

Donald Trump pleads not guilty to 34 felony counts of falsifying business records

Former President Donald Trump pleaded not guilty to 34 felony criminal charges of falsifying business records in Manhattan criminal court Tuesday afternoon.

Trump surrendered and was placed under arrest Tuesday before he was arraigned in a historic and unprecedented court appearance, in which the former president heard the charges against him for the first time. While the arraignment was routine, the case is now poised to linger over Trump's 2024 candidacy as he fights the charges both in court and in public.

Prosecutors alleged that Trump sought to undermine the integrity of the 2016 election through a hush money scheme with payments made to women who claimed they had extramarital affairs with Trump. He has denied the affairs.

Trump was part of an unlawful plan to suppress negative information, including an illegal payment of \$130,000 that was ordered by the defendant to suppress the negative information that would hurt his campaign, prosecutors alleged.

Trump "repeatedly and fraudulently falsified New York business records to conceal criminal conduct that hid damaging information from the voting public during the 2016 presidential election," according to the charging documents.

After the arraignment, Trump immediately flew back to Florida. He held an event with his supporters Tuesday evening at his Mar-a-Lago resort, where Trump made his public case against the indictment and previewed how he intends to fight against the charges politically as he runs again for the White House in 2024.

While he was warned by Judge Juan Merchan during Tuesday's arraignment not to make comments that could "jeopardize the rule of law" or create civil unrest, Trump railed later that evening against Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg and the judge himself.

"I never thought anything like this could happen in America, never thought it could happen. The only crime that I have committed is to fearlessly defend our nation from those who seek to destroy it," Trump said.

"It's an insult to our country," he added.

The indictment returned last week by a grand jury against Trump was unsealed Tuesday and provided the public – and Trump's legal team – with the first details about the specific charges he will face.

The indictment was quickly criticized by Trump's Republican allies, and even some legal experts raised questions about the case. CNN Senior Legal Analyst Elie Honig said that prosecutors will

have to make their case that Trump committed felonies and not misdemeanors by showing that the falsified records were used to conceal another crime, which was not identified in the indictment.

“One of the complicated legal questions here is in order to bump that up from a misdemeanor to a felony you have to show that those records were falsified to commit some other crime, some second crime,” Honig said. “You heard the defense lawyers, I think, rightly, complaining about that.”

Bragg said at a news conference after the arraignment that the indictment did not specify what laws Trump broke because “the law does not so require.”

Bragg highlighted one law that Trump allegedly broke during the conference: “New York state election law – what makes it a crime to conspire to promote a candidacy by unlawful means.” He also mentioned violations of a federal election law capping contribution limits.

The evidence, Bragg said, will be “borne out in a public courtroom in downtown Manhattan,” he said.

Next hearing in December

Trump responded to the judge when directed to do so during the arraignment and made the not guilty plea himself.

The former president’s voice was measured in the courtroom. He walked in slowly scanning the reporters in the courtroom and looked at the judge when he was speaking.

The next in-person hearing date for Trump’s case in New York is currently set for December 4.

In addition to the indictment, a 13-page “statement of facts” detailed in plain language how Trump allegedly committed crimes to help him get elected to the White House in 2016.

“From August 2015 to December 2017, the Defendant orchestrated a scheme with others to influence the 2016 presidential election by identifying and purchasing negative information about him to suppress its publication and benefit the Defendant’s electoral prospects,” the statement of facts says. Prosecutors described a “catch and kill scheme” to suppress negative stories about Trump – “in furtherance of his candidacy for President.”

Each criminal charge Trump is facing relates to a specific entry among the business records of the Trump Organization, according to the indictment.

The Manhattan prosecutors accuse Trump of repeatedly causing false entries in the business records.

A judge said Monday night that news outlets were not allowed to broadcast the proceedings, rejecting a request from several media organizations, including CNN. Five still photographers, however, were allowed to take pictures of Trump and the courtroom before the hearing begins.

Trump responds at Mar-a-Lago

While there had been some discussion about Trump speaking to the media while in the courthouse Tuesday, he did not do so. Instead, Trump responded at his event at Mar-a-Lago that night, making his first on-camera remarks while surrounded by supporters.

Trump has consistently denied all wrongdoing and condemned the indictment as political persecution.

Some of Trump's comments came to the fore during the arraignment when prosecutors handed the judge a packet of Trump's social media postings and informed the court that Trump was making threats with "irresponsible" social media posts, specifically citing Trump's sharing of an article that showed a photo of Trump with a baseball bat.

Trump's attorneys responded that Trump has First Amendment rights and said that he was expressing his frustration with alleged illegal leaks about the indictment from the district attorney's office. Trump's lawyers also claimed that Trump's social media posts were not threatening.

Merchan acknowledged Trump's right to free speech, but warned both sides about making comments with the potential to "incite violence, create civil unrest or jeopardize the safety or well-being of any individuals."

Neither side made a request for a gag order.

Despite the judge's comments, Trump in his speech Tuesday evening claimed he had a "Trump-hating judge" in the New York case. Trump also attacked Bragg and the indictment – as well as the other prosecutors investigating him, President Joe Biden and additional political opponents.

"This fake case was brought only to interfere with the upcoming 2024 election. And it should be dropped immediately," Trump said.

Bragg's indictment marks the first criminal charges against Trump, but it's not the only potential legal trouble in front of the former president: Special counsel Jack Smith is still moving forward with an investigation into Trump's role in the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol and the handling of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago. And a Fulton County special grand jury has completed its investigation into efforts to overturn the 2020 election in Georgia.