

Public Opinion and Foreign Electoral Intervention

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Abstract: In recent years, governments have used various tactics to influence elections in other countries, but we know surprisingly little about how citizens respond to foreign electoral interference. Under what conditions would American citizens (dis)approve of foreign involvement in their elections? To what extent does foreign electoral intervention sap confidence in democracy? How does election interference affect relations between countries? We use survey experiments to answer these fundamental questions. Our experiments, administered to more than 3,700 adults in the United States, reveal that even modest forms of electoral intervention provoke public ire, polarize citizens along partisan lines, and undermine faith in democratic institutions. Nonetheless, Americans are unwilling to retaliate harshly against electoral interference, especially when the interference benefits their party. Our findings suggest that electoral interference can be an effective tactic for manipulating and/or weakening an adversary, without running the risks associated with conventional military intervention.

1. INTRODUCTION

The revelation that the Russian government executed a wide-ranging plan to influence the 2016 U.S. Presidential election has sparked a global debate about foreign interference in democratic electoral contests. While countries have long interfered in each other's elections,¹ the sophistication and scope of Russian activities signaled the arrival of a new era of foreign meddling. U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that Russian interference had dual goals: to hurt the campaign of Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, and to undermine faith in American democracy.² By striking at the heart of American democracy, a foreign country had the potential to affect not only the balance of political power in the U.S., but also confidence in American political institutions.

Experts have warned that Russia's activities in 2016 likely do not represent the last time a foreign country will attempt to influence an American election.³ The growth of the internet means that states can attempt to influence elections in faraway countries even if they are greatly outmatched from a conventional military standpoint, and observers bemoan the lack of effective strategies for defending against this form of foreign influence.⁴ Despite warnings that foreign interference is part of the new American electoral landscape, we know surprisingly little about its effects on public opinion.

In this article, we use experiments to investigate three fundamental questions about U.S. public reactions to foreign election interference. First, to what extent do revelations of foreign meddling polarize the public along partisan lines? Polls conducted in the aftermath of the 2016 election show that Democrats and Republicans expressed different opinions about Russian interference. Democrats were more likely to believe that Russia interfered, more likely to think that Russia altered the outcome of the election, and more concerned about the potential for foreign meddling in the future.

It is difficult to draw general conclusions from this particular episode, however. Above all, we do not know how Americans would have responded if the shoe were on the other foot. If a foreign country intervened on behalf of a Democratic presidential candidate, would Democrats continue to denounce the intervention as an unacceptable attack on American democracy, or would they belittle—or even welcome—the foreign assistance? Would Republicans change their tune, as well, disapproving more strongly of foreign backing for a Democratic candidate than of

¹ Levin (2016a) calculates that the U.S. and the USSR/Russia intervened to help specific political candidates in one-ninth of all competitive national-level executive elections between 1946 and 2000, frequently tipping the balance.

² “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections.” January 6, 2017. https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/26/politics/democracy-interference-report/index.html>; <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/19/politics/bolton-nk-election-meddling/index.html>; Tenove et al. 2018.

⁴ For example, for a fraction of the cost of advanced military weaponry, Russia set up “troll factories” that exposed tens of millions of voters to propaganda. United States of America v. Internet Research Agency, 2018. <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>.

otherwise equivalent meddling to help a Republican candidate? Would partisan reactions depend not only on the intended beneficiary of the intervention, but also on the particular form of meddling and the identity of the perpetrator? Although data from 2016 cannot provide the answers, we can investigate these issues systematically through survey experiments.

Second, does learning about foreign electoral intervention undermine faith in democracy and diminish the desire to vote in the future? One of the ostensible goals of the 2016 Russian intervention was to make Americans doubt their own political institutions. Americans espouse less approval of domestic institutions now than before 2016, but it is difficult to know whether Russian intervention *caused* public sentiment about democracy to slide, especially since the downward trend began long before Donald Trump took office. How much higher would faith in American democracy have been if foreign powers refrained from interfering in U.S. elections? This question is difficult to answer with historical data, but it becomes tractable with survey experiments.

Finally, how does knowledge of foreign electoral intervention lead to demands for retaliation? In the aftermath of 2016, many U.S. politicians denounced Russian interference as an act of war and likened Russian actions to the events of September 11, 2001, which precipitated the U.S. war on terror and military intervention in Afghanistan. Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) explained that “when you use cyber ... to compromise our democratic, free election system, that’s an attack against America. It’s an act of war.” Others countered that Russian behavior was neither “an initiation of armed conflict” nor “a violation of the U.N Charter,” and would not justify a military response. How does election interference affect public support for diplomatic, economic, and military retaliation against the aggressor, and to what extent do opinions split along partisan lines?

To answer these fundamental questions, we embedded experiments in a large-scale survey of the American public. All respondents read a vignette about a future U.S. presidential election. In some vignettes, a foreign government attempted to help one of the presidential candidates by verbally backing one of the candidates, or by taking active measures such as providing funding, manipulating information, or hacking into voting machines. In other vignettes, the foreign country stayed out of the election entirely.

In addition to randomizing the existence and nature of the electoral intervention, we randomized which candidate the foreign country favored (Democrat or Republican), and which candidate won the election. Finally, we randomized information about the identity of the foreign country and confidence in that assessment. Having presented the vignette, we measured three sets of dependent variables: attitudes about the foreign intervention, faith in American democracy, and support for retaliation.

Our experiments revealed that even modest forms of electoral intervention provoke public ire and undermine faith in democratic institutions. Reactions divide strongly along partisan lines, however. Members of each party express substantially lower levels of disapproval and substantially higher faith in democracy when a foreign power intervenes on their side, than when a foreign power aims to help the candidate from the opposite party. Thus, the divisive effect of foreign electoral intervention is a general phenomenon, not a unique reaction to Russian intervention in 2016. Nonetheless, Americans are unwilling to retaliate harshly against electoral interference, especially when the interference benefits their party. Our findings suggest that electoral interference can sow public discord and erode faith in democracy, without running the risks associated with conventional military intervention.

2. HOW DOES FOREIGN ELECTORAL INTERVENTION AFFECT PUBLIC ATTITUDES?

In recent decades, it has become increasingly common for countries to play an active role in foreign elections. Often, this involvement aims to enhance the quality of democracy. In the run-up to an election, foreign governments sometimes assist with electoral reforms designed to improve voter registration, dampen the role of money in politics, and enhance the representation of women and minorities.⁵ When election day arrives, foreign countries and NGOs monitor activities in an effort to detect and deter irregularities such as intimidation and ballot stuffing. Given the growth of this kind of assistance, an expanding literature investigates how foreign election observers affect domestic perceptions of the quality of elections (e.g. Brancati 2014; Robertson 2015; Bush and Prather 2017).

In some cases, however, countries become involved in foreign elections with the intention of undermining, rather than aiding, democratic electoral processes (Levin 2016a). This article examines a particular type of foreign interference: using rhetoric or resources in an effort to help a particular candidate or political party gain an electoral advantage.⁶ Levin refers to these types of actions as “partisan interventions.” The Russian intervention in 2016, which aimed to help Donald Trump defeat Hillary Clinton, exemplifies the type of interference we are studying.

Past Research about Foreign Election Intervention

Given the potential importance of foreign election interference for both domestic and international politics, there is surprisingly scant research on how foreign election interventions affect domestic attitudes. Only three studies, to our knowledge, have investigated public opinion about foreign election interference, and none incorporated data from the United States.⁷

Shulman and Bloom (2012) studied public approval of Russian and Western involvement in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential elections, in which Russia publicly backed one candidate and the U.S. and EU another. Shulman and Bloom argue that when citizens evaluate election interference, they consider the effects of intervention for both national identity and national

⁵ See for example, Kelley 2008; Hyde 2011; Hyde and Marinov 2014; Norris 2017.

⁶ Our scope is similar to Levin (2016a; 2016b) who focuses on partisan electoral interventions, and narrower than that of Corstange and Marinov (2012), who use the term intervention to describe both partisan interventions and democracy promotion. On forms of intervention that are not necessarily partisan, see Tenove et al 2018. See also Lin and Kerr, forthcoming, on “Information/influence warfare and manipulation (IIWAM)”, which is “the deliberate use of information by one party on an adversary to confuse, mislead, and ultimately to influence the choices and decisions that the adversary makes.” (4-5). This can include foreign meddling in elections.

⁷ In an important contribution, Levin (2016a) investigates how interference by the U.S. and the USSR/Russia affected election outcomes between 1946 and 2000. Using an original dataset, he finds that intervention increased the vote share of the favored candidate by about 3 percentage points. While this research sheds fascinating light on macro-level question such as election outcomes, the data do not allow us to assess the *micro*-level attitudes of interest in this paper. See also Levin 2018a on the effect of foreign election intervention on national levels of democracy, and Levin 2018b on how foreign intervention affects the incidence of domestic terrorism. For historical analyses of specific electoral interventions, see for example Daugherty 2004; Deconde 1958, Miller 1983, Haslam 2005; Prados 2006; Gustafson 2007.

autonomy. Using public opinion surveys fielded approximately a year after the election, Shulman and Blum find that the public disapproved of both Western and Russian electoral involvement, but disapproved more of Western influence, possibly because many Ukrainians identified more strongly with Russia than the West. They conclude that “Foreign influence over any aspect of a state’s political development, especially one that so closely symbolises self-rule such as elections, risks unleashing a backlash fuelled by citizens jealously guarding their national autonomy and national identity.” (470).

