

BAHRIA UNIVERSITY ISLAMABAD



RESEARCH THESIS

TOPIC

Russia's Disinformation Campaigns to Manipulate Public Opinion: A Case Study of the U.S Elections 2016

SUBMITTED BY

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ENROLLMENT NO

01-155221-065

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Acknowledgement

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. All praise and thanks are due to Allah, who granted me the strength, patience, and wisdom to complete this work.

I want to sincerely thank my supervisor, Dr. Sadia Khanum, for her important advice, unwavering support, and constructive feedback during this project. Her perceptive advice, patient guidance, and dedication to academic achievement have been essential to finishing this thesis. My thanks also goes to Madam Sanabil Sibtain for her support and valuable inputs during this journey.

My family's prayers specially my husband's, support, and unshakable faith in me have been a continual source of strength, and for that I am truly grateful. Every obstacle has been easier to overcome thanks to their assistance.

Lastly, I would like to express my appreciation to all the academics and researchers whose work served as the basis for this thesis. Without their contributions to the field, this study would not have been possible.

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Abstract

With an emphasis on how Russia has revised its influence tactics in the 21st century to attain geopolitical goals without resorting to direct armed conflict, this thesis explores the late Russian involvement in political manipulation. Russia has used a complex combination of misinformation, cyber operations, psychological attacks, diplomatic intimidation, and backing for proxy groups to influence political results in targeted governments as global politics have increasingly turned toward information-driven power. Although these strategies are not wholly novel, they have significantly increased in scope, sophistication, and technology integration in recent years, giving Russia strategic clout in both regional and global contexts.

The study examines significant instances of Russian manipulation, such as election meddling, narrative structuring through governmental media, and covert influence networks, using a qualitative research methodology backed by secondary data. The goal is to comprehend the reasons for Russia's attempts at manipulation, the methods it uses, and the structural circumstances that enable these strategies to be effective. Additionally, the study looks into how these interventions affect public trust, democratic institutions, and the overall balance of power in the world. According to the concept, Russia's late-stage manipulation tactics are an intentional move toward "asymmetric influence," a type of power that places more emphasis on disinformation, ambiguity, and stealth than on conventional military action. Russia aims to undermine adversaries, broaden its sphere of influence, and alter international standards by taking advantage of social divisions, technology weaknesses, and global communication networks.

The study comes to the conclusion that Russia's manipulation attempts present serious threats to international security, necessitating more public awareness, better digital management frameworks, and coordinated international actions. All things considered, the thesis advances knowledge of how current manipulation techniques redefine government and the course of contemporary geopolitics.

Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction:

Unprecedented foreign meddling, especially from Russia in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, was marked as an important turning point in the American history. Extensive disinformation campaign of Russia, which had used multifaceted strategy to influence the electorate of U.S.A, was the aim of these efforts. In order to erode confidence in institutions of democracy and effect the election in Donald Trump favor's, this meddling transcended cyber-attacks and developed into disinformation operation. For undermining Hillary Clinton's campaign, the Russian authorities, especially through the GRU and the Internet Research Agency (IRA), carried out cyber-attacks against the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and sent private information to websites like WikiLeaks. They organized political rallies and developed phony profiles of Americans on social media in an attempt to polarize the political landscape. According to U.S.A Intelligence Community's judgment, The President of Russia Vladimir Putin had authorized these influential activities personally¹.

Russian official media sites like Sputnik and RT exacerbated divisiveness by airing anti-Clinton and pro-Trump propaganda. Interference aftermath brought to light democratic systems' weaknesses in the digital era. The Mueller inquiry demonstrated the extent and consequences of activities of Russia and verified that the Russian Government had been involved in systematic influence in violation of U.S. criminal law. Foreign powers might use technical platforms and cultural divisions to sway public opinion. The U.S initiated measures to enhance the media literacy, raises public awareness of disinformation strategies and fortify electoral security. For safeguarding democratic institutions from the outside dangers became crucial illustration of contemporary information warfare and a reminder of the necessity of the ongoing attention, international collaboration and flexible remedies. ²

¹ U.S. Senate Select Committee on the Intelligence, "Senate Intel Committee Releases Bipartisan Report on Russia's Use of Social Media," Press Release Archive, 116th Congress, October 8, 2019, accessed March 10, 2025, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/press/senate-intel-committee-releases-bipartisan-report-russia%E2%80%99s-use-social-media>.

² Emily A. Fowler. 2021 *(Dis)information Warfare: The 2016 Election, Russian Hackers, and U.S. Democratic Precarity* (B.A. thesis, Department of Political Science and Robert D. Clark Honors College, Purdue University, Spring 2021: no 10, accessed March 10,

1.2 Problem Statement

The 2016 United States presidential election was marked by an unprecedented surge of Russian backed disinformation operations that exploited social-media platforms, fake news websites and bot networks to sow division, undermine trust in democratic institutions and influence voter perceptions. Despite growing awareness of these tactics, the mechanisms by which Russian disinformation campaigns achieved their objectives particularly in terms of message targeting narrative amplification and impact on public opinion remain insufficiently mapped. Existing scholarship focuses largely on the content of false stories on the scale of online reach but lacks a systematic analysis that links campaign strategies to measurable shifts in voter attitudes and electoral outcomes. This thesis will address the gap by investigating how Russian disinformation was designed, disseminated and received during the 2016 election and by assessing its tangible effects on public opinion and democratic processes

With major focus on the strategies used, how well they shaped and used the public opinion and the wider ramifications for integrity of electoral, this study attempts to examine Russia's disinformation efforts during the 2016 U.S. elections. This study aims to evaluate the efficiency of post-election actions and the intensity to which Russian meddling harmed and effected the democratic processes by looking at official reports, empirical evidences and the already existing literature. Disinformation strategies were changing and presenting constant risks to democratic government globally. So, addressing this issue is essential.

1.3 Research Questions:

1. Which specific tools or tactics employed by Russia in the 2016 US election were most effective in achieving their stated goals of undermining public confidence and influencing the outcome?
2. What were the consequences of Russia's disinformation strategy for the 2016 US presidential elections?
3. In what ways did it alter public perceptions both before and after the election?

2025.<https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/6c949863-13cd-4066-9c54-e95a55df6c53/content>.

1.4 Research Objectives:

1. To analyze the techniques utilized and strategies adopted by Russia's disinformation campaigns, focusing on the propaganda disseminated by Russia, fake news, and social media platforms to manipulate public opinions in the United States.
2. To examine a political hacking group or entity and the spread of false information via Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.
3. To evaluate the impact of foreign disinformation on voters' preferences, increased political polarization, and diminished public trust in democratic institutions.

1.5 Significance of the Study:

This study is extremely important in order to comprehend how disinformation is changing and how it had impacts on democratic processes. By examining Russia's disinformation efforts during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. The study enhances our knowledge of how foreign actors influences the public opinion, erode confidence in democratic institutions and take benefits from social divisions. Given growing dependence on digital platforms for political discourse, this study is crucial for spotting social media ecosystem weaknesses and investigating the manner in which algorithm driven content amplifications enhance the spread of misinformation. The report is significant for policymakers because it shows the domain that need strict regulatory frameworks and offers greater insights into how to protect against foreign disinformation function. These findings can be implied by governments around the world to improve the integrity of voting measures, cyber security policy and diplomatic replies to state-sponsored disinformation.

For instant, by granting better and efficient understanding of how false narratives enter the information landscape and how to dispute them effectively, this research is beneficial to media organizations, journalists and facts checkers. This study fills the research gaps in long-term effects of disinformation by making part to the body of knowledge on cyber security, political communication and informational warfare.

