

What Constitutes Foreign Interference vs. Acceptable Nation-State Influence

Throughout 2020, the Paris Call Community for Countering Election Interference—led by the Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD), the Government of Canada, and Microsoft in support of the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace—convened a series of multi-stakeholder workshops, each addressing a critical topic related to preventing interference in the electoral process. The outcomes below are a first glimpse at some of the key observations made by practitioners during these workshops. A more in-depth overview of best practices is planned for early 2021.

There is little consensus on what “foreign interference” is and how it compares to related concepts such as “influence”. Clearer definitions can help protect core democratic values. Here are recommendations we heard from stakeholders across government, industry, and civil society on core elements that should be included in defining foreign interference.



Incorporate the Notion of Coercion

- Coercion undermines freedoms in democratic society. For example, foreign actors can create or exploit economic dependencies.



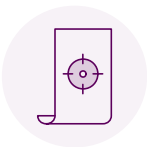
Incorporate the Concept of Deception

- Deception – or the lack of transparency – is an important component of interference because perpetrators often cover their tracks.
- This can also be framed as inauthenticity or misrepresentation.
- Democracy requires transparency, and the lack of transparency erodes institutional integrity – a key aim of authoritarian actors.



Attempt to Consider the Activity's Intent

- Ask what a foreign actor is seeking to achieve. Do they intend to disrupt, manipulate, damage or erode confidence in democratic organizations, institutions and processes? If so, this is often “interference”.
- There may not be a partisan objective. The intent may be simply to sow confusion and incite chaos in the system.
- Intent can be challenging to determine, and that determination may be possible only after damage has been caused.



Consider Scope and Framing, then Test Definitions

- Foreign efforts to undermine democracy take various forms.
- Definitions should apply to the full range of threat actors and to a wide array of threats vectors.
- Political definitions can apply to a broader range of threats than can definitions framed in terms of international law.
- Governments should test their definitions to make sure they do not affect acceptable activities such as public diplomacy.