

# Political disinformation campaigns not as threatening as you think

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When foreign powers try to interfere with the politics of another country by spreading strategic disinformation, research suggests there is no real effect on policies or the balance of power in the targeted country.

In a recent study, a researcher at the University of Waterloo investigated whether foreign powers such as Russia and China can influence an election and political outcomes by spreading disinformation.

Canada's [federal government](#) has warned of potential interference from Russia during the upcoming election, according to Alexander Lanoszka, assistant professor of political science at Waterloo. Voters in other democracies, said Lanoszka, should not be too concerned that attempted interference would actually influence an election or other political outcomes.

"Great powers like Russia will of course push narratives about its foreign relations that are not only self-serving, but will also misrepresent true intentions, especially if they are up to no good," said Lanoszka.

The study defined disinformation as a systematic government effort aimed at misleading a particular audience—whether a government or key members of society—in order to influence the political process.

His paper cites three key obstacles that stand in the way of campaigns of disinformation. The first is a fundamental skepticism within potentially targeted countries when an adversary broadcasts information; the second

is the prevalence of deeply ingrained identifies and political attitudes among targeted political elites and ordinary citizens; and third is the countermeasures that a targeted country can enact—such as the Canadian government's forewarning of potential election interference.

Lanoszka points to a 2017 poll that found 59 per cent of Canadians have unfavourable views of Russia, which is well above the global median of 40 per cent. Furthermore, he points out that all three of Canada's leading parties have made statements condemning Russian aggression.

"Since Russia suffers a deficit of trust already with Canadian voters, any information spread by Russia that implicates our [election](#) outcome would be viewed with significant suspicion by most Canadian voters," said Lanoszka.

As well, he says a large body of political science research suggests that voters tend to process new information in light of firmly entrenched prejudices and assumptions. This is especially clear in the U.S., where, for example, information on climate change or economics is viewed primarily according to Democratic or Republican allegiances.

"The growing evidence about disinformation is that its effects have largely been limited to a small segment of voters, who likely would have supported extremist parties, anyway."

In the research paper, Lanoszka focuses on the case of disinformation in the Russian campaign against the Baltic states, including the 2014 annexation of Crimea. He says evidence in this case, and in other examples of [disinformation](#), strongly suggests that its intended strategic effects of political interference are exaggerated.

Disinformation in international politics is published in the *European Journal of International Security*.

**More information:** Alexander Lanoszka, Disinformation in international politics, *European Journal of International Security* (2019). [DOI: 10.1017/eis.2019.6](https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2019.6)

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