By the integration of theories of media influence, polarization of politics, priming theory and hybrid warfare, it will be offering a thorough framework for examining contemporary disinformation strategies. At social level, this study promotes the knowledge of how foreign meddling shapes the public opinions and how crucial digital literacy is for spotting manipulation.

By developing educational programs that supports and encourages the media literacy. Critical thinking can be aided by an effective understanding of the psychological processes of disinformation susceptibility.

1.6 Literature Review:

The 2016 U.S Presidential election was analyzed to achieve a Russian disinformation campaign, which aimed at swaying the public opinion and examining democratic processes. In the book; *The Plot to Hack America* by Nance and Malcolm they talk about the Russian cyber interference and the WikiLeaks participation in the 2016 elections. Russia's cyber-attack tactics are said to have worked with WikiLeaks in spreading stolen and false information just for sway the outcome of election. Their book also looked into the Democratic National Committee (DNC), the hacked and the subsequent release of stolen information. While the Mueller Report and other secret services confirmed Russian interference in the 2016 election, but the scope of alleged coordination between the Trump campaign and Russian companies remains a matter of conflict. Nance's book, presents available evidence. Sometimes presents interpretations that go beyond the established facts, potentially blurring the line between analysis and speculation³.

Russian hackers and trolls supported in the 2016 election. Their coordinated efforts influenced the outcomes of their choices by manipulating the opinion of public through cyber-attacks and propaganda on social media. Kathleen Hall Jamieson's *Cyber war: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know* dissects Russia's diverse interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Drawing on political communication scholarship and original polling data, Jamieson meticulously analyzes the tactics employed by Russian cyber actors and the Internet Research Agency, including hacking, disinformation campaigns, and the strategic use of social media. The book examines how these efforts interacted with mainstream media coverage and exploited existing societal divisions. While acknowledging the difficulty of definitively proving causality at the individual voter level, Jamieson argues persuasively that Russia's actions likely played a significant role in Donald Trump's victory by strategically disseminating information aligned with his interests and undermining his opponent.

³ Malcolm Nance, *The Plot to Hack America: How Putin's Cyberspies and WikiLeaks Tried to Steal the 2016 Election* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016): 55, accessed March 15, 2025, <https://archive.org/details/plottohackameric0000nanc?utm>

Ultimately, *Cyber War* serves as a critical examination of the vulnerabilities in the American information ecosystem and a stark warning about the ongoing threat of foreign cyber interference in democratic processes⁴.

These supports whether they were from the hackings and stolen data or WikiLeaks, they focused to manipulate public opinion, exacerbate the division in society and undermine the electoral procedure integrity. Comprehensive study of these activities resulted the extensive approach and effect of Russia's strategies while underscoring the vulnerabilities within system of democracy. Official account of the active measures from Russia includes cyber-attacks and informational warfare, providing detailed evidence of active interference in 2016 election, as per the report of United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence⁵.

Partisan media ecosystem especially on the right one were susceptible to the Russian disinformation, helping in spreading of propaganda and involving to political polarization⁶.

Operative from Russia, particularly the Internet Research Agency (IRA), orchestrated various multifaceted campaigns, mainly targeting the U.S. voters solely. On Facebook, Russian actors signed in 470 accounts during the 2016 campaign. Six of these accounts generated the content that shared 340 million times, mentioning the organic spread of disinformation through the engagement of users. Advancement in technology helped Russia to conduct the campaigns, leveraging platforms of social media to amplify their impact and reaching capacity⁷. As financial investments

⁴ Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, "In 'Cyberwar,' Jamieson Argues Russians Helped Secure Trump's Victory," *Institutions of Democracy*, October 3, 2018, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/cyberwar-book-jamieson-russians-trumps-victory/>

⁵ U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election: Volume 3: U.S. Government Response to Russian Activities*, 116th Cong., 2nd sess., S. Rpt. 116, accessed March 20, 2025, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume3.pdf

⁶ Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018):no106, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/network-propaganda-9780190923631?cc=pk&lang=en&>

⁷ International Affairs Editorial Board, "Contentious Narratives: Digital Technology and the Attack on Liberal Democratic Norms," *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1.5 (2018):no 62, accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/e26508110>

are considered, the IRA spent \$100,000 on almost 3,500 Facebook Ads from June 2015 to May 2016.

Clinton and Trump campaigns on total spent \$81 million on Facebook ads during the same time, demonstrates the modest but impactful Russian expense. Russia's 2016 activities within an expanded custom of political and information warfare reminds of historical perspectives on disinformation tactics⁸. The Internet Research Agency (IRA) used social media to spread political polarization in United States, which mainly highlights the intensity of sophistication of their operations and campaigns⁹. IRA targeted various demographic groups to influence the public opinion and sowed discord¹⁰. Russian operatives created fake personas for infiltrating the American political discourse by manipulating the social media narratives for influencing and swaying the voters¹¹. Potential overlapping with Russian misinformation efforts connected it to a broader concern about the privacy of data and manipulation of public opinion¹².

Social media platforms have evolved beyond mere channels for circulating political ideas; they now actively support manipulative disinformation campaigns. While some of these campaigns are orchestrated by individuals, the majority leverage sophisticated software, commonly known as bots, designed to perform repetitive tasks. These bots, along with fake accounts and human "trolls," can be coordinated to create the illusion of widespread consensus. The book "*Computational*

⁸ Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2020): no 225, accessed March 22, 2025,

https://books.google.com.pk/books/about/Active_Measures.html?id=IWltDwAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y

⁹ Samuel C. W. Howard and Philip Noble, *The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the U.S.: Computational Propaganda Research Project* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2018): 5, accessed March 22, 2025, <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2018/12/The-IRA-Social-Media-and-Political-Polarization.pdf>

¹⁰ Renee DiResta and New Knowledge, "*The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency*" (New Knowledge, 2018): no 52, accessed March 22, 2025,

<https://archive.org/details/TacticsAndTropesOfTheInternetResearchAgency>

¹¹ Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti, "The Fake Americans Russia Created to Influence the Election," *The New York Times*, 2017, accessed March 22, 2025, <https://archive-yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/new-york-times-fake-americans-used-influence-election>

¹² Hal Berghel, "Malice Domestic: The Cambridge Analytica Dystopia," *Computer* 51, no. 5 (2018): no 84, accessed March 22, 2025, https://oasis.library.unlv.edu/compsci_fac_articles/77/

*Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians and Political Manipulation on Social Media*¹³ by Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard argues that this automation and platform manipulation constitute a novel form of political communication termed "computational propaganda." This differs from traditional propaganda by its use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully spread misleading information across social media networks, while simultaneously learning from and mimicking real users to effectively manipulate public opinion. Political actors of Russia and other foreign entities use the computational propaganda to manipulate the public opinion through social media platforms. The propaganda model of Russia characterized by the high-volume, multichannel disinformation of falsehoods, determining its effectiveness and suggesting countermeasures. The strategy of Russian's extended beyond Facebook, media outlets controlled by state such as RT and Sputnik, disseminated false and fabricated information which was further amplified by the pro-Russian accounts on the Twitter and other social media platforms.

This matter was mirrored in Soviet-era as "Active Measures" but was promoted by rapid and gradual dissemination abilities of modern digital platforms. The article "*How Russia Harvested American Rage to Reshape U.S. Politics*" likely argued that Russia's interference campaign in the 2016 U.S. presidential election strategically exploited existing social and political divisions, anger, and discontent within American society. Russian operatives exploited the existing tensions of society in the U.S, by using social media platforms to amplify the divisions and influence the political outcomes¹⁴. While the term "Harvested Rage," holds that this exploitation has had lasting negative consequences on American political discourse and social cohesion.

