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Introduction

The year 2016 delivered a devastating blow to Democrats, defying all political predictions. Polls and surveys pre-maturely anticipated that Hillary Rodham Clinton would be the first female President of the United States, thwarting assumptions of a landslide victory for Democrats. However, Trump secured the presidency with 304 of the Electoral College votes, and, on the losing side, Clinton won 232 Electoral College votes. Trump's victory unfolded in a backdrop of national and international shock, with many political pundits and news outlets vocalizing their disappointment at the election results. The Los Angeles Times encapsulated Trump's unexpected victory in an article titled "How Did That Happen" (n/d)[1]. Similarly, and probably most notably, the New York Times published an article describing Trump as "the most unprepared President-Elect in modern history … and temperamentally unfit to lead a diverse nation of 320 million people" (n/d)[2]. Indeed, both articles were prophetic, foreseeing the perils of a Trump-led White House. In practice, the Trump Administration was plagued with controversy and corruption allegations. The tax cuts for billionaires, benefiting the top 1%, the January 6th insurrection in an attempt to overturn the 2020 election, and the packing of the Supreme Court with conservative justices calls into question concepts of corruption that deepen the understanding of illicit practices in U.S. politics. This research paper investigates Trump's conduct through various levels of political corruption and clientelism. In so doing, this paper will offer insights and policy recommendations that can mitigate and prevent corruption in the federal government. This paper also examines the opportunity structures and framework that allowed Trump to achieve corrupt objectives, rendering political opposition from the Democrats obsolete.

Petty Corruption During The Trump Presidency

Corruption, and its forms, are harmful to the political, social, and economic well-being of democratic societies worldwide. Transparency International argues that "corruption undermines good government, fundamentally distorts public policy, leads to the misallocation of resources, harms the private sector and private sector development, and particularly hurts the poor" (n/d)[3]. Several corruption types can be detected in the Trump-Pence Administration; petty corruption has been an identifiable, almost defining characteristic of the Trump Administration. Petty corruption refers to small acts, or rent-taking actions, by civil servants and politicians, including bribery, influencing, and gift-giving. According to Yoo (2018)[4]:

Typically, petty corruption [occurs] when private citizens (such as investors and business managers) have to deal with relatively low-level bureaucrats in getting approval for specific privileges or economic activities, and small bribes are involved in completing a particular transaction within a reasonable time-span. (268)

One of the potential corruption charges leveled at President Trump was the alleged breach of the Emolument Clause, a constitutional rule that prevents public officials from receiving payments or gifts from foreign powers; many legal scholars view the Emolument Clause as the country's original anti-corruption measures (Lezra, 2019)[5]. Yet, this constitutional rule failed to prevent President Trump from seeking personal gains. In 2019, Nancy Pelosi, former Speaker of the House of Representatives, launched an impeachment inquiry into Donald Trump to investigate if the President violated the rule during his phone call with Ukrainian President, Vladimir Zelensky. During their suspicious conversation, Zelensky claimed that he has been a loyal customer of the Trump business, signaling an activity that abuts the boundaries of the Emolument Clause. Trump also asked Zelensky to investigate Hunter Biden as a favor. On a similar occasion, a House investigation concluded that six foreign governments spent hundreds of dollars at the Trump hotel from 2017 to 2018 (Doornbos, 2022)[6]. These transactions occurred while Trump was President and amounted to $750,000. The House report also claimed that Saudi and Emirati public officials had been pushing President Trump to remove Tillerson for his role in intervening to stop a Saudi invasion of Qatar a year prior. Indeed, this activity pulled Trump's legal conduct into questioning, generating a colossal wave of backlash and public scrutiny. In many respects, Trump's engagement in petty corruption laid out the ground for a high-scale type of

corruption: grand corruption.

Grand Corruption During the Trump Presidency

Petty corruption, compared to grand corruption, is seen by many scholars as trivial and insignificant, emphasizing the urgency to deal with grand corruption first (Riley 1999)[7]. Scholars supporting this claim argue that grand corruption is more consequential as it could undermine the rule of law and subvert public funds for personal gains. Grand corruption is "the abuse of high-level power that benefits the few at the expense of the many, and it usually includes a systemic or well-organized plan of action involving high-level public officials that causes serious harm" (Transparency International)[3]. Such harm happened in 2021 when Trump rejected the results of the 2020 presidential election, claiming the election was rigged, and, therefore, the presidency was stolen by Democrats. As a result, Trump's statements led to nationwide protests, culminating in the fatal January 6th insurrection. Many factors explain how President Trump managed to carry out such a massive anti-government protest. First, Trump exploited political influence to subvert the electoral process. Political corruption, defined by De Sardan (1999), as "a form of secret social exchange through which those in power (political or administrative) take personal advantage, of one type or another, of the influence they exercise in virtue of their mandate or their function" (27)[8]. For instance, during his presidency, foreign government officials and political leaders held over 250 events and ceremonies at fourteen Trump-owned properties, generating millions in revenue for the Trump Organization. Furthermore, these events were hubs for political leaders from the United States, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Russia, and Ukraine to discuss policy-making. These gatherings were perceived as corrupt because their intense privacy and opaqueness cast a shadow of illegitimacy on policies championed by Trump. These gatherings were viewed with suspicion because they provided foreign power unlimited access to American policymakers, corporate executives, lobbyists, and even the President. A report by CREW[8] looked into Trump's disclosed dealings and found that some groups paid six figures at Trump properties. Most notably, an American Airline, a firearm interest group, and even a university secured favorable policy outcomes after they spent money on Trump-owned estates. The CREW[8] research also concluded that over 30 groups won favorable policy goals after they held private events at Trump properties. Furthermore, corruption was more flagrant on other occasions. For instance, the Air-Conditioning, Heating, and Refrigeration