The other two studies, which focused on the 2009 parliamentary elections in Lebanon (Corstange and Marinov 2012; Marinov 2013) reach a different conclusion: while Ukrainians universally rejected foreign interference, Lebanese voters appeared to *welcome* foreign intervention when it benefitted their preferred candidate. To reach these conclusions, Corstange and Marinov ran a survey experiment in which they randomly assigned information about either American or Iranian support for one side in the Lebanese parliamentary election. They subsequently measured support for protecting foreign relations with the U.S. and Iran and satisfaction with the role played by the foreign country.

The results suggested that information about American intervention polarized the Lebanese electorate. When the beneficiaries of American influence (supporters of the Sunni-led March 14 alliance) heard that the U.S. had favored one side, they responded by expressing an increased desire for cooperation with the U.S. (Corstange and Marinov 2012). In contrast, members of the Shia community, whose preferred candidates had been shunned by the U.S. in the 2009 election, preferred to downgrade relations when told that the U.S. had favored one side. Although the experiment did not find analogous effects for Iranian intervention, the authors concluded that information about foreign intervention “did not provoke a nationalistic backlash against any meddling in domestic affairs whatsoever” (667).

Marinov (2013) drew on the same experimental data, but examined voters’ satisfaction with foreign involvement in the election. He found that low-education voters who preferred a U.S.-supported candidate tended to approve of partisan U.S. intervention, whereas the opposite was true of low-education voters who preferred a candidate the U.S. was not backing. More educated, sophisticated voters did not display these partisan reactions; nor did voters who were asked to consider an Iranian intervention.

Thus, the three existing studies about public reactions to foreign electoral interference not only reach conflicting conclusions, but also leave open many important questions. By focusing on interventions that consisted primarily of overt verbal statements, past studies cannot say how the public would react to more active forms of electoral intervention. Moreover, voters in the Ukraine in 2004 and Lebanon in 2009—a “fragile and unconsolidated” democracy (659)—may be more tolerant toward intervention than voters in a longstanding democracy such as the United States. Finally, previous studies do not reveal how foreign interference affects faith in democracy; whether the public would support retaliation against a country suspected of intervening in an election; or whether uncertainty about the perpetrator’s identity diminishes support for reprisal. In the remainder of this section, we develop our hypotheses in more detail, thereby setting the stage for our experimental design.

Hypotheses about Disapproval and Polarization

We hypothesize that revelations of foreign intervention sow discord by generating polarized partisan responses. Unlike traditional forms of foreign intervention, such as a military

attack on a nation's territory, partisan electoral interventions create domestic winners and losers: they help one candidate or party at the expense of others.⁸

We anticipate that American voters will disapprove more strongly of foreign meddling on behalf of political opponents, than of foreign meddling to assist members of their own party. There are three possible reasons for this apparent double standard. The first reason is consequentialist. Many voters believe that victory by their own party would produce better policies than victory by the opposition, where better is understood as enhancing their own utility or the welfare of the country as a whole. To the extent that voters judge foreign interference based on its consequences, they should, therefore, disapprove most strongly of interference on behalf of adversaries, since such interference could contribute to bad policy outcomes for themselves or the nation.

The second reason is perceptual. Numerous psychological studies have shown that people tend to overestimate the extent to which other citizens agree with their own opinion. This "false consensus effect" is evident in many spheres, including politics, where members of a party generally overestimate the percentage of voters who agree with their party. The false consensus effect could color how people respond to electoral interventions. Suppose that people are normatively opposed to interference that would change the outcome of the election, but willing to tolerate interventions they regard as less consequential. If, due partially to the false consensus effect, people expect their own party to win with or without foreign assistance, they should be less likely to disapprove of intervention on behalf of their own party (which would win regardless of foreign help), than assistance on behalf of the opposition (which might not win without foreign aid).

The final reason is symbolic. In sports, people tend to approve of fans who express solidarity with their own team, and disapprove of fans who cheer for the opposition, even when such cheerleading has no effect on the outcome of a match. A similar logic applies to politics: expressing enthusiasm for one's own party seems less objectionable than expressing support for the opposition, even when expressions of support would not affect the outcome of an election. As such, even when foreign meddling has no real impact on the election, citizens should disapprove more strongly of meddlers who took the "wrong side" than of meddlers who supported the right political team.

In summary, we predict that citizens could exhibit a partisan double-standard for three reasons: foreign intervention on behalf of the opposition could (1) be seen as contributing to bad policy outcomes, (2) be perceived as more likely to change the outcome of the election, and/or (3) be regarded as symbolic support for the wrong team. Of course, not all voters have firm partisan affiliations. We anticipate that independent voters without a clear partisan lean will not discriminate among interventions that favor Democrats compared to Republicans.

We also assess whether disapproval depends on the form of foreign intervention. Foreign election intervention can come in two general modes: rhetorical support and concrete actions. Foreign countries often express their opinions about candidates, sometimes accompanied with a promise of future reward or threat of future punishment. Foreign power also take concrete actions such as donating money to an election campaign, spreading embarrassing information about a candidate, or, at the extreme, hacking into voting systems to alter the tally of votes.

⁸ Of course, there are exceptions, such as weapons manufacturers, but most wars do not involve widespread domestic winners.

We hypothesize that the public is more likely to disapprove of foreign electoral involvement when a country takes active measures, compared to making verbal statements about candidates or staying out of an election entirely. From a normative standpoint, active interventions are likely to be seen as inappropriate infringements on sovereignty, whereas citizens might regard foreign rhetoric as an unproblematic exercise of free speech. Active interventions are also more likely to be seen as consequential, that is, more likely to change the outcome of the election. For both reasons, citizens should disapprove more strongly of active intervention than mere rhetorical support.

Foreign Electoral Intervention and Attitudes about Democracy

We next hypothesize that foreign involvement in elections has negative consequences for attitudes about U.S. democracy, including faith in the integrity of elections, confidence in the electoral outcome, and attitudes about future political participation. Scholars have established that electoral fraud and manipulation erode trust in elections and institutions and depress public participation (e.g. Anderson et al. 2005; Simpson 2013; Wellman, Hyde, and Hall 2017). Building on this literature, we argue that foreign electoral interventions will contribute to disillusionment with democracy. Democratic elections are premised on the idea that citizens choose their own representatives. If voters believe—or even suspect—that a foreign intervention influenced the electoral outcome, they might lose confidence in the integrity of the democratic process. To the extent that active interventions are perceived as more consequential than verbal expressions of support, active interventions should be particularly corrosive for confidence in democracy.

Although foreign intervention may contribute to democratic pessimism in general, we predict that the effects will be most pronounced among citizens whose own party was attacked. Two reasons contribute to this prediction. First, as discussed earlier, individuals tend to overestimate the extent to which their preferences are shared by others (the false consensus effect). When citizens learn that a foreign country intervened on behalf of the opponent, as opposed to helping their own party, they will tend to conclude that the intervention was more consequential. Because consequential foreign interventions do more to undermine the democratic process, interventions designed to help the opponent will be more damaging to attitudes about democracy.

Second, research has shown that voters on the losing side of an election are significantly less satisfied with how democracy functions and exhibit less faith in democratic institutions (e.g. Anderson and Tverdova 2001; Anderson et al. 2005; Anderson and Guillory 1997). As Anderson and Tverdova (2001) put it, “because the political system is a friendlier place for those identifying with a governing party, people in the political majority should be more positive about its workings” (324). Following this logic, foreign intervention should be especially demoralizing when the intervention aims to help the opposition *and*—perhaps partly as a consequence of foreign aid—the opposition actually wins.⁹

⁹ By a similar logic, we also expect that the winners of elections will be more satisfied about democracy than the losers, regardless of whether or not an intervention occurred. Research has also uncovered partisan differences in responses to fraudulent elections (e.g. Wellman, Hyde, and Hall 2017).

Foreign Electoral Intervention and Foreign Policy Preferences

Finally, what are the consequences of election intervention on public attitudes about foreign relations with the intervening power? Existing research has yet to investigate this question. To date, definitive norms about appropriate foreign policy responses to election interference have not emerged.¹⁰ For example, while some Americans concluded that Russian interference in the 2016 election was an “act of war” deserving a forceful reply,¹¹ others have advocated for a more measured response even while acknowledging that Russia intervened.

We hypothesize that both the mode of the intervention and partisan considerations will influence support for retaliation. First, we expect that active interventions will produce greater support for a firm response than verbal statements. Verbal statements are not only likely to be seen as less effective, but they also are less likely to be perceived as an act of war than active measures such as cyber hacking.