The 2016 Russian disinformation campaign not only exploited the existing societal divisions but the leveraged digital platforms to disseminate the falsehoods, particularly affecting the public opinion and highlighting the vulnerabilities in the electoral system of U.S. concerning all these challenges which requires a multifaceted approach, includes technological protection and policy reforming. Twitter played an important role in the spreading of false information in that time.

¹³ Samuel C. Woolley and Philip N. Howard, *Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018):no 23, accessed March 22, 2025, <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news-events/computational-propaganda-the-book/>

¹⁴ Amy M. Rosenberg and Matthew Rosenberg, "How Russia Harvested American Rage to Reshape U.S. Politics," *The New York Times*, 2016, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://www.niemanlab.org/reading/how-russia-harvested-american-rage-to-reshape-u-s-politics/>

Automated Pro-Trump bot and Pro-Clinton Bots were outnumbered by an estimated ratio of five to one in the day resulting up to the election. This contribution of disparity to the amplification of pro-Trump bot's narratives and the opposing viewpoints by the mean of suppression.

The expanding fake news especially influenced the perception of public. Stanford University studies founded that the fabricated stories favoring Trump were shared with the people 30 million times, which was almost quadrupling the shares of pro-Clinton fake news. Furthermore, the researchers of Oxford University explored that the pro-Trump Bots overwhelmed over the pro-Clinton messages, by skewing the landscape of messages. Platforms of social media faced scrutiny for their roles in helping and facilitating the spread of false and disinformation. Facebook denied the allegations of influential fake news initially but later on, realized that approximately 126 million American's might have encountered the content from the operatives which were Russian based. The platform had implemented measures to improve the content review and curb the spread of false information.

1.7 Literature Gap:

There are number of vital holes in research despite large number of studies on Russian misinformation during the 2016 U.S. election. The strategies and stages utilized in obstruction have been assessed, more investigation is imperative to decide the long-term impacts on democratic institutions, public confidence and future patterns of voting. Research on impacts of changing the tactics of disinformation on electoral integrity is rare. These strategies incorporate work of AI-Driven bots, platforms encrypted and digital manipulation. It is also hidden how successful the responses are, especially when the disinformation strategies are evolving. For capturing the evolving nature of information warfare, the recent case studies are required. More examinations are essential into the long-term diplomatic interference and political repercussions for domestic administration and U.S - Russian ties.

1.8 Research Hypothesis:

1. Russian meddling in 2016 presidential elections molded public opinion in favor of Trump.

1.9 Theoretical Framework:

This study uses the Priming Theory in conjunction with the Hybrid Warfare method as its main theoretical framework to better explain how Russian disinformation tactics affected public opinion during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The term *hybrid warfare*, as currently used, was first introduced by US Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Frank G. Hoffman in 2006, though Hoffman states he took the term from a thesis by Robert G Walker in which Walker describes low-intensity operations conducted by the US Marines¹⁵. According to *Hoffman and Frank G (2007)*¹⁶, hybrid warfare is the combination of classic military tactics with unconventional weapons like disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, economic pressure, and political influence campaigns. This approach's fundamental premise is that contemporary battles are waged across a variety of domains, including the informational and psychological realms, rather than just on the battlefield. This methodology is exactly in line with Russia's use of internet propaganda, fake news, and social media manipulation, which aims to undermine social cohesiveness rather than militarily destroy an adversary by taking advantage of internal differences.

Priming Theory, created by *Lyengar and Kinder (1987)*¹⁷, is also used in this study to examine the psychological impact of these hybrid tactics on the general population. The process through which media exposure shapes people's criteria for assessing political persons, events, or topics is known as priming. Its fundamental premise is that regular exposure to particular themes or messages makes them more salient in the public's consciousness, influencing their political assessments and beliefs. Tactics frequently highlighted divisive topics including immigration, government corruption, and racial tensions. They prepared American audiences to concentrate on particular

¹⁵ Russian Hackers and the Election of 2016,” *The New York Times*, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199743292/obo-9780199743292-0260.xml>

¹⁶ Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007): 11, accessed March 23, 2025, https://www.potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf

¹⁷ Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 210, accessed March 23, 2025, <https://archive.org/details/newsthatmatterst0000iyen>

concerns by persistently promoting these narratives online, which in turn influenced public trust, voter preferences, and emotional reactions.

The way Russia exploited online disinformation to psychologically condition or "prime" the American public for mistrust, divisiveness, and cynicism toward democratic procedures makes the connection of hybrid warfare and priming evident. This strategy fits with the goals of the study, which is to evaluate how voter choices were affected and public trust in the institutions of democracy was undermined by foreign disinformation. In addition to disseminating lies, the hybrid strategy used persistent, repeating messaging to influence public opinion—a psychological method backed by both priming theory and hybrid warfare theory.

1.10 Methodology:

This study has been made in order to examine Russia's disinformation efforts during 2016 U.S. election by using qualitative research technique. Because it allows a thorough inspection of the narratives, tactics and procedures employed in misinformation campaigns as well as their wide consequences for democratic processes and public opinion, for which qualitative approach is more suitable. For investigating the effect of meddling from Russia this study uses topic analysis, case study and content analysis approach. Content analysis is the main technique used, which involves methodically looking at reports, academic studies, social media posts and news details that influences the activities.

This method helps in identifying important trends, themes and tactics as employed in disinformation operation, including the spreading of false information, tampering with social media algorithms and the operation of state-sponsored media like Sputnik and R.T. Investigate journalism articles that have shown involvement of Russia in internet manipulation, researches of scholars on computational propaganda and publicly accessible U.S. Intelligence reports are some examples of content sources. Thorough description of Russia's meddling in 2016 election is also given by using a case study methodology. This research paper provides a comprehensive view of how such functions and operations by concentrating on particular examples of disinformation, such as the actions of Internet Research Agency (IRA), distribution of fake and hacked emails. Thorough examinations of the strategies used, targeted audiences and their efficacy in influencing public opinion and the results of election is made possible by the case study methodology.

Senate Intelligence Committee, researches of scholars from organizations like Oxford’s Computational Propaganda Research Project, also analysis from think tanks that focuses on cyber-security and informational warfare. Validity and reliability in understanding the results are ensured by triangulating data from different sources. By using qualitative approach, this study seeks to offer thorough examination of disinformation tactics from Russia, their effects on democratic processes and expected solutions to lower future election meddling.

1.11 Organization of the Study:

CHAPTERS	CONTENT DESCRIPTION
Chapterno:1 Introduction:	The study's foundation is presented in this chapter. The research backdrop, problem statement, research questions, aims, study importance, and theoretical framework are all included. Along with reviewing previous research on the subject, the chapter also identifies gaps in the literature and describes the study approach employed to address the issue.
Chapterno2: 2016 U.S. Election Champaign Phase 14	A thorough summary of the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign is given in the second chapter. Pre-election polling patterns, the main candidates' political backgrounds, the campaigns they ran, and the major issues that preceded the election are all covered. This chapter lays the groundwork for comprehending the social and political environment prior to election day
Chapter no 3: Elections Phase	The actual election procedure is the main topic of this chapter. It looks at voter demographics, official election results, methodological notes from Edison Research, and exit poll results. It also looks at allegations of manipulation, third-party interference, and the fall of the "Blue Wall." It also discusses disinformation, propaganda, and the impact of social media during

	and right after the election.
Chapter no 4: Late Russian role in Manipulation	The last phases of Russian meddling and manipulation efforts are examined in the fourth chapter. It lists the instruments, conclusions, and proof of Russian involvement. The type and degree of interference, its effects on public opinion, and the general integrity of the 2016 election are all discussed. The chapter ends with a summary of the study's key conclusions.
Chapter no 5: Conclusion	The final chapter summarizes the findings, discusses the implications for policy regarding the foreign meddling in elections, social media and cyber technology.

