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2024 Panel Exercise Scenarios

Critical Election Incident Public Protocol

Critical Election Incident Public Protocol – the Panel

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Incident Evaluation

The Panel will be responsible for evaluating potential election interference incidents.

What incidents may feature

Information manipulation

- Disinformation (ie. efforts to deceive)
- Coordinated inauthentic behavior
- Content created through artificial intelligence (AI)
- Spoofed, faked, or manipulated media

Who/what is being targeted?

- Voters
- Marginalized groups
- Specific communities
- The electoral process
- Political parties, leaders, candidates or officials
- Infrastructure
- Others

Who is doing it?

- Foreign state
- Third party or state proxy
- Domestic actors
- Other
- Unattributable entity

Why are they doing it?

- Influence election outcome
- Erode public trust
- Sow chaos
- Gain financially
- Test their methods
- Other
- Unknown

Cyber incidents

- Hack and leaks
- Denial of service
- Ransomware

Person-to-person interference

- "Traditional" FI (espionage, elicitation, honey trapping, etc.)
- Transnational repression
- Illegal contributions
- Interfering with nomination processes

Key Panel Considerations

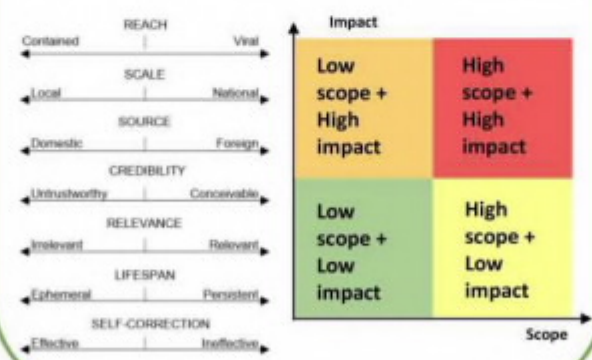
The degree to which the incident(s) undermine(s) Canadians' ability to have a free and fair election

The degree of confidence officials have in the intelligence or information

The potential of the incident(s) to undermine the credibility of the election

Determining whether the threshold has been met will require considerable judgement that reflects the context around the incident – assessments can be made using certain parameters including, but not limited to:

Electoral incidents impact assessment



Announcement Considerations

Purpose

Messenger

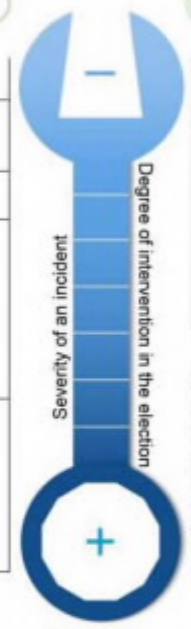
Information / Awareness

Mitigation

Reassurance

Set the record straight

Notice of election interference



PCO / Department Communications

Heads of security agencies

Clerk and/or Panel members

Elections Canada

Within mandate of Panel

All other steps exhausted

Impact on election

National security risks

Differential effect on specific people or groups

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How to approach scenario exercises

- A scenario exercise is intended to have the Panel apply the Protocol in the context of a plausible but imagined incident that could occur during the Caretaker Convention.
- When working through a scenario the Panel must determine whether the incident meets the threshold for a Panel announcement outlined in s. 6 of the Protocol or if other measures or tools could mitigate the risk.
- The focus of the exercise is the deliberation process in making this determination through considering:
 - the degree to which the incident(s) undermine(s) Canadians' ability to have a free and fair election;
 - the potential of the incident(s) to undermine the credibility of the election; and
 - the degree of confidence officials have in the intelligence or information.
- The Panel will also consider the range of tools available to address the incident, whether through other sections of the Protocol, or regular Government operations.
- To stimulate real-life conditions, the exercise is also meant to get the Panel comfortable with working in the context of unforgiving timelines and partial or imperfect information.

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How to approach scenario exercises

- A scenario exercise differs from a tabletop exercise (TTX) in that it focuses on the deliberation process – i.e. does the event(s) described require a response from the Panel whether formal or informal – rather than roles and responsibilities of different actors during an incident.
- In addition to determining whether a hypothetical incident facing the Panel meets the threshold, the Panel could also assess:
 - What, if any, other sources or entities the Panel would like to hear from, either in advance of or during an election
 - Whether and how other elements of the Protocol could be applied in the scenario, i.e., short of a formal announcement by the Panel
 - If and how the real-time reality of the scenario impacts the Panel's assessment
 - Any other source of information or support that the Panel would need, or that would benefit the Panel's deliberations

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Scenario 1 – Riding solo

- During the election period, half of the candidates in one riding are the subject of a significant cyber event that prevents those candidates from campaigning – the candidates and their local party offices can no longer access any of their devices, files, voter data, or communications tools needed for campaigning, issuing communications and placing ads. The candidates affected include the two leading candidates in the riding. No other riding has experienced similar events.
- Given that affected parties immediately take steps to contact CSE's cyber hotline, SITE becomes aware of the event in near real time and the Panel is briefed very soon thereafter.

