with his campaign made outright claims of fraud before votes had been cast. Trump participated in spreading the baseless claims. He also portrayed the Virginia gubernatorial election of 2021 as fraudulent before election day. In the 2022 midterms, hundreds of Republican primary candidates were election deniers. Some of them lost their primaries and went on to claim that their loss was due to fraud (Democracy Docket 2022). Many others were victorious in the primaries, and as a result, out of the total of 552 Republicans running for House, Senate, Governor, Secretary of State or Attorney General, 199 fully denied the legitimacy of the 2020 election and an additional 61 raised questions about the 2020 results (FiveThirtyEight 2022). Some of them made unfounded claims of electoral fraud a central part of their campaign. A total of 178 election deniers were elected (Blanco, Wolfe, and Gardner 2022).

*Gerrymandering* has a long-lasting impact because electoral districts are generally drawn only once per decade. The state legislatures whose actions are analyzed in this study had been elected using electoral maps from early 2010s, and many of them were in Republican control because of gerrymandering (Grose et al. 2019, 2–3). In the time period covered by this study, electoral districts were redrawn, which provided both parties new opportunities for gerrymandering. Republicans had control over the redistricting of 187 congressional districts, while Democrats only controlled the redistricting of 75 districts. Both parties seized the gerrymandering opportunities they had, which significantly reduced the number of competitive districts for the House of Representatives (Li and Leaverton 2022). Lack of competitiveness deprives the voters the opportunity to hold candidates or elected officials accountable for breaches of democratic norms, disinformation, and other electoral manipulation acts. In the 2022 midterms, for example, election deniers were successful in many uncompetitive races, while in competitive contests, voters rejected election denier candidates decisively.

With regards to future presidential elections, one potentially consequential state-level gerrymander undertaken in the early 2020s was that of Georgia, where both state legislative maps gave the Republican party a significant advantage, and the party won control of both chambers of the state legislature (Ballotpedia n.d. a; Ballotpedia n.d. b; Princeton Gerrymandering Project n.d.). Another one was that of Wisconsin, where heavily gerrymandered state legislative maps drawn by the Republican controlled state legislature were eventually adopted after a lengthy legal battle (Marley 2022). Republicans retained control of both chambers of the Wisconsin state legislature (Ballotpedia n.d. c; Ballotpedia n.d. d). Republican control of the state legislatures of these two states may prove significant, if there is an attempt to overturn key swing state election results resembling Trump's 2020 attempt, because both Georgia and Wisconsin are considered key swing states in the 2024 presidential election (Brownstein 2022; Dorman 2022; Mathesian 2022). As Georgia and Wisconsin

may retain their swing state status in the future, these gerrymanders have potential implications also for the 2028 presidential election.

*Voter suppression* was a controversial topic in the two newspapers examined for this case study. The *Washington Post* often raised alarm over new voting laws whereas the *Wall Street Journal* mostly defended them and objected to the use of the term voter suppression. From the data analyzed in this study, it is nevertheless evident that Republican state legislatures introduced an exceptional number of new laws in 2021 and 2022 that make voting more difficult. Furthermore, a large proportion of the new laws passed. The new laws restrict voting in many ways, for example by making it more burdensome to vote by mail, limiting Election Day registration, and making it more difficult to vote without a traditional address (Brennan Center for Justice 2022b, 2022c). An explicit desire to suppress the Black vote was expressed in 2022 by Texas Republicans in their state party convention, where delegates suggested repealing the Voting Rights Act. In an attempt to counter the actions of the state legislatures, the Justice Department sued Georgia, Texas, and Arizona over their new voting laws. In the Texas case, a U.S. district court ruled that portions of a new voting law violated the Civil Rights Act (United States Department of Justice 2023a). In Arizona, a U.S. District court ruled against some of the provisions of the new law, finding them to be in violation of federal laws (United States Department of Justice 2024). At the time of writing, the Georgia case was still ongoing.

*Intraparty pressure* within the Republican party assumed multiple forms in 2021 and 2022. One prominent example was the decision by the Republican National Convention to censure representatives Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger for their role in the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol. The 10 House Republicans who voted for Trump's second impeachment were all subject to retaliation by their party, such as censure, resignation suggestions, successful primary challenges and, in the case of Cheney, removal from a leadership position. Eight of them left Congress at the end of 2022. The same dynamic was also observed on state and local level, where officials faced censure, threats, and ousting attempts for having accepted the results of the 2020 election.

