

## **Public Opinion and Foreign Electoral Intervention**

Michael Tomz  
Department of Political Science  
Stanford University  
Encina Hall West, Room 310  
Stanford, CA 94305-6044  
[tomz@stanford.edu](mailto:tomz@stanford.edu)

Jessica L. P. Weeks  
Department of Political Science  
University of Wisconsin  
110 North Hall  
Madison, WI 53706  
[jweeks@wisc.edu](mailto:jweeks@wisc.edu)

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**Abstract:** Foreign electoral intervention is an increasingly important tool for influencing politics in other countries, yet we know surprisingly little about when citizens would tolerate electoral intervention and when they would condemn it. In this paper, we use experiments to study American public reactions to revelations of foreign electoral intervention. We find that even modest forms of foreign electoral intervention polarize the American public along partisan lines. Americans are far more likely to condemn foreign involvement, lose faith in democracy, and seek retaliation when a foreign power sides with the opposition, than when a foreign power aids their own party. Nonetheless, Americans are unwilling to respond militarily to an electoral attack on the United States, even when their own political party is targeted. Together, our findings suggest that electoral interference can be an effective tactic for dividing and weakening an adversary without running the risks of escalation associated with conventional military intervention.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The discovery that Russia executed a wide-ranging plan to influence the 2016 U.S. Presidential race has sparked a global debate about foreign involvement in democratic politics. While countries have long interfered in each other's elections (Bubeck and Marinov 2017; Levin 2016, 2019),<sup>1</sup> the scope and sophistication of Russian activities signaled the arrival of a new era. Changes in information technology now make it possible for states to undertake ambitious influence campaigns in faraway countries, even when outmatched from a conventional military standpoint.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, observers have struggled to identify effective strategies for stopping this potentially powerful form of foreign influence.<sup>4</sup> One can, therefore, expect more foreign efforts to shape elections in the future.

In this article, we use survey experiments to investigate three fundamental questions about how Americans would respond to revelations of foreign electoral intervention. First, when would U.S. citizens tolerate foreign involvement in American elections, instead of condemning external efforts to tip the scales? Polls conducted in the aftermath of the 2016 election show that Democrats and Republicans expressed different opinions about Russian interference. Democrats

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<sup>1</sup> Levin (2016) 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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>.

<sup>4</sup> Tenove et al. 2018.

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 historical episode, however. For example, we do not know how Americans would have responded if the shoe were on the other foot. If citizens learned that a foreign country had intervened on behalf of a Democratic candidate, would Democrats denounce the foreign intervention as an unacceptable attack on American democracy, or would they condone the foreign assistance? Would Republicans change their tune, as well, disapproving more strongly of foreign aid for a Democratic candidate than for a Republican one? Would public reactions depend not only on the intended beneficiary of the intervention, but also on the particular form of meddling? Data from 2016 cannot provide the answers, but we can investigate these issues systematically through experiments.

This article also uses experiments to address a second fundamental question: when would news of foreign electoral intervention undermine confidence in democratic institutions? One ostensible goal of the 2016 Russian intervention was to make Americans doubt their own political system. Although Americans espouse less approval of domestic institutions now than before 2016, it is difficult to know whether Russian intervention *caused* public sentiment about democracy to slide, especially since the downward trend began long before the 2016 election. How much stronger would faith in American democracy be 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, we use experiments to shed light on a third fundamental question: when would Americans allow foreign intervention to pass instead of demanding retaliation? In the aftermath

of 2016, some U.S. politicians denounced Russian interference as an act of war and likened it to the attacks of September 11, 2001, which precipitated the U.S. war on terror and military intervention in Afghanistan. Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) explained, “when you use cyber … to compromise our democratic, free election system, that’s an attack against America. It’s an act of war.”<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> How does the revelation of election interference affect public support for diplomatic, economic, and military retaliation against the aggressor, and to what extent might retaliatory sentiments split along partisan lines?

To answer these 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 verbally endorsed one of the candidates or actively supported a candidate by providing funding, manipulating information, or hacking into voting machines. In other vignettes, the foreign country stayed out of the election entirely.

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<sup>7</sup> Nelson, Louis. “Cardin: Russia’s Election Meddling is ‘An Act of War’.” *Politico*, November 1, 2017. <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/11/01/russia-meddling-us-elections-ndi-event-244414>

<sup>8</sup> Nakashima, Elle. “Russia’s Apparent Meddling in U.S. Election is Not an Act of War, Cyber Expert Says.” *Washington Post*. February 7, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/07/russias-apparent-meddling-in-u-s-election-is-not-an-act-of-war-cyber-expert-says/?utm\\_term=.55e860dba0b9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/07/russias-apparent-meddling-in-u-s-election-is-not-an-act-of-war-cyber-expert-says/?utm_term=.55e860dba0b9)

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

Our experiments revealed that news of foreign intervention polarizes the public along partisan lines. Instead of rejecting foreign involvement *tout court*, Americans exhibited a partisan double standard. Both Democrats and Republicans were far more likely to condemn foreign involvement, lose faith in democracy, and call for retaliation when a foreign power sided with the opposition, than when a foreign power aided their own party.