Chapter 2 2016 U.S. Election Campaign Phase

2.1 Background of Political Party and the Candidates

In the presidential election of 2016, The Libertarian Gary Johnson and the candidate from Green Party Jill Stein garnered the marginal but importantly third-party support, while the democratic nominee Hillary Rodham Clinton had faced off against the Republican Contender Donald J. Trump. Hillary Clinton had extensive public life history going into 2016, she was the First Lady from 1993 to 2001, U.S. Senator from New York from 2001 to 2009, and the U.S. Secretary of State from 2009 to 2013. Through an amalgam of pledged delegates, elected official support, and the institutional party backing. She managed to protect the Democratic nomination as following tense primarily seasoned that included a serious challenge from Senator Bernie Sanders, whose revolutionary campaign focused economic inequality and motivated the younger voters. Founding on the Obama coalition, Clinton's association prioritized ethnic and racial minority groups, various union households, and the exurban voters with college degree holders.

Although, there were continuous concerns about Clinton's sincerity and capability to connect with working-class white voters in the industrial sector of Midwest. 2016 campaign of Donald Trump was seemed unusual in history. In reality, Trump was TV star and real estate entrepreneur who had never been held as public office before. His populist, anti-establishment campaign focused on trade re-negotiation (especially the "Replace and Repeal" of trade deals had harmed American Workers, as claimed by him), restrictions and strictness on immigration and a patriotic "America First" Agenda. Donald Trump had gained support from those who had felt left behind by post-industrial economic and cultural changes by reassembling dissatisfying white working-class supporters, especially in the Rust Belt (Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin). Trump's conquest emphasized his ability to control the media coverage, turn media attention into direct voter reach, and take benefit of intra-party tensions. The Republican primary field had been sizable. However, their final votes contribute were small in comparison to the two major parties, third party candidates which had attracted the attention in some media accounting and polls as possible "Spoilers" in close state while in some states their totals exceling the gap between Trump and Clinton.

2.2 How the Campaign was Carried Out?

Operations like State-by-State field, rallies, fundraising, advertisements on TV, debates and focused surpass to significant groups were all part of the campaigns' routine operations. Founding on Obama-era strategies, campaign of Clinton's focused micro-targeted digital encouragement and coordinated an immense field effort in over various field of battle states. The approach of Clinton endeavor to unite a massive population, however associated, democratic majority by ending up on the specific policy and experience with calls for stability and continuity. While balancing and maintaining smaller on the ground professional organization in some states but highly visible existence in others, Trump's campaign placed higher priority on large rallies, direct, provoking messaging often using Twitter as basic communication channel, and heavy earned media (united media coverage far exceeding paid ads buys). Enormous expenditures were made on digital alliances and advertising during the election of 2016. Campaigns and foreign organizations made important investments in state markets and digital ad buys, which were significant component of convincing techniques. Hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on TV and digital advertising during cycle of 2016. According to media experts and political ad-tracking groups, and the amount as spent on digital ads continued to rise in comparison to previous elections. Trump aided from unchanging earned media exposure that out distance many sponsored positioning, even though Clinton raised and spent more money overall than Trump in many months.

During Federal and Presidential elections, large expenditures on internet and TV advertisements were monitored by the Wesleyan Media Project and other analysts. In 2016, digital and social media policies strategies were seemed to be significant change. Trump campaign had used social media to spread the ideas and deploy the supporters. Clinton's team exploited data analytics and micro-targeted advertisements convey over from the Obama campaigns. At the same time, social media was used by non-campaign player, such as domestic adherent media and foreign information operation, to enhance narratives and sway debate. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube became into major issuance platforms where selected ads and viral content could quick dominancy perceptions more quickly than cultural gatekeepers. The unsymmetrical role of earned media was one of the key characteristics of 2016's election. Trump's dramatic, alienating manner led to gigantic amounts of free press, including live broadcasts of rallies and conflicts, which aided his views get general realization at little expense. This impact was amplified by 24-hour cable news

cycle and the click economy on the media: politicians who founded content that was dramatic, alienating or malicious profited from high views and shares.

2.3 Pre-Election Controversies

According to various assessments, influenced close states outcomes that last months and weeks leading up to the election were dominated by number of high0profile events, some of which are extensively attributed to altering voter attitudes and experiences. Controversy over Hillary Clinton's using private email server during her tenure as the Secretary of state continued. Then FBI Director James Comey criticized and questioned Clinton supervising classified data in July 2016 and also narrated that the FBI would not propose criminal proceedings. On 28th October, 2016, eleven days before the election, Comey stated to Congress to inform and acknowledge them that the FBI was looking into latest found emails that might be related to the investigations and inquiries. Five days later, he wrote that the review had not modified previous conclusion. The Comey announcement, especially the Letter of October, had important impact on the perception of public and probably minimized the Clinton's lead in crucial oscillating states, as per number of post-election assessments, reporting changes and statistical models. Public action of Comey was later on described as "Serious Mistakes" in judgment by an inspector general statement.

Video in 2005 as the "Access Hollywood" tape appeared in October 2016 and obtained offensive comments made by Donald Trump regarding women. The recording gradually sparked national resentment, leading to criticism from certain Republican leaders and provoked discussions about the withdrawal of Trump. However, some voters said that they were put off by the brief apology of Trump, the scandal did not conduct to a widespread party withdrawal, and Trump maintained sizable succeeding among core Republican voters. The incident explored cracks in the discipline of party and sparked discussion about the media's focus on the character matter rather than policies. Websites like WikiLeaks began modelling a wealth of emails from Democratic National Committee (DNC) and campaign of Clinton head John Podesta plainly available in middle of 2016. According to U.S. Intelligence Agencies and the Special Counsel's, Russian Military Intelligence (The GRU) fetched out cyber breaches into Democratic groups and campaign personnel. Stolen materials were then transferred to the middle men who imparted them. False statements and polarizing content were spread over social media by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and other actors in parallel operations. Leaked interior documents combines with the concerted amplification

effort consequently caused consistency, noteworthy statements associated with the weakness of candidates and internal democratic fluctuations. This interposition was described as “Sweeping and Systematic” in the Special Counsel’s out comings.

2016 institute the attention to how mechanized bot networks, hyper-partisan links and “fake news” culvert spread inappropriate or misleading disinformation. Various high-interaction pieces that favored and allowed the storylines to get interacted and aligned with Trump were among the numerous false items that were found to be circulated widely by the academic study and reporting’s from platforms. Facebook eventually explored that tens of millions of Americans may have seen content from the actors with ties to Russia. False information spread rapidly due to interaction of biased media, confirmation prejudice and social interacting algorithms that stimulated interaction. Acute exploration of platform obligations and calls for extra content control and transparency were spurred by the occurrence.

2.4 Pre-Polling

Hillary Clinton led countrywide popular-vote polls in the weeks leading up to the Election Day, as according to number of state and national polls aggregated. Depending on the source, Clinton won popular vote by between 2.1 and 2.9 percentage points and majority of predicting models forecasted that she would win the Electoral College. Massive public trackers and the polling average from Real Clear Politics gave Clinton slight lead in national polls. In final days, FiveThirtyEight’s model, one of the most famous uncertain predictions, indicated that Clinton would win by between 70-75%¹⁸. However, its internal replications still generated an important minority of scenarios in which Trump won. The magnitude of margin and the unpredicted band varied, Clinton was also preferred by large number of other foretell, including The Economists and The New York Times Upshot.

Models non-discriminated primarily, demographic turnout presumption and national polls. Electoral College course was proposed by Clinton’s national lead and evident profits in certain demographic groups. Although, the forecaster pointed out some drawbacks, including the potential for the systematic polling error such as unrecognized working-class whites or non-college voters.

