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FMI Primer

ELECTIONS

Foreign Malign Influence (FMI) and Elections

Foreign Malign Influence refers to subversive, undeclared, coercive, and criminal activities by foreign governments, non-state actors, or their proxies, to affect another nation's popular or political attitudes, perceptions, or behaviors.

Election influence, or efforts by a foreign government to shape election outcomes or undermine democratic processes, can include foreign malign influence operations. This is separate from **election interference**, or efforts to degrade or disrupt the United States' ability to hold an election. [[Foreign Threats to the 2022 US Federal Elections, December 2023](#)]

ELECTION INFLUENCE

Election influence comes in all shapes and sizes; the scale, scope, and tactics vary widely. For example, some foreign governments undertake efforts to influence the outcome of an election, including the Presidential or Congressional races, and voters' opinions. In contrast, some foreign governments seek to exacerbate social divisions or question the legitimacy of our institutions or electoral processes as a means of undermining our democracy.

Foreign actors engage in election influence using a variety of methods to try to shape how Americans receive, interpret, and act on information. One such method is the use of social media, which enables actors to reach Americans directly with content that is personalized, persuasive, and hard to detect.

The following highlights some methods common across actors:

- **Influence campaigns** are long-term efforts by foreign governments to help achieve a strategic objective. Foreign efforts to influence the election are part of broader influence campaigns focused on the foreign country's core interests and undermining the United States' global role. Foreign governments continually adjust their efforts to advance their campaigns as events warrant.
- Campaigns often rely on **information manipulation**, when an actor deploys tactics to alter, modify, or mischaracterize information to shape public views, undermine trust in the authenticity of information, or disrupt democratic decision-making.
- Foreign actors often launder their manipulated information through **authentic American voices**. Foreign actors continue to rely on witting and unwitting Americans to seed, promote, and add credibility to narratives that serve the foreign actors' interests. These foreign actors seek to take advantage of these Americans to spread messaging through their channels and engagements.



FMI PRIMER: ELECTIONS (CONTINUED)

- Foreign actors also sometimes use **commercial firms**, such as marketing and public relations companies, to leverage these firms' expertise in communications, technical sophistication, and to complicate attribution. In addition, they are nimbler and have fewer bureaucratic hurdles compared to government entities. [\[Foreign Malign Influence Campaigns on Social Media Platforms Targeting Elections for Federal Office, October 2022\]](#)
- **Artificial Intelligence** is a malign influence campaign accelerant. It is being used to more quickly and convincingly tailor synthetic content, including audio and video. In the months preceding November's general election, foreign actors may create deep fakes of politicians and try to flood the information space with false or misleading information to sow doubt about what is real. [\[Risk in Focus: Generative AI and the 2024 Election Cycle\]](#)

ELECTION INTERFERENCE

Election interference refers to efforts to degrade or disrupt the United States' ability to hold an election, as compared to influence which seeks to shape the outcome or undermine confidence in it. In [2020](#) and [2022](#), the Intelligence Community (IC) assessed that foreign governments did not attempt to interfere in U.S. elections; the IC remains vigilant in its duty to monitor for election interference and to provide warning if detected.

Election Security Updates

Please see [Election Security Updates](#) for more information.

USG Efforts to Protect Against FMI

The federal government is committed to protecting America's democratic processes, institutions, economy, and public from FMI. Security-related agencies from across the U.S. Government provide assessments, reports, and guidance to the National Security Council; the executive branch; Congress; state, local, tribal, and territorial partners; and the American public, exposing election interference efforts and FMI against our democratic institutions and processes. This Primer is part of that effort.

REPORTING REQUIREMENTS

Presidential Executive Order 13848, [Imposing Certain Sanctions in the Event of Foreign Interference in a United States Election](#), requires:

- ODNI to provide an assessment on foreign election influence and interference within 45 days of federal elections.
- The Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of Homeland Security to jointly report on the impact of any foreign interference targeting election-related infrastructure, as well as that of political organizations or candidates.
- The Department of the Treasury to report on the appropriateness of enacting sanctions against foreign governments engaged in election influence or interference.



FMI PRIMER: ELECTIONS (CONTINUED)

[The National Defense Authorization Act of 2020](#), Section 532 (e), requires the Director of National Intelligence to make public the IC Assessment of Foreign Interference in U.S. Elections to the greatest extent possible while protecting sources and methods.

NOTIFICATION FRAMEWORK REGARDING FOREIGN MALIGN INFLUENCE AND INTERFERENCE OPERATIONS TARGETING UNITED STATES ELECTIONS

The executive branch developed a framework for evaluating whether and when to notify U.S. persons when there is credible information that a foreign actor is targeting them for malign influence or interference in our elections. Notifications may be delivered privately to targets—such as candidates for public office—or to the American public when doing so would be appropriate.

The [Notification Framework](#) supplements existing laws and policies related to victim notifications and ensures decisions are consistent, well-informed, non-partisan, coordinated across multiple government agencies, and do not interfere with First Amendment-protected activities.

FOREIGN AGENT REGISTRATION ACT (FARA)

Enacted in 1938, [FARA](#) was put in place to ensure that the U.S. Government and the American people are aware of persons who are acting within the United States as agents of foreign principals, such as foreign governments. It also ensures that the American people are informed about activities by these agents to influence public opinion or government action on political or policy matters. FARA requires that these agents register with DOJ, label the informational materials they distribute, and make periodic public disclosures about their activities and their relationship with the foreign principal. These [requirements](#) allow U.S. Government officials and the American people to evaluate the agents' statements and activities with knowledge of the foreign interests they serve.

Protecting our elections from foreign influence or interference requires a whole-of-government approach. The following resources detail how U.S. Government partners work to that end:

- [Election Security – DHS](#)
- [Election Security – Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency \(CISA\)](#)
- [Generative AI and the 2024 Election Cycle – CISA](#)
- [Election Crimes and Security – FBI](#)
- [Combating Foreign Influence – FBI](#)
- [Protected Voices – FBI](#)
- [Cybersecurity – DOJ](#)
- [Foreign Agents Registration Act – DOJ](#)
- [Elections as Critical Infrastructure – U.S. Elections Assistance Commission](#)