Further, we expect that responses will be influenced by partisanship, with greater support for an aggressive response when the opposing side benefits from foreign help. This is because voters will disapprove more of interventions on behalf of the opposing side, seeing them as worse for the country, more effective, and less appropriate from a symbolic standpoint. Voters without firm partisan attachments, however, should be indifferent to which side was favored by foreign powers.

Finally, electoral interference is distinct from many other forms of foreign intervention because of greater uncertainty about the identity of the perpetrator. Given the difficulty of tracing the origins of cyber-enabled attacks in particular, intelligence agencies may find it difficult to attribute responsibility.¹² The potential for uncertainty about the identity of the offender, in turn, could be consequential for foreign policy. We anticipate that citizens who are unsure about whether a country committed election interference will be more hesitant to react decisively, out of fear of unnecessarily harming relations with a country that later turns out to be innocent. Alternatively, citizens might support a strong foreign policy response against a suspected election meddler even in the face of uncertainty. They might reason that deterring future interference by other countries is worth the risk of alienating the wrong culprit. Our experimental design allows us to evaluate these competing possibilities.

¹⁰ For an interesting legal analysis, see Ohlin (2016).

¹¹ “A Consensus Emerges: Russia Committed an ‘Act of War’ on Par With Pearl Harbor and 9/11. Should the U.S. Response Be Similar?” Glenn Greenwald, February 19, 2018, *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2018/02/19/a-consensus-emerges-russia-committed-an-act-of-war-on-par-with-pearl-harbor-and-911-should-the-u-s-response-be-similar/>

¹² Indeed, former FBI director James Comey said that Russians were “unusually loud in their intervention,” perhaps because Russia *wanted* its activities to be discovered. “Russia Wanted Trump to Win. And it Wanted to Get Caught.” Julian Sanchez, *New York Times*, February 17, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/17/opinion/russia-interference-elections-trump.html>

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

To study public perceptions of foreign electoral intervention, we administered a survey experiment to a diverse sample of 3,732 U.S. adults in March 2018. The sample was recruited by Lucid, which selected participants to resemble the gender, age, geographic, and racial distribution of the U.S. adult population.¹³

We began by telling participants: “On the next few pages, we will describe a situation that could take place in the future. Please read the description carefully. After you have read about the situation, we will ask for your opinions.” All respondents then received a vignette about the U.S. Presidential election of 2024.

We randomly assigned each participant to one of three treatment groups, which varied in the degree to which a named foreign country interfered with the election. Members of the statement group received a scenario in which the country publicly announced its preference for one of the candidates, but took no steps beyond intimating that a disappointing outcome would prompt it to rethink its relationship with the United States. In contrast, the action group read a story in which agents from the foreign country used money, information, or hacking to give their favored candidate an electoral advantage. Finally, members of the stay out group received a control vignette, in which the foreign country did not meddle in the U.S. election.

We now describe each treatment in more detail. Members of the statement group read the following vignette, with randomized components in italics:

In 2024, the government of [*country*] made several public statements during the U.S. Presidential election campaign. [*Country*] said that it strongly preferred [*favored candidate*] and hoped [*favored candidate*] would win the U.S. Presidential election. [*Country*] said that, if [*disfavored candidate*] won, it would rethink its economic and military relationships with the U.S. In the end, [*winner*] won the U.S. Presidential election. Observers began debating whether [*country*]'s statements during the campaign might have affected the results of the election.

In our survey, *country* was assigned to be China, Pakistan, or Turkey; the *favored candidate* was either “the Democratic candidate” or “the Republican candidate”, leaving the other candidate as the *disfavored candidate*; and the *winner* either the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate. *Country*, *favored candidate*, and *winner* were randomized independently, resulting in $3 \times 2 \times 2 = 12$ variations.

The action scenario involved more active modes of intervention: giving money to support a campaign, spreading true or false information, or hacking into voting machines. Members read the following text, with randomized components in italics.

In 2024, a foreign country developed a plan to influence the U.S. Presidential election. There was a [*percent*] chance that the foreign country was [*country*]. The plan was designed to help [*favored candidate*] and hurt [*disfavored candidate*]. According to the plan, agents from the foreign country would [*action*]. The foreign country carried out its plan to help [*favored candidate*] and hurt [*disfavored candidate*]. In the end, [*winner*] won

¹³ Later, we discuss how results from the U.S. in 2018 may generalize to other countries.

the U.S. Presidential election. Authorities began investigating whether the foreign country might have affected the results of the election.

Country, *avored candidate*, *disfavored candidate*, and *winner*, were randomized based on the protocol described earlier. Recognizing that citizens might not be sure which foreign country carried out the intervention, we randomized *percent* to be 50%, 75%, 95%, or 100%. Finally, we randomized the *action* of the foreign country. Its agents would give money (“give \$50 million to support the campaign of *avored candidate*”); spread truth (“use social media to spread embarrassing but true information about *disfavored candidate*—accurately revealing that *disfavored candidate* had broken laws and acted immorally”); spread lies (“use social media to spread embarrassing lies about *disfavored candidate*—falsely claiming that *disfavored candidate* had broken laws and acted immorally”); or hack machines (“hack into voting machines and change the official vote count to give [beneficiary] extra votes”). Overall, the action group included $3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 4 \times 4 = 192$ combinations. Depending on the hypothesis being tested, we analyze some of these variations while averaging over the others.

Finally, in the stay out story, the named country never carried out an intervention. The text appears below, with randomized components in italics.

In 2024, there was a false rumor that [*country*] had developed a plan to influence the U.S. Presidential election. In fact, [*country*] never had such a plan. The election proceeded without any involvement by [*country*], and [*winner*] won the U.S. Presidential election.

As in the other scenarios, *country* was China, Pakistan, or Turkey, and the *winner* was either the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate. Thus, the stay out group involved $3 \times 2 = 6$ experimental variations. Table 1 summarizes these experimental treatments.

Readers might wonder about our decision to name China, Pakistan, and Turkey as the countries in our vignette. Our scenarios required countries that met three criteria. First, the country had to be technologically advanced enough to mount an operation such as hacking into voting machines. If we had asked about a militarily and technologically weak country such as Syria, for example, subjects might have doubted whether it could carry off such a feat. Second, the country needed to have a plausible motive to interfere in a U.S. election. If we had asked about a liberal democracy such as France or Germany, respondents might have doubted whether it would have any motive to undermine U.S. elections. Third, we sought to avoid countries where public perceptions of the country currently feature a strong partisan split. By selecting China, Pakistan, and Turkey, we chose three countries that are militarily powerful enough that they could potentially carry out the kinds of plans we describe in our scenario, who could have a plausible motive in the eyes of Americans, and where perceptions of the country are not sharply

split on partisan lines.¹⁴ As we show later, the specific country mentioned had little effect on public perceptions of intervention.

Table 1: Experimental Treatments

	Statement Group	Action Group	Stay Out Group
<i>country</i>	China, Pakistan, Turkey	China, Pakistan, Turkey	China, Pakistan, Turkey
<i>avored candidate</i>	The Democratic candidate, The Republican candidate	The Democratic candidate, The Republican candidate	N/A
<i>winner</i>	The Democratic candidate, The Republican candidate	The Democratic candidate, The Republican candidate	The Democratic candidate, The Republican candidate
<i>percent</i>	N/A	50, 75, 95, 100	N/A
<i>action</i>	N/A	Give money, Spread truth, Spread lies, Hack machines	N/A

Each participant read one scenario. We then measured opinions about three topics. First, would they approve or disapprove of how the foreign country behaved? Second, how would such events affect their confidence in U.S. elections and American democracy? Finally, what foreign policies they would support with respect to the country in the scenario? We organize the remainder of the paper around these three questions.

4. RESULTS

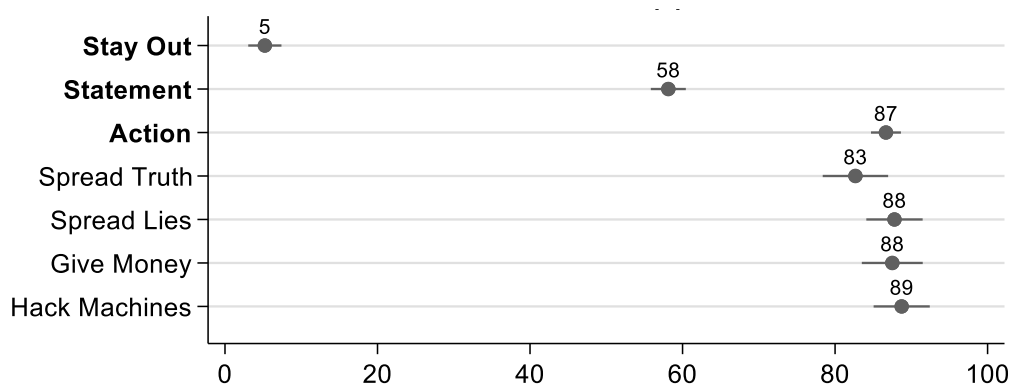
Public Disapproval of Foreign Electoral Intervention

We first investigate how the public views foreign electoral intervention. Do interventions sow discord by polarizing the electorate along partisan lines? After presenting the scenario, we asked respondents whether they approved or disapproved of how the foreign country behaved. There were five response options: approve strongly, disapprove somewhat, neither approve nor disapprove, disapprove somewhat, and disapprove strongly. For simplicity, we focus on the percentage of respondents who disapproved, but the appendix documents that our main conclusions hold when we analyze the full five-point scale, as well.

