

MEMORANDUM

TO: Interested Reporters

FROM: Office of Senator Mark Warner, Vice Chairman, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

RE: Election Security Claims: Facts and Context

Foreign adversaries routinely seek to influence U.S. elections. They spread disinformation, amplify political divisions, intimidate voters, incite violence, and attempt to undermine Americans' confidence in democratic institutions.

What foreign adversaries have *not* done, according to repeated public, unclassified assessments from the U.S. Intelligence Community, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the FBI, the Senate Intelligence Committee, and bipartisan state election officials, is alter vote totals, hack voting machines to change election outcomes, or compromise the integrity of the 2020 presidential election. The clearest pattern across recent elections is not successful vote manipulation – it is sustained influence operations, aided and abetted by domestic actors, designed to convince Americans that their elections cannot be trusted.

These facts matter because conspiracy theories about stolen elections cannot become a pretext for weakening our democratic system or stripping states and local election officials of their longstanding constitutional role in administering elections. The answer to foreign threats is to strengthen election security, support state and local officials, and combat foreign influence operations – not to “[take over](#)” or federalize election administration based on claims that have been repeatedly investigated and debunked.

Reporters have a unique responsibility at this moment. The press is the only profession expressly protected by the Constitution because the Founders understood that an informed public depends on a free and independent press willing to separate fact from fiction and hold those in power accountable. Regardless of the source seeking to amplify false narratives about American elections, journalists should approach extraordinary claims with the same rigor they would apply to any other allegation: demand credible evidence, consult the extensive public record, engage subject-matter experts with experience tracking foreign intelligence operations, and provide audiences with the full context of repeated findings from the Intelligence Community, federal cybersecurity officials, bipartisan state election administrators, audits, recounts, and the courts. Careful, evidence-based reporting is one of the strongest defenses against efforts to undermine confidence in American democracy. To that end, we have assembled the following reference guide to help reporters quickly evaluate some of the most common claims about election security against the extensive public record developed by the Intelligence Community, CISA, the FBI, bipartisan state election officials, audits, recounts, and the courts.

Claim: China interfered in the 2020 election to help Biden.

FACTS: Under the leadership of then-Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe, the Intelligence Community [assessed](#) that China considered but did not deploy influence efforts intended to change the outcome of the 2020 presidential election. By contrast, the IC assessed that Russia conducted influence operations aimed at denigrating Biden and supporting Trump,

and that Iran conducted efforts to undercut Trump and sow division. The Intelligence Community, Department of Justice, and Department of Homeland Security all [agree](#) that *there was no changing of votes or compromise of the integrity of election infrastructure* in the 2020 election. Even the Minority View included in the public 2020 Intelligence Community Assessment – which assessed that China may have undertaken some modest influence operations – concurred with the overall IC assessment that there was “**no information suggesting China tried to interfere with election processes.**”

Claim: Venezuela, Dominion, or Smartmatic hacked voting machines.

FACTS: In November 2020, President Trump’s own CISA, working alongside state and local election officials from both parties, [declared](#) the 2020 election “*the most secure in American history.*” CISA stated there was “no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised,” and highlighted the extensive safeguards built into U.S. elections, including paper records, audits, recounts, certification, and pre-election testing.

Claim: Georgia proves the machines were wrong.

FACTS: Georgia’s [post-election audit](#) showed the opposite. Because the presidential margin was so close, the state conducted a full manual tally of all presidential paper ballots. The Georgia Secretary of State, a Republican, reported that the audit confirmed the original machine count accurately identified the winner, with differences within the expected range of human hand-counting error.

Claim: Foreign interference means votes were changed, or elections are illegitimate.

FACTS: This claim conflates two different concepts. The IC has repeatedly warned that foreign adversaries conduct *influence* operations, including hack-and-leak operations, disinformation campaigns, and efforts to undermine confidence in U.S. democracy. But those assessments distinguish *influence* from *interference* such as alteration or manipulation of ballots, vote tabulation, or voter registration.

Claim: Foreign actors can easily flip a federal election.