Inject 1

- A day after the emergence of the cyber event, affected candidates' local party offices in the riding are subject to anonymous bomb threats, while their staff begin to receive threatening messages through their personal social media accounts. Half of the candidates in the riding remain unaffected, and no candidate or their staff in any other riding report a cyber-event or receiving threats.

Inject 2

- In the week following, those candidates affected by the cyber event remain offline and have also been advised by law enforcement not to approach their offices due to the ongoing investigation into the bomb threats. SITE deems it likely – but not certain – that the cyber event and bomb threats are part of a concerted effort by non-state actors from the country of Genovia, with domestic elements in Canada.

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Scenario 2 – Leaks in media

- During the election period, Canadian media begin covering a claim that four months before the election was called, CSIS had established that a Member of Parliament was working with agents of the PRC to advance the PRC's foreign policy goals. The media is basing its coverage on alleged leaked documents from CSIS, and its coverage includes partial screenshots of documents purporting to be from CSIS. The same Member of Parliament is now running as a candidate for Party A (governing party) in a riding the candidate has held for the last three elections. Parties quickly jump on the news, while Party A states that their candidate is being attacked on racist grounds.
- The Panel is briefed that the partial screenshots in media are likely to reflect actual documents from CSIS and that CSIS is investigating the source of the leak. The Panel is also briefed that the claims in media are accurate to the degree that CSIS did establish credible links between the Member of Parliament and agents of the PRC four months prior to the election, and that at least three Ministers at the time were briefed both in writing and in person. However, the credible links established, while unsavory, did not clearly indicate that existing laws were being broken by anyone involved, and no action was taken.

Inject 1

- In the days following, media continues to cover the story in detail, including through screenshots of additional documents purporting to be from CSIS. These documents state that the candidate poses a clear risk to Canada's national security. The Panel is quickly briefed that these documents are pure fabrication, with no basis in fact or actual CSIS documents. SITE is working to determine where this batch of documents originated from.

Inject 2

- Soon after, media, Party B and Party C begin questioning why the Panel is staying silent and not intervening considering there is "evidence from CSIS" that a candidate is a "national security concern" and "working for the PRC and not for Canadians." Meanwhile, SITE has reason to believe that the batch of purely fabricated "CSIS documents" originated from a Chinese-American diaspora group known for its advocacy work critical of the PRC and those with links to the PRC government.

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Scenario 3 – Claims of interference, no signs of interference

- Three weeks before election day, Russian media features a video interview in which the Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs claims Russia is actively interfering in the ongoing Canadian federal election by covertly supporting candidates from two political parties and by amplifying TikTok influencers critical of Party A (governing party). These claims spread far and wide among social media users and they are covered by domestic and international media.
- When the Panel is briefed two days later, SITE indicates that they have so far not found any indication that Russia, or anyone else, is interfering in the manner described.

Inject 1

- While media coverage of the Russian claims continues, the Panel is further briefed that SITE continues to be confident in their assessment that no interference is occurring, which is supplemented by information from the Commissioner of Canada Elections and local law enforcement. Officials from TikTok choose to act transparently and provide SITE with information and assurance that no artificial amplification of influencers is occurring on the platform. TikTok also offers to make efforts to reduce the circulation of content claiming Russia is interfering in Canada's election. Political parties remain confident in their vetting processes.

Inject 2

- A week after election day, which ousted the incumbent government, a long-term Member of Parliament and former Minister who ran and lost her seat in the election takes to social media to claim that Russia, unbeknownst to her, supported her campaign. She offers what appear to be records of financial transactions originating in Russia to her campaign and invites the Commissioner of Canada Elections to investigate. She questions how SITE or the Panel "could not have known," "how many more of us are there," and vocally claims that the finding calls into question the validity of the results of the election.

