

Interview – Dov H. Levin

Written by E-International Relations

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Dov H. Levin is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Hong Kong. His main current research project is on the causes, effects, and effectiveness of partisan electoral interventions/foreign election interference, a topic on which he has published multiple scholarly articles. His book on this topic, *Meddling in the Ballot Box: The Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2020 and won the Robert Jervis & Paul Schroeder Best Book Award for 2021 from the American Political Science Association.

Where do you see the most exciting debates happening in your field?

There are multiple such debates. However outside of those directly related to my research, I would note two in International Relations. The first is on the effects of leaders on their countries' foreign policies. For many years the first image (or the individual level of analysis) was neglected or declared unimportant because it was hard to find ways to systematically study leaders. However with the emergence of good databases on leaders' characteristics this has become more tractable, leading to a renaissance of interesting empirical research on this aspect. The second is on the role of status in country's foreign policies. References to its potential importance go back to ancient historians, but only in the last 10–15 years have IR scholars begun to systematically explore it and how and when it exactly matters.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

As a result of my research, my view of relations between democracies has significantly darkened over time. Democracies are clearly frequently willing to use various non-violent forms of coercion and other rather unethical methods (in liberal or democratic terms) to get what they want from other democracies. In other words, democracies may be quite unwilling to go to war with each other – but that particular aspect of self-restraint does not seem to extend otherwise to their behaviour towards each other which is in many cases far from “nice” or “benevolent”, especially when serious disagreements arise.

How did events in 2016 impact the academic study of electoral intervention?

It led to a great burst of growth in academic research on this topic. Before the Russian intervention in 2016, the number of academic articles on this topic in International Relations (including my early 2016 article in *International Studies Quarterly*) could be counted on one hand. Likewise, from my first-hand experience of trying to explain my dissertation topic before 2016, many scholars were simply unaware of how common electoral interference is. As a result, many scholars saw it as an odd, rarely used form of foreign regime change of little consequence and therefore largely ignored it. The 2016 Russian electoral intervention, and the long public debate over the Trump campaign's collusion with Russia and how much, if at all, it benefited Trump's candidacy, brought great attention within the field to this intervention method and to how frequently it has been used by great powers. Accordingly, it led to an influx of scholars into research on partisan electoral interventions using various tools. This research has been greatly increasing our understanding of various aspects of partisan electoral interventions.

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Your 2020 book, *Meddling in the Ballot Box*, explores partisan electoral interventions by great powers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What are the causes of and conditions for a successful intervention?

I argue that great powers carry out a partisan electoral intervention when two concurrent conditions exist. First: the world power feels threatened by a candidate or party with divergent preferences in a foreign country. That candidate or party has (or is perceived to have) inflexible preferences on important issues that diverge from that of the great power. That, in turn, makes many of the “regular” policy options appear potentially ineffective or too costly to the great power.

Secondly and more importantly, a local political actor agrees to collude with the great power in such an activity. Great powers usually know too little about the domestic politics of other countries to have a decent chance of success in a partisan electoral intervention unless they are guided by knowledgeable local politicians – so if they can’t secure such cooperation from a local political actor, they won’t try to intervene in this manner. The collusion usually provides the great power with high-quality information on the most potentially effective techniques for affecting voters’ behaviour in the target country – thus leading such interventions to usually significantly increase the vote share of the assisted side and, in many cases, win the election in question.

Your research suggests there is a porous border between interventions in a target country’s electoral politics and its wider political culture. Are there links between the democratic breakdown we saw in the aftermath of the 2020 US election and instances of election meddling four years earlier?

Unfortunately yes. In a paper of mine in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (published in 2019) using my dataset of electoral interventions (PEIG), I found that electoral interventions done covertly significantly increase the chances of a democratic breakdown when they succeed in elevating the preferred candidate desired by the great power into office. I find that this type of partisan electoral intervention inadvertently causes a democratic breakdown because it tends, for example, to inadvertently select for authoritarian minded candidates, who, once in power, try to dismantle their country’s democracy. Successful covert electoral interventions also can weaken democracy by spreading political corruption in the target. Given that the Russian intervention in 2016 was meant to be secret, the exposure of the Russian hand in the DNC hacking etc. was something that was supposed to remain hidden from the US public, the connections are obvious.