¹⁸ Nate Silver, “FiveThirtyEight General 2016 Election Forecast,” *FiveThirtyEight*, November 8, 2016, accessed August 25, 2025, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/a-users-guide-to-fivethirtyeights-2016-general-election-forecast/>

Late movement among the undecided voters, thin polling in some Rust Belts states and uncertain changes among the non-college white voters. Additionally, random predictions explore chances rather than certainty, even a 70% chance of winning leaves sizable credibility of less likely result.

According to Empirical examination of Post-October Survey, various battleground states, Clinton's margins shrank following the Comey Letter on October 28. According to statistical Reconstruction, it was essential in altering the Electoral College math in various states and cut Clinton's lead in oscillate states in half. According to investigation conducted by FiveThirtyEight, Clinton's chances might have been essentially greater in insufficiency of Comey narrative and the Russia-related distribution of damaged information. Various researches indicates that the late developments basically changed voters' judgments and strict the race, even though precise casual imputing is still up for question. On 8 November 2016, Hillary Clinton won national popular vote by about two or three million votes but Donald Trump won Electoral College. The inconsistency between Clinton's popular vote win and the Electoral College result extracted number of lessons: foreseeing models must openly express uncertainty; small turns in audience in few states can swing the election; the state level polls and audience models are significant for Electoral College outcomes than countrywide polls. Majority of public dialogues portrayed Clinton's advantage more secure than odds indicated, which was quiet crucial and surprising for many standards, rather than the fact the Trump won, he was potentially a winner in terms of probability. The campaign of 2016 revealed that the interaction between contemporary media environment earned media dynamics, social platforms, viral promulgation and conventional campaign activities. It revealed drawbacks in everything from polling and alliances modeling to platform governance and information security. It implied that non-traditional actors like partisan publishers, associated troll farms and foreign intelligence services, could have impact on the landscape of information in such ways that interact with campaign messaging and voter sentiment.

Chapter 3 Elections Phase

3.1 Introduction to Phase of Election

Although it had revealed that how susceptible the democracy systems are to coordinated the operation of information, cyber-attacks and algorithm driving amplification. The 2016 U.S election was a turning point in modern politics of electoral. As started out similar to traditional race between two major-party candidates, Democrat Hillary R. Clinton and Republican Donald J. Trump, rapidly turned into a demonstration of how the foreign actors could use selective disclosure and vast social media manipulation to swing public opinion and explore the trust in institutions. According to the later governmental investigations, Kremlin-led operation by merging the sophisticated computational promotion with standard intelligence and “Active Measures” to form strategic political effects that are intended basically to hurt Clinton and enhance the chances of Trump. Furthermore, being national political rivalry these analyses presented the election, immense instance of hybrid information warfare that utilize at the sequence of social psychology, media environment and hacking¹⁹.

Three linked components of phase are investigated in this chapter: (1) Main claims of declares of manage, paying specific attention to the reasons why outcomes were scanned as obstructed and how these discriminations fueled claims of fraud or foreign misinformation. (2) The formal outcome, Popular and Electoral College whole, and geographical and demographical patterns that manufactured the result. (3) Exit-poll predictions and divining surrounding that formed public assumptions advance to and on electoral night. These units shed light on measurable mechanisms of supremacy operations as well as instructive context like polls, models and media initiatives etc. that sculptured the public’s perception of vote.

3.2 Exit-Poll Results

In modern elections, exit polls and uncertainty projections distribute two purposes: They give media, operation and local expectations, which revolve shapes subsequent narratives, and they

¹⁹ Andrew Radin, *Hybrid Warfare in the Baltics: Threats and Potential Responses* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 11–13, accessed September 1, 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1577.html

give real time information about inclination. These challenges were transfer out in 2016 by various institutions. While the media vent released module and random forecast depend on united polling and systemic factors like household and economic composition. Edison Research regulated National Election Pool (NEP) exit polls, placing thousands of interviewers at the polling stations²⁰. One of the most famous probabilistic foresee was provided by Nate Silver’s FiveThirtyEight, which evaluated state-by-state argues by combining polls, hurting the terminology and simulation approaches. The local expected victory of Clinton going into election night since majority of estimated models projected Clinton as more likely winner, although with differing degrees of certainty. For instance, FiveThirtyEight’s module repeatedly showed Clinton victory as the modal result, but it gave Trump sad non-trivial odds. According to poll aggregators like Real Clear Politics and media projects like The Economist and NYT Upshot, in various national polls, Clinton was also leading. The main point of dispute among prediction was not the direction of the advantage but its magnitude. When the results digress, the disturbance was both substantive and cognitive because of the substantial “Forecasting Expectation” impact the results from that consensus and harmony.

3.3 Edison Research and Methodological Notes

The accurate field dataset on who voted and why was developed by Edison Research, the NEP exit-poll builder, on 8th November²¹. Edison has produced methodological documentation that describes the recruitment of interviewer, wording of questions and weighting procedures use to manage for socio-demographic disparities and non-communicative. The NEP Exit-Poll initiative incorporated confine exit interviews with limited vote returns to produce voter-level snapshot. Edison and other exit-poll category warn against exit polls as accurate predictions of final returns in every nation due to possibility of faults caused by illustrating variability and discriminating non-constructive, especially in states with exclusive competition or low gathering predictions. Exit-poll data exposed the fundamental trends that were in accordance with succeeded tabulations.

²⁰ ABC News, “2016 Election Results and Exit-Poll Analysis,” *ABC News Politics*, November 9, 2016, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/election-2016-national-exit%E2%80%91poll-results%E2%80%91analysis/story?id=43368675>

²¹ Edison Research, *National Election Pool Exit Polls: 2016 General Election – Data Overview and Methods Statement* (Somerville, NJ: Edison Media Research, 2017): 8, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://www.edisonresearch.com/behind-numbers-2016-national-election-exit-poll>

While Trump had important assist from white voter without college degrees as well as from bucolic and small-town areas, Clinton had powerful leads among non-white voters and women with college degrees. Exit reports also mentioned challenges and issues that positioned with Trump’s platform, including immigration, modification and economy. The Exit poll margins overemphasized Clinton’s lead in association to votes in crucial Upper Midwest swing states, which triggered post-election allegations of “Mismatches” between exit polls and vote comprehensive. These inconsistencies fueled both valid investigations methodologies and isolated claims of vote-altering. The methodological investigations exposed that factors of weightage and sampling such as the under-valuation of defaulter or late ballots in some predicted samples, which were the likely causes of imbalance. The pronouncement of the predictors of different uncertainty, even with the fact that various publications mentioned likelihood of Clinton’s winning. Even when Clinton was the pioneer, Trump victory was always a part in the predicted distribution because FiveThirtyEight’s imitation’s planning especially expressed distribution of Electoral College maps. Because of extensive media portrayal of Clinton as the expected winner, actual electoral direction. The slim victory of Trump in number of Rust Belt states, was seen by broad segments of local and media as analytical heretic. The Senate Intelligence Committee’s study of Kremlin, Edison Research’s exit-poll methodology and extent, the Special Counsel’s report explaining influence of Russian vectors and timing, and FiveThirtyEight’s public predictors representations and post-election detailing’s are some of the main sources that support the weight of this section.

3.4 Official Results of Election

According to the official results of 2016 elections, which revealed historic difference between the electoral College result and the popular vote, the candidate who had lost the popular vote has only won the presidency five times in the history of America. Several states that had been backed previously the Democratic Party were overthrown by Donald J. Trump just for winning, especially in the Upper Midwest and the Rust Belt, causing what the observers called the “Blue Wall Collapse”.

