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Preventing Foreign Interference In National Elections

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Introduction

Foreign interference in national elections has emerged as a critical challenge for the functions of modern-day democracies. Through methods such as disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and political financing, external parties can distort public opinion and manipulate electoral outcomes. Looking ahead, the challenge is set to become even more complicated. Advances in technology ensure new tools to operate in new ways, such as: algorithms prioritizing extreme numbers of views; Twitter bots and new malware to access secret information about elections.

The stakes are high. Elections are the times in which societies establish legitimate governments and ensure public trust in political institutions. Interference undermines not only national sovereignty but also global stability. Technological advances, especially in artificial intelligence, social media algorithms, and cyber capabilities, have enlarged the reach and sophistication of interference efforts. Addressing this problem requires protecting national security, while also preserving freedom of expression, digital privacy, and open political discussion.

Definition of key terms

Hack and leak

Hack and leak strategies means using publication of private information for personal or corporate rather than public interest. The leaked contents may be authentic, fabricated, doctored or a mix of all these. Recent examples include the 2016 Democratic National Committee email leak and the 2017 Macron email leak, which were both amplified by such established actors as WikiLeaks.

Disinformation

False content which is deliberately made to deceive people. Disinformation is often spread on social media.

Misinformation

False content which is made without the intention of deceiving people.

Election integrity

The principle of fair and transparent elections to ensure the results reflect the will of the people.

Hybrid warfare

Warfare involving both conventional military methods and techniques such as cyberwarfare, the spreading of disinformation, and the use of soldiers.

General Overview

In earlier periods, interference often took tangible forms, such as printed propaganda, radio broadcasts, censure in newspapers and concealed funding of political parties during periods like the Cold War.

For example, Italy's 1948 general election became an early Cold War battleground. The United States covertly funnelled millions of dollars to anti-communist parties and encouraged Italian Americans to write letters to relatives warning against voting for the left. The CIA also supported a media campaign portraying communism as a threat to religion and freedom. The intervention played a significant role in securing victory for the Christian Democrats over the Popular Democratic Front, a coalition including the Italian Communist Party.

One of the more notable examples of this period occurred in the lead-up to the planned elections in South-Vietnam in 1956.

In the 1956 Vietnamese national elections, intended to reunify the country under the Geneva Accords, the United States and the South Vietnamese government blocked the vote, fearing that communist leader Ho Chi Minh would secure an overwhelming victory. This intervention denied the electorate the chance to determine their own political future and solidified the division of Vietnam, contributing to decades of conflict.

Other notable cases include the 1996 Russian presidential election, in which Western governments, especially the United States, offered financial aid and political consultancy to boost Boris Yeltsin's faltering campaign. This assistance ranged from IMF loans to the hiring of American political advisors, helping Yeltsin to a narrow win over communist challenger Gennady Zyuganov

More recently, the 2016 US Democratic National Committee cyberattacks, perpetrated by Russian intelligence agencies spread disinformation to influence US voters. In addition to the hacking of email accounts and disclosure of private information, the most significant aspect was the use of social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, to spread division and heighten nationalist movements within the electorate.

Today, the nature of election interference has shifted into the digital and information domains, but many of the strategies are similar to the earlier decades. Disinformation operations often combine multiple tactics: micro-targeting particular voter groups, creating networks of false social media accounts to simulate public opinion and using "*hack-and-leak*" strategies to release stolen materials at politically sensitive moments. The 2016 U.S. presidential election illustrates this approach. Russian operatives not only hacked email accounts belonging to the Democratic National Committee but also used Facebook and Twitter to impersonate American activists, organize opposing political rallies, and amplify divisive issues, with the aim of undermining Hillary Clinton's candidacy or to help elect Donald Trump as president.

Interference such as these happens far more often. Countries such as Iran intervened with elections in the U.S. and China intervened in elections of countries with a relatively high number of Chinese people.