Our experiments also revealed that even modest forms of electoral intervention divided and demoralized the country. Although active measures such as funding, defamation, and hacking were most corrosive, mere endorsements by foreign countries also managed to provoke substantial public ire, undermine faith in democratic institutions, and split the nation along partisan lines. Ironically, though, Americans—including the victims of electoral intervention—were unwilling to retaliate harshly. These findings suggest that electoral interference can be an effective offensive tool, one that sows public discord and erodes faith in democracy without running the retaliatory risks associated with conventional military intervention.

In the remaining sections of this article, we develop hypotheses about how the American public would react to news of foreign electoral intervention; describe the experiments we conducted; and summarize the effects of intervention on public disapproval, faith in democracy, and support for retaliation.

## **2. HOW DOES FOREIGN ELECTORAL INTERVENTION AFFECT PUBLIC ATTITUDES?**

In recent decades, it has become increasingly common for countries to involve themselves in foreign elections. Often, this involvement aims to enhance democracy without favoring a particular candidate or party. Before elections, foreign governments and NGOs assist with electoral reforms, and during elections they monitor activities to detect and deter irregularities.<sup>10</sup> Given the growth of foreign election assistance, an expanding literature investigates how external observers affect domestic perceptions of the quality of elections (e.g. Brancati 2014; Robertson 2015; Bush and Prather 2017, 2018).

In some cases, however, countries seek to tip the scales; they use rhetoric and/or resources to give specific parties or candidates an electoral advantage (Bubeck and Marinov 2017; Bush and Prather 2019; Corstange and Marinov 2012; Levin 2016, 2019). We refer to these types of activities as foreign electoral interventions.<sup>12</sup> The Russian interference of 2016, which aimed to help Donald Trump defeat Hillary Clinton, exemplifies this form of intervention.

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<sup>10</sup> See for example, Kelley 2008; Hyde 2011; Hyde and Marinov 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Our use of the term “electoral intervention” is closest to what Levin calls a “partisan electoral intervention” (Levin 2016, 2019). Levin 2019 defines a “partisan electoral intervention” as “a situation in which one or more sovereign countries intentionally undertakes specific actions to influence an upcoming election in another sovereign country in an overt or covert manner which they believe will favor or hurt one of the sides contesting that election and which incurs, or may incur, significant costs to the intervener(s) or the intervened country” (90). As discussed below, however, we include one type of electoral intervention that Levin excludes, namely

### *Past Research about Foreign Electoral Interventions*

Researchers have only recently begun to investigate the effects of foreign electoral intervention. In a pioneering study, Levin (2016) examined how interventions by great powers affected election outcomes in target states. He found that partisan electoral interventions by the U.S. and the USSR/Russia during the years 1946–2000 increased the vote share of the favored candidate by three percentage points, on average. Levin also showed that partisan electoral interventions contributed to political instability by encouraging the formation of domestic terrorist groups, increasing the risk of terrorist incidents, and raising the probability of a democratic breakdown (Levin 2018a, 2018b).

We know less about how citizens would judge the act of foreign intervention itself. If citizens became aware of foreign involvement, when would they tolerate and when would they condemn efforts to influence their own elections? Only two studies, to our knowledge, have examined this important question. Both studies made significant strides, but as we explain below, they reached conflicting conclusions. Moreover, by focusing on specific episodes in Ukraine and Lebanon, the studies left open important questions about how citizens in mature democracies would react to foreign electoral intervention, how different modes of intervention would influence public reactions, and whether foreign interference would erode confidence in democracy and provoke retaliatory foreign policies.

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“positive/negative things said about a candidate/party by the intervener before an election with no concrete threats/promises” (Levin 2019, 91). Our use of the term electoral intervention is narrower than Bubeck and Marinov (2017) and Corstange and Marinov (2012), who define electoral interventions to include not only partisan interventions but also democracy promotion.

In one ground-breaking study, Shulman and Bloom (2012) analyzed public approval of Russian and Western involvement in the 2004 Ukrainian presidential elections. During that election, Russia offered “nakedly partisan” support for incumbent Viktor Yanukovych (455). The Russian government contributed money to Yanukovych’s campaign, and Russian President Vladimir Putin backed him publicly throughout the election. Western efforts were not as openly one-sided. The U.S., the EU and Western organizations took care not to campaign for Yanukovych’s rival, Viktor Yuschenko, and they did not contribute money to his campaign. Western countries did, however, disproportionately fund opposition parties, and Western election monitoring and exit polling contributed to Yanukovych’s defeat by exposing electoral fraud.

To study how Ukrainians reacted to Russian and Western involvement, Shulman and Bloom analyzed public opinion surveys fielded approximately a year after the election. They found that the public disapproved of both Western and Russian activities, and concluded 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).<sup>16</sup>

A second study, which focused on the 2009 parliamentary elections in Lebanon, reached a different conclusion (Corstange and Marinov 2012). Corstange and Marinov innovated methodologically by running a survey experiment that randomly conveyed information about

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<sup>16</sup> Shulman and Bloom found that Ukrainians disapproved *more* of Western influence even though Russian interference was more openly partisan. They hypothesized that many Ukrainians identified more strongly with Russia than the West, and therefore viewed Russian involvement as less of a challenge to Ukrainian sovereignty.

American or Iranian support for one side in the Lebanese election. They then measured the public's desire to protect foreign relations with the U.S. and Iran, as well as satisfaction with the role the foreign country played.