FACTS: Both the Senate Intelligence Committee and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) have said the decentralized nature of U.S. election infrastructure makes large-scale manipulation very difficult to carry out without detection through intelligence collection, audits, cybersecurity monitoring, and physical security controls. This assessment was reaffirmed by DOJ and DHS in a [joint report](#) on the 2020 U.S. Federal Elections – a report mandated by Executive Order 13848, which was signed by President Trump himself in 2018. Indeed, federal funding – much of which took place through appropriations bills under President Trump’s first term – helped shore up the security of state and local election systems in advance of the 2020 U.S. Federal Elections.

Claim: States cannot be trusted to administer elections.

FACTS: The Founding Fathers thought otherwise, assigning the responsibility for election administration to states in the Constitution. As a result, elections are administered by more than 8,000 state and local jurisdictions, making centralized or outcoming-shaping fraud extraordinarily difficult. Election security relies on multiple independent safeguards – including

but not limited to paper ballots or voter-verifiable paper records, bipartisan poll workers, post-election canvasses, audits, recounts where appropriate, and certification by state and local officials. The federal government's role has historically been to provide intelligence, cybersecurity assistance, and voluntary best practices through agencies like CISA, the FBI, and ODNI (notably, resources the current administration has curtailed) – not to run or “take over” elections. A bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee investigation [recommended](#) more support for state and local election officials, not replacing them with a federally controlled election system.

Claim: Dead people or non-citizens voted in large numbers, or there are more ballots than registered voters.

FACTS: These discrepancies are usually attributable to clerical or data issues, and while there are occasional isolated cases, multiple comprehensive studies have found that noncitizen voting is [vanishingly rare](#). Notably, under President Trump's influence, many GOP-led states have *withdrawn* from the Electronic Registration Information Center (ERIC) – the nationwide clearinghouse to assist states in improving the accuracy of voter rolls.

Claim: Mail-in ballots or ballot drop boxes are inherently insecure.

FACTS: CISA [notes](#) that states employ multiple, overlapping safeguards for mail-in and drop-box voting, including voter signature verification or other voter validation methods, ballot tracking, secure ballot handling and chain-of-custody procedures, ballot reconciliation, and post-election audits. The specific safeguards vary by state, but they are designed so that no single control is solely responsible for protecting election integrity. Importantly, mail-in voting has traditionally been a critical method of ensuring that military personnel can exercise their right to vote and has been commonplace in many states for over a decade.

The factual record is clear: Foreign adversaries try to influence Americans and undermine confidence in our elections, but unclassified government assessments and state audits have not shown that China, Venezuela, or any foreign actor hacked voting machines or changed vote totals in 2020. The real threat is not that Americans' votes were secretly flipped; it is that foreign adversaries and domestic actors continue to spread false claims designed to make Americans doubt legitimate election results.

The Bipartisan Record

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's bipartisan investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election – led by Chairman Richard Burr (R-NC) and Acting Chairman Marco Rubio (R-FL) – remains the most comprehensive congressional review of foreign election meddling ever conducted. Over the course of more than three years, the Committee reviewed classified intelligence, interviewed hundreds of witnesses, and issued a five-volume report documenting both the scope of Russia's interference campaign and recommendations to strengthen U.S. election security.

The Committee reached several [conclusions](#) that remain directly relevant today:

- Russia conducted an extensive campaign to meddle in and influence the 2016 election through cyber operations, social media manipulation, and information warfare.
- “The Committee has seen no indications that votes were changed, vote-tallying systems were manipulated, or that any voter registration data was altered or deleted.”

These findings reinforce a critical distinction that has remained consistent across subsequent Intelligence Community assessments: foreign adversaries seek to influence elections and undermine confidence in democratic institutions, but there is no evidence that Russia, or any other foreign government, successfully altered vote tallies or changed the outcome of a U.S. presidential election.