While China, Russia and the U.S. are the most well-known countries to engage in foreign interference, they are not the only ones; according to researchers, disinformation is distributed via social media by over 80 countries, and by non-state actors, such as the Wagner group and linked entities.

Major parties involved

European Union

The European Union has developed one of the most comprehensive approaches to countering election interference. It created the East StratCom Task Force in 2015 to expose disinformation campaigns. In 2019, the EU launched the Rapid Alert System, enabling member states to share information quickly about threats during elections. The EU has also introduced transparency rules for online political advertising and strengthened cooperation on cybersecurity. For the EU, the issue is about defending both national elections and the safety of the union as a whole.

People's Republic of China

China has been accused of attempting to influence elections abroad, even though China stands by its non-interference policy. Chinese actors have engaged before in cyber operations, political donations through intermediaries, and the use of state-controlled media to shape narratives in other countries. China has been linked to coordinated disinformation campaigns and media manipulation designed to weaken pro-independence parties in Taiwan. In Canada, security services reported that Chinese officials sought to interfere in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections by supporting candidates seen as favorable to Beijing's interests.

China denies allegations of interference, emphasizing its principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. However, its broader strategy of political influence operations has been documented in multiple countries. It often involves diaspora communities, business networks, and Confucius Institutes. Unlike Russia's often disruptive tactics, China's activities tend to focus on long-term influence.

Russian Federation

Russia is frequently accused of interfering in elections abroad. Western intelligence agencies have attributed to Russia a range of tactics, including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns run by the Internet Research Agency, and covert funding of favorable parties. Russia denies these claims, framing them as politically motivated. Nonetheless, Russian military doctrine openly acknowledges the use of *information confrontation* as a state tool.

United States of America

The United States has been both a target and an actor in election interference. Domestically, the 2016 presidential election showed exposures, encouraging reforms such as the creation of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. Internationally, the U.S. has faced criticism for its involvement in foreign elections, including covert support for Christian Democrats in Italy's 1948 election and backing Boris Yeltsin during Russia's 1996 presidential race. Today, the U.S. promotes universal norms against interference while continuing to strengthen its own defenses.

Timeline of events

1948 April 18th	Italian general election takes place. The United States covertly funds the Christian Democratic Party and supports an extensive media campaign to prevent a communist victory.
1954 July 20	The Geneva agreement, discussing the separation of Vietnam, the cease-fire and the planned elections for July 1956.
1956 July	The planned national elections in Vietnam are cancelled. The United States and South Vietnam blocked the vote, fearing that Ho Chi Minh would win, whose victory would mean that the entire country would fall into communist hands.
1996 June 16	Russian election takes place, won by Boris Yeltsin after American financial and political support.
2016 November 8	The American presidential election takes place. While the Russian Federation hacked emails and used social media to spread disinformation and impersonate U.S. citizens.
2018 December	The European Union established the Rapid Alert System to counter disinformation and election interference among member states.
2024 February 8	The European Parliament passes a resolution condemning ongoing Russian efforts to undermine European democracy

Possible solutions

Preventing foreign interference in national elections requires multiple tactics. Because no single measure can prevent it fully, delegates need to work together and combine strengths. The following approaches could serve as a starting point for the debate:

Establishing international norms on election integrity.

Although national sovereignty makes enforcement difficult, an UN-led framework or convention could help define what constitutes unacceptable interference. Even a non-binding declaration could establish shared expectations and provide a basis for diplomatic consequences when states surpass the made definition of unacceptable interference.

Improving transparency in political funding.

A significant portion of foreign influence takes place through hidden financial channels. Stricter rules on political donations, clearer disclosure of funding sources and international monitoring mechanisms could make it harder for foreign actors to covertly shape electoral outcomes.

Using civic education to ensure the recognition of foreign interference.

An informed public is less susceptible to manipulation. Media literacy programs in schools, as well as public campaigns on how to recognize false or misleading content, could help citizens navigate political information more critically

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