¹⁴ For data on military power, we inspected the National Military Capabilities dataset, version 5.0 (Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey 1972). We also consulted data on perceptions of countries as friends or enemies, to ensure that we were not selecting countries that Americans perceive to be firm friends: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/02/03/upshot/which-country-do-americans-like-most-for-republicans-its-australia.html>. While Turkey is a NATO ally, its democratic institutions have been declining in recent years, and Americans on average do not perceive it to be particularly friendly toward the U.S.

Figure 1 shows the average level of disapproval in each of our three main treatment groups: stay out, statement, and action. The estimates in Figure 1 integrate over the other experimental conditions in Table 1, and therefore reflect the average rate of disapproval regardless of the country we described, the level of certainty about the perpetrator, the candidate who was favored, and the eventual winner of the election. In this figure and all others, the dots represent point estimates, and the horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 1: Disapproval of the Country’s Behavior, by Mode of Intervention



Note: The figure shows the percentage of respondents who disapproved. Sample sizes were 402 for stay out; 1,777 for statement; and 1,151 for action. Sample sizes for the four subcategories of action (spread truth, spread lies, give money, and hack machines) were 300, 303, 264, and 284, respectively.

When the foreign country did not interfere in the U.S. election, only 5% of respondents disapproved, perhaps because they yearned for foreign interference or erred when registering their preferences. Levels of disapproval were considerably higher when the foreign country got involved, either by stating its opinion (58%) or by taking concrete actions to bolster its favorite candidate and undermine the opponent (87%).

The bottom portion of Figure 1 disaggregates the four types of action in our experiment. Approximately 83% of respondents disapproved when the foreign country spread embarrassing but true information about a candidate. Reactions were even more negative when the foreign country spread lies about the opponent, gave money for campaigning, or hacked into voting machines. In those situations, disapproval hovered between 88 and 89 percentage points.

The patterns in Figure 1 suggest three surprising conclusions. First, most Americans disapproved of foreign involvement, *even when* the foreign country did little more than express its preferences. This finding was not preordained. One might think that foreign countries are entitled to voice their opinions, just like domestic political actors. Indeed, at the end of the survey, some respondents volunteered that stating a preference was fundamentally different from other forms of involvement, including the intrusive measures Russia was accused of taking during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Although some respondents clearly felt this way, most people who read the “statement” scenario reacted with disdain.

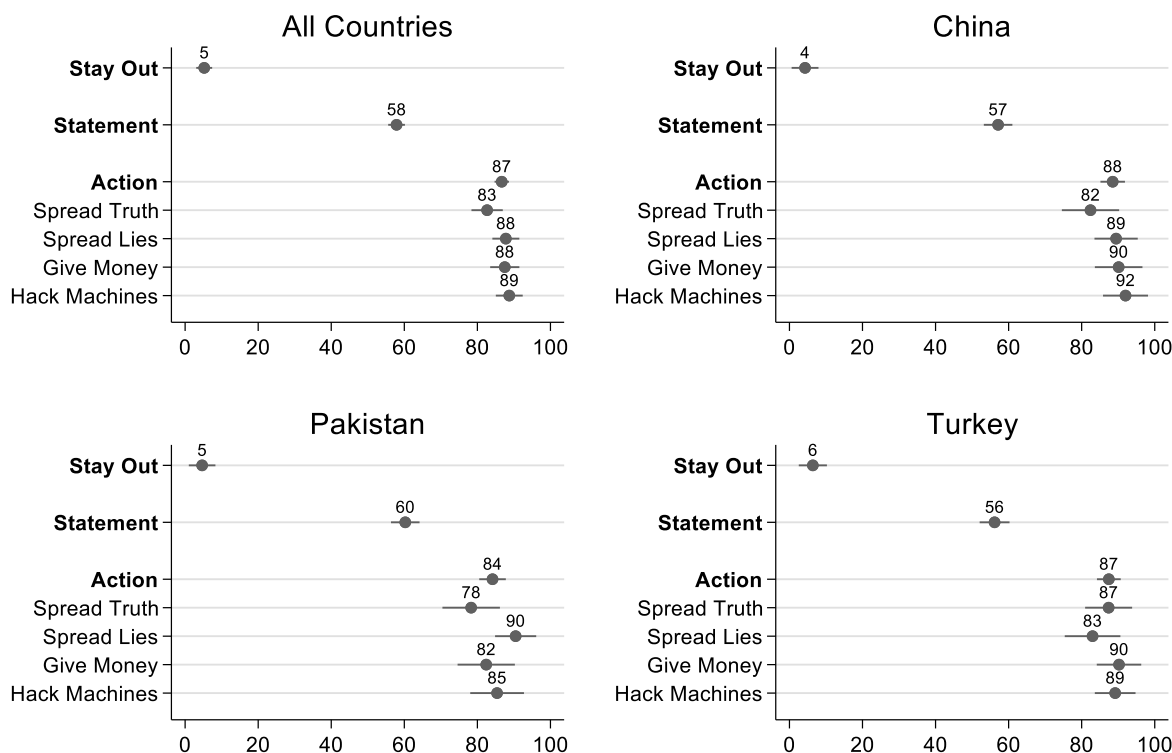
Second, citizens did not draw a sharp distinction between spreading truth and spreading lies. In the “spreading truth” scenario, agents from the foreign country used social media to spread embarrassing but true information about one of the candidates, accurately revealing that

the candidate had broken laws and acted immorally. One might think that some Americans would welcome, or at least tolerate, information about actual improprieties by a U.S. presidential candidate. Instead, 83% of respondents disapproved when the foreign country disseminated true information. A higher proportion, 88%, disapproved of spreading lies, but the difference in reactions to these two treatments was only 5 percentage points.

Finally, respondents reacted just as negatively to foreign campaign contributions as to spreading lies or hacking election machines. One might think that citizens would view campaign contributions as more legitimate than falsely scandalizing a candidate or rigging the electoral tally. On the contrary, our data show that Americans view foreign money as no less objectionable than misinformation and cheating.

Recall that we varied whether we told respondents that the country in question was China, Pakistan, or Turkey. As Figure 2 shows, the public had largely similar reactions regardless of the identity of which country we named.

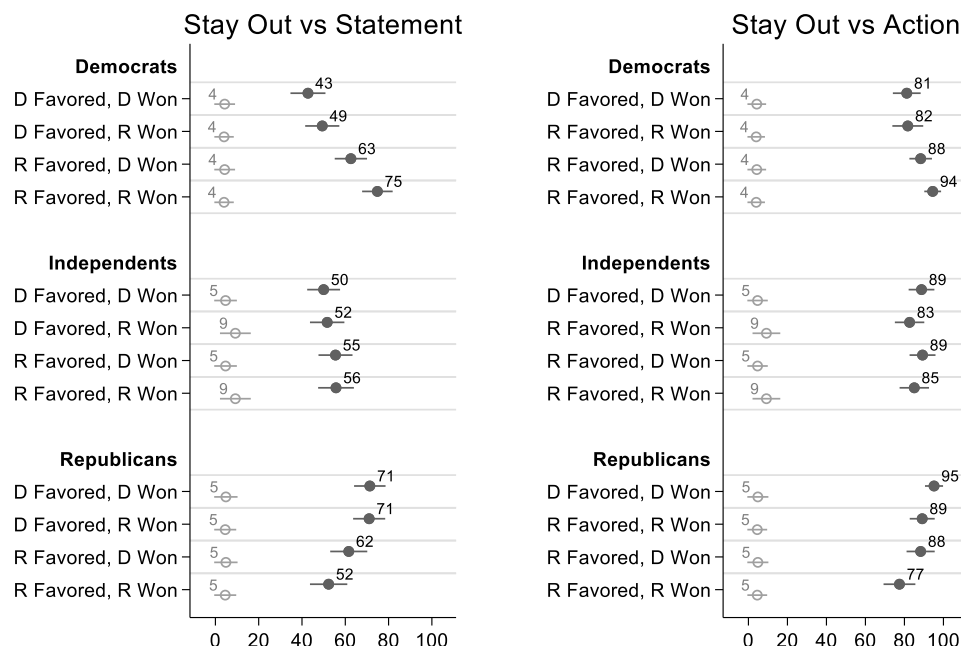
Figure 2: Disapproval of the Country's Behavior, by Country



We next investigated how reactions to foreign involvement varied by political party, to assess whether foreign intervention polarized the electorate. In our sample, 36% of respondents were Democrats, 31% were Republicans, and the remaining 33% did not identify with either party. In the statement and action groups, they encountered situations in which (1) the foreign country favored the Democrat and the Democrat won; (2) the foreign country favored the Democrat but the Republican won; (3) the foreign country favored the Republican but the Democrat won; and (4) the foreign country favored the Republican and the Republican won. In

the control group, some respondents read that the Democrat won, whereas others read that the Republican won.

