

Joachim Maciejewski

Understanding Electoral Manipulation in Hybrid Regimes

An Analysis Based on the Cases of Singapore and Malaysia

Topic and Research Question

This thesis analyzes the role of elections in hybrid regimes, political systems in which elections are regularly held but are neither fully free nor fair. In these regimes, elections are used not only as a means of political competition but also as instruments for maintaining political control. Electoral manipulation is therefore a central feature of hybrid regimes and is employed to influence electoral outcomes and gain advantages in the electoral process.

While electoral manipulation is well studied in the existing literature, research often concentrates on specific practices or isolated moments of electoral interference. Less attention has been paid to how manipulation unfolds across different stages of the electoral process. Electoral manipulation is highly versatile and dynamic and can occur before, during, and after elections, taking on various legal, institutional, individual, and operational forms.

To address this gap, the thesis examines the following research question: **How does electoral manipulation in hybrid regimes vary across the electoral cycle?** By focusing on the temporal dimension of elections, the study highlights how manipulation strategies change across electoral stages rather than being confined to election day alone.

State of the Art

Research on elections in hybrid regimes has expanded significantly over the past decades. Scholars increasingly emphasize that elections are not limited to democratic regimes but are also a common feature of authoritarian and hybrid regimes. Within this literature, hybrid regimes are commonly understood as political systems that combine formal democratic institutions, such as elections, with authoritarian practices that restrict political competition.

Electoral manipulation is a central concept in this field of research. Existing studies have identified a wide range of manipulation practices, including legal and institutional reforms, voter intimidation, media control, and other forms of interference with the electoral procedures. Contributions by Schedler (2002), Levitsky and Way (2012), and Simpson (2013) have demonstrated that manipulation can serve different purposes, including securing electoral victory, maintaining regime legitimacy, or consolidating political power. Schedler's and Simpson's concepts of a "menu of

manipulation" and "direct vs. indirect effects" of manipulation highlight that regimes possess multiple tools to influence elections.

However, much of the existing literature focuses on specific manipulation techniques or single stages of the electoral process. As a result, less attention has been paid to how different manipulation practices interact across the entire electoral cycle.

This thesis builds on these insights by adopting a temporal perspective and examining electoral manipulation before, during, and after elections. By integrating typological and temporal approaches, it contributes to the literature by highlighting variation and patterns of manipulation across different stages of the electoral cycle in hybrid regimes.

Methodology and Approach

To answer the research question, this thesis adopts a comparative case study approach. The analysis focuses on two hybrid regimes, Singapore and Malaysia, and examines two consecutive elections in each country. This design allows for both cross-case comparison and within-case analysis over time, making it possible to observe variation and continuity in electoral manipulation across different electoral cycles.

The central analytical tool of the thesis is a four-category framework that captures electoral manipulation across the entire electoral cycle. The electoral cycle is understood as consisting of the pre-election period, the election period, and the post-election period.

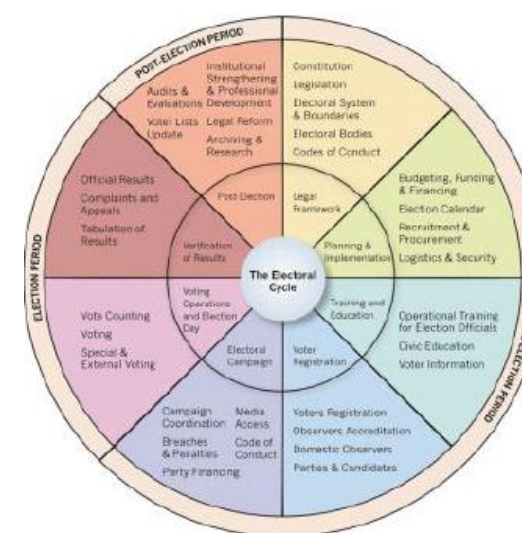
The four defined analytical categories are: (I) Legal and Institutional Context, (II) Manipulation of Individuals, (III) Manipulation of Voting Operations, and (IV) Outcomes and Consequences of Manipulation. Legal and institutional manipulation shape the rules and institutional environment in which elections take place. Manipulation of individuals and voting operations represents more situational and visible forms of interference that typically occur closer to election day or on election day itself. The fourth category captures electoral outcomes, levels of legitimacy, and public reactions, which provide insights into the broader consequences of manipulation.

For data, the analysis draws on election laws, official documents, observer reports, survey data, and secondary literature.

Main Facts

In Singapore and Malaysia, electoral manipulation occurs across the entire electoral cycle, but differs substantially in form, visibility, and intensity. In both cases, legal and institutional manipulation is a central feature of the electoral process and primarily shapes competition in the pre-election period. Electoral laws, institutional arrangements, and the organization of electoral management bodies influence electoral outcomes long before election day.

In Singapore specifically, electoral manipulation is largely based on the legal and institutional context. The ruling party relies on low-visibility mechanisms embedded within the electoral framework, while manipulation targeting individuals or voting operations plays a secondary role. This reflects strong institutional control, high administrative capacity, and high levels of regime legitimacy. Under these conditions, electoral risk remains low, reducing the incentive to employ more visible or coercive forms of manipulation.



The Electoral Cycle

In Malaysia, legal and institutional manipulation also serves as a baseline strategy but is complemented by additional forms of interference. As electoral competition intensified and regime legitimacy declined over time, manipulation increasingly extended beyond institutional mechanisms. Practices targeting individuals, such as vote buying or pressure on voters and candidates, became more prominent. Interference with voting operations was also observed, particularly during the election period, reflecting higher electoral uncertainty and risk.

Results

The results show that electoral manipulation in hybrid regimes varies systematically across the electoral cycle and is not confined to election day. Legal and institutional manipulation emerges as a baseline strategy in both cases, shaping electoral competition primarily in the pre-election period through rules and institutional arrangements. These mechanisms allow regimes to influence outcomes with relatively low visibility and low political cost.

The comparison further demonstrates that the intensity and visibility of manipulation differ depending on political context. In Singapore, high regime legitimacy and low electoral risk are associated with a strong reliance on institutional manipulation and limited use of more coercive strategies. In Malaysia, declining legitimacy and increasing electoral competition led to a broader range of manipulation practices, including the manipulation of individuals and voting operations, particularly as elections approached.

Overall, the findings highlight that electoral manipulation unfolds across multiple stages of the electoral cycle and adapts to changing political conditions. Elections in hybrid regimes may therefore appear procedurally clean while remaining substantively controlled through less visible forms of manipulation. This is relevant for election observers and analysts, as it highlights the importance of looking beyond election day and beyond overt forms of interference.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <https://theses.univie.ac.at/>

About the Author

Joachim Maciejewski holds a BA in Korean Studies and Political Science from the University of Tübingen. He has working experience in the field of political foundations and international organizations. He is now working for the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA).

Contact Information:
joachim.maciejewski@protonmail.com

Date of Examination: 29 January 2026