Trump himself continued pressuring his fellow partisans. According to Wisconsin State Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, a Republican, Trump kept trying to overturn the 2020 election all the way up to the summer of 2022 and pressured Vos to help him. There is also evidence to suggest that he pressured Republican candidates in the 2022 midterms to spread disinformation about the 2020 elections (Select Committee 2022, 13–14). When Republicans did not yield under pressure, Trump endorsed their opponents in the primaries and lambasted them in public.

*Intimidation and violence* were vividly present during the time period in focus in this study and shortly thereafter. In December 2022 and early January 2023, the homes of four Democratic local officials were shot at, and a sleeping ten-year-old was

nearly hit. A defeated Republican candidate for state legislature was later charged with having orchestrated the violence and participated in the last shooting (United States Department of Justice 2023b). It appeared that disinformation had prompted the violence. The alleged culprit, Solomon Peña, had lost his 2022 bid for New Mexico state House by an overwhelming margin in a solidly Democratic district but refused to concede and kept trying to persuade people that the election had been rigged, a baseless claim he appears to have believed in. According to Peña's social media posts, he had attended the January 6th rally that turned into an attack on the Capitol (Gardner and Rosenzweig-Ziff 2023a; Romero and Feuer 2023). Republican leaders condemned the violence but were mostly unwilling to blame election denialism and disinformation for Peña's actions (Gardner and Rosenzweig-Ziff 2023b).

In the fall of 2021, Republican congressman Paul Gozar used his official congressional Twitter account to publish an anime video of himself graphically murdering a Democratic congresswoman. Republican leadership did not take a clear stand to condemn the action, and only two House Republicans voted in favor of censoring Gozar. There were also several other instances where Republican politicians made comments that seemed to support or encourage political violence or normalize it through humor. Violent rhetoric was also part of some Republican 2022 midterm campaigns.

In addition to the violent actions and words, the Republican Party's attitude towards the violent attack on the Capitol on January 6th contributed to an atmosphere permissive of political violence. When Republican National Convention censured Cheney and Kinzinger, the formal censure resolution called the Capitol attackers "ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse." There were also other instances when Republicans downplayed and normalized the Capitol attack instead of condemning the violence.

The political culture permissive of violence, combined with disinformation about the elections, has created dangerous situations for election workers. Trump loyalists have threatened election workers and their families with hanging, firing squads, torture, and bomb blasts (So 2021). Ahead of the 2022 midterms, both the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security expressed concern about threats to election workers (FBI 2022; United States Department of Homeland Security 2022). One in six local election workers have experienced threats, and over half of them have been threatened in person (Brennan Center for Justice 2022a, 6).

Not all threats rely on prompting fear of physical violence. Because of new laws passed by Republican legislatures, there is a threat of harsh criminal and civil penalties hanging over election workers in many states. Numerous new laws make it easier to threaten election officials with penalties for innocent mistakes or sincere attempts to solve unexpected situations (States United Democracy Center, Protect Democracy, and Law Forward 2022, 6). Intimidating election workers serves a

purpose: to replace democracy-upholding election workers with partisan-minded individuals willing to participate in electoral manipulation (States United Democracy Center, Protect Democracy, and Law Forward 2021, 5–6). The strategy seems to be working: three in 10 local election workers know at least one local election worker or official, who has left their job at least in part because of fear for their safety, increased threats, or intimidation (Brennan Center for Justice 2022a, 19).

During the 2022 midterms, some voters were also subject to intimidation. Trump and his allies had encouraged supporters to monitor ballot drop boxes, and in Arizona this resulted in some private citizens surveilling drop box locations in tactical gear and body armor, photographing voters and their license plates and accusing them of voter fraud. In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis formed an election police force that acts under his authority and has unprecedented investigative power. In August 2022, before the midterms, he held a press conference announcing the arrest of 20 felons accused of voting illegally. Most of the people arrested were Black, and there is substantial evidence to suggest all of them believed they had the right to vote and therefore did not commit a crime when voting. The arrests seem poised to intimidate individuals unsure of their eligibility to vote and to discourage them from voting.

*Corrupting state and government institutions* is where the biggest dangers to American democracy most likely lie. In 2021 and 2022, state legislatures proposed and enacted a substantial number of bills that can have a corrosive effect. State legislatures seized power over election responsibilities and attempted to micromanage election minutiae, creating unworkable burdens in election administration. In some states, they even considered bills that would give the legislature the possibility to reject the choice of the voters, although none of those were passed. According to a group of non-governmental organizations focusing on threats to democracy, the new measures “increase the risk of election subversion – that is, the risk that an election’s declared outcome does not reflect the choice of the voters” (States United Democracy Center, Protect Democracy, and Law Forward 2022, 4).

