



UPDATED: January 2022

ISSUE BRIEFING: Securing Elections Against Cyber Threats

The Issue: Nearly 40 members of the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) serve as their state's Chief Election Official. Paramount to this role is safeguarding the integrity of the elections process. Securing elections from a range of threats and building a resilient system has long been a priority for Chief Election Officials. Foreign efforts to interfere in US elections have led to an increased focus on election security by all levels of government, the private sector and non-profits. All 50 states consider their election infrastructure and processes to be a target for bad actors.

States have made significant progress in implementing security controls, resiliency measures, training and other efforts to manage the risks to election systems. Chief Election Officials recognize election security is a race without a finish line. They are operating in an evolving threat landscape and are continuously engaged in this effort.

What has been done?

Election Infrastructure Subsector Government Coordinating Council (EIS-GCC)

Election infrastructure was designated part of the nation's critical infrastructure in January 2017. Consequently, an Election Infrastructure Government Coordinating Council (EIS-GCC) was formed to facilitate coordination between federal, state and local governments. The EIS-GCC has 29 members, of which 24 are state and local election officials. Eight are NASS representatives. Among its most important tasks, the EIS-GCC maintains protocols for threat information sharing and incident reporting related to elections. The EIS-GCC encourages adoption of the protocols by all election officials and industry providers.

Election Infrastructure Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC)

All 50 states, as well as about 3000 local jurisdictions, are members of the Election Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center (EI-ISAC) which was launched by the EIS-GCC and is sponsored by the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The EI-ISAC provides a range of cybersecurity services to help its members monitor network traffic and detect, block and report threats. The EI-ISAC also facilitates information sharing, analyzes information to report trends and provides incident response services. These efforts, and the broad participation in the EI-ISAC by state and local election offices and industry providers, have led to significantly increased situational awareness across the election administration community.

State Efforts

Chief Election Officials have expanded the IT and cybersecurity teams within their offices. They have also established partnerships around election security with the federal government, National Guard, other state government agencies, private sector firms, universities and civic-minded non-profits.

- Risk and Vulnerability Management Programs
 - State election offices implement a range of efforts to detect and manage risks and vulnerabilities to the election systems they manage. These efforts include risk assessments that leverage common tools such as the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Cybersecurity Framework or Center for Internet Security



(CIS) Controls, vulnerability scanning services from Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), penetration testing, and vulnerability disclosure programs.

- Outreach to Local Election Officials
 - State election offices also provide support to local election offices. States have provided cyber hygiene and incident response training, implemented multi-factor authentication for access to statewide voter registration databases, supported risk assessments and more. Most states have cyber navigator programs or similar efforts through which the state election offices hire cybersecurity professionals to provide direct assistance and “boots-on-the-ground” support to county and/or municipal election offices and IT providers.
- Collaboration with National Guard
 - More than half of states have partnered with their National Guard on election security. Guard units have assisted with assessments and provided surge support for incident response. State election offices regularly evaluate opportunities for National Guard partnerships. States have varying levels of opportunity to partner with the Guard due to differences across states in Guard capabilities and policy landscapes.
- Technology Improvements
 - Chief Election Officials have also focused election security efforts on improving the hardware and software systems that support election administration. States have or have helped local governments replace and modernize voting systems, voter registration systems and other IT systems to optimize security. States have also improved their patch management policies and are helping locals do the same.
- Audits
 - States implement procedures to verify the security and accuracy of elections including technology audits, process audits and post-election tabulation audits.

Federal Funding

Federal funding appropriated by Congress and distributed by the US Election Assistance Commission (EAC) has helped states meet their unique needs to further invest in election security protections, personnel and systems. Congress appropriated funds for election security and election administration improvements in 2018 and 2019. Funds are used to support and expand the state efforts discussed in previous sections. While funds are sometimes spent in large portions for technology replacements or similar efforts, states often allocate federal funds over many years to help support long-term efforts such as cyber navigator programs. States also utilized federal funding through the CARES Act in 2020 for COVID-19 election administration-related expenses.

Looking Forward

Election security is not a goal to be accomplished for one election. Rather, it requires ongoing efforts. State efforts described above will persist and expand. Securing elections requires a whole-of-society approach. All levels of government will continue to collaborate and share information with each other, election industry providers and non-profit organizations that support elections.

For additional questions on this issue, please contact NASS: (202) 624-3524 or lforsen@sso.org.