Rather than recommending a federal takeover of elections, the bipartisan Committee concluded that states should remain firmly in the lead on administering elections, while the federal government should provide timely intelligence, cybersecurity assistance, and resources to help defend against foreign threats. Specifically, the Committee recommended:

- Reinforcing states’ primary role in administering elections.
- Improving intelligence sharing with state and local election officials.
- Expediting security clearances for appropriate election officials.
- Expanding cybersecurity assistance and best practices for election infrastructure.
- Strengthening defenses against foreign cyber and influence operations.

This principle – that the federal government should support state and local election officials, not replace them – has become a cornerstone of U.S. election security policy.

What the Intelligence Community Has Consistently Found

Across multiple election cycles and under multiple administrations, the Intelligence Community and federal election security agencies have reached the same core conclusions: foreign adversaries seek to influence American voters and undermine confidence in U.S. democracy, but there is no evidence they successfully altered vote totals or changed the outcome of a U.S. presidential election. Indeed, in the 2020 Intelligence Community Assessment, the IC noted – with unanimity – that there were “no indications that any foreign actor **attempted** to alter any technical aspects of the voting process in the 2020 US elections[.]”

2018

Following the 2018 midterm elections, the Intelligence Community [assessed](#) that Russia, China, Iran, and other foreign actors conducted influence activities targeting U.S. elections and public opinion. “*At this time, the Intelligence Community does not have intelligence reporting that indicates any compromise of our nation’s election infrastructure that would have prevented voting, changed vote counts, or disrupted the ability to tally votes,*” said then-Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats.

Similarly, the Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security [concluded](#) there was no evidence that foreign interference efforts affected the security or integrity of election infrastructure or altered election outcomes.

2020

The [Intelligence Community Assessment](#) reached four key judgments:

- No foreign actor interfered, **or even attempted to interfere**, in the voting process: “We have no indications that any foreign actor attempted to alter any technical aspect of the voting process, including voter registration, casting ballots, vote tabulation, or reporting results.”
- Russia conducted influence operations intended to denigrate Joe Biden, support Donald Trump, undermine confidence in the electoral process, and exacerbate political divisions.
- Iran conducted influence operations intended to undermine President Trump’s reelection.
- China considered, but ultimately did not deploy, influence efforts intended to change the outcome of the presidential election.
 - While the assessment included a Minority View from the National Intelligence Officer for Cyber (which President Trump repeatedly mischaracterizes) reflecting a differing assessment on China’s *influence* efforts, the Minority View emphasized that it agreed with the overall IC view that “we have no information suggesting China tried to interfere with election processes.”

2022

ODNI [concluded](#) that foreign governments continued to conduct influence operations designed to sow division and undermine confidence in U.S. democracy – not manipulate vote counts.

2024

[Throughout the 2024 election cycle](#), ODNI, FBI, and CISA [issued multiple joint public](#) statements warning that Russia remained the most active foreign influence threat and was manufacturing fake videos, fabricated news stories, and other disinformation intended to undermine public confidence in U.S. elections.

For example, the agencies publicly attributed fabricated videos alleging illegal voting in Georgia and ballot destruction in Pennsylvania to Russian influence actors, emphasizing that these materials were part of Moscow’s broader effort to “raise unfounded questions about the integrity of the U.S. election and stoke divisions among Americans.”

Throughout the 2024 election cycle, the IC and Department of Justice released an unprecedented amount of intelligence on foreign actors’ plans, intentions, and operations – with credible, fact-based assessments, indictments, and other materials to support these judgements.

The New York Times

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

March 31, 2026

Trump Is Trying to Override Our Voting System



By Mark R. Warner

Mr. Warner, a Democrat from Virginia, is the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

In the decade since President Vladimir Putin of Russia directed a sweeping campaign of hacking and social media messaging to try to tilt the 2016 presidential election toward his preferred candidate, the United States has rightly focused on shoring up our elections against foreign meddling.

But I fear that foreign interference is no longer the most pressing danger to our elections. It is increasingly evident that the greatest threat now comes from inside our own government.

For months, President Trump has made his intentions clear. He has called for the federal government to “take over” elections, impose national rules and override state authority. Now we are beginning to see how he may plan to do this.

