

Election 2024: China's Efforts to Interfere in the U.S. Presidential Election

by Lindsay Maizland and Clara Fong : 10-12 minutes

Russia opened a new chapter in geopolitical competition in 2016 when it used social media to [interfere in the U.S. presidential election](#). Whether that effort affected the election's outcome [can be debated](#). What seems beyond debate given Russia's [interference attempts in 2020](#) and again [this year](#) is that the Kremlin thinks that meddling works.

Now China looks to be following suit. In February, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence [issued a threat assessment](#) stating: "Beijing is expanding its global covert influence posture to better support the CCP's goals. The PRC aims to sow doubts about U.S. leadership, undermine democracy, and extend Beijing's influence." This week the *New York Times* [reported](#) that "covert Chinese accounts are masquerading online as American supporters of former President Donald J. Trump, promoting conspiracy theories, stoking domestic divisions and attacking President Biden ahead of the election in November." This campaign, known as "[spamouflage](#)," has prompted Meta to [take down](#) thousands of fake Facebook accounts operating in China.

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China's interference efforts mark a significant shift in policy. In 2021, the U.S. intelligence community [concluded](#) that China opted not to interfere in the 2020 election: "We assess that China did not deploy interference efforts and considered but did not deploy influence efforts intended to change the outcome of the US Presidential election. We have high confidence in this judgment." The intelligence community attributed the Chinese decision to a calculation that the costs of being caught meddling outweighed the potential benefits. Likely influencing that judgment was the assessment "that Russia's efforts to interfere in the 2016 election significantly damaged Moscow's position and relationship with the United States."

The Water's Edge

[James M. Lindsay](#) analyzes the politics shaping U.S. foreign policy and the sustainability of American power. 2-4 times weekly.

Why China has changed its calculations and what it hopes to accomplish are up for debate. Beijing may have decided that a second Trump presidency would [better serve its interests](#) than a second Biden presidency, whether because Trump would be more open to cutting a deal, less likely to have an effective foreign policy, or more likely to [antagonize U.S. allies](#). Conversely, Beijing may not see much difference between the two candidates given the broad consensus in the United States that China is America's primary adversary. Rather than chose between "[two bowls of poison](#)," Beijing's goal may simply be to weaken American democracy, and hence its ability to act coherently abroad, by inflaming political divisions.

As with Russia's meddling, it's difficult to say whether China's interference will affect the election outcome. The Biden administration, however, isn't taking any chances. Biden [warned](#) Xi Jinping in a phone call this week against interfering in the U.S. election. The fact that call was necessary points to a problem. Last November in San Francisco, Xi [promised](#) Biden that China wouldn't meddle in the U.S. election. That promise now looks hollow. The question is what Biden will do if Chinese interference efforts continue.

Stay tuned.

Campaign Update

Connecticut, New York, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin held primaries this week. [The results](#) were either meaningless because the nominees of both parties have been decided—or a sign that both nominees have substantial problems heading into the general election. Take your pick. Turnout in all four states was understandably low given that the race of the nomination is over. Nonetheless, between 11 and 14 percent of Republicans who voted in all four states opted for Nikki Haley. Meanwhile, 12 percent of Connecticut Democrats, 15 percent of Rhode Island Democrats, and 8 percent of Wisconsin Democrats vote for “uncommitted” or “uninstructed.”

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Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen [announced](#) his support this week for awarding all of the state’s electoral votes to the statewide winner of the popular vote. Back in 1991, Nebraska decided to award one electoral vote to the winner of the popular vote in each of the state’s congressional districts. Maine is the only other state to follow this practice. Whether Nebraska returns to the winner-takes-all rule that the other forty-eight states follow could be pivotal to the 2024 election. In 2020, Biden won the Nebraska congressional district centered around Omaha. If he loses Arizona, Georgia, and Nevada this November but wins every other state he won four years ago, that single Nebraska electoral vote would give him a 270 to 268 victory in the Electoral College. Without it, the outcome of the election would be decided by the new House of Representatives. Nebraska’s legislators [voted overwhelmingly](#) on Wednesday night to reject a move to change the law. The bill is unlikely to receive another hearing before the legislative session concludes on April 18. However, Governor Pillen could call a [special legislative session](#) to consider revising Nebraska’s electoral rules.