Figure 3: Disapproval of the Country's Behavior, by Partisanship



Note: The figure gives the percentage of respondents who disapproved of foreign statements or actions (black dots) compared to a baseline in which the country stayed out (grey circles). For each of the twelve combinations of partisanship on the vertical axes, there were 125–168 observations in the statement group, 77–120 observations in the action group, and 62–75 observations in the stay out group.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans who disapproved in each of these situations. (As before, we average over other features of the experiment.) The black dots measure disapproval when the foreign country issued statements or took action; the grey circles measure disapproval in analogous situations when the foreign country stayed out. The row labels indicate whether the foreign country favored the Democrat or the Republican, and whether the Democrat or the Republican won the election. In the stay out condition, the foreign country never took sides. Thus, holding the winner of the election constant, the grey control values are the same in rows labeled “D Favored” as in rows labeled “R Favored.”

Figure 3 reveals that reactions to foreign intervention were strongly influenced by partisan considerations. Consider the left panel, which summarizes how people reacted when the foreign country stated its preference for one of the candidates. Only 43% of Democrats disapproved when the foreign country favored the Democratic candidate and that candidate won. In contrast, 75% disapproved when the country sided with the Republican opponent and the opponent prevailed. Thus, Democratic disapproval swung by 32 percentage points, from a clear minority to

an overwhelming majority, depending on which side the foreign country took and how the election turned out.

The left panel shows that Republicans also viewed interference through a partisan lens. Only 52% disapproved when the country endorsed their side and their side won, versus 71% in the opposite situation. Opinion shifted by 19 points, from apparent ambivalence to overwhelming disapproval of how the foreign country behaved. Finally, as expected, rates of disapproval among independents did not depend on which side the foreign country praised, or on who won the presidential election.

Partisan reactions were more muted, but still strongly evident, when the foreign country actively interfered in the election. Among Democrats, disapproval was highest (94%) when the country sided with the eventual Republican victor, but was 13 percentage points lower (81%) in the opposite situation. Likewise, Republicans expressed the most ire (95%) when the country sided with an eventual Democratic winner, but this decreased by 18 points (77%) when the country might have helped their own candidate win. Once again, independents voiced consistently high rates of disapproval, regardless of the foreign country's intent and the outcome of the election.

In sum, our findings strongly indicate that partisan election interference polarizes the public along partisan lines. Both Democrats and Republicans responded much more favorably to foreign intervention that helped their preferred candidate than foreign activities on behalf of the opponent. Moreover, Democrats and Republicans evinced remarkably similar levels of overall approval to the interventions we described.¹⁵ Our findings therefore suggest that if Russia had attempted to bolster Clinton's candidacy in 2016, the Democratic reaction would have been significantly more nonchalant than when Russia intervened on the Republican side. Republican voters, in contrast, would have been substantially more negative about Russian attempts to help the Democratic side than they were about Russian efforts to improve Donald Trump's electoral chances.

Foreign Electoral Intervention and Attitudes about Democracy

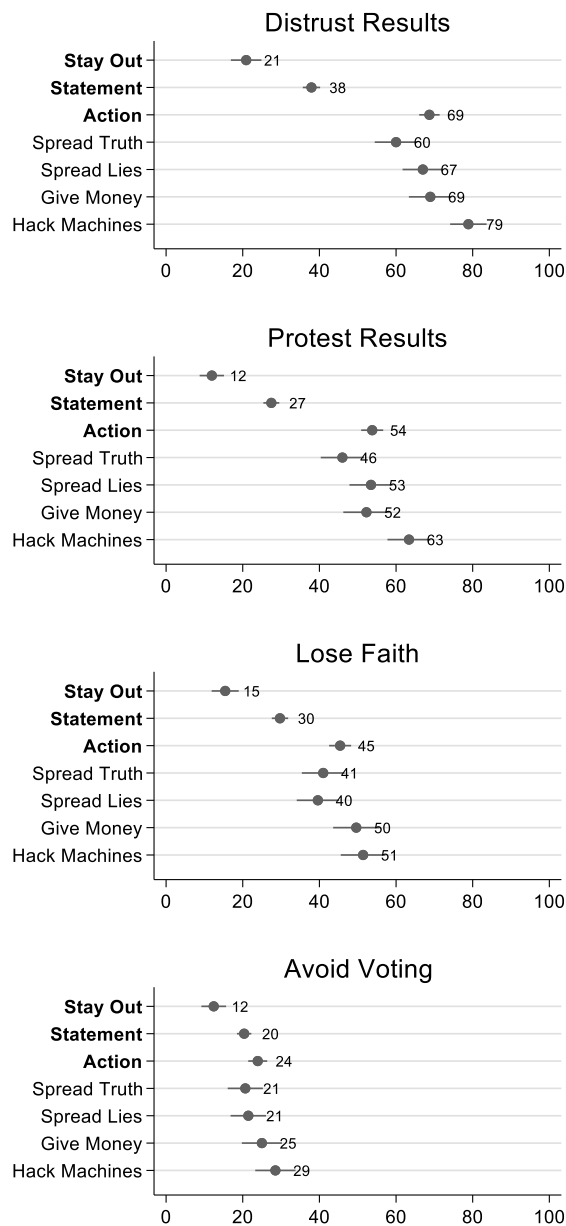
We next investigate how foreign electoral intervention affected attitudes about democracy. We hypothesized that the public would become more disillusioned about democracy when a foreign country actively interfered with the election, than when it issued verbal statements or remained aloof. Second, we hypothesized that partisanship would moderate the reaction to foreign involvement, with Americans becoming especially disillusioned when foreigners interfered on behalf of the opposite party.

To gauge attitudes about American democracy, we asked: "If the 2024 election happened just as we described, would you agree or disagree with the following statements?" The four statements were, "I would trust the results of the election," "I would protest the results of the election," "I would be unlikely to vote in future elections," and "I would lose faith in American democracy." The response options for each question were agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, and disagree strongly. To simplify the exposition, we report the percentage

¹⁵ Our findings therefore bolster previous research that found that Lebanese citizens were more welcoming toward foreign efforts on behalf of their own political camp than toward involvement that could benefit the opposition (Corstange and Marinov 2012).

of respondents who agreed with each item, but all our conclusions hold when we analyze the full four-point scale.

Figure 4: Attitudes about Democracy, by Mode of Intervention



Note: Note: The figure shows the percentage of respondents who offered each answer. Sample sizes were 402 for stay out; 1,777 for statement; and 1,151 for action, comprised of 300, 303, 264, and 284 for spread truth, spread lies, give money, and hack machines.

As Figure 4 shows, when the foreign country stayed out of the election, 21% of respondents said that they would distrust the results of the election. When the foreign country

limited itself to verbal statements, distrust increased to 38%, but considerably more than half of Americans said they would still trust the electoral outcome. Distrust was substantially higher in the four active treatment conditions, ranging from 60% when the foreign country disseminated truthful information on social media, to 79% when the country hacked voting machines. On average, the four types of active intervention increased distrust by a massive 69 percentage points.

Similar patterns emerged when we asked whether subjects would protest the results of the election. Twelve percent said they would protest even when the foreign power did not interfere, perhaps because their preferred candidate lost, or because they were already disillusioned with the electoral process. The propensity to protest was higher—27%—when a foreign country made statements in favor of one candidate. Finally, when a foreign country took concrete action, between 46 and 63% of respondents said they would protest the outcome. As before, the tendency to protest was lowest when the foreign country spread embarrassing but accurate information, and highest when it hacked into voting machines. On average, though, active interference would draw protest from a majority of the U.S. adult population.

Learning of foreign election interference also sapped the public's faith in democracy. Although 15% lacked faith even when the foreign country refrained from intervening, the figure doubled to 30% when the foreign country verbally sided with one of the candidates, and tripled to 45% when a foreign power took concrete action. On average, active election interference depressed faith in democracy by 30 percentage points, a substantively and statistically meaningful effect.

Finally, foreign intervention depressed future intentions to vote. When the foreign power stayed out of the election, 14% of subjects said they would abstain from voting in future elections. The desire to avoid voting rose to 20% when the foreign country made statement, and to 24% when the foreign country actively intervened. Consistent with our earlier results, hacking into voting machines had the greatest potential to depress future voter participation.

Overall, these findings imply that foreign involvement can have profoundly negative effects on American democracy. Interference in a presidential election would discourage Americans from trusting the results, and would draw widespread protest. Moreover, the adverse effects on the American psyche seem likely to extend beyond the particular election, by sapping faith in American democracy more generally, and by discouraging people from going to the polls in the future.

Although foreign intervention can be corrosive on average, we hypothesized that it would prompt different reactions among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans. To test this hypothesis, we examined how each bloc responded when the foreign country sided with an eventual Democrat or Republican winner. Within each of these subgroups, Figure 5 shows how foreign statements and actions affected beliefs about democracy, relative to the baseline in which the country stayed out. The black dots are average treatment effects, which we computed by averaging over the other dimensions of the experiment.