They found that foreign intervention "did not provoke a nationalistic backlash against any meddling in domestic affairs whatsoever" (667). Indeed, unlike Ukrainian voters who generally rejected foreign interference, Lebanese voters sometimes appeared to appreciate foreign intervention on behalf of their preferred candidate. When Lebanese citizens heard that the U.S. had favored one side, those who agreed with the American position increased their desire for cooperation with the U.S., while those who disagreed with the American position downgraded the importance of U.S. relations. News of Iranian interference did not provoke a similar split reaction, however, raising questions about why some interventions would divide the public whereas others would not.<sup>18</sup>

Those two studies not only reached different conclusions, but also left several fascinating questions unanswered. For instance, how would voters in a longstanding democracy such as the U.S. judge foreign electoral intervention? As Corstange and Marinov (2012, 659) argue, voters in "fragile and unconsolidated" democracies may tolerate interventions that help their side. When the future of democracy is in doubt, it could be rational to prioritize short-term political

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<sup>18</sup> As Corstange and Marinov (2012, 667) point out, reactions to the Iranian treatment might have been weaker because, prior to the experiment, Lebanese were more familiar with the objectives and behavior of Iran than of the U.S. In a follow-up article, Marinov (2013) used the same experimental data from Lebanon to examine how individual-level characteristics such as education and political sophistication moderated public reactions to external involvement.

gains over the potential negative effects of foreign meddling. Consequently, voters in unstable democracies may react more positively on average, and in a more polarized way, than voters in longstanding democracies such as the United States.

Previous research also left unclear how voters would respond to different types of electoral interventions. Corstange and Marinov (2012) reminded respondents that the U.S. or Iran “made it clear that it strongly preferred one side over the other,” without specifying whether the intervention went beyond verbal statements. Shulman and Bloom (2012), in contrast, studied historical interference that included both verbal statements and active measures, making it difficult to determine which actions provoked the most public ire. By experimentally randomizing what the foreign country did, one could compare reactions to various forms of interference.

Finally, previous studies did not reveal how foreign interference affected faith in democracy or support for reprisals. We develop hypotheses about these themes, thereby setting the stage for our survey experiments. In developing our predictions, we adapt previous work to the American context and extend it to cover a broader range of potential foreign intrusions.

#### *Hypotheses about Tolerance vs Condemnation*

We hypothesize that American tolerance of foreign intervention should depend on the type of intervention and the intended beneficiary. With respect to the first hypothesis, we distinguish two modes of interference: rhetoric and action. Rhetorical interventions occur when foreign countries express their opinions about candidates, sometimes accompanied with a promise of future reward or threat of future punishment. In contrast, active interventions occur when foreign

powers take concrete steps such as donating money to an election campaign, spreading embarrassing information about a candidate, or hacking into voting systems.

We suggest two reasons why news of active interventions should be more likely to provoke American disapproval. First, active interventions could be perceived as greater challenges to democracy. Polls show that Americans rate democracy as the best form of government and express overwhelming support for fair elections.<sup>19</sup> Americans also embrace free speech as essential to democracy, while expressing anxiety about inequalities in campaign funding, the proliferation of fake or biased news, or vulnerabilities in voting equipment. We anticipate that many Americans would regard foreign endorsements as legitimate forms of free speech, while viewing active interventions as antidemocratic attempts to tilt the electoral playing field.<sup>20</sup>

Second, active interventions may be regarded as greater threats to sovereignty. The norm of sovereignty—that countries should not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries—is well established in international law and a foundation of the U.N. charter. Shulman and Bloom (2012, 470) found that the commitment to sovereignty was “alive and well” in Ukraine and helped explained why Ukrainians rejected foreign interference during the presidential elections of 2004. To the extent that Americans share a commitment to sovereignty, they should be especially

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<sup>19</sup> Drutman, Diamond and Goldman (2018) and Pew Research Center (2018).

<sup>20</sup> Public reactions could, of course, differ in countries where democratic norms more tenuous. Indeed, Corstange and Marinov (2012, 659) found that Lebanese citizens tolerated foreign meddling in their fledgling democracy, while stressing that acquiescence would be “implausible in consolidated democracies.” We therefore expect a stronger negative reaction in the U.S. than what Corstange and Marinov found in Lebanon.

concerned about active electoral interventions, which the U.N. has classified as impermissible interference in the internal affairs of another nation.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Americans might view foreign endorsements as instances of ordinary diplomacy that do not violate norms of sovereignty.

We also hypothesize that revelations of foreign intervention will generate 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.<sup>25</sup> Given the possibility of asymmetric partisan gain, we anticipate that American voters will disapprove more strongly of foreign meddling on behalf of political opponents, than of foreign meddling to assist their own party.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, U.N. Resolution 60/164 (16 December 2005), which demands “respect for the principles of national sovereignty and diversity of democratic systems in electoral processes” and calls on all states to avoid interfering through measures such as “financing political parties or organizations in any other state.”

<sup>25</sup> Although foreign attacks may benefit some domestic groups, such as weapons manufacturers, they are typically harmful for the population as a whole.

