

Critical Election Incident Public Protocol – the Panel

Incident Evaluation

The Panel will be responsible for evaluating potential election interference incidents:

Disinformation

- Deep fakes
- Fake and manipulated news sites
- Amplification – bots
- Inauthentic SMP use

Cyber Attacks

- Hack and leaks
- Data manipulation
- Denial of Service

Person-to-Person, Espionage, and Interference

- Nomination interference
- Blackmail
- Bribery
- Infiltration
- Physical threats/intimidation
- Illegal contributions

Who

Are the intended targets?

- Voters
- Marginalized groups
- Specific groups – divisive issue; gender etc.
- Electoral Process
- Political Parties, leaders, candidates or officials
- Other

Is doing it?

- Foreign state
- Third party or state proxy
- Domestic actors
- IMVE
- Unknown
- Other

Why

Are they doing this?

- Erode public trust in democracy
- Influence the outcome of election
- Anarchy
- Financial gain
- Other
- Unknown

Key Panel Considerations

The degree to which the incident(s) undermine(s) Canadians' ability to have a free and fair election

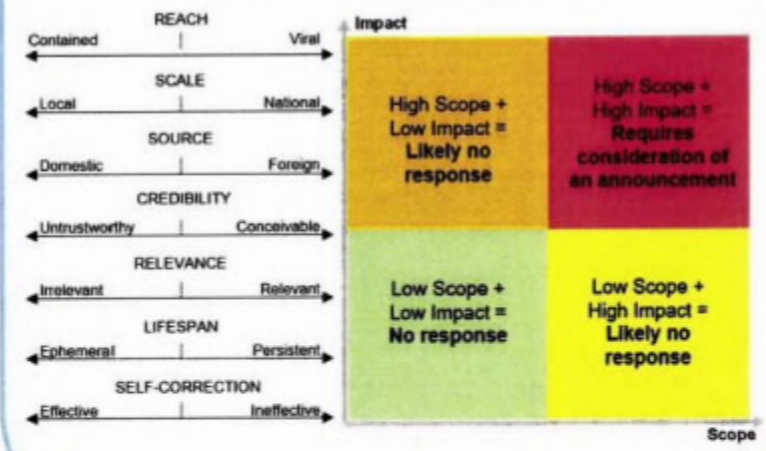


The degree of confidence officials have in the intelligence or information

The potential of the incident(s) to undermine the credibility of the election

Determining whether the threshold has been met will require considerable judgement that reflects the context around the incident – assessments can be made using certain parameters including, but not limited to:

Electoral incidents impact assessments



Announcement Considerations

Purpose

Messenger

- Information / Awareness
- Mitigation
- Reassurance

Set the record straight

Notice of election interference



PCO / Department Communications

Other Trusted Official (e.g. Dr. Tam)

Heads of Security Agencies

Clerk and/or Panel members

Elections Canada

Within mandate of Panel

All other steps exhausted

Impact on election

National security risks

Differential effect on specific people or groups

Scenarios for Critical Election Incident Public Protocol Review – FOR EXERCISE PURPOSES ONLY

Scenario 1: International Affairs

A week after the writ is dropped, a prominent political aide for the leader of the governing party makes a number of claims about other party leaders and candidates purported connections to a foreign independence movement on a popular public broadcasting politics program. On the program, the aide is cautioned by a host around making false statements about candidates, but instead, the aide takes the opportunity to repeat her inflammatory statements. A clip of the interview begins circulating in partisan circles on social media networks – for supporters as a sign of the high stakes of the election and a fair play in the political arena; and for others, a sign of arrogance or desperation of the governing party.

Inject 1 – Numerous news media organizations begin to fact-check some of the claims and report on the wide acceptance of these claims in certain partisan circles of the Internet (i.e., Facebook groups; Twitter; private messaging groups); no evidence is found to support the alleged connections between the federal parties, their leaders or candidates and the foreign governments. However, online discussion begins to spill into the physical world when certain candidates begin to experience interruptions at their events, from jeering and yelling, bomb threats and similar, causing the cancellation of activities and meetings in multiple ridings, in numerous provinces.

Inject 2 - Canada Proud begins an online media campaign on various forums to denounce the election, saying Elections Canada is biased as it is not acting on the incumbent parties engagement in lies and deception and providing links to the traditional media and fact-checking organizations that note that the foreign government connection is likely false.

Inject 3 – A number of candidates for the governing party in dozens of ridings begin to allude to these claims of foreign involvement in their campaigning including written material and communications to electors about their opponents. Some of the targeted candidates call on Elections Canada and the commissioner to investigate the claims and punish those spreading them based on the section of the Canada Elections Act prohibiting publishing false statements. The Commissioner's office holds a press conference noting that they have received numerous complaints, but that they are unable to comment any further.

