Foreign Influence and Election Security in America

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Introduction

Foreign influence in American elections is not new, but its tools, tempo, and reach have been transformed by digitization and globalization. Where once interference relied on limited channels and slower persuasion, today it exploits interconnected networks, vast data flows, low-cost automation, and opaque financial paths. This book

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takes a clear-eyed look at how hostile state and non-state actors probe, pressure, and manipulate the U.S. electoral system—and how public institutions and private companies can work together to defend it.

We focus on three primary lines of effort used by foreign actors. First are cyber intrusions that target election infrastructure, political parties, campaigns, and the vendors that support them. Second are influence operations—coordinated disinformation and propaganda designed to shape narratives, inflame divisions, and depress or redirect participation. Third is covert and proxy funding that seeks to amplify preferred voices, purchase access, or launder money into the political ecosystem. Each tactic exploits different vulnerabilities, but they are mutually reinforcing: stolen data feeds propaganda; propaganda pressures officials; financial influence sustains the machinery.

America’s decentralized election system is both a strength and a challenge. Thousands of jurisdictions, varied technologies, and layered legal authorities complicate any single point of failure. Yet this diversity also expands the attack surface and diffuses accountability. Meanwhile, critical dependencies—cloud services, content platforms, telecommunications, and specialized vendors—introduce private-sector decision points into what many consider a purely governmental function. Effective defense therefore demands joint action across federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial authorities, alongside platforms, newsrooms, civil society, and security researchers.

Our approach is pragmatic and resilience-oriented. Rather than promising perfect security, we advocate verifiable integrity: systems that anticipate failure, contain damage, recover quickly, and communicate clearly. The framework emphasized throughout the book rests on five pillars—governance, technology, operations, information, and finance. For each pillar we identify the most consequential risks, the controls with the highest return on investment, and the metrics that allow leaders to measure progress. The goal is not only to block attacks, but to preserve public trust by making outcomes auditable and explanations credible.

The chapters ahead combine technical analysis with policy context. We map threat actors and their doctrines, examine case patterns in cyber intrusions, and trace the supply chains that connect local officials to global vendors. We analyze the modern disinformation economy and the incentives that drive virality, as well as the emerging risks from synthetic media. We also track the money: how influence flows through front organizations and intermediaries, and how transparency, enforcement, and due diligence can disrupt it without chilling legitimate participation.

This is a book for practitioners. Election administrators will find checklists, process improvements, and implementation notes tailored to resource-constrained offices. Policymakers will encounter options that balance security with civil liberties,

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federalism, and transparency. Technologists will see architectural patterns—such as paper-backed ballots, risk-limiting audits, segmented networks, and zero-trust principles—translated into operational steps. Journalists, researchers, and community leaders will gain tools for verification, crisis communication, and public education.

Finally, we recognize that defending democracy requires more than firewalls and filings; it requires norms. Free expression, an independent press, competitive markets, and nonpartisan administration are not obstacles to security but its foundation. By the end of this book, readers will have a coherent playbook for raising the cost of interference, lowering the impact of inevitable incidents, and strengthening the institutions that make self-government possible.

CHAPTER ONE: The Attack Surface of U.S. Elections

The notion of an "attack surface" might sound like something ripped from a spy novel or a cybersecurity manual, and frankly, it is. But in the context of American elections, it’s not just about firewalls and encrypted data. It’s a sprawling, intricate tapestry woven from technology, human processes, legal frameworks, and even our deeply ingrained social habits. To understand how foreign adversaries attempt to meddle in our democratic process, we first need to map out this complex landscape – the myriad points where a determined actor might gain leverage.

Imagine an election as a grand, multi-stage operation. It begins long before a single ballot is cast, with voter registration, candidate declarations, and the seemingly mundane tasks of election administration. It continues through the campaigning period, the actual voting process, and finally, the arduous but essential work of tabulation, auditing, and certification. Each of these stages presents distinct opportunities for interference, much like different doors and windows into a very large and old house. Some are obvious, some are hidden, and some are surprisingly easy to jimmy open.

The decentralized nature of American elections, often lauded as a bulwark against single points of failure, simultaneously expands this attack surface to an almost bewildering degree. There isn't one election system, but rather thousands. Each state has its own set of laws, procedures, and even types of voting equipment. Within states, counties and even smaller jurisdictions often operate with significant autonomy, choosing their own vendors, configuring their own networks, and managing their own voter rolls. This patchwork quilt of systems means that a successful attack in one county doesn't necessarily translate to another, but it also means there are far more targets to choose from, each with varying levels of security sophistication.