<sup>26</sup> Our prediction dovetails with research showing that citizens apply a partisan double standard when thinking about domestic issues, including political corruption (Anduiza, Gallego, and Muñoz 2013), election fraud (Beaulieu 2014), and election rules (Ahlquist et al 2018). Corstange and Marinov (2012) found a partisan double standard in Lebanon, but suggested that reactions might be different in a consolidated democracy such as the U.S. In contrast, we expect a polarized reaction even in the U.S.

At least three mechanisms could contribute to this double standard. The first is consequentialist. Many voters believe that victory by their own party would produce better policies than victory by the opposition. To the extent that voters judge foreign interference based on its consequences, they should disapprove more strongly of interference on behalf of domestic political adversaries, since such interference could contribute to bad policy outcomes. Conversely, they should be more tolerant of assistance for domestic political allies, since foreign assistance could help domestic allies win and contribute to more desirable policies.

The second mechanism is perceptual. Psychological studies have shown that people overestimate the extent to which others share their opinions (Ross, Greene, and House 1977). This “false consensus effect” is evident in many spheres, including politics, where members of a political party overestimate public support for their own side (Delavande and Manski 2012). Studies also show that citizens interpret data selectively, accepting news that portrays their party in a positive light while dismissing news that portrays their party in a negative light (Bush and Prather 2017).<sup>27</sup> These types of cognitive biases could cause citizens to perceive foreign intervention on behalf of their own party as less consequential—and therefore less objectionable—than foreign intervention on behalf of the opposition.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> According to the classic Michigan model, partisanship “raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favorable to his partisan orientation” (Campbell et al 1960, 133).

<sup>28</sup> Both processes are examples of motivated reasoning; see Bolen, Druckman, and Cook 2014; Leeper and Slothuus 2014; Lodge and Taber 2013.

The final mechanism is symbolic. In sports, people disapprove when fans cheer for the opposition, even when cheerleading does not affect the outcome of a match.<sup>29</sup> 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 alter the outcome of an election. As such, even when foreign meddling has no real impact on the election, we predict that citizens will disapprove more strongly of meddlers who took the wrong side than of meddlers who supported the right political team.

In summary, we suggest three reasons why citizens might exhibit a partisan double standard. Foreign intervention on behalf of the opposition could be seen as contributing to bad policy outcomes; be perceived as more likely to bias the outcome of the election; and/or be castigated as symbolic support for the wrong team. Of course, not all voters have firm partisan affiliations. We anticipate that independent voters will not discriminate based on which party the intervention aimed to help.

#### *Hypotheses about Faith in Democracy*

In addition to provoking disapproval, the discovery of foreign involvement in elections could change attitudes about democracy. Previous studies have found that meddling by *domestic* actors raises doubts about the integrity of elections, triggering a chain reaction that delegitimizes the political system, depresses voter turnout, and encourages mass protest (Norris 2014; Tucker 2007; Wellman, Hyde and Hall 2018). Research has documented the prevalence and consequences of domestic threats to electoral integrity, including efforts to block opposition parties, censor the media, launder campaign funds, gerrymander districts, suppress turnout, buy

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<sup>29</sup> On in-group bias and intergroup discrimination more generally, see Tajfel and Turner 1979.

votes, stuff ballots, and manipulate the rules that translate votes into seats (e.g., Ahlquist et al. 2018; Birch 2011; Simpser 2013).

We extend this line of inquiry to the international realm by assessing how *foreign* interference affects attitudes about democracy.<sup>31</sup> We expect that news of foreign interference will raise suspicions about the outcome of the election, sap faith in democratic institutions, and depress future political participation. We further expect a bigger impact on proximate outcomes (such as distrusting the results of the immediate election) than on distant and diffuse ones (such as losing faith in democracy or abstaining from future elections). Thus, foreign intervention should taint perceptions of democracy, but reactions should weaken as one radiates away from the triggering event.

We also hypothesize that active interventions will inflict more damage than rhetorical expressions of support. Although democracy is a contested concept, most would regard free and fair elections as the *sine qua non* of a democratic system (Dahl 1971). Although foreign meddling of any kind may rub citizens the wrong way, active foreign interventions such as hacking, funding, and misinformation seem like especially clear violations of democratic norms. At the same time, citizens are likely to perceive active interventions as more consequential in swaying the outcome of the election. Thus, for both normative and practical reasons, active interventions are more likely to sow distrust and undermine public confidence in political institutions.

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<sup>31</sup> Whereas others have studied responses to foreign election observers (e.g. Brancati 2014; Bush and Prather 2017), we examine foreign efforts to give one side a political advantage.

Finally, we hypothesize that foreign interference will have especially corrosive effects on the democratic confidence of citizens whose party was attacked. As explained earlier, motivated reasoning should lead citizens to perceive attacks on their own party as more consequential—and therefore more threatening to democracy—than attacks on the opposition. Moreover, research has shown that citizens on the losing side of an election exhibit less faith in democratic institutions than citizens on the winning side (e.g. Anderson and Guillory 1997; Anderson et al. 2005).<sup>32</sup> Following this logic, foreign intervention should be especially demoralizing when it appears to help the opposition win.

#### *Foreign Electoral Intervention and Foreign Policy Preferences*

Finally, foreign electoral intervention could spur demands for retaliation. We consider two broad categories of options. The U.S. could take *nonmilitary* measures such as severing diplomatic relations with the offending country or imposing economic sanctions, or *military* measures such as threatening to use force or even launching a military strike against the meddling nation.