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Scenario 4 – Domestic meets foreign

- In the days following the English language leaders' debate, registered Third Party Y launches a video ad attacking the leader of Party B. The ad consists of opportunistic editing of Party B leader's appearance at the debate in an effort to persuade viewers that electing Party B will "inflamm" Canada's already "strained" federal-provincial relationship with some Western provinces. All phrases spoken by Party B leader in the edited video were in fact spoken by him at the debate; these have not been doctored but they have been taken out of context for the purposes of the video. The edited video is shared on social media with the hashtag #PartyBooFederalism, including by candidates from Party C, with whose political lean Third Party Y has historically been aligned. Some Candidates from Party A and Party D are also sharing the video, adding that electing Party B poses a risk to our federation.

Inject 1

- Party B reacts to the video by pointing out that Third Party Y is creating disinformation and shares its own video which includes more context from the leaders' debate surrounding the statements made by the leader of Party B. This video receives a lot of engagement online by users and Party B candidates who are attempting to correct the record. The leader of Party B accuses the Leaders' Debates Commission of crafting "unfair" questions to "set Party B up" and of providing an opportunity for other parties to "create disinformation." A small number of users and some candidates from Party B suggest that the debate moderator acted with anti-Party B bias during the debate.

Inject 2

- Three days later, an audio recording emerges on social media in which the leader of Party B is heard discussing a plan for holding a referendum in two Western provinces on secession from Canada. The audio recording is shared explosively online and quickly covered in Canadian media. Party B stays silent while all other parties issue statements reaffirming their commitment to federalism and re-iterating their concerns following the debate. SITE briefs the Panel that it is likely – but not certain – that the audio recording has been entirely created through artificial intelligence. SITE also indicates that it is following intelligence that points to the AI-generated audio recording originating as part of the efforts of a foreign-based influence-for-hire firm that may have been recruited by two large US-based oil corporations with financial interests in Alberta. This intelligence, however, is in its infancy.

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Scenario 5 – Spamouflage campaign

- In the days following writ drop, more than 50 candidates take to social media to comment that their social media accounts are being targeted by a similar spamouflage campaign as the one experienced by dozens of Members of Parliament in fall 2023, and which Global Affairs Canada issued a public statement and letters to Parliamentarians about. Multiple candidates targeted as part of the fall 2023 campaign are posting screenshots showing almost identical engagement to that of fall 2023 under recent social media content and election ads they've posted.
- The Panel is briefed that there is in fact a similar, PRC-linked, spamouflage campaign occurring as the one that GAC-RRM detected in fall 2023, and that much like in fall 2023, the content is of low quality and not receiving much engagement.

Inject 1

- It does not take long for affected candidates and media to begin questioning and expressing confusion over why GAC has not issued a statement this time around. Many note that SITE – of which GAC is a member – is meant to be actively monitoring the election. Some also wonder why the Panel has not said anything about “such a clear case of foreign interference” in the election.

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Scenario 6 – CEIPP becomes the news

- At the start of the election period, a mainstream Canadian media outlet runs an in-depth feature on the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol, describing the Cabinet Directive and explaining that the Panel is operational throughout the Caretaker period. This article accurately portrays the CEIPP and Caretaker Convention, and receives what can be considered baseline engagement among Canadians online.
- Soon after, a second mainstream Canadian media outlet runs an editorial criticizing the Government's approach to protecting the general election and in a separate article highlights that the CEIPP Panel is made up of high-ranking public servants, who, while qualified, have been appointed by the Prime Minister. The article posits that this renders the CEIPP an unfit tool in the highly partisan context of a general election. This editorial receives significant online engagement. The topic is picked up by *CBC News' At Issue* segment.

Inject 1

- During the *CBC News At Issue* segment, the host inaccurately states that any decision by the Panel to make an announcement is subject to a prime ministerial veto and asks whether this, combined with the Panel members being appointed by the Prime Minister, diminishes the value of the CEIPP during a general election. None of the four participants in the segment correct the host on the error, and the conversation that follows draws heavily on this inaccurate description of a prime ministerial veto power.

Inject 2

- Two days later, an audio tape emerges in which it seems a Panel member is conversing with an unknown person about the CEIPP having a prime ministerial veto power given the Prime Minister could repeal the Cabinet Directive at any time, should he so choose. The Panel member immediately indicates to colleagues that the clip is inauthentic and no such conversation ever occurred. SITE Task Force is able to quickly determine that the audio clip has been created by stitching together old public remarks by the Panel member, made during the course of their regular duties as a deputy minister, and phrases created through deep fake technology.