Institute (AHRI) received a major policy victory from the Trump Administration after it organized an event at the Trump National Doral in 2017. Surprisingly, the CREW[8] research discovered that AHRI spent at least $700,000 at the Trump venue. Unfortunately, the President's financial dealings at his private estates remain unavailable to the public.

On top of that, the New York Attorney General, Letitia James, initiated a civil investigation into the Trump Organization, claiming that Donald Trump, Donald Trump Jr. Ivanka Trump, and Eric Trump intentionally used misleading and fraudulent financial statements to reap millions of dollars in economic gains amounting to $250m. To do so, the Trump family falsely inflated their net worth by billions of dollars "to induce banks to lend money to the Trump Organization on more favorable terms than would otherwise have been available to the company to satisfy continuing loan covenants, to induce insurers to provide insurance coverage for higher limits and at lower premiums, and to gain tax benefits, among other things (NY Attorney General Office)[9]. Many corruption elements inform Trump's case. First, the senior management of the Trump Organization was spearheaded by family members, cultivating an erosion of accountability. In this case, the owner of the Trump Organization is Donald Trump, with his two sons Donald Trump Jr. and Eric Trump as executive vice presidents. This triangle of leadership encourages a culture of corruption because accountability can easily be eroded for several reasons. Family-run businesses suffer from a lack of structural formality, which is achieved by having a clear business framework with strict guidelines. However, having a family-run business can easily allow members to avoid maintaining some procedures and business processes, compromising the quality of business, and laying down grounds for corruption. Moreover, familial loyalty can amplify the potential for corruption. As defined by Leibig & Green (1999)[10], familial loyalty is "the quality of being truthful to those persons and ideals that one stands under an obligation to defend or support" (89). Furthermore, conducting a family-run business leads to a biased decision-making process. One way decision-making can become biased is through planned succession. When Trump won the presidency in 2016, he announced that he stepped down from his leadership role because the U.S. Constitution bars him from handling business besides the presidency. His two sons assumed their father's responsibilities, but stepping down did not mean Trump's influence wavered. His sons still had direct access to their father, and dealings related to the Organization could have been easily discussed behind closed doors. Therefore, the likelihood of Trump's involvement in inflating and deflating the Organization's assets becomes more plausible.

Policy Recommendations

President Trump's overreaching corruption necessitates legal reforms and frameworks that should be adopted by the U.S. Congress to exhaust corrupt activities by future presidents:

1. Congress must pass legislation requiring future presidents to disclose their tax returns. Presently, disclosure of tax returns has been adopted by presidents as a tradition to encourage transparency and accountability. However, this tradition can be challenged easily at a president's will.
2. Implementation of an oversight committee that is specifically tasked with investigating a president's financial dealings, assets, and family-run organizations. While President Trump stepped down from the Organization's leadership, it remains uncertain whether Trump influenced its transactions and decisions. Such an oversight committee would serve as an investigator of a president's pursuits.
3. Imposing severe legal consequences handled by a court independent of Congress. Currently, the sole mechanism to hold a president accountable is through launching an impeachment inquiry. The only person capable of exercising that Congressional power is the Speaker of the House of Representatives. Unfortunately, politics would, perhaps, render that accountability measure obsolete because a Speaker would be reluctant to impeach a president of the same political affiliation. Members of Congress may also be hesitant to impeach a president of their party. Thus, creating a new court specifically responsible for holding a president accountable would strengthen anti-corruption measures.
4. Designing a policy that caps donor money will mitigate external influences, enabling presidents to focus on laying out their agenda and plans. Legal frameworks such as the Federal Elections Campaign Act (FEC), which limit how much people can donate to politicians. However, there are loopholes surrounding that law. Therefore, building on this existing act by reducing the donation amount would limit the influence of wealthy people and close these loopholes. Lastly, Congress should pass laws targeting the money threshold that enables candidates for president to qualify to continue their presidential bid. In doing so, money will become an insignificant factor in American politics.

Conclusion

The Trump presidency, marked by unexpected victories and subsequent controversies, unfolded as a complex narrative of corruption. From petty financial dealings to grand attempts to undermine the electoral process, Trump's administration displayed a spectrum of ethical transgressions, fueled by familial business interests and conflicts of interest with major donors. This research paper delved into small, grand, and political corruption, shedding light on the structures that facilitated Trump's corrupt objectives.

To address and prevent such corruption in future administrations, this paper recommends measures such as mandatory tax return disclosure, the establishment of an independent oversight committee, and the implementation of anti-corruption laws. By examining the root causes and proposing tangible solutions, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on corruption in U.S. politics, fostering transparency and rebuilding public trust in democratic institutions.

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