Inject 4– An article in the Globe and Mail states there is absolutely no proof that these allegations are anything more than fabrication. In response, the political aide who made the initial comment tweets that sometimes information is not made public for a number of reasons, including national security or information from sensitive sources. The tweet is slyly worded and does not definitively state there is actual information.

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Scenario 2 – Hack or No Hack?

It is a two weeks into a very tight election. A number of tweets go viral claiming that members of Q-Anon have hacked into the databases of the opposition party, stolen a vast amount of personal information, and are selling this information on the dark web. The wording of the tweets is awkward and riddled with spelling mistakes.

Inject 1: This story quickly becomes front-page news in Canada and internationally. Journalists are unable to confirm the leaks, and the implicated political party is not giving any information other than there is an ongoing investigation. Attempts by journalists to find any indication that the information is on the dark web come up empty, however the commentary from online forums and traditional media outlets is that people are extremely worried that something has happened and there are calls for answers from the Panel.

Inject 2: SITE briefs the Panel that the political party reached out to them, and CSE determines that no such hack occurred. SITE members have also found no indication that any voter information is available on the dark-web. Furthermore, they have proof that the claims on social media originated from a group associated with a hostile foreign state, and are being amplified by bots. Analysis of the wording of the claims fit other forms of interference in other democratic elections by the same state. SITE is highly confident that this an active disinformation narrative is afoot.

Inject 3: Lists of voter information appear online that are purportedly part of the hack. All of the information (names, addresses and phone numbers) is publicly available. The leader of the opposition announces that an investigation confirms that there was no hack and the information appearing online did not come from the party's database. Despite this, there is a great deal of public mistrust, and polling indicate support for the party is dropping dramatically. Other parties do not appear to take advantage of the situation.

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Scenario 3: The Elbonian Candidate

Rumours emerge on various social media platforms that candidates in the Lower Mainland of Vancouver have received support during their nomination contests from a foreign hostile state. On social media, screenshots of messages in a foreign language promoting nomination contestants by the foreign country are widely shared as evidence. The messages provided detailed instructions, including for non-Canadian citizens, on how to register to be a member of the political party that ran the nomination contest and to how to vote for the contestant.

Inject 1 – Traditional media begins to report on this story, and two narratives emerge:

- a) That the foreign state is interfering with Canadian democracy, and that members of this group are complicit.
- b) That these are baseless accusations that seek to create racial divisions and foster hate towards members of the group.

Inject 2 - Lists of Canadian politicians at all levels and parties (federal to municipal) with affiliations to the foreign country begin to circulate online, noting that these candidates are traitors and that the political parties are compromised. The lists contain personal information on the candidates, escalating to destruction of personal property and racist graffiti.

Inject 3 - Similar allegations and lists of candidates from the Greater Toronto Area, the National Capital Region, and Montreal are alleged to have received similar support from the same foreign country. Op-eds questioning the legitimacy of the candidates, and more indirectly our electoral process, begin to surface in the media.

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Scenario 4: Fake News and Early Results

The Covid-19 Delta variant skyrockets the week after an election is called and Elections Canada sees a huge spike in mail-in ballot requests. On the morning of election day, a deepfake video of a respected reporter relaying early results from the mail-in ballots circulates widely on social media. The graphic behind the reporter shows that the incumbent party is in second place, and the forerunner is closing in on a majority. A screenshot of this goes viral and is shared over a million times.

Inject 1: The news agency for whom the reporter works announces that the video is fake. The story of the fake report is a top story on all the major news outlets in Canada as well as a number of outlets abroad. Elections Canada also responds by clearly laying out its mail-in ballot process, including safeguards such as the verification of outer envelopes, and that the counting of many of such ballots will only begin after the polls close. SITE briefs the Panel that they see little in the way of foreign involvement, and most of the sharing has been done domestically with little indication of artificial amplification.

Inject 2: Social media platforms remove the video, however a screenshot of the results continues to surface on various pages attributed to partisan groups that support the supposed first place party and the incumbent. Many of these have repurposed the graphic in a manner that could possibly be seen as satirical.

Inject 3: After advance polls are closed, EC reiterates an earlier statement that results will be delayed, adding that the delay will be longer than originally anticipated as the number of mail-in ballots has far exceeded expectations. Claims of fraudulent ballots and incorrect counts appear across several competitive ridings and increase in number, scope and intensity, and a clear result has yet to be announced three days after election day.