

New MIT paper outlines plan to fight election interference

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One of the most urgent threats facing our democracy and other democracies abroad is the ability to detect and thwart foreign election interference. But, research on election interference is scarce, according to a new article published in *Science* this week by two professors from MIT titled "Protecting Elections from Social Media Manipulation."

The dearth of real data has led scientists to disagree about the extent of the problem. Has social media manipulation affected the results of elections around the world in recent years? Differences of opinion on this important question stem from differing beliefs about the likely reach and scope of misinformation campaigns and the likely effects of social media manipulation on voter turnout and vote choice.

For example, some scientists contend that Russian interference probably did not decide the 2016 election because the reach and scope of Russian misinformation was small, concentrated and selective. Others argue a combination of Russian trolls and hacking likely tipped the election for Donald Trump. Similar disagreements exist about the U.K. referendum on leaving the European Union and recent elections in Brazil, Sweden, and India. As a result, there is no clear path forward to fixing the problem.

In their new *Science* paper, Sinan Aral and Dean Eckles of the MIT Sloan School of Management outline a four step research agenda to understand how, when and to what extent interference affects our elections.

"If we fund and pursue this agenda," says Aral, "we will learn how to protect democracy. Without it, democracies will remain vulnerable to foreign and domestic attacks worldwide."

The authors' four-step research agenda for estimating the causal effects of social media manipulation on [voter turnout](#) and vote choice include: (1) Cataloguing exposure to manipulative media, (2) Combining exposure data with data on [voting behavior](#). (3) Assessing the effect of manipulative messages on behavior and (4) Computing the aggregate consequences of changes in voting behavior for election outcomes.

"You cannot manage what you do not measure," says co-author Dean Eckles. "We need rigorous analysis of effects of these foreign campaigns on voting behavior."

One key takeaway for policymakers designing legislation is that they must think systematically about the tradeoffs, for example, between election integrity and [privacy policy](#). As the authors point out, "well-intentioned privacy regulations, while important, may also impede assessments of

election interference by complicating or even outlawing routine retention of data necessary to audit [election](#) manipulation."

"There are privacy-preserving ways to protect our data and our elections at the same time," says Aral. "To take advantage of them, Congress must consult experts in designing legislation that acknowledges these multiple goals and avoids their tradeoffs."

Achieving a scientific understanding of the effects of social [media](#) manipulation on elections is an important civic duty. Without it, democracies remain vulnerable. The authors conclude: "The sooner we begin a public discussion of the tradeoffs between privacy, [free speech](#), and [democracy](#) that arise from the pursuit of this science, the sooner we can realize a path forward."

More information: S. Aral et al., "Protecting elections from social media manipulation," *Science* (2019). [science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi ... 1126/science.aaw8243](https://science.sciencemag.org/cgi/doi/10.1126/science.aaw8243)

[mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to ... nipulation-elections](https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-...-manipulation-elections)

Provided by MIT Sloan School of Management

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