3.4.1 Final Results

Candidate	Party	Votes	Percentage	Electoral Votes
Clinton	Democratic	65,853,514	48.21%	227

Donald J. Trump	Republican	62,984,828	46.10%	304
Gray Johnson	Libertarian	4,489,233	3.30%	0
Jill Stein	Green Party	1,457,216	1.10%	0
Others	Independent Parties	750,000	----	0

Clinton had won the popular vote by almost 2.87 million votes. Donald trump had secured the Presidency with the resounding 304-227 victory in the Electoral College.

3.4.2 Margins for Swing States

With total margin of 77,744 votes, the victory of Trump merged on extremely narrow margins in three key swing states: Michigan, Wisconsin²² and Pennsylvania²³.

State	Margin	Winner
Michigan	10,705	Trump
Wisconsin	22,748	Trump
Pennsylvania	44,293	Trump
Florida	112,912	Trump
Arizona	91,234	Trump

Just because these margins had impliedly associated with even slight deception, turnout suppression and targeted meddling may have affected the results, they are significant for subsequent analysis of claims of manipulation.

3.4.3 “Blue Wall” Collapse and Electoral Map

Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania had backed all the Democratic Party in six consecutive presidential elections (1992-2021) before 2016. Furthermore, to being surprised, their determination to support Trump was strategically crucial because these states were concerned and

²² Wisconsin Election Commission, *2016 Presidential Election Recount Summary Results* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin State Election Board, December 12, 2016), accessed September 2, 2025, <https://tylerpaper.com/2016/12/12/wisconsin-completes-election-2016-recount-the-result-donald-trump-won-by-even-more-than-first-count/>

²³ Jill Stein, *Petition for Recount, Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, Docket No. 722 MD 2016*, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://ecbawm.com/results/the-jill-stein-2016-presidential-recount-case/>

considered to form the “Democratic Firewall”. The analysis of politics agrees that this rearrangement was caused by following factors:

- Working class economical discontent.
- Misinformation campaigns that deepened the divisions.
- resistance to agreements of trade including NAFTA and TPP.
- Drop in union loyalty.
- Anti-Globalization posture.

3.4.4 Voter Turnout and Demographics

Along with extensive media intervention, the 2016 voter participation was lower than predicted at roughly 55.7%.

Group	Trump	Clinton
White voters	57%	37%
White non-college voters	67%	28%
Black voters	8%	89%
Latino	28%	89%
Women	41%	66%
Men	52%	41%

One sufficient factor later connected to alleged foreign intervention was the interventional use of Facebook misinformation by Russian troll groups (IRA) to suppress the Black American voters in places like Michigan and Wisconsin. Fake websites like “Blacktivist” aided and encouraged Black American to not cast their ballots, dissimilate the notion that “Both Candidates Are Corrupt-Don’t vote”.

3.4.5 Impact of Third-Party on Results

State	Trump	Jill Stein
Michigan	10,704	51,463
Wisconsin	22,177	31,072

Pennsylvania	44,292	49,941
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Various post-election commentators contended that by diverting the votes from Clinton, third-party candidates helped Trump in swing states. Supporters of Clinton and liberal circles invoked mostly by criticizing the results, citing “spoiler effect” and misleading third-party misinformation campaigns.

3.5 Proclamation of Manipulation

Allegations that result was influenced by national and international manipulation arose gradually as vote total initiated to favor Donald Trump in critical Mid-Western states. These declarations can be divided into three major classes that have become focus of local discussion, attention of media and investigations: (1) Russia sponsored influential operations which integrated particulars disclosures, cyber-crime and social media influence; (2) information negotiation through mass production and promulgation of false and deceptive stories; and (3) technical asymmetry in the way votes were organized. These classes intersect: same international actors who managed to engage in cyber-getaway also utilized social media platforms to spread deceptive information and minimize voter turnout in general groups. According to U.S Intelligence Community’s January 2017 report of Kremlin Effort, the actors of Russia “directed” campaign focused to be aimed at threatening public trust in American democratic procedure, deflating Secretary Clinton and improving elected President Trump’s electoral chances. Cyber-encroachment and release initiatives (GRU hacking of DCCC, DNC²⁴ and targeted Clinton campaign and ensuing local disclosure of the stolen materials) and social media influence project run by Internet Research Agency (IRA), the St. Petersburg formed organization that fabricated U.S. personas, bought specific ads and circulated content on Twitter, Facebook and other platforms, were the main initiatives of Kremlin that were registered in the report. According to Intelligence community, top positions of the government of Russia directed these actions. Procedure of the operation were revealed by the proofs collected by investigators and included in accusations. According to Special Counsel’s report and Department of Justice citation that was made local in July 2018, the specialist

²⁴ Ellen Nakashima and Tom Hamburger, “Russian DNC Hackers Start Releasing Stolen Emails,” *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2016, accessed September 2, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2016/07/22/117f0574-504f-11e6-a422-83ab49ed5e6a_story.html

of GRU compromised email accounts and servers of party using fishing campaigns and other methods. Certain stolen documents were sent directly and indirectly to WikiLeaks, which released Podesta emails starting on 7th October 2016, at a time when the campaign of Clinton was getting negative publicity such as Access to Hollywood tape. IRA's social media activities were recorded by same DOJ account and governmental tape²⁵. Tens of thousands of tweets as well as thousands of Facebook posts and ads, roughly about 3,500 ads were recognized in congressional revelations, exposed tens of millions of user content of Russian site. Facebook reported that about 80,000 postings with Russian interdependence reached up to 126 million Americans between 2015-2017²⁶. The IRA paid about ad purchases came to about \$100,000, which is small amount in comparison to local campaign ad expenditure but is amplified by sharing and platform procedure. These operations were very powerful due to various number of characteristics. First, timing of the DNC declaration in July and WikiLeaks Podesta leaks began on 7th October 2016, initiated offensive and political damaging content into new cycles at times when recognition was needed the most. Second, strategy of IRA intentionally took advantage of divisions in area of race, immigration, gun control and LGBT challenges to propose the content that would obtain strong feelings and enhance sharing among the groups with same interest. Thirdly, actors were able to outreach specific demographics pieces in swing states by compounding micro-targeted paid ads with organic energy, which is the occurrence when the consumers share stuff without realizing where it came from. Finally, sensitive and conspiratorial stories were more likely to "Stick" as a consequences of the public rising mistrust of media.

3.6 Counting, Recounts and Information Unreliability

The result of election was delayed for various rational reasons, especially to the audience's outside bounds where the counting took place, a first, even when the polling in state indicates that one candidate will win the popular vote, limited margins in few states like Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan can result in a sequel that deviates crucially from the national expectations. This is all due to the Electoral College system means that Presidential winner is decided by state. Because

²⁵ Ben Nimmo et al., "*IRA Influence Campaigns 2014-2020*," (Graphika Report, October 2020): no 45, accessed September 2, 2025, https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_copypasta.pdf

²⁶ Colin Stretch, "Written Testimony Before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism" (hearing of the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, October 31, 2017): 02, accessed September 3, 2025, <https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/10-31-17%20Stretch%20Testimony.pdf>

of absentee ballots, different state suggesting regulations and basic analytical fact that a very small margin can take hours or even days to complete, tabulation many battle line countries in 2016 moved slowly²⁷. Secondly, counting process got more formal procedures and public attention as result of Jill Stein recount petitions in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Michigan. Although the efforts of Stein which was disguised as statistical audit and led by worries due to flaws in voting system, which sparked court cases and recounts that pursued until December 2016, they sustained the impression that the results were still up for discussion and stimulated further investigation into irregularities and flaws in system. In Wisconsin and Michigan, the results of recounts were inadequate to change the result of election: in Pennsylvania, the courts restricted and rejected the requests. Long after Election Day, various researchers and observers felt that the result was still in flux due to litigation and recount work. Thirdly, informal proof of counting issues was generated by technical issues and constrained equipment failures on Day of Election, ranging from Detroit's snapped scanners to limits errors of reporting. Although, post-election audit and recounts exposed no evidence of omnipresent, countrywide hack that importantly manipulated and changes the vote totals, these issues were real and crucial for the impacted voters. Although Controlled Security research such as DEF CON Demonstration and Academic work, showed attack vectors and cyber security specialist had long warned that various voting systems were hypothetically vulnerable, local forensic examinations of 2016 counts malfunctioned to access solid proof of successful, general vote-amend attack that modified the result. Precise analysis demands this difference between known susceptibilities and successful, large-scale utilization that took place in 2016. Lastly, penetration of delay was heightened by the predictor atmosphere and media framing. When returning in the Midwest started to favor Trump, journalists seen the difference through the identical prisms of surprise. The majority of major newspapers and poll accumulation had forecasted Clinton to win. People who are disposed to doubt the presumption gradually translate surprise as evidence of manipulation in the political division; the revelation of international influence activities only strengthen this frame of interpretation. To put it conclusively, the delay was mostly an informational procedure.

