



The issue of foreign interference in elections

Major world powers have been interfering in other countries' elections for centuries. The methods used by Russia to intervene in 2016 were just a few among a wide variety of overt and covert methods frequently used for this purpose. Other common interference methods include the provision of money to the preferred side's campaign, public threats or promises, training in advanced campaigning methods, an increase in foreign aid or other assistance before election day, or withdrawal of this aid.

Electoral interventions usually occur when a foreign power perceives its interests as being endangered by a significant candidate or party running for election, and another significant candidate running in that election agrees to collude with the foreign power.

In many cases, such meddling can have major effects on the election results. Data shows that meddling between 1946 to 2000 that such interventions increase overall the vote share of the preferred candidate by [3%](#) on average — enough, in many cases, to determine the result. The estimated effects of such meddling are the same both in the Cold War and post-Cold War eras as well as in new and established democracies. In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, for example, Russian meddling increased Trump's overall vote share by about two percent — enough to give him his electoral college victory.

If we have learned anything since the 2016 U.S. election, it is that foreign election interference is not just a strategic tool used by Russia. Many countries are now using social media disinformation as statecraft to attack democracies. With a relatively small investment of personnel and financial resources, a foreign power can use social media and other online tools to heighten divisions in the electorate, spread disinformation and conspiracy theories, and undermine confidence in the electoral system specifically and democratic institutions generally.

Another example was when Pro-Russian hackers launched a series of cyberattacks over several days to disrupt the [May 2014 Ukrainian presidential election](#), releasing hacked emails, attempting to alter vote tallies, and delaying the final result with [distributed denial-of-service attacks](#).

A final example is the Russian interference in the 2016 Brexit referendum remains unproven but there are multiple sources saying that evidence exists to show that Russia attempted to persuade the British public to leave the European Union. While an investigation is being undertaken by the [UK Electoral Commission](#), the [UK Parliament's Culture Select Committee](#) and [Intelligence and Security Committee](#), and the [United States Senate](#). "The Russia Report" published by the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament in July 2020 did not specifically address the Brexit campaign, but it concluded that Russian interference in UK politics is commonplace. It also found substantial evidence that there had been interference in the [2014 Scottish independence referendum](#), with an attempt to obtain a vote in favour of the split

Politicians often describe foreign election interference as a cyber-attack against the nation, or as an act of war.

Points to Consider

- How should this be prevented?
- Should the United States and other democracies should raise the legal penalties on any domestic actor knowingly collaborating with a meddling foreign power?
- Should the collusion of local citizens with a foreign power attempting to interfere with a domestic election be designated as a standalone crime with a maximum penalty akin to that of spying (i.e., life in prison)? Can such a law can deter various private third parties from agreeing to cooperate in such an undertaking?
- Criminalize Solicitation of Foreign Interference?
- Is encouraging Social Media Firms to Label Foreign Conduct reasonable?
- Should democratic countries reverse the growing trend toward electronic voting and counting and return to traditional, electronics-free methods?
- If intelligence agencies are fortunate enough to discover highly credible evidence that a foreign covert intervention is happening in an upcoming election, should they inform the public about it immediately?

Useful links

- <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/foreign-election-interferences-an-overview-of-trends-and-challenges/>
- <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/how-to-manage-the-threat-of-foreign-election-interference/>
- <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2019/07/31/combating-disinformation-and-foreign-interference-in-democracies-lessons-from-europe/>