

## Political Committee: Topic 1

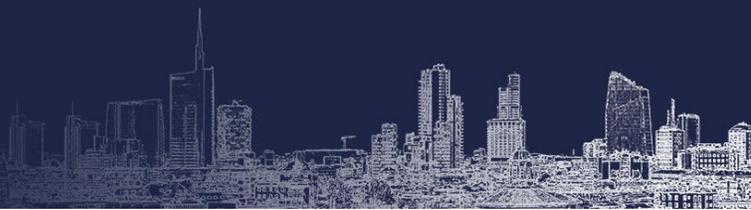
# Measures to Protect Free Elections

### Background:

The most fundamental principle of a **free election** is that they must reflect the free expression of the will of the people. To achieve this, elections should be transparent, inclusive and accountable. This requires a series of things. For one, **integrity**. Only eligible voters should be allowed to vote, and those votes must be protected from any alteration or exclusion. This raises a controversy; what is considered to be interference in the integrity of votes?

The term 'meddling' in an election is used when an outside party uses its influence to particularly favor one candidate over the other. This has often come in the form of **cyber interference**. With the fake news pandemic that has come with the widespread development of big social media platforms, cyber interference has become increasingly dangerous. The issue was first addressed during the 2016 presidential election. On July 24th, Clinton's campaign manager Robby Mook told CNN he had good reason to believe Russia was releasing the Democratic National Committee's emails in an attempt to help Trump. After extensive investigation by national intelligence, it was proved that Putin had taken out a massive influence campaign that seriously impacted the outcome of the election by weaponizing tech platforms with state-sponsored disinformation operations. Russia had similar accusations from the Ukrainian Central Election Commission in 2014, when a group of Russian hackers slowed down the country's network for twenty hours, nearly leading to the announcement of a false winner.

Outside influence is not the only factor that puts the integrity of elections at risk. There are multiple strategies internal politicians can use to manipulate elections to their advantage, most of these even legally. An example of this is **gerrymandering**. Gerrymandering is the practice of drawing the boundaries of electoral districts in a way that gives one political party an unfair advantage over its rivals, or that dilutes the voting power of members of ethnic or linguistic minority groups. Modifying the boundaries of districts changes the majority, impacting the honesty of electoral outcomes. Regardless of this, gerrymandering is legal in many countries, proving how in some cases elections can be exploited from within the nation.



Three different ways to divide 50 people into five districts

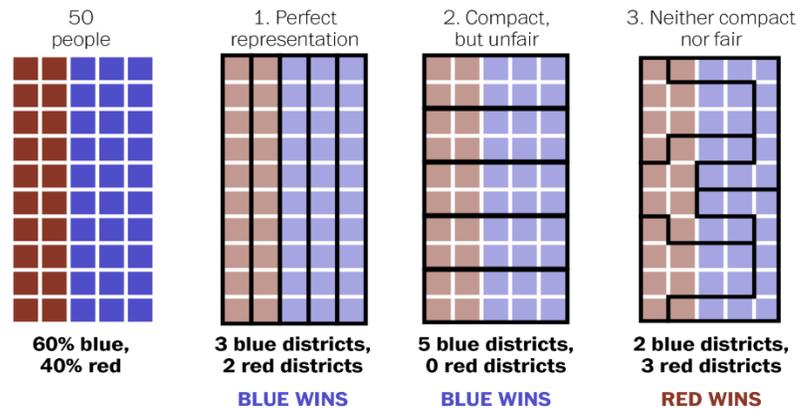


Figure 1) Gerrymandering explained<sup>1</sup>

### Current Situation:

After 2016, the issue of foreign influence and social media manipulation seized the public's attention. In America, the past four years have seen extraordinary growth in the study of cyber interference and foreign meddling, resulting in increased vigilance not only from intelligence researchers but from the voters themselves. With the 2020 elections, the biggest threat to the integrity of the outcome is the controversy surrounding **mail-in ballots**. Donald Trump has been very vocal about how mail-in ballots can lead to electoral fraud. With the pandemic, ballots were a widely used method of voting with about 94 million mail in votes being sent in. As they represented the voice of millions of citizens, it was of fundamental importance for these ballots to be assessed and counted correctly. The increasing polarization over the trustworthiness of mail in votes has threatened the resilience of America's electoral system.