Which measures would citizens support, and under what conditions? We expect higher public support for nonmilitary options than for military ones. This prediction may reflect not only prudential concerns about the costs of military engagement, but also normative skepticism about whether violence would constitute an appropriate response to non-kinetic attacks (Kreps and Das 2017; Kreps and Schneider 2018). Although some American politicians characterized

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<sup>32</sup> The gap could arise because losers react negatively to loss, winners react positively to victory, or both (Esaiasson 2011; Wellman, Hyde and Hall 2018).

the Russian interference of 2016 as an “act of war,” election interference presumably does not qualify as an “armed attack” that would justify military retaliation under just war theory or international law.<sup>35</sup> To the extent that citizens share this view, they should prefer nonmilitary options over military ones.

However, support for retaliation of any kind should depend on the mode and partisanship of the foreign intervention. Previously, we explained why citizens would be especially upset about active interventions and attacks on their own party. Carrying these arguments to their logical conclusion, citizens should be more inclined to retaliate against active interference than against verbal support, and more willing to punish attacks against their own party than attacks on the opposition.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, the desire for retaliation should increase with confidence in the identity of the perpetrator (Kreps and Das 2017). In some cases, intelligence agencies may have a hard time inferring who was meddling, especially if the foreign power used covert tactics to launder campaign contributions, spread misinformation, or hack into voting systems. In other cases, it might be obvious which country carried out the electoral intervention. We expect that citizens

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<sup>35</sup> E.g. “McCain: Russian Cyberintrusions an ‘Act of War’” December 30, 2016. CNN.

<https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/30/politics/mccain-cyber-hearing/index.html>; Goodman 2017; Hathaway et al 2012.

<sup>36</sup> The latter prediction relates to new work by Bush and Prather (2019), who found that citizens in Tunisia and the United States were less willing to engage economically with foreign countries that sided against them in domestic politics.

will be more willing to retaliate if they know they are punishing the real offender, rather than a likely but unproven suspect.

### **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

To test these hypotheses, we administered a survey experiment to a diverse sample of 2,948 U.S. adults in March–April 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.

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 four groups, which varied in the degree to which a named foreign country interfered with the election. Members of the endorsement group received a scenario in which the country publicly announced its preference for one of the candidates. Members of the threat group received a vignette in which the country not only announced its preference, but also intimated that a disappointing outcome would prompt it to rethink its relationship with the United States. Members of the action group read a story in which agents from the foreign country used money, information, or hacking in an attempt to give their

favored candidate an electoral advantage. Finally, members of the stay out group received a vignette in which the foreign country did not meddle in the U.S. election.<sup>37</sup>

We now describe each treatment in more detail. Members of the endorsement 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 [*candidate*] and hoped [*candidate*] would win the U.S. Presidential election. In the end, [*candidate*] won the U.S. Presidential election. Observers began debating whether [*country*]’s statements during the campaign might have affected the results of the election.

*Country* was assigned to be China, Pakistan, or Turkey<sup>38</sup> and *candidate* was either “the Democratic candidate” or “the Republican candidate.”<sup>39</sup> In our survey, *country* and *candidate* were randomized independently, resulting in  $3 \times 2 = 6$  variations.

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<sup>37</sup> In our scenarios, there was no ambiguity about whether a foreign country intervened or not. Future experiments could study how citizens would respond if they were unsure whether an intervention took place.

<sup>38</sup> We selected three countries that were technologically advanced enough to intervene and had plausible motives for getting involved. As we show in the appendix, the specific country mentioned had little effect on public perceptions of intervention. Future research could examine how the American public would respond to interference by other countries, including U.S. allies.

<sup>39</sup> In this scenario (and in the threat and action scenarios, described below), the candidate that received support from the foreign country ultimately won the election. Future experiments could include scenarios in which the favored candidate lost the election.

Members of the threat group received the following vignette, which not only included an endorsement, but also intimated that victory by the opponent might have consequences for economic and military relations with the U.S.

In 2024, the government of [*country*] made several public statements during the U.S. Presidential election campaign. [*Country*] said that it strongly preferred [*candidate*] and hoped [*candidate*] would win the U.S. Presidential election. [*Country*] said that, if [*opponent*] won, it would rethink its economic and military relationships with the U.S. In the end, [*candidate*] won the U.S. Presidential election. Observers began debating whether [*country*]’s statements during the campaign might have affected the results of the election. As in the endorsement condition, we independently randomized *country* and *candidate* (leaving the other politician as the *opponent*), yielding  $3 \times 2 = 6$  variations.

The action scenario involved 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 [*candidate*] and hurt [*opponent*]. According to the plan, agents from the foreign country would [*action*]. The foreign country carried out its plan to help [*candidate*] and hurt [*opponent*]. In the end, [*candidate*] won the U.S. Presidential election. Authorities began investigating whether the foreign country might have affected the results of the election.