²⁷ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections: The Analytic Process and Cyber-Incident Attribution* (ICA 2017-01, 2017): 20, accessed September 3, 2025, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

3.7 Misinformation, Propaganda and Social-Media Influence

In 2016, the words “Fake News” became mostly used to refer to intentionally inaccurate narratives and initiated articles that broaden extensively on social media. Scope and nature of the event were reported by various studies and projects: in months leading up to the election, misinformation that were beneficial to Trump were thoroughly propagated on Facebook and other platforms. Simultaneously, Russian actors used both paid and unpaid to diverge on contentious challenges. Minority of highly associated user created and modified the greatest proportion of misinformation, even while majority of users did not use substantial proportion of propaganda. According to Governmental filings, IRA’s 3,500 Facebook ads inclined to direct and apparent support for specific candidate in favor of provoking social pressures and lowering voter turnout among specific demographics, for instance, African-American voters through sites such as Blacktivist. Academics alert against oversimplified informal contention that associate coting with exposure to the content of Russia. Exposure was outreached, recent researches shows that computable effects on people voting behavior are more difficult and crucial to identify and seem to be focused among the populations that are politically active or persuaded. Similarly, rather than flipping millions of undecided and finalized voters on its own, the Russian operation was successful in exposing and boosting already-existing differences as well as changing the tone and content of local conversation. Although, the combination of micro-targeted messages, persistency unfavorable exposures and weaker fact checking ecosystem likely modified the electoral countryside, a change that authorization important policy and customary attention.

3.8 Inquiries and their results

With high level of confidence, the ICA came to conclusion that the Russian government influential operation in 2016 with the aim of influencing the Presidential election of U.S. in such a way that would favor Trump and hurt Clinton. IRA social media campaigns, distribution of stolen stuffs, GRU and Mueller investigation, Russia had carried out “Sweeping and Systematic” campaign that include social media influence, hacking documents and distribution, interacting with Trump campaign associates and people connected to Russian campaigns. Report did not prove that Trump campaign was engaged in criminal conspiracy with Russia to oscillate election on the crucial issue of collusion. Mueller report is still concerned as primarily forensic description of methods,

procedure and participants²⁸. Multi-volume report from Senate Committee expanded on the local findings of the ICA by exposing the extent of Russian active measures, function of state media and targeted socioeconomic divisions in U.S.²⁹. Committee allowed previous intelligence reports and assessments concerning Russian intent and presented copious proofs regarding the IRA's ads and social media posts. Furthermore, detailed information regarding mechanism of information circulation and lack of detection was given by parallel governmental hearings and platform disclosures. The critics claimed that platform providers introduced adjustments such as vetting and bad politics, issuing of state-affiliated media, transparency tools for ads, modifications were long and inefficient to call algorithmic modification at scale.

3.9 Was the Results of Election affected by Manipulation?

The most empirical question is still this one. Fact that Russia carried out the operations focused at influencing the election and that these operations touched millions of Americans is evaluated by official findings and reports. They don't provide an accurate numerical estimate that international interventions amend votes to swing the results of the Electoral College. This problem is explained by various factors: (a) the behavior of election is multi-casual and it is hard to recognize aggregate social-psychological effects; (b) An important part of the content of Russia seems to have empowered prior ideas rather than changing significant number of voters who are still not confirmed; and (c) It is hard to associate specific exposure to particular voter because social media exposure data nowadays are lacking. Even a direct change in number of votes is hard to find, researchers stress that misinformation and meddling altered informational environment, leading skepticism, polarization and diminish in confidence. Implications for policy include empowering

²⁸ Robert S. Mueller III, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 2019): 05, accessed September 3, 2025, https://www.justice.gov/storage/report_volume1.pdf

²⁹ U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election: Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media* (2019), accessed September 3, 2025, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/2020/08/18/publications-report-select-committee-intelligence-united-states-senate-russian-active-measures/>

cyber defenses, improving platform transparency and funding media literacy and interest of local journalism to stop future intervention.

3.10 IRA Ads on Facebook

Platforms and committee staff recognized about 3,500 paid Facebook ads and sent them to Congress. These ads were created in various languages and the majority of U.S. targeted purchases were in English. Facebook enlightened Congress that between 2015 and 2017, around 80,000 pieces of content were posted by accounts connected with Russia and that throughout that time approximately 126 million Americans might have seen at least one post associated with Russia. 22-30% of the ads focus on civil rights and race. These included websites such as Blacktivist, ads that mentioned police brutality to stoke dissatisfactions and lower voting's turnout in aimed neighborhoods and content that enhanced mistrust of voting or protesting instead voting. 12-18% of ads were relevant to immigration and messages against Muslims. These mentioned anti-immigration sentiment, showed Muslim refugees as a danger and particularly targeted conventional organizations and white working class voters in battleground states³⁰. 8-12% of ads contain second-amendment and pro-gun material. These tried to manage pro-gun voters and balance political divisiveness around gun policy. 10-15% of ads had event advertisements and local state organizing. Local activities like rallies, protest and "Make America Great again", that were located geographically close to battleground zones were organized and enhanced by IRA accounts. 15-20% ads contain political polarization and beliefs that both sides are corrupt³¹. These ads, which were particularly directed at left-inclination minority populations, attempted to lower the congregation by enhancing scoffing. However, the percentage of fine-grain such as custom audience micro-targeting in the delivered ad set is debatable, platform assertion and Senate staff concludes show the IRA used geo-targeting options where possible and bought certain ads particularly targeted at zip code and city levels. Leaks such as hacked DNC stuff → WikiLeaks → MSM coverage, brought topics out of supporter settings and into national new cycles, and IRA

³⁰ Barbara Starr, "Russian Hackers Targeted Election Systems in 21 States," *CNN Politics*, September 22, 2017, accessed September 5, 2025, <https://www.axios.com/2017/12/15/russian-hackers-targeted-21-states-during-2016-election-1513303144>

³¹ Joshua A. Tucker et al., "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature," *Political Science Quarterly* 137, no. 2 (2022): 345, accessed September 5, 2025, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3144139

material mostly acted as briefing material for mainstream publications. The effect of the initial information was increased by this waterfall effect.

June and July, 2016 → GRU attacks Democratic target, emails from John Podesta and the DNC/DCCC.

22nd July, 2016 → DNC emails are made public by WikiLeaks³².

7th October, 2016 → WikiLeaks starts releasing Podesta emails.

8th November, 2016 → Election Day.

6th January, 2017 → The DNI Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) was published.

October – November, 2017 → Executives from Google, Twitter, and Facebook bear evidence before Congress; Facebook says that up to 126 million U.S. users may have seen content associated to Russia and the company exposes about 80,000 posts.

May, 2018 → Democrats made the database of about 3,500 Facebook ads connected to Russia publicly available³³.