This year was also the year of presidential elections in **Belarus**. In August, a Belarusian state television aired footage of the arrests of 33 suspected Russian mercenaries near Minsk. Belarus claims, without making any evidence public, that the alleged mercenaries are part of Russia's Wagner Group and were sent to Minsk to destabilize the country ahead of the presidential election. Belarus' Investigative Committee linked the detained Russians to a jailed opposition logger, as part of a criminal investigation into alleged preparations of mass riots.

The issue of safe and free elections has also reached the **UK** regarding the 2019 general election. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab made a statement in July this year that he is "reasonably confident" that Russians sought to interfere in 2019. A Downing Street spokesman dismissed these as "nonsense" suggestions, as significant concrete evidence is in short supply, inciting controversy.

<sup>1</sup> Ingraham, Christopher. "This Is the Best Explanation of Gerrymandering You Will Ever See." The Washington Post. April 26, 2019. Accessed November 15, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/03/01/this-is-the-best-explanation-of-gerrymandering-you-will-ever-see/>.



**Important bloc positions:**

- United States of America: Seen as the principal exporter of democracy and faced with accusations of election fraud in the past two presidential elections, the USA has an important role in the debate on voter protection and election integrity.
- Russia: The country most accused of interfering in foreign elections. Cyberattacks in Ukraine, Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, France, UK and Austria that investigators attributed to Kremlin-backed hackers appeared to be aimed at influencing election results.
- “White Hat” Hackers: The term “white hat” in internet jargon refers to an ethical computer hacker who specializes in penetration testing that ensures the security of an organization’s information systems.
- European Union: In Europe, automated bots, sometimes backed by the government, have shaped and shifted the online conversation. This has influenced key debates like the one regarding independence in Catalonia and immigration in Italy.

**Possible solutions:**

- Ensure the protection of voting and election rights.
- Establish an effective, impartial and non-discriminatory procedure for the registration of voters.
- Ensure that the necessary steps are taken to guarantee non-partisan coverage in State and public-service media.
- Promote education and information programmes and policies on democratic principles, in particular on respect for the secret ballot.
- Train officials responsible for organising and overseeing elections.
- Step up cooperation with civil society and NGOs involved in promoting greater respect for democracy and safe voting.
- Make sure that ballot papers are transported securely so as to preserve the secrecy of the ballot.



### **Further reading:**

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3. Quinn et al. "There's Still Time (Barely) For America To Have A Free And Fair Election". *Foreign Policy*, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/23/theres-still-time-barely-for-america-to-have-a-free-and-fair-election/>. Accessed 10 Nov 2020.
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2. "Foreign Influence Operations After 2020". *Lawfare*, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/foreign-influence-operations-after-2020>. Accessed 10 Nov 2020.
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4. Ingraham, Christopher. "This Is the Best Explanation of Gerrymandering You Will Ever See." *The Washington Post*. April 26, 2019. Accessed November 15, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/03/01/this-is-the-best-explanation-of-gerrymandering-you-will-ever-see/>.
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6. Schmitt, Michael et al. "Foreign Cyber Interference In Elections: An International Law Primer, Part I". *Ejiltalk.Org*, 2020, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/foreign-cyber-interference-in-elections-an-international-law-primer-part-i/>. Accessed 10 Nov 2020.
7. "Supporting Free And Fair Elections | Democracy, Human Rights And Governance | U.S. Agency For International Development". *Usaid.Gov*, 2020, <https://www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/democracy-human-rights-and-governance/supporting-free-and-fair-elections#:~:text=The%20most%20fundamental%20principle%20defining,to%20compete%20in%20the%20elections>. Accessed 10 Nov 2020.
8. "What Are The Requirements Of A Free And Fair Election?". *Medium*, 2018, <https://medium.com/agorablockchain/what-are-the-requirements-of-a-free-and-fair-election-7f734b13b04d>. Accessed 10 Nov 2020.