In several states, Republican officials proposed and occasionally authorized unprofessional, partisan audits of the 2020 elections. In Arizona, the Republican-controlled state senate commissioned a company called Cyber Ninjas to audit ballots and voting machines used in Maricopa County. The audit lacked objectivity, competence and transparency and resulted in security failures. It compromised the security of all Maricopa County voting machines, which the county then had to replace, costing taxpayers over two million dollars. Similar scenarios played out in other states (Bydlak et al. 2021). None of the audits or reviews unearthed noteworthy irregularities, but they lent disinformation undue credibility and further eroded voters’ trust in American elections, which can make manipulating future elections seem more acceptable and even prompt political violence. The audits may also have

inspired grassroots activists, such as the group that tried to get a small county court to declare sealed 2020 paper ballots public records for citizens to perform hand recounts. Had the court done so, the decision would have set a precedent applicable to all Georgia counties regarding both past and future elections.

The Republican Party also inserted election deniers and other potential electoral manipulators into all levels of electoral administration. There was a concerted effort to recruit hyper-partisan election sceptics and conspiracy theorists to precinct-level electoral positions such as election judge and inspector. The same applies to at least some county level canvassing boards (States United Democracy Center, Protect Democracy, and Law Forward 2021, 5). On the state level, more than half of Republican gubernatorial candidates, around one in three of Republican Attorney General candidates and almost half of Republican Secretary of State candidates in the 2022 midterms were election deniers (States United Democracy Center 2022). Had the election deniers running for statewide office been successful in the 2022 midterms, the table would have been set for electoral subversion. Baseless fraud claims could have spread from one election denier to another from precincts to counties and all the way up to the highest election officials in the state.

The loss of election denier candidates in key statewide races lessened the risk of successful electoral subversion in 2024, but election deniers in precinct and county level offices can nevertheless cause significant harm. After the 2020 elections, lawyers working to overturn Trump's defeat sent computer experts to copy election data in several states, and there is evidence to suggest that local election officials helped them access the data. The data they obtained was later shared with election deniers, conspiracy theorists and right-wing commentators. Security experts have voiced concern that the election data could be exploited by hackers or other people seeking to manipulate future elections.

Prominent Republicans, election denier activists, the Republican National Convention, and state level Republican parties actively recruited and trained poll watchers with false 2020 fraud claims in mind (Parker, So, and Warburton 2022; Marley, Helderman, and Hamburger 2022), thus politicizing and possibly even weaponizing an institution meant to secure electoral integrity. However, attempts to alter the 2022 election outcome with baseless post-electoral lawsuits were rare. A notable exception was a suit filed by the failed Arizona gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake, in which she claimed without evidence that illegal votes or voting machines had altered the outcome of her race. The claims were dismissed by Arizona Supreme Court (Barchenger 2023). In a similar case, Arizona Secretary of State candidate Mark Finchem filed a lawsuit after his electoral loss, targeting Katie Hobbs, who had served as Arizona secretary of the state at the time of the election. Finchem accused Hobbs of misconduct but was later sanctioned by a judge who labelled Finchem's suit "groundless and not brought in good faith" (Cooper 2023). In addition, the process of

certifying election results was politicized in some counties in Arizona, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania, when local election officials attempted to refuse to certify the results, making unfounded claims of fraud and irregularities. All the results were eventually certified, but in some cases that only happened after an intervention by the courts.

Perhaps the most serious attempt to weaken checks and balances was that of North Carolina state legislative leaders, who filed a gerrymandering-related lawsuit that could have led to the United States Supreme Court embracing the so-called Independent State Legislature Theory. The theory argues that state legislatures have the sole power to decide issues regarding federal elections irrespective of the state constitution or decisions by the state supreme court, and it has implications that go far beyond gerrymandering. Conservative former US Court of Appeals judge J. Michael Luttig (2022) saw the lawsuit as a direct continuation of Trump's 2020 electoral manipulation attempt and expressed concern that were the Supreme Court to adopt the theory, the Republican party would be willing and able to overturn a potential democratic presidential victory in the 2024 elections. However, the Supreme Court ruled against the theory (Barnes 2023).

## 4 Discussion: Implications for the 2024 Elections

This article has shown that numerous prominent members of the Republican party are following in Trump's footsteps when it comes to electoral manipulation: not only are they resorting to most of Trump's tactics, but they are also combining the tactics in similar ways, for example by using disinformation to justify attacks on democratic institutions. The situation does not bode well for the 2024 presidential election. Many acts of electoral manipulation discussed above have potential to impact the integrity of the 2024 election, and it is possible that some of them were undertaken specifically to prepare for another attempt to overturn a presidential election were the Republican candidate to lose.

