

Election Interference: Overview

Introduction

Electoral interference occurs when one nation acts to disrupt or influence the electoral process of another sovereign nation. There are many examples from history of foreign nations interfering in the American electoral process, and the United States has likewise intervened in foreign elections in an effort to advantage the United States in trade or diplomatic relations.

The issue of foreign electoral interference became more controversial beginning with the 2016 US presidential election, during which Russian state agents interfered in the election to support the candidacy of Donald Trump. Although the full impact of this interference remained unclear, it appeared that the Russian government felt that a Trump victory would make the United States less likely to intervene or interfere with Russia's aggressive, colonialist foreign policy aims.

Debate has since turned toward the means by which the United States can counter foreign election interference in future elections—as well as the extent to which distorted or misleading political speech can, or should, be limited in a democracy.

Understanding the Discussion

Bot: An autonomous computer program that can interact with computer systems or can generate communications with users.

Deepfake: An image or video created by merging audio recordings and human behavior from one source with imagery and/or sound from another source to make it appear as though a person or persons did or said things that they did not.

Disinformation: Falsehoods that are intentionally distributed to sway opinion or obscure true information.

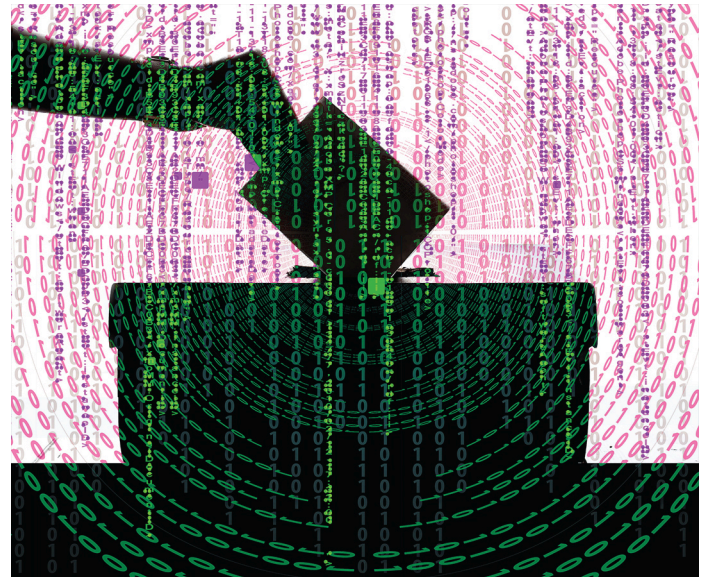
Fake news: A work of fiction that is presented as a factual news story, often with the intent of deceiving the reader into believing it is factual and enticing them to share it.

Misinformation: Inaccurate, wrong, or potentially deceptive information.

Ransomware: A type of malicious software program that blocks access to a computer system or its functions, typically used to extract a ransom from the computer owner before access or functionality will be restored.

Social media: Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content as part of social networking activities.

Troll farm: An operation involving multiple, paid computer users working together to generate online activity to influence public opinion or to spread misinformation.



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History

The first electoral interference controversy in the United States occurred during the administration of the nation's very first president: George Washington. During Washington's time in office, revolutionary France and Great Britain went to war, which divided Americans into political factions. Federalists like Vice President John Adams sought to remain neutral in the conflict and to strengthen diplomacy and trade with Britain. Democratic-Republicans like Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson were sympathetic to the French Revolution, which abolished the French monarchy, and wanted to strengthen relations with France. When the Federalists created the Jay Treaty with Britain, French ambassador to the United States Pierre-Auguste Adet attempted to bribe US senators to stop its ratification, but failed because of a lack of funds. Adet changed tactics, obtaining a copy of the Jay Treaty and publishing it in American newspapers. As Adet surmised, many in the public disapproved of the treaty.

Adet's efforts coincided with the 1796 US presidential election, the first contested election, between Adams and Jefferson. Just beforehand, Adet published a series of letters warning that Adams's election would mean war with France, to sway voters

toward Jefferson. That campaign failed too, largely because Adet lacked reach. His letters were distributed widely only in a few cities, such as Philadelphia, where Jefferson won the election. However, Adams still had sufficient support to win the Electoral College vote, by a narrow margin of three electoral votes.

During the twentieth century, advances in communication and international mobility made it possible for foreign agents to undertake more complex efforts to undermine the American electoral system. Perhaps the most flagrant example of this occurred during World War II, when Britain and Germany sought to influence American politics to promote or discourage American intervention in the war, respectively.

Nazi ideology was directly influenced by an American movement known as eugenics, which became a very influential pseudoscience in the early to mid-twentieth century. Eugenics is the belief in an evolutionary hierarchy among human beings based on certain traits, such as race; notably, eugenicists viewed people of Northern and Western European descent as more advanced than people of other ethnic or racial descent. Thus, eugenics was a form of scientific racism that in large measure served to intellectualize xenophobia and racial prejudice. During World War II, realizing that they had allies among America's racist White population, the Nazi Party engaged in efforts to influence the 1940 American election in favor first of a noninterventionist Democrat, John L. Lewis, and then the Republican Party. Specifically, Nazi agents and sympathizers published and distributed articles in American newspapers and magazines, spreading propaganda and misinformation about Nazi and British activities in Europe.