*Country* and *candidate* (and, by implication, *opponent*) were randomized as 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 *candidate*”); spread truth (“use social media to spread embarrassing but true information about *opponent*—accurately revealing that *opponent* had broken laws and acted immorally”); spread lies (“use social media to spread embarrassing lies about *opponent*—falsely claiming that *opponent* had broken laws and acted immorally”); or hack machines (“hack into voting machines and change the official vote count to give *candidate* extra votes”). Overall, the action group included  $3 \times 2 = 6$  combinations of *country* and *candidate*, crossed with  $4 \times 4 = 16$  combinations of *percent* and *action*. Below, we simplify the exposition and increase statistical power by analyzing 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 [*candidate*] won the U.S. Presidential election. As in the other scenarios, *country* was China, Pakistan, or Turkey, and *candidate* 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.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> At the end of each scenario, we asked a series of brief attention checks (see appendix) and retained respondents who answered at least 80% of the checks correctly.

**Table 1: Experimental Treatments**

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

After assigning each participant to one group and presenting them with 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 more generally? Finally, what foreign policies would they support with respect to the country in the scenario? We organize the remainder of the paper around these three questions.

#### 4. FINDINGS

##### *Public Disapproval of Foreign Electoral Intervention*

We first investigate when the public would condemn or condone foreign electoral intervention. We hypothesized that the reactions of voters would hinge on how the foreign country intervened and which side it helped. We predicted that Americans would react more negatively to active measures than to verbal support, and would disapprove more strongly of foreign efforts to help political opponents than of foreign assistance to their own party.

To evaluate these predictions, we asked voters whether they approved or disapproved of how the foreign country behaved. There were five response options: approve strongly, approve somewhat, neither approve nor disapprove, disapprove somewhat, and disapprove strongly. For simplicity we focus on perhaps the most natural and easily interpretable quantity of interest, the percentage of respondents who disapproved, but the appendix documents that our conclusions hold when we analyze the full five-point scale, as well.

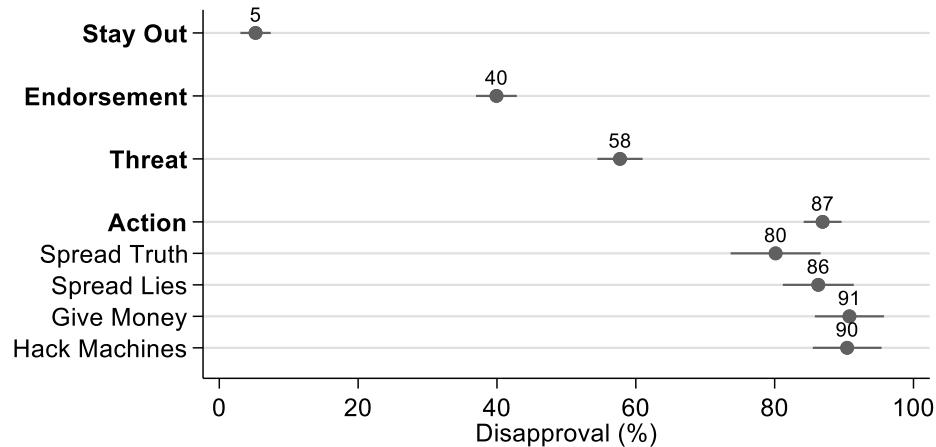
Figure 1 shows the average rate of disapproval in each of our four main treatment groups: stay out, endorsement, threat, and action.<sup>46</sup> The estimates in Figure 1 integrate over the other experimental conditions in Table 1, and therefore reflect average levels of disapproval regardless of the foreign country we mentioned, the level of certainty about the perpetrator, and the party of the candidate who was favored.<sup>47</sup> In this figure and all others, the dots represent point estimates, and the horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

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<sup>46</sup> Based on the values in Figure 1, one can compute a treatment effect for each type of intervention by taking the level of disapproval when the government intervened, and subtracting the level of disapproval when the government stayed out. For a graphical summary of treatment effects and confidence intervals, see the appendix.

<sup>47</sup> The appendix shows that the public had similar levels of disapproval regardless of whether we said the country was China, Pakistan, or Turkey. Later in the article, we analyze public reactions to the other experimental variations: certainty about the perpetrator, and the party of the candidate who was helped.

**Figure 1: Disapproval, by Mode of Intervention**



*Note:* The figure shows the percentage of respondents who disapproved. Sample sizes were 402 for stay out; 1,072 for endorsement; 887 for threat; and 587 for action. Sample sizes for the four subcategories of action (spread truth, spread lies, give money, and hack machines) were 146, 175, 130, and 136, 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. However, public disapproval was considerably higher (40%) when the foreign country intervened by saying which candidate it preferred. When the foreign country not only expressed a preference but also threatened to downgrade relations with the U.S. if its favorite candidate lost, the majority of Americans (58%) objected. Thus, large proportions of 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, like domestic political actors, would be entitled to voice their opinions and engage more fully with some partners than with others. However, many Americans who read the “endorse” scenario—and most who read the “threat” scenario—reacted with disdain.

As expected, disapproval was highest (87%) when the country took concrete actions to bolster its favored candidate. The bottom portion of Figure 1 disaggregates the four types of action in our experiment. Approximately 80% 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 86% and 91%.

The bottom portion of Figure 1 also suggests some surprising conclusions. In particular, 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, 80% of respondents disapproved when the foreign country disseminated true information. A higher proportion, 86%, disapproved of spreading lies, but the difference in reactions to these two treatments was only 6 percentage points.