The self-described centrist group No Labels [has pulled the plug](#) on its effort to run a third-party ticket. In a statement, the group [wrote](#): “No Labels has always said we would only offer our ballot line to a ticket if we could identify candidates with a credible path to winning the White House. No such candidates emerged, so the responsible course of action is for us to stand down.”

The Candidates in Their Own Words

Last month, Trump supporters [accused](#) Democrats and the national news media over distorting Trump’s use of the word “bloodbath” in a campaign rally in Ohio. They insisted that the former president was not inciting violence but only using a metaphor describe what lies ahead for the U.S. automotive industry if Biden succeeds in persuading Americans to buy electric vehicles. Trump, however, seems not to have gotten the message. On Tuesday, he [told a campaign rally](#) in Grand Rapids that Biden had caused a “[border bloodbath](#)” during a [campaign rally](#) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It didn’t appear to be a slip of the tongue. Trump was standing in front of a sign saying: “Stop Biden’s Border Bloodbath.”

Trump Michigan

Trump also responded to Democratic complaints that his language describing immigrants was dehumanizing. Not surprisingly, Trump didn’t back down: “Democrats said please don’t call them ‘animals.’ I said, ‘no, they’re not humans, they’re animals.’”

Trump appeared on Hugh Hewitt’s syndicated national radio show yesterday. The former president expanded on [comments he made last week](#) that seemed to criticize Israel’s war against Hamas. Trump agreed with Hewitt’s characterization that he remained “100% with Israel.” Trump [added](#):

I’m not sure that I’m loving the way they’re [the Israelis] doing it, because you’ve got to have victory. You have to have a victory, and it’s taking a long time. And the other thing is I hate, they put out tapes all the time. Every night, they’re releasing tapes of a building falling down. They shouldn’t be releasing tapes like that. They’re doing, that’s why they’re losing the PR war. They, Israel is absolutely losing the PR war.

Trump concluded by saying that the Israelis have “got to finish what they started, and they’ve got to finish it fast, and we have to get on with life.”

What the Pundits Are Saying

FiveThirtyEight.com’s Nathaniel Rakich [pulled together polling numbers](#) showing that the Biden-Trump re-run isn’t the most unpopular of the last twelve presidential elections. That distinction remains with the 2016 race that pitted Trump against Hillary Clinton. The average net favorability rating—that is, the favorability ratings minus the unfavorability ratings—of that pair was -18 points. Biden-Trump the rematch is currently standing at -12 points. The most popular pairing? George H. W. Bush and Michael Dukakis back in 1988. Their net favorability rating was +20 points.

Politico’s Lara Seligman, Stuart Lau, and Pau McLeary [wrote](#) that the Biden administration is working with European allies to find ways to ensure that weapons continue to flow to Ukraine even if Trump wins in November. One of the proposals to “Trump-proof” support for Ukraine is to shift leadership of the [Ukraine Defense Contact Group](#) from the United States to NATO. In the view of one expert, putting the group “under NATO kind of isolates it from a Trump presidency, or even from a U.S. that might get distracted by China and can’t keep it going or can’t get his own funding act together.”

What the Polls Show

Familiarity may breed contempt, but absence does not necessarily make the heart grow fonder. That seems to be the takeaway of a Gallup poll released this week. Gallup [found](#) that ratings of Biden on a range of character qualities such as “is likeable” and “is honest and trustworthy” have fallen across the board since 2020. His ratings fell by at least six points in every category. The biggest decline was on “can manage the government effectively.” That rating fell by thirteen points. Conversely, how Americans rate Trump on those same characteristics remained more or less unchanged.

The Campaign Schedule

Trump’s criminal trial in New York state court for falsifying business records to hide his relationship with Stormy Daniels is set to begin in ten days (April 15, 2024).

The oral arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court on Trump’s claim that he has blanket immunity for all his actions while president are set to begin in twenty days (April 25, 2024).

The Republican National Convention opens in Milwaukee in 101 days (July 15, 2024).

The Democratic National Convention opens in Chicago in 136 days (August 19, 2024).

Election Day is 214 days away.

Inauguration Day is 290 days away.

Sinet Adous assisted in the preparation of this post

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