Even though Trump's attempt to overturn the 2020 election failed, that is not to say a similar but better prepared attempt could not succeed in the future. The actions that were taken to resist Trump in 2020 were, while successful, mostly focused on the immediate situation and did little to prevent a similar attack on electoral integrity in the future (Tomini, Gibril and Bochev 2023, 124–5). Since then, some important steps to counter such a threat have been taken, such as passing the Electoral Count Reform and Presidential Transition Improvement Act of 2022. In the 2022 midterms, voters also contributed to diminishing the risk of electoral subversion in 2024 by rejecting election denier candidates who were running for state level positions such as

Secretary of State that would have put them in charge of administering the 2024 election. Nevertheless, the danger persists.

Based on the case study presented in this article, 10 threats to the integrity of the 2024 elections can be highlighted: 1) Electoral disinformation has taken a firm hold of American society and many voters have lost faith in the integrity of American elections. 2) The fate of televised debates between presidential candidates is unclear, which threatens the voters' ability to make informed decisions. 3) Restrictive voting laws may have a negative impact on non-white turnout, and intimidation can also dissuade minority voters from casting a vote. 4) Many democracy-upholding election workers have left their posts. 5) Several states have made it easier to intimidate those election workers still trying to defend democracy. 6) The Republican party has inserted election deniers and other potential electoral manipulators into all levels of electoral administration. 7) New laws in place in many states move power away from election officials into the hands of state legislatures. 8) Gerrymandering has given Republicans control of the state legislature in Georgia and Wisconsin, two likely 2024 swing states, potentially making it easier to overturn election results in those states. 9) Intraparty pressure has prompted many moderate Republicans to retire or caused them to lose primary challenges, making Congress and especially the House tilt more towards election denialism. 10) Violent rhetoric and acceptance of political violence are on the rise.

Identifying acts of electoral manipulation and understanding their interplay is essential for recognizing threats to the integrity of future elections. This, in turn, can help build democratic resilience and safeguard American democracy.

**Acknowledgements:** This research was supported by Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation, whom I sincerely thank for their generosity and their faith in my work. I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to Tapio Raunio and Anna Kronlund for their invaluable help in revising the manuscript.

**Research funding:** This work was supported by the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation (00230217).

## Appendix 1

Coding frame utilized in the case study.

- Other than electoral manipulation (discarded)
- Electoral manipulation
  - Non-Republican (discarded)
  - Republican
    - Actions on or before Jan 6 (discarded)

- Actions after Jan 6
  - Breaking democratic norms
  - Disinformation
  - Gerrymandering
  - Voter suppression
  - Hacking and leaking
  - Collusion with one or more foreign states
  - Intraparty pressure
  - Intimidation and violence
  - Corrupting state and government institutions
  - Other

## Appendix 2

Category definitions for the coding frame utilized in the case study.

Other than electoral manipulation: Everything that does not fall within the scope of the definition of electoral manipulation below.

Electoral manipulation: Both legal and illegal actions that undermine electoral integrity undertaken by a candidate or other prominent member of a political party before, during or after an election to manipulate the elections in their favor or in the favor of their party. In this definition, electoral integrity refers to the key aspects of electoral integrity as defined by James and Garnett (2023, 15–19).

Non-Republican: Actions undertaken by one or several people none of whom is a Republican as defined below.

Republican: Actions undertaken by one or several members of the Republican party or one or several citizens who publicly supports Republican figures such as former president Donald Trump. When an action is undertaken by a group of people, it is classified as Republican even if some members of the group are not members of the Republican party or Republican supporters.

Actions on or before Jan 6: Actions that were taken on or before January 6, 2021.

Actions after Jan 6: Actions that were taken after January 6, 2021.

Breaking democratic norms: A breach of societal soft norms that contributes to the groundwork for the use of more serious electoral manipulation tactics.

Disinformation: False or misleading information spread deliberately to deceive people.

Gerrymandering: Drawing voting district maps unfairly to gain partisan advantage or to suppress the votes of some subgroup of voters.

Voter suppression: A legal or illegal measure whose purpose or practical effect is to reduce voting by members of a targeted subgroup of voters.

Hacking and leaking: Stealing potentially damaging information about a political opponent and publicizing it anonymously via a third party such as a newspaper or a website.

Attempted collusion: An attempt to make a secret pact with a foreign entity to manipulate an election.

Intraparty pressure: Pressuring members of one's own political party to break democratic norms or the law to help manipulate an election.

Intimidation and violence: The action of frightening or threatening someone to persuade them to do something, and the use of physical force to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy.

Corrupting state or government institutions: Undermining, altering, or abusing political or judicial institutions for political gain.

Other: Actions that do not belong in any other subcategory on the same level of the coding frame.

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