Moreover, respondents reacted just as negatively to foreign campaign contributions as to spreading lies or hacking election machines. One might expect citizens to view campaign contributions as more legitimate than falsely scandalizing a candidate or rigging the electoral tally. On the contrary, Americans in our study viewed foreign money as no less objectionable than misinformation and cheating.

We also investigated how partisanship moderated reactions to foreign interference. In our sample, 37% of respondents were Democrats, 30% were Republicans, and the remaining 33% were Independents who did not identify with either party. For each of these sets of

respondents, we estimated the reaction to each type of intervention by measuring the percent who disapproved when the foreign country intervened in that way, minus the percent who disapproved when the foreign country stayed out, while holding the winner of the election constant.

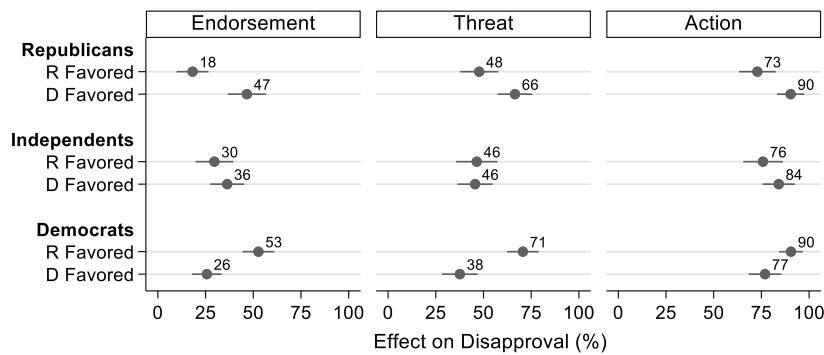
Consider, by way of illustration, how Republicans responded to foreign endorsements. In our experiment, 51% of Republicans disapproved when the foreign country endorsed the Democrat and the Democrat won, whereas only 5% disapproved when the foreign country abstained and the Democrat won. Thus, holding the eventual winner constant, disapproval among Republicans was  $51 - 5 = 47$  [get decimals] percentage points higher when the foreign country endorsed the Democrat, than when the foreign country stayed out entirely.

Republicans reacted much differently when the endorsement favored their own party. In our data, only 23% of Republicans disapproved when the foreign country endorsed the Republican candidate and the Republican won, while 5% disapproved when the foreign country stayed out and the Republican won. Here, here effect of the foreign endorsement was only  $23 - 5 = 18$  percentage points. This example fits our hypothesis that Americans react much more negatively to foreign intervention on behalf of the opposition, than to otherwise equivalent intervention in support of their own party.

This example illustrates a remarkable double standard that arose throughout our experiments. Figure 2 summarizes how Republicans, Independents, and Democrats reacted to each type of foreign intervention. The top left corner graphically displays the treatment effects in our earlier example; disapproval among Republicans swelled by only 18 percentage points when the foreign country endorsed a Republican (R Favored), versus 47 percentage points when the foreign country endorsed a Democrat (D Favored). The bottom left corner shows that reactions

among Democratic voters were similarly partisan. Disapproval among Democrats grew by 53 percentage points when the foreign country endorsed a Republican (R Favored), versus 26 percentage points when the foreign country endorsed a Democrat (D Favored), again holding the ultimate winner of the election constant.<sup>48</sup> The reactions of Independent voters, in contrast, were far less sensitive to which party the foreign country endorsed.

**Figure 2: Effects of Intervention on Disapproval, by Partisanship**



*Note:* The figure gives the effects of intervention on the percentage of respondents who disapproved of the foreign country's behavior. For each of the six combinations of partisanship on the vertical axes, there were between 62-75 observations in the stay out group (the control condition against which the effect was measured), 136-217 observations in the endorsement group, 130-169 observations in the threat group, and 83-117 observations in the action group.

We found similar patterns when the foreign country threatened that the outcome could affect future economic and military relations with the United States. This type of intervention

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<sup>48</sup> Corstange and Marinov (2012) found a similar partisan reaction in a much more fragile democracy, Lebanon. In their study, Lebanese citizens were more welcoming toward foreign efforts on behalf of their own political camp than toward involvement that could benefit the opposition.

caused Republican disapproval to surge by 66 percentage points when the country sided with the Democratic candidate, versus only 48 percentage points when the country sided with the Republican candidate. Democrats also responded in a partisan fashion; their disapproval grew by 71 percentage points when the foreign country backed the Republican, compared with only 38 percentage points when the foreign country backed the Democrat. Moreover, as expected, the effect of threats on Independent voters did not depend on which side the foreign country took.

The right side of Figure 2 shows partisan double standards even when the foreign country actively interfered in the election. Among Republicans, disapproval swelled by 90 percentage points when the country actively aimed to help the Democrat, compared with 73 percentage points when the country sought to help the Republican. Likewise, Democrats reacted more negatively (a 90 percentage point effect) when the country sided with the Republican, than when the foreign country sided with the Democrat (a 77 percentage point effect). Once again, the reactions of Independents were less sensitive to which side the foreign country took.

Although Figure 2 emphasizes the effects of intervention by contrasting treatments with controls, the underlying levels of disapproval (shown in the online appendix) are also informative for seeing how foreign electoral interference could split the American electorate. The appendix shows, for example, that when the foreign country issued threats on behalf of a Democratic candidate, most Republicans (71%) disapproved, whereas only a minority of Democrats (42%) objected. Likewise, when a foreign country privileged the Republican in this way, the vast majority of Democrats (75%) protested, but only half (52%) of Republicans balked. These figures illustrate how foreign interference can be a potent tool for sowing domestic divisions.