March, 2019 → Mueller Report, which found no proper evidence of prosecutable conspiracy for campaign, released document stating “Sweeping and Systematic” Russian meddling.

2019-2020 → The results got extended in Senate Intelligence Committee.

³² Greg Miller, “WikiLeaks Releases Podesta Emails Linked Russian Hackers,” *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2016, accessed September 5, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/how-the-russians-hacked-the-dnc-and-passed-its-emails-to-wikileaks/2016/07/13/af19a828-86c3-11e8-8553-a3ce89036c78_story.html

³³ House Democratic Staff, “Release of IRA Facebook Ads,” May 10, 2018, summarized in *Wired*, “House Democrats Release 3,500 Russia-Linked Facebook Posts,” May 2018, accessed September 6, 2025, <https://www.wired.com/story/house-democrats-release-3500-russia-linked-facebook-ads/>

Chapter 4 Russian Role in Manipulation and Tools Used in 2016

4.1 Russian Role in Manipulation

Russia's recent engagement in international politics has been characterized by deliberate foreign policy initiatives, clandestine influence operations, and sophisticated information warfare. In order to influence political results in its favor, Russia has increasingly resorted to disinformation initiatives, cyber operations, and backing for proxy groups rather than direct military conflict. These strategies seek to increase Russian geopolitical power without resorting to overt conflict, weaken adversaries, and cause internal strife. Russia has attempted to influence public opinion, weaken democratic institutions, and defend its strategic goals on the international scene by taking advantage of social media, cyber networks, and propaganda outlets.

4.2 Tools Used In Manipulation

Russia has shifted from Cold War propaganda to a mix information warfare strategy since the early 2000s. This strategy had used psychological warfare, social media manipulation, misinformation, cyber operations and furtive funding to swing elections globally without adopting to direct military conflict. Russian meddling looks after to gnaw local trust in democracy, sway the opinion of public and influence the result of election to suit the geopolitical objectives of Moscow's. As the cyber operation which were carried out by the hacking groups like Fancy Bear (APT28) and Cozy Bear (APT29), connected to the Russian military intelligence, which are one of the main instrument of Russia. These entities had hacked the officials of election, governmental institutions and political groups. Furthermore, the democratic National Committee (DNC) was compromised during the Presidential election of 2016. Confidential emails were released to harm and hurt the Democratic campaigns. Bundestag in Germany got targeted by Russia in 2015, and the bad and denial of service abuses and smacks were used in the Eastern Europe, especially in Estonia and Ukraine, which had tried to interfere with election system and obstruct the vote counting. RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik, which were two state-run media organizations that circulated misinformation in various languages globally, are also used by Russia in its disinformation campaigns. Such networks had spread modified content under the appearance of independent journalism, as do fake news websites and social media profiles. To polarizes the states and exacerbate the internal conflicts, mostly the content centers on sensitive and crucial topics like immigration, nationalism,

race and religion. Manipulation on social media is a key tool used in the election. Troll farms like St. Petersburg based IRA run hundreds of social media profiles and bots that imitate actual people. These accounts spread hate speech, conspiracy theories and misinformation. 2016 U.S. election, the Brexit referendum, the 2017 French, African and Latin America election were all effected by Russian toll efforts. For its goal, Russia also employed backstairs political funding to back nationalist, far-right and anti-Western political parties. Russia had helped financially to the National rally in France, FPO in Austria, AFD in Germany and Fidesz in Hungary. Russia had offered extracting rights, political faithfulness and strategic influence to governments in Mali, Sudan, Libya and Central Republic in the Global South, especially Africa. Psychological operation is another main component of the campaign of Russia. Moscow had presented itself as defending conventional nationalism, conservative Christianity and traditional values against what it sees as the moral breakdown of Western Liberalism. Nativism and religious movement in Europe, the U.S. and some Muslim countries, where Russia had feed anti-Western and anti-democratic propaganda, found vibrancy in this ideological narrative. Furthermore, Russia had circulated conspiracy theories about the western governments in an effort to explore public confidence in political processes, outlets of media and democracy.

4.3 Evidence

There are plenty of evidences of Russian political meddling, which has been confirmed and verified by social media companies, cyber securities companies and governments. Russian military Intelligence components were associated directly to cyber- attacks by cyber security companies such as Crowd Strike³⁴ and Fire Eye³⁵. Google, Facebook and Twitter³⁶ (now X) deleted thousands of forged Russian accounts that spread political propaganda. Financial reporting's explored covert

³⁴ CrowdStrike, *Bears in the Midst: Intrusion into the United States Democratic National Committee* (2016), accessed September 15, 2025, <https://cyber-peace.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Bears-in-the-Midst -Intrusion-into-the-Democratic-National-Committee-%C2%BB.pdf>

³⁵ FireEye Cybersecurity, "APT28: A Window into The Cyber Espionage Operation of Russia? FireEye Threat Intelligence Report. Milpitas, CA: FireEye Inc. 3-5, accessed on 15th September. <https://cyber-peace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/fireeye-apt28.pdf>

³⁶ Twitter Inc., *Update on Russian Interference and Informational Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Twitter Public Policy Report, October 2018), accessed September 15, 2025, https://blog.x.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/information-ops-on-twitter

of Russian money going to European political parties through Swiss and Cyprus institutions. Comprehensive directives pointed Russian trolls to target American voters with posts deliberated to initiate chaos and spread distrust, which were made public by IRA in papers that were exposed. Reports from U.S. Intelligence services confirming Russian meddling in 2016 elections, which were made public.

4.4 Involvement of Russia

Major question is still: Did Russia meddle with vote tallies to directly or indirectly manipulate election? The majority of the time, the answer is no. because direct vote interfering is dangerous and detected easily, Russia rarely does it. However, Russia did make an unsuccessful try to interfere with digital vote tallies in Ukraine. Instead of concentrating on indirect influence which is merely risky and challenging as well to track down. This includes vote suppression strategies and policies to lower the predictions. Psychological manipulation for deepening polarization, misinformation campaigns for misleading the voters, bot amplification and modifications for controlling online narratives and redirecting funds to support pro-Russian politicians.

Chapter 5

5.1 Conclusion

Addition to the surprising results, the 2016 Presidential election has been seen as a turning point in the modern political history because of the remarkable foreign intervention and interference that had accompanied it. There is now solid evidence that Russia had carried out planned, intentional, multi-thorny influential campaign to eliminate the confidence of public in democracy of America and sway the outcomes of election. However, investigations conducted by the Senate Intelligence Committee, Special Counsel Robert Mueller and U.S. Intelligence agencies explored that Russian agents associated in widespread interference through misinformation, cyber-attacks and psychological, manipulation, they did not ensure direct voting tampering within election infrastructure. Therefore, rather than changing the ballots physically, the involvement was meaningful and purposeful but indirect impacting voters' thoughts. The strategy of Russia included psychological profiling, targeted advertising and propaganda, big data analytics and cyber warfare. Moscow utilized social media sites like Twitter, YouTube and Facebook to deepen the divisions of politics, influencing the political identity and increase the public misbelief of the media, institutions and the process of voting itself. Manipulation of election in the digital age has been changed from using the ballot boxes to utilize the algorithms and rational warfare, as evidenced by using the groups like the Internet Research Agency (IRA), hack credited to fancy Bear and Cozy Bear, and data manipulation through Cambridge Analytica. In summary, the meddling of Russia prejudiced the democratic procedure by influencing the political choices, description and feelings, but it did not rig the election mechanically. Beyond the foreign meddling, the most daunting legacy of 2016 is increased inclination of democratic societies to hybrid warfare and digital coercion. The election of 2016 serves as reminder that elections in the twenty-first century can be decided in cyberspace before a single ballot is cast.

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