Figure 5: Effects of Interference on Attitudes about Democracy, By Party

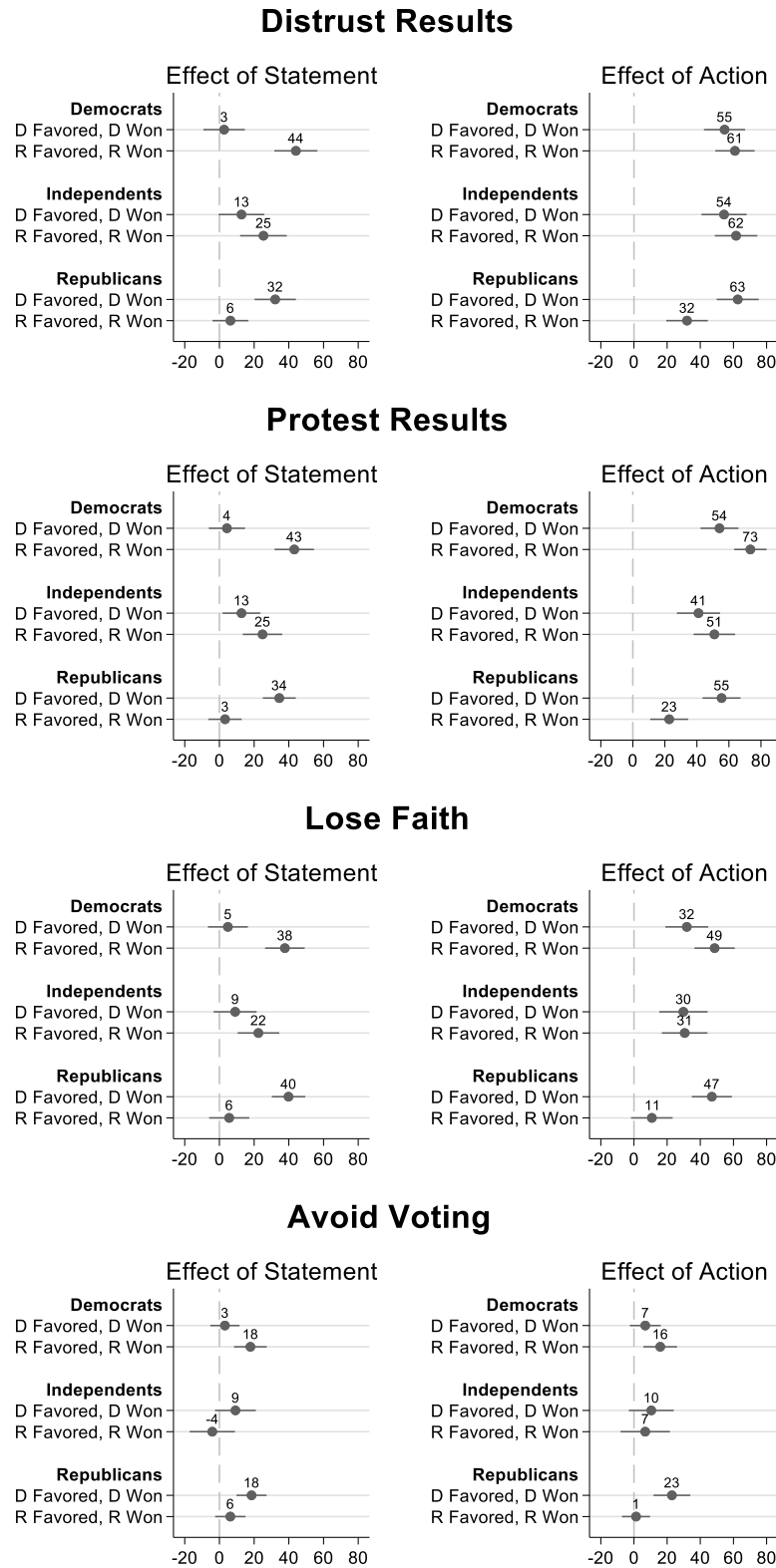


Figure 5 shows that foreign interference not only undermined American attitudes toward democracy, but also exacerbated partisan polarization. Consider the left side of Figure 5. When a foreign country verbally endorsed the Republican and that candidate proceeded to win (the rows labeled “R Favored, R Won”), attitudes toward democracy changed sharply among Democrats. They became 44 points more likely to distrust the outcome and 43 points more likely to protest. Their faith in democracy fell sharply, and they became substantially more likely to report that they would abstain in future elections. Republicans, on the other hand, showed *no* statistically significant changes on any of these dimensions.

The opposite happened when the foreign country endorsed the eventual Democratic winner (the rows labeled “D Favored, D Won”). In that situation, Republican levels of protest and distrust soared by 32–34 percentage points. Their faith in democracy suffered, as did their willingness to vote in the future. Democrats, meanwhile, exhibited *no* significant changes in opinion. As expected, foreign involvement caused independents to sour on democracy, but not to the same degree as citizens who witnessed interference against their own party.

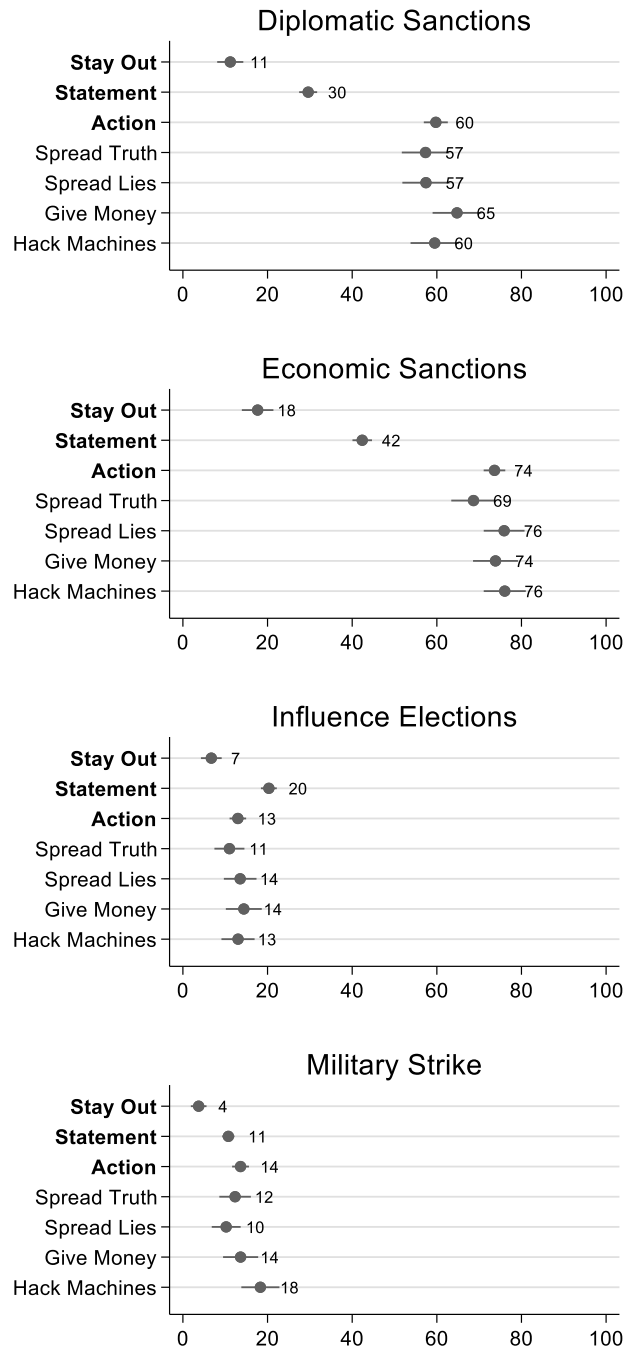
The right side of Figure 5 presents treatment effects when the foreign country took active measures instead of staying out. Once again, Democrats and Republicans responded asymmetrically, with each group becoming especially negative about American democracy when the foreign country favored the opposing side. However, all the estimates on the right side are positive, and roughly four-fifths of them are significantly distinguishable from zero. On average, active intervention demoralized not only citizens whose party suffered, but also citizens whose party received assistance and emerged victorious. These findings are quite concerning, because they suggest that active foreign intervention not only contributes to partisan polarization, but also undermines the democratic ethos, even among citizens the intervention was designed to help.

Foreign Electoral Intervention and Foreign Policy Preferences

Finally, we investigated how election interference changed public attitudes about foreign policy. Members of the stay out and statement groups read the following preface: “If the 2024 election happened just as we described, which policies would you support or oppose?” Members of the action group received a slightly longer preface, which reiterated the level of certainty about the national identity of the perpetrator. “If the 2024 election happened just as we described, and there was a [percent] chance that the foreign country was [country], which policies would you support or oppose?” After presenting this preface, we asked whether respondents would support or oppose each of the following four options: cutting off diplomatic relations with [country], imposing economic sanctions on [country], trying to influence elections in [country], and launching a military strike against [country].

We hypothesized that the public would support firmer policies against countries that actively intervened, than against countries that stated their preferences or stayed out of the election. Figure 6 sheds light on this hypothesis, by presenting the percentage of respondents who supported each policy option, conditional on whether and how the foreign country intervened. Each dot represents the mean level of support, averaging over the other features in the experiment. (Later, we test whether these conclusions depend on certainty about the identity of the foreign country.)