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Consider the physical infrastructure first. Voting machines themselves, while increasingly scrutinized, represent just one component. There are the electronic poll books used to check in voters, the servers that store voter registration databases, the networks connecting these various components, and even the seemingly innocuous office computers used by election staff. Each of these can be a potential entry point for a cyberattack, whether it's through malware, phishing attempts, or direct intrusion. The software running these systems also presents vulnerabilities, with bugs and unpatched security flaws serving as ready-made invitations for exploitation.

But the attack surface extends far beyond the purely technical. The human element, for all its strengths, introduces a different set of vulnerabilities. Election officials, poll workers, and campaign staff are all potential targets for social engineering, spear-phishing, or even direct coercion. An email with a malicious attachment, disguised as a legitimate communication from a vendor or a colleague, can be all it takes to open a backdoor into a system. Disgruntled employees, or those simply susceptible to pressure, can also become unwitting or unwilling conduits for foreign influence. The human factor is often the easiest to exploit, as even the most robust technical defenses can be circumvented by a single click from an unsuspecting user.

Then there’s the information environment, a battleground increasingly favored by foreign adversaries. This includes everything from traditional media outlets to the sprawling, often chaotic landscape of social media. Disinformation campaigns, designed to sow discord, spread false narratives, and erode public trust, thrive in this environment. The sheer volume of information, coupled with the speed at which it travels, makes it difficult for individuals to discern truth from fiction. Foreign actors exploit this by creating fake accounts, amplifying divisive content, and even fabricating entire news stories to manipulate public opinion. The goal isn't always to change a vote directly, but to undermine faith in the democratic process itself, making the outcome seem illegitimate regardless of the reality.

Funding mechanisms also form a critical part of the attack surface. Covert financial contributions, often funneled through shell corporations or proxy organizations, can influence elections by amplifying certain candidates or messages, or by funding seemingly legitimate grassroots movements that are, in fact, controlled by foreign entities. The opaque nature of political financing in some areas creates loopholes that adversaries can exploit to inject money into the system without leaving a clear trail. This financial influence can be subtle, buying access or shaping policy debates, or more direct, by directly supporting campaigns or ballot initiatives.

Supply chain vulnerabilities represent another significant, and often overlooked, dimension of the attack surface. Election equipment, software, and even basic office supplies are often procured from a wide range of vendors, some of whom may have their own security weaknesses or even be susceptible to foreign influence. A single

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compromised component in the supply chain – a microchip with a backdoor, for instance, or a software update tainted with malware – could potentially affect numerous jurisdictions. Tracing the provenance of every component in every piece of election technology is a monumental task, and adversaries are keenly aware of these complexities.

The legal and regulatory frameworks governing elections, while designed to ensure fairness and transparency, can also present vulnerabilities. Ambiguities in election laws, differing standards across jurisdictions, and the inherent slowness of legislative processes can be exploited. Foreign actors may engage in "lawfare," using legal challenges and loopholes to disrupt the election process, create confusion, or even influence court decisions. Understanding these legal nuances and their potential for exploitation is crucial in developing a comprehensive defense strategy.

Finally, the very discourse surrounding elections—the public debate, the media coverage, and the campaigning rhetoric—can be weaponized. Strategic leaks of stolen data, often coupled with carefully crafted narratives, are designed to influence public perception and damage candidates. The timing of such leaks, often just before an election, can maximize their impact and minimize the opportunity for fact-checking or rebuttal. This psychological dimension of the attack surface aims to exploit existing societal divisions and anxieties, transforming them into tools of foreign influence.

Each of these elements, from the tangible voting machines to the intangible currents of public opinion, forms a potential point of entry for foreign interference. They are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, meaning that a weakness in one area can quickly be exploited to compromise another. Understanding this multifaceted attack surface is the indispensable first step in building a robust and resilient defense for American democracy. It requires moving beyond a narrow focus on cybersecurity to embrace a holistic view that encompasses technology, people, information, finance, and law. Only by appreciating the breadth and depth of these vulnerabilities can we truly begin to safeguard the integrity of our elections.

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