According to recent [reporting](#) in The Washington Post, allies of Mr. Trump’s working in coordination with people close to the White House have circulated a draft executive order that would declare a national emergency based on false claims of foreign interference in the 2020 election. That declaration would be used to unlock sweeping presidential powers over how Americans vote.

The proposal would allow the federal government to bar widely used voting methods, including mail ballots. It would force Americans to reregister to vote on short notice, requiring proof of citizenship. It would insert federal agencies into the voter verification process in novel ways. And it would attempt to override the constitutional role of states in administering elections.

And that is just what is envisioned by the draft executive order. Further steps could be justified, at least on paper, by invoking emergency powers. The president could also attempt to seize voting machines under the guise of a national security investigation. Federal agents could be deployed to polling places in the name of election integrity, intimidating voters rather than protecting them. Entire categories of lawful ballots could be seized or discarded based on unsubstantiated claims of interference.

There is no legitimate basis for such an emergency. That is not the point. The point is that the Trump administration could manufacture an impression of an emergency, creating a pretext for intervention.

There have already been some warning signs. In January, the director of national intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, was present for a law enforcement raid in Fulton County, Ga., involving the seizure of ballots and voting machine records from 2020. According to Ms. Gabbard’s testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee, she was there at the direction of Mr. Trump. When the warrant affidavit supporting that raid was later unsealed, it revealed no credible foreign interference concern. Instead, the would-be justification for the warrant was a slop of debunked conspiracy theories that had already been rejected repeatedly by courts, independent investigators and Georgia’s Republican secretary of state.

Ms. Gabbard’s appearance at this raid — as well as her involvement in [seizing voting machines from Puerto Rico](#), again without any tie to foreign intelligence — was an extraordinary breach of the longstanding firewall between intelligence authorities and domestic political and law enforcement activity. One wonders what else she might be willing to do in service of Mr. Trump’s demands: Might she or another Trump official be

willing to manufacture a claim of foreign interference in order to justify federal intervention in elections?

It is worth noting that people who played central roles in efforts to overturn the 2020 election are now operating inside the federal government with access to sensitive election security information and the ability to influence law enforcement actions. One example is Kurt Olsen, the White House's [director of election security and integrity](#). According to court filings, Mr. Olsen helped trigger the seizure of ballots in Georgia.

To intervene in the midterms at the federal level, Ms. Gabbard would not even need to fabricate intelligence outright. She could selectively release fragments of existing intelligence collection, stripping out caveats and context in ways that create a distorted impression of a threat.

This is not how American democracy is supposed to work. Our voting system is deliberately decentralized. States and localities administer elections, creating a structure that is more resilient and less vulnerable to manipulation from any single point of control. While the federal government can provide resources to help ensure the security of our elections, the Constitution does not give the president the authority to disregard that system.

What we are seeing now is an effort to change that, not through a constitutional amendment but through the abuse of executive power, the making of false claims and the misuse of national security authorities. That effort must be stopped.

First, Congress must assert its constitutional role. That means rejecting efforts to nationalize election administration and conducting rigorous oversight of how federal authorities are being used or misused.

State and local officials must also hold the line. They are the stewards of our election system, and their adherence to the law is one of our strongest defenses against interference.

Republicans who believe in the Constitution have a particular obligation to speak out. The principle that voters, not politicians, decide elections should not be partisan. Silence in this moment will not be forgotten.

Lawyers across the country must be prepared to challenge any attempt to invoke emergency powers to interfere with elections. The courts will once again serve as a critical backstop — but only if cases are brought quickly and decisively.

Former intelligence and law enforcement officials also have a responsibility to speak out. If they see intelligence being distorted, misused or politicized, they must say so clearly and publicly.

Political observers must meet this moment with clarity. Claims about election interference or fraud from this administration must be evaluated with appropriate

skepticism and subjected to rigorous scrutiny, not treated as just another political argument in which both sides are granted equal legitimacy.

Most of all, the American people must remain vigilant. Democracies rarely fail in a single moment. They are tested when the boundaries between lawful authority and political power are deliberately blurred. The idea that a president could fabricate an emergency to take control of elections would have been unthinkable not long ago. It must remain unacceptable now.