

Review – Meddling in the Ballot Box

Written by Tobias Lemke

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TOBIAS LEMKE, APR 9 2023

Meddling in the Ballot Box: The Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions

By Dov H. Levin

Oxford University Press, 2020

Few phenomena in international politics have gotten more attention over the past several years than foreign interference operations that seek to shape and manipulate the domestic politics of other states. Public concern for this issue became particularly salient following the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and, later that year, the U.S. presidential election that saw Donald Trump capture enough Electoral College votes to move into the White House. Following years of investigative journalism, intelligence reports, parliamentary and congressional hearings, and sundry academic studies into the matter, there is now little doubt that Russia, or at least close associates of the Kremlin, actively meddled in these two democratic elections and likely ran similar operations in many others.

Dov Levin's *Meddling in the Ballot Box* is a timely intervention into this topic and succeeds in providing readers with a comprehensive and detailed purview of the field and literature. Levin begins by reminding us that meddling in another country's domestic politics – what the author refers to as partisan electoral interventions – is certainly not a new phenomenon, nor is it particularly rare when considering the grand sweep of international relations and history. From various meddling attempts by European princes into the papal politics of the early modern period, *via* French attempts to influence the earliest U.S. elections in the 1790s, to the spread of disinformation campaigns on social media platforms today, attempts to interfere, disrupt, or decide the outcome of electoral contests is clearly part of the standard repertoire of great power competition and should be treated as such.

The primary purpose of the book is to develop a theoretical grounding for both the *causes* and the *effects* of partisan electoral interventions (p.6) and then to demonstrate the feasibility of said framework against the empirical record. Levin's argument unfolds across nine chapters, with most of the heavy lifting done in chapter two. Here the author presents their main argument that partisan electoral interventions occur when two conditions are present: 1) a great power perceives its interests as being endangered by a political candidate or party in a democratic target country, and 2) a significant domestic actor within the target country is willing to be aided by a foreign great power during an electoral contest (pp.28–29). Only when these two conditions coexist, Levin argues, are we likely to see episodes of sustained partisan electoral interference. When it comes to the effects of these operations, the author offers several more observations, including that electoral interventions increase the chances of the aided candidate to succeed in an election, that overt interventions are more likely to yield success than covert interventions, that these types of operations are less likely to lead to success in founding elections of a polity, and that interventions tend to differ in their effects depending on whether assistance is granted to an incumbent or a challenger (pp.40–45).

Levin begins the empirical section of the book throughout chapters three and four by way of six in-depth case studies that examine the causes of partisan electoral interventions, ranging from the decision by the United States to intervene on behalf of the Christian Democratic Union in the 1953 West German election to the absence of such an intervention in the 1967 Greek election. Chapter five provides an overview of the universe of U.S. and Soviet/Russian interventions from 1946 to 2000 based on an original dataset developed by the author. In chapters six and seven, the author returns to the effects of partisan electoral interventions by first offering a large-N statistical test of the four main hypotheses (pp.40–45) and then turning to survey data gathered from elections surveys of the 1953 West

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German election and the 1992 Israeli elections. This multi-method approach, the author contends, enables a direct examination of the key theoretical mechanisms charted out in chapter two. Chapter eight leaves the historical realm and tests the feasibility of the main arguments of the book through an investigation of the Russian electoral intervention in the 2016 U.S. elections. In Chapter nine, Levin summarizes the book's findings and cautions readers of the possibility that international relations will see a return to more direct forms of meddling, including the manipulation of vote tallies.

Levin's argument and the evidence marshalled in support are persuasive throughout. What makes the book truly impressive, however, is its potential to engage with several distinct audiences and their fields of study. Accordingly, International Relations scholars interested in great power competition will find much to like and more to ponder in Levin's account of electoral meddling. Particularly insightful here is Levin's rejection that states behave anything like rational and unitary actors (pp.22–27). Instead, the author foregrounds the importance of domestic political developments and thus speaks directly to a growing chorus of heterodox security studies scholars that analyze great power politics beyond a narrow focus on material, that is, military power indexes (e.g., Gunitsky 2014; Goddard and Nexon 2016; Musgrave 2019).

In turn, the discussion of the electoral effects of partisan meddling will be interesting for comparativists interested in democratization and backsliding (e.g., Haggard and Kaufman 2016; Ziblatt 2017). More generally, the book speaks to relevant issues in the intelligence, security, and diplomatic studies communities, while scholars of U.S. institutions will find plenty of food for thought in Levin's discussion of the 2016 election and the implications of ongoing partisan electoral meddling campaigns. Much of the ability of the book to speak to multiple audiences comes from its structure. Whereas many books in the genre follow a strict outline of theory, cases, and conclusion, *Meddling* is ordered more thematically and based on the methods used in each chapter. This allows readers to easily jump between chapters depending on their various interests.

It is difficult to find a serious point of critique in Levin's argument and its presentation throughout the book. However, if one had to identify a potential blind spot it would likely be the undertheorized role of digital technology generally and social media networks (SMNs) specifically. To be fair, Levin gives a nod to the issue of cybersecurity in the conclusion (pp.253–57) and most of the book's cases exist in a pre-internet world. Yet even in the chapter eight discussion of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the distribution of damning information on the internet *via Wikileaks*, for example, is taken for granted without reconciling how this might affect the broader theoretical argument. This may be particularly problematic for Levin's hypotheses regarding the causes of partisan meddling. Accordingly, it is quite possible to imagine a world in which the fragmentation of public spheres and digital news ecologies, along with increased levels of cultural and political polarization and the anonymity and audience reach provided by the affordances of social media, can fundamentally change the calculus of great powers to intervene in domestic elections. In this sense, it may no longer be necessary that a willing domestic partner exists. It may simply be enough, in the words of a former White House chief strategist, for any actor interesting in foreign electoral meddling to "flood the zone with sh*t" and let the chips fall where they may.

In sum, *Meddling in the Ballot Box* is a rich and important piece of scholarship that adds much to our understanding of how great powers choose to promote their geopolitical interests and should therefore become a staple for graduate-level courses on international security and order. More importantly, Dov Levin's skillful and persuasive use of prose makes the book a pleasure to read front cover to back cover.

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Tobias Lemke is Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Washington College in Maryland. His research focuses on digital disinformation campaigns and the intersection of national identity discourses and international order. Some of his work has been published in *International Relations*, the *Journal of Global Security Studies*, and *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. He lives in Pennsylvania with his loving wife Maggie and their cat Lord Palmerston.