Meanwhile, the British government, which desperately needed US intervention to prevent occupation, engaged in efforts to manipulate the election in favor of the Democratic Party candidate, President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Britain bugged and surveilled American governmental offices and published thousands of articles designed to promote America's relationship with Britain and the idea of direct intervention. British agents not only tried to promote Roosevelt's candidacy but also worked to promote Republican candidates who were sympathetic to intervention and to reduce support for isolationists, such as Republicans Thomas Dewey, Robert Taft, and Herbert Hoover. British agents even created a US public opinion organization known as Market Analysts, Inc., which regularly produced polls showing high levels of American approval for intervention.

Between 1946 and 2000, a period extending slightly beyond the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union (the forerunner of modern Russia), the United States undertook more than eighty election interference campaigns abroad, according to Carnegie Mellon University political scholar Dov Levin. By Levin's count, Russia sought to interfere in at least three dozen international elections during that time. Some Cold War-era campaigns were covert while others were open. US efforts in the late twentieth century increasingly turned toward open support and funding for civic, pro-democracy organizations.

During the 2016 US presidential election, Russian agents used fake social media groups and pages, some operated by individuals and others automated with bots, to promote Donald Trump or to demonize Trump's opponents, including both Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican primary candidates Jeb Bush, Ted Cruz, and Marco Rubio. Investigations undertaken by Congress later found that Russia used a troll farm known as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), led by Russian intelligence operatives, which began disseminating fake news and largely pro-Trump articles and propaganda through Facebook, Twitter, and other sites as early as 2014. The IRA also stirred up issues important to specific demographics, including the political left, the political right, and Black Americans, to increase division. In a separate but connected attack, the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Army (GRU) hacked the email accounts of Clinton staffers and the offices of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to obtain data useful in damaging the Clinton campaign.

In October 2019 the Senate Intelligence Committee released the second half of its report on Russian electoral interference in 2016 and concluded that there had been a concerted effort to promote Trump's presidential campaign. Specifically, the report stated, "This campaign sought to polarize Americans on the basis of societal, ideological, and racial differences, provoked real world events, and was part of a foreign government's covert support of Russia's favored candidate in the U.S. presidential election," and went on to say that the tactics of the operation were "overtly and almost invariably supportive of then-candidate Trump." The committee also reported that evidence indicated that the Russian troll farm was actively attempting to influence the 2020 presidential election.

On October 21, 2019, Facebook announced that it had suspended three troll farm networks operated from Iran and another with connections to Russia's IRA, all seeking to influence US users. One such IRA-linked network had been used to operate fifty separate Instagram accounts and one Facebook account, collectively reaching 246,000 followers, 60 percent of whom were in the United States. Much of the information published was directed at congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or presidential candidate Joe Biden, both Democrats.

Election Interference Today

As Trump and several Republican politicians contested Biden's win in the 2020 election, repeatedly and publicly claiming that the election had been fraudulent, the National Intelligence Council submitted its report on foreign threats to the 2020 election to executive and legislative officials in January 2021. As part of their assessment, the intelligence council found that Russian state-sanctioned influence had occurred once more in this election cycle, with efforts aimed at negatively impacting Biden's campaign, sowing further political divisiveness, and decreasing public confidence in the electoral process. At the same time, another country that had attempted to exert influence, in this case meant to harm Trump's reelection campaign but through similar tactics, was identified as Iran. Not long after the declassified

release of the report, Biden's administration authorized sanctions against more than thirty Russian individuals and entities deemed to have been involved. In addition to sanctions leveled against Iran in late 2020 for alleged interference, the Treasury announced further individual and group sanctions against the country in late 2021 while the Department of Justice announced an indictment of two Iranian nationals for an organized disinformation campaign related to the election. Following a State Department announcement in July 2022 of a reward of up to \$10 million offered for information on foreign interference in US elections, including, specifically, about the IRA and other actors, new sanctions against Russia were announced. Additionally, it was revealed that an intelligence community review had found that Russia had given more than \$300 million to various political parties and others worldwide in interference attempts since 2014.

Debate has continued over how prepared the United States is, both in the public and private sectors, to counter future efforts by foreign governments to interfere in the nation's elections. Considerations include government deterrence efforts, concerns over safeguarding or limiting freedoms of speech and expression, and the emergence of computing technologies that may facilitate hacking and misinformation campaigns.

About the Author

Micah Issitt is a journalist, researcher, and independent scholar who has been writing about politics and popular culture for twenty years. Issitt is the author of twelve books on politics, sociology, and American history.

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