Figure 6: Support for Foreign Policies, By Mode of Intervention



The top portion of Figure 6 summarizes support for diplomatic sanctions. In the “stay out” condition, only 11% of subjects wanted to cut off diplomatic relations with the foreign country. That number rose to 30% when the country made verbal statements, and further increased to an average of 60% when the country actively intervened. When thinking about this policy option, the public did not make sharp distinctions between types of active intervention. Overall, 57% supported severing relations when the foreign country had spread truthful or untruthful information via social media; 65% called for a diplomatic rupture when the country had given

\$50 million to one side's campaign; and 60% advocated cutting diplomatic ties when the country hacked into voting machines.

The second graph in Figure 6 presents public support for economic sanctions. Baseline support for sanctions was 18%, perhaps because the countries in our experiment (China, Pakistan, and Turkey) were not universally popular, even in the control condition. When the country made statements about the election, though, support for economic retaliation swelled to 42%. In the face of active foreign intervention, moreover, strong majorities of citizens supported punitive economic measures, with an average of 74% across the four specific actions in our experiment. Among these, support for sanctions was slightly lower when the country spread truthful information (69%) than when it gave money (74%), spread lies (76%), or hacked into voting machines (76%).

Participants in our experiment were less enthusiastic about in-kind retaliation. In the "stay out" condition, only 7% supported intervening in the foreign country's electoral process, suggesting distaste for this form of foreign influence. When the country made verbal statements, public support increased to 20%. Interestingly, and for unknown reasons, the public was less enthusiastic about retaliatory election meddling when the foreign country had pursued active forms of intervention. Overall, Americans have little appetite for meddling in foreign elections; they would rather retaliate across issues than respond in tit-for-tat fashion.

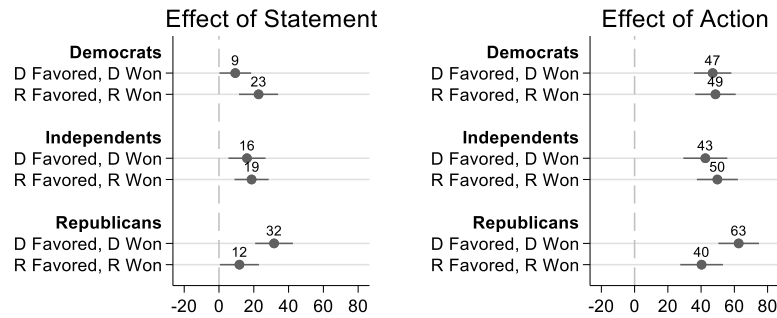
Finally, the public displayed little enthusiasm for responding to election interference with military force. Compared to the baseline condition in which 4% supported military strikes, support for military action was 11% when the country made verbal statements, and 14% when the country actively interfered. Support for military strikes was, predictably, highest when the foreign power had hacked into U.S. voting machines to change the electoral tally. However, even this serious form of meddling elicited a mere 18% support for military intervention, far from the levels of public support that typically precede military strikes.

These findings have important implications for foreign policy in the wake of electoral interference. We found that, by verbally endorsing a candidate and threatening to rethink its relations with the United States, a foreign country can influence the public, undermine faith in democracy, and attract the ire of most Americans. Ironically, though, these negative reactions do not translate into support for international retaliation. In our study, only 30% of the statement group supported diplomatic sanctions; only 42% supported economic sanctions; only 20% wanted in-kind retaliation, and only 11% favored a military strike. Pointedly, we never observed majority support for the kinds of retaliation that might deter a foreign adversary from interfering in the first place.

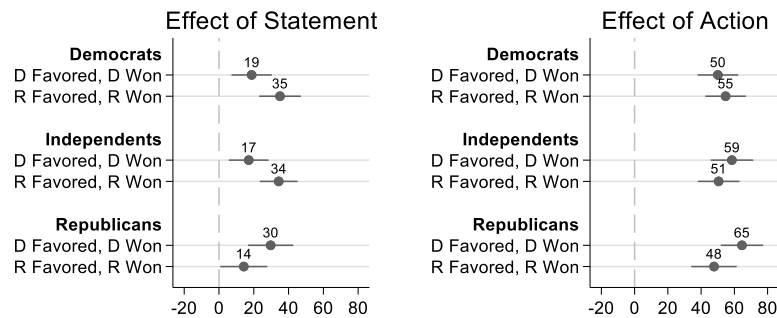
As hypothesized, public support for retaliation was generally higher when the foreign country took active measures to distort the electoral process. Even then, however, only 13% recommended attempting to influence the adversary's elections, and only 14% advocated a military strike. Clear majorities supported diplomatic sanctions (60%) and economic sanctions (74%), but it is not clear how much pain those strategies would inflict on a foreign power. Thus, countries that aspire to interfere in U.S. elections might take comfort in knowing that their actions, however detrimental to American democracy, might not provoke retaliation beyond a diplomatic rupture and economic sanctions.

Figure 7: Effects of Interference on Foreign Policy, by Party

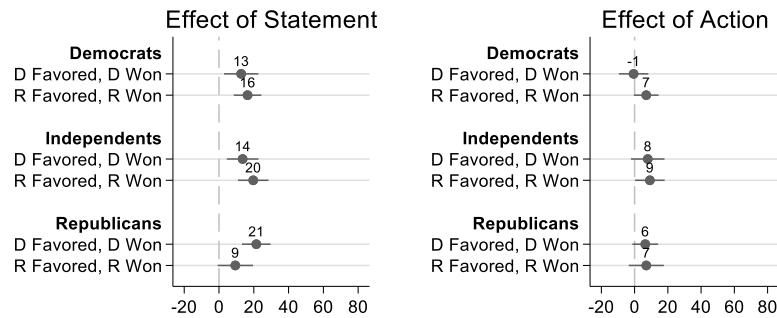
Diplomatic Sanctions



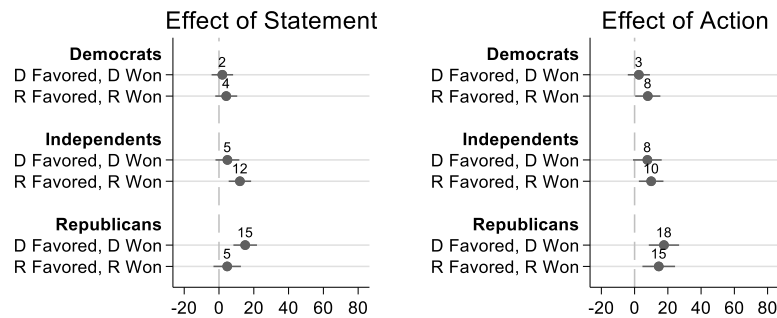
Economic Sanctions



Influence Elections



Military Strike



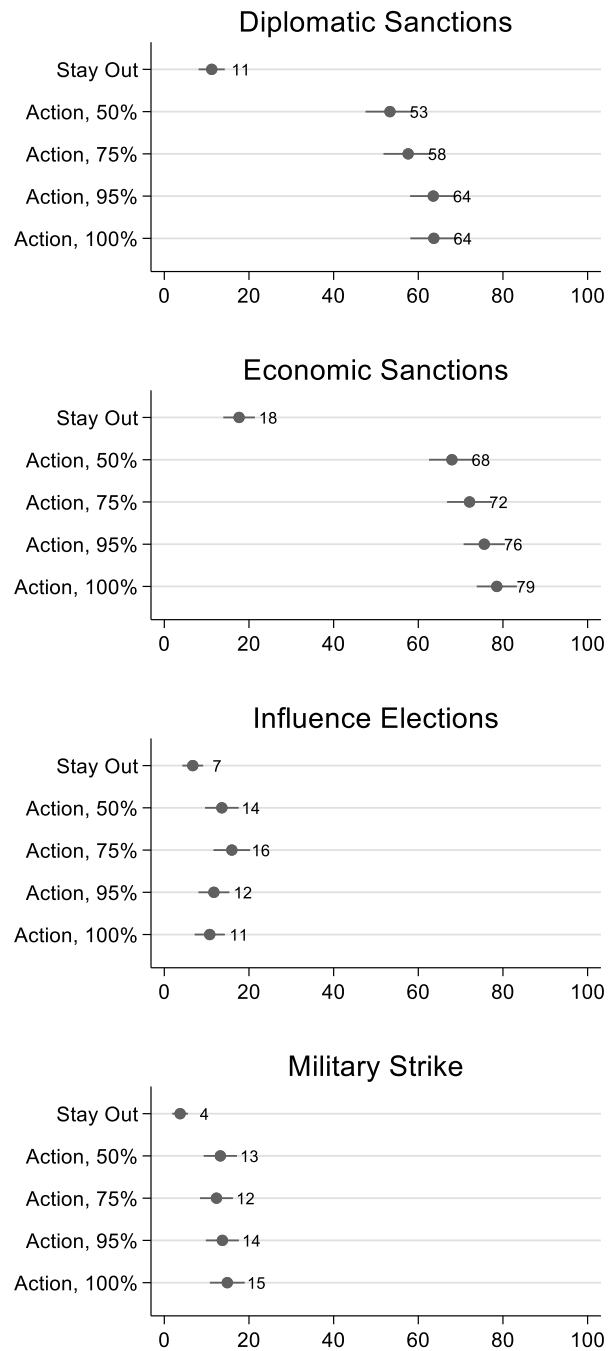
We next explore how partisan considerations affect support for retaliation in the face of electoral intervention. We hypothesized that the effect of foreign intervention on support for retaliation would vary by political party. Figure 7 tests this hypothesis, by showing how much foreign statements and actions increased support for retaliation, conditional on the party of the respondent and the partisan tenor of the intervention itself. The dots in Figure 7 are average treatment effects, integrating over the other dimensions of the experiment.

