

Counterpoint: The US Government Must Do More to Protect Elections from Foreign Interference

Thesis

The United States needs to increase efforts to protect against election interference and must be prepared to handle evolving technological threats.

Talking Points

- Campaign finance reform could be used to address election interference by altering rules about purchasing campaign advertisements.
- Technological threats such as ransomware and deepfakes have made it more difficult to address election interference and could continue to do so in the future.
- Research suggested that Russia and other actors attempted to influence the 2020 presidential election and that it remained unlikely that social media companies and existing laws could prevent such interference from happening.

Summary

Ben Freeman, director of the Foreign Influence Transparency Initiative at the Center for International Policy think tank, has written that US laws regarding campaign finance, which dictate who can purchase and disseminate political advertising through American media, have always created an opening for unwanted foreign influence. The Supreme Court decided in the 2010 *Citizens United* case that political contributions are protected under First Amendment protections of free speech and expression. This, Freeman argued, makes it possible for foreign agents to influence American elections more easily through their ownership or influence over American corporations and interest groups; for instance, in 2022 a US intelligence community review was reported to have found that, beginning around 2014, Russia had secretly given more than \$300 million to political parties around the world with the intention of interfering in foreign politics and elections.

In addition, while states and private companies invested in detecting and protecting against the electoral interference methods used in the 2016 election interference scandal and beyond, advanced technologies have presented new threats that

are more difficult to detect and combat. A September 2019 report from the Homeland Security Department's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency indicated that hackers could disrupt the 2020 election by using ransomware programs to lock out access to and even destroy state voter registration databases. Further, congresswoman Yvette Clarke and cybersecurity experts have expressed concern about the use of political deepfakes, which are videos in which an image is altered using algorithms and artificial intelligence to make it appear that a person has done or said things that they did not. In May 2019 a video of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that had been altered to make Pelosi appear unstable or confused was circulated through social media in an apparent attempt to discredit or embarrass the Speaker. The fact that President Donald Trump shared the altered video of Pelosi demonstrated the threat posed by deepfakes and how they can be used to spread manipulative or misleading information.

Both governmental and private investigations conducted by social media companies have indicated that Russia remained interested in influencing the US election process and had interfered in the 2020 election. The Senate Intelligence Committee announced in October 2019 that information suggested that Russian agents were in the process of gathering personal information, including emails, phone numbers, and banking information, belonging to US audiences vulnerable to Russian "disinformation." Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon argued that targeted influence campaigns "weaponize personal information about Americans," as Patrick Tucker quoted for *Defense One*, and further contended that such campaigns were becoming harder to detect and to expose. Indeed, in an assessment released in early 2021, the National Intelligence Council reported that both Russia and Iran, as well as others on smaller scales, had carried out coordinated, multifaceted interference campaigns related to the 2020 election.

Ponder This

- The author has presented the fundamental positions for this perspective in the debate. Outline the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective.
- If asked to begin forming an argument for this position, what sources would you need to build your case? What fundamental information do you need? What opinion

leaders in this debate would you look to in solidifying your argument?

- What are the weakest aspects of the position outlined by the author? How might those weaker arguments help you prepare a counterargument?
- What additional Talking Points could you add to support this position?

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