Counterintuitively, you suggest cyberattacks threaten a return to pre-modern modes of electoral intervention. How so? Do you see this strange, atavistic logic at work in other areas of global politics?

In the pre-modern era elections happened as well here and there in Europe such as for the pope or for some monarchs (such as the Polish monarchy). Two key differences in these elections from modern ones were that when these pre-modern elections occurred they usually involved far smaller electorates (such as a few dozen cardinals for the pope) and/or were conducted in one central location with a handful of people counting the votes in some manner. Those two characteristics of pre-modern elections made it possible for great powers to meddle in them by directly interfering in the vote tallies through bribing much of the electorate (the cardinals or noblemen) or the vote counters. Indeed, we know that they meddled in that manner in many medieval and early modern cases. Meddling in the vote tallies stopped being possible in modern elections which usually include electorates numbering in the hundreds of thousands or millions and thousands or tens of thousands of polling stations and vote counters, leading this form of meddling to vanish in the modern era.

However, with the rise of national and local elections using electronic voting machines, and in a few cases even online voting, such meddling in the vote tallies becomes feasible again via cyber-hacking. Many online voting systems have been found to have severe security issues, making it possible for a state actor to easily and quietly hack the system and change the vote tallies with a few clicks. Likewise, electronic voting machines, despite the supposed “airgap” they have from the internet, can be plausibly hacked in practice by a state actor given that the technical staff needs to regularly access the voting machines’ hardware for various updates, which are in turn downloaded from the internet into thumb drives etc. A foreign power can for example, Stuxnet style, implant in the

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thumb drives (or the information downloaded into them) used by the programmers to update the machines as to the upcoming elections a malware ordering the voting machines to automatically shift some votes from the “undesirable” candidate or party to the “desirable” one. With the growing issues concerning the accuracy of election polls all around the world, a great power could meddle in the vote tallies for years and no one would notice anything suspicious with the modified tallies.

In my opinion, we can see that “everything old is new again” logic in some other fields of global politics, such as the case of private security companies. Mercenaries, after millennia of use in warfare, largely vanished in the early nineteenth century due to the rise of citizen armies and the huge increases in overall army sizes. With the growing political costs for governments of casualties suffered by their national armies, as well as an increase in the post-Cold War era of mid-sized military interventions where a few additional thousands or ten of thousands of soldiers can make a difference, we are now seeing an increasing return of mercenaries (in the form of PSC) for various military tasks (such as guarding bases) as an important component of countries’ military deployments abroad.

What can governments and the public do to protect their electoral processes?

Ban completely all forms of electronic voting and counting and have all voting done in paper ballots (in person or via mail) counted and tallied manually. The great computing and financial resources available to a state actor, and the impossibility of making an unhackable voting system which needs to be regularly accessible to many people around a country, make the provision of full proof cyber security to electronic voting systems an impossible undertaking. Paper ballots cannot be hacked.

Who is, or has been, the most prolific election meddler?

Between 1946 and 2000 the United States has been the most prolific intervener in elections, intervening in more than 81 elections during this period (or one of every eleven national level executive elections during this period). The U.S. has been equally prominent as an intervener in foreign elections both during the Cold War and the post-Cold War eras.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Don’t be afraid to venture into the outer frontiers of Political Science knowledge and try to study completely new topics outside of what much of the field is focusing on at the moment. If no one, or very few people have studied something beforehand, or very few people are working on this at present, that could be your golden opportunity. Just make sure that you have the research tools and (potentially) available data to study it in a reasonable amount of time – and be prepared for it taking a while until many others will see the value in your research agenda.