Consistent with our hypothesis, respondents were most likely to demand retaliation when the intervention favored the opposing party. The left side of Figure 7 shows that, when the foreign country endorsed the eventual Republican winner, support for diplomatic sanctions jumped by 23% among Democrats, but only 12% among Republicans. Likewise, support for economic sanctions rose by 35% among Democrats, but only 14% among Republicans, and support for in-kind retaliation rose by 16% among Democrats, versus only 9% among Republicans. Finally, the “R Favored, R Won” scenario did not significantly increase support for military strikes among members of either party. In a similar way, partisans reacted asymmetrically to the scenario in which the foreign country endorsed the democratic winner. The right panel of Figure 6 shows that Democrats and Republicans also react differently to identical forms of active interference.

These patterns not only support our hypotheses, but also suggest what kinds of retaliatory policies might—or might not—be politically feasible after an electoral intervention. According to Figure 7, electoral interventions are much less likely to spur retaliatory sentiment by members of the winning party, than by members of the losing party. This means, for example, that if a Republican candidate rode to victory in the context of pro-Republican interference, Democrats might demand retaliation, but members of the newly elected president’s own party would be less likely to do so. Knowing this, foreign countries should feel even more confident that they could intervene with relative impunity.

Readers might wonder whether respondents refrained from retaliating because, in at least some cases involving active interference, they could not be sure which country committed the infraction. To check this possibility, while also testing our predictions about uncertainty more generally, we compared support retaliation when respondents were 50%, 75%, 95%, or 100% certain of the identity of the country that actively intervened. (Recall, from Table 1, that we did not raise doubts about the identity of the country that publicly voiced its preferences, because such expressions are by definition overt, leaving no ambiguity about who made the statement.)

Figure 8: Support for Foreign Policies, By Level of Certainty



We anticipated that support for hostile foreign policies would increase with the level of certainty about the country that was culpable. We found some evidence for this hypothesis, but much less than expected. Figure 8 shows how support varied by the level of certainty, averaging over the other dimensions of our experiment. To our surprise, most citizens wanted to cut diplomatic ties with the foreign country named in our experiment, even when citizens could only be 50% sure that the country was responsible for an intervention. Support for diplomatic sanctions rose steadily with certainty, but the transition from 50% to 100% certainty translated into a mere 11-point change in policy preferences.

Figure 8 reveals similar patterns for economic sanctions. When a country actively intervened but there was only a 50-50 chance that the country we named was behind the intervention, 68% of Americans supported economic retaliation. Enthusiasm increased incrementally with the level of certainty, eventually reaching 79% when Americans could be certain of the foreign country's identity. As with diplomatic sanctions, a change in certainty from 50% to 100% increased support for economic sanctions by a mere 11 percentage points.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, Figure 8 shows that levels of certainty had no appreciable effect on support for in-kind retaliation and military strikes. Opinions in the scenario involving 50% certainty were not substantively or statistically different than opinions in the scenario involving 100% certainty. Thus, Americans are reluctant to influence elections in other countries or retaliate with military force, even when they know with certainty which foreign country actively interfered in an American election.

In summary, voters appear less sensitive to uncertainty than one might have supposed. Thus, although several of our scenarios realistically acknowledged that citizens might not know who interfered in their elections, our conclusions about retaliation do not depend on the presence of uncertainty. Our findings about uncertainty also have a surprising political implication: although investigations into electoral intervention might increase clarity about the identity of the perpetrator, the accumulation of evidence may not result in substantially higher public support for international retaliation.

5. CONCLUSION

How do American citizens respond to foreign electoral intervention? Despite the importance of election interference for contemporary U.S. politics, we know relatively little about how citizens view foreign meddling. In this paper, we use survey experiments to evaluate three fundamental questions about public reactions to foreign involvement.

First, how does the public *view* election interference? We found that most Americans disapproved of foreign involvement even when the foreign country did little more than express its preferences. Moreover, consistent with our expectations, disapproval was substantially greater when the country took active steps such as donating money to a campaign, disseminating accurate but embarrassing information about a candidate, spreading lies about a candidate, or hacking into voting machines to change the vote count. We also investigated how partisan considerations influenced reactions to foreign involvement. Our experiments revealed that when the foreign country made verbal statements, disapproval swung wildly depending on which side the foreign country endorsed and how the election turned out. For example, 43% of Democrats disapproved when the foreign country took the side of the Democratic candidate and that candidate won, while 75% disapproved when the country favored the opponent and the opponent

prevailed. Among Republicans, only 52% disapproved when the country favored their side and their side won, versus 71% in the opposite situation. Partisan reactions were also evident, if more muted, when the foreign country actively interfered in the election. Our findings therefore suggest that the large difference between Democratic and Republican reactions to the 2016 Russian interference—with Republicans looking much more favorably on Russian activities than Democrats—did not depend on specific features of that election. Instead, partisan polarization appears to be a general reaction to foreign election meddling. According to our results, if a foreign country were to take the Democratic side in a future election, fellow Democrats would view foreign activities much more benignly than Republicans, who in turn would strongly denounce foreign interference.

Second, we investigated the domestic political consequences of foreign electoral intervention. We found that foreign involvement can have profoundly negative effects on American democracy. Voters who learned of a foreign intervention—particularly those who learned of active interventions such as donating money or hacking voting machines—were substantially more likely to distrust the results of the election, protest the electoral outcome, lose faith in American democracy, and avoid voting in future elections. Moreover, we found that foreign interference exacerbated partisan polarization. When a foreign country favored the candidate from the opposing party and that candidate subsequently won, confidence in democracy plummeted. In contrast, voters' faith was much less shaken when a foreign country took the side of their preferred candidate. These patterns are worrisome, suggesting that foreign intervention both contributes to partisan polarization and undermines faith in American democracy.¹⁶

Finally, we studied how election interference changes public attitudes about foreign relations. We found that, when a foreign country issued public statements about an election, voters were unwilling to cut off diplomatic ties or issue economic sanctions. Only when an intervention reached the level of active interference were voters willing to retaliate with diplomatic or economic measures. Moreover, support for these policies varied with partisanship: citizens were substantially more supportive of diplomatic and economic sanctions when foreign intervention appeared to help the opposing party. Regardless of the mode of intervention, voters were unwilling to retaliate by intervening in the country's elections or striking the country militarily. These patterns suggest that foreign countries can feel confident that they could interfere in American elections and only face mild punitive measures. Moreover, voters appear less sensitive to uncertainty about the identity of the perpetrator than one might have supposed.

Future research could extend our approach in a various ways. First, our experiment presented foreign intervention in the U.S. election as fact; the only uncertainty was about the identity of the perpetrator. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, however, many Republican voters have disputed whether foreign intervention occurred at all.¹⁷ Future experiments could present ambiguous information about whether a foreign country intervened, or describe a partisan dispute about whether intervention took place. We suspect that by introducing

¹⁶ Our findings also could provide a new mechanism explaining how foreign interventions could weaken democracy (Levin 2018a): if enough voters react to news of foreign intervention with diminished faith in democracy and lowered levels of political participation, this could result in a weakening of democratic norms and practices at the national level.

¹⁷ See, for example, <https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2526>.

uncertainty about whether any foreign country intervened, one might observe even greater levels of partisan polarization than those observed here.

Future experiments could also vary additional characteristics of the intervention. Here, we focused on partisan interventions in which the foreign country promoted one candidate at the expense of another. Foreign countries could also, however, intervene in a more evenhanded fashion. Future experiments could assess to what extent partisan reactions are muted when the intervention was not designed to give one side an advantage.

Third, future research could explore the effects of election interference in other countries. The American context we studied features high levels of partisan polarization and strong partisan identities. Scholars could adapt our experiment to countries with weaker levels of partisan identification or a different electoral system, in order to evaluate whether foreign intervention has similarly divisive effects in other political contexts. Together, these kinds of experiments could tell us much about the effects of election interference in the U.S., as well as in democracies around the world.

In the meantime, our findings suggest that electoral interference is a highly effective tool against the U.S. Past research has shown that foreign powers who intervene in elections can boost the chances of their favored candidate. Our results reveal that by intervening in an election, foreign powers can also polarize the electorate and diminish faith in democratic institutions, while not running any of the risks of conventional military intervention.

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