It is worth considering how our experimental design might have affected the magnitude of the partisan differences we uncovered. Our scenarios conveyed no ambiguity about whether the foreign country had tampered with the U.S. election or refrained from getting involved. What if party leaders had disputed the existence or absence of foreign meddling? After the 2016 U.S. election, some Republican elites, including President Donald Trump, dismissed Russian intervention as a hoax that Democrats had fabricated to rationalize why their candidate lost. If elites in our vignettes had debated whether intervention occurred, thereby politicizing what might otherwise seem like an unacceptable attack on American institutions, would we have found even sharper partisan differences? We leave this as a topic for future research. Overall, though, our experiments showed that even modest forms of foreign intervention provoked public disapproval and polarized the public along partisan lines.

#### *Foreign Electoral Intervention and Attitudes about Democracy*

We next consider how foreign electoral intervention affected attitudes about democracy. We hypothesized that intervention would undermine trust in the election results, erode faith in democratic institutions, and depress future political participation. We further expected interventions to have a stronger effect on perceptions of the immediate election outcome than on more diffuse and distant attitudes, such as faith in democracy and willingness to vote in the future. We also anticipated that active interventions would be more destructive than verbal statements, and that voters would react more favorably when foreigners tried to help their own political 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 three

statements were, “I would trust the results of the election,” “I would be unlikely to vote in future elections,” and “I would lose faith in American democracy.” We calculated the percentage of respondents who agreed or disagreed with each statement.

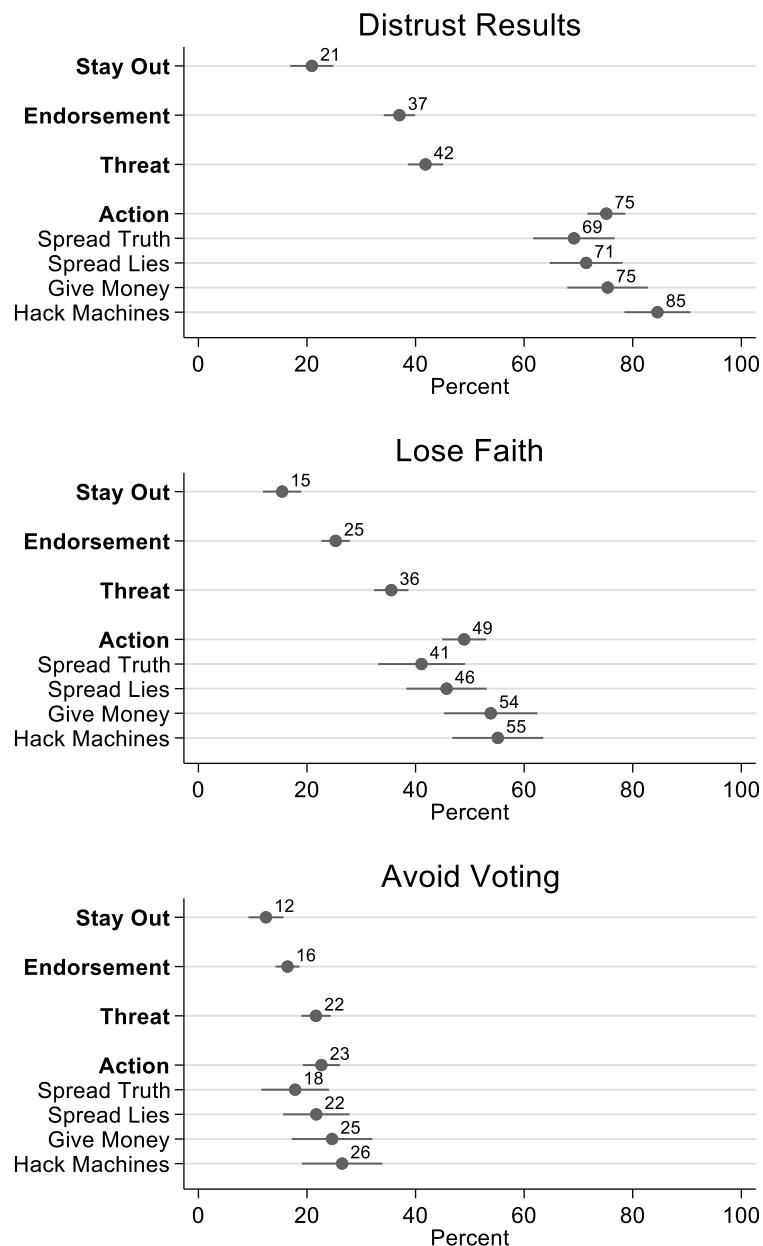
We found that foreign intervention greatly increased distrust in the results of the election (first graph in Figure 3). When the foreign country stayed out, 21% voiced distrust, reflecting preexisting cynicism about the integrity of American elections. But distrust increased to 37% when the foreign country offered an endorsement, and to 42% when the country coupled the endorsement with a threat. Finally, distrust was highest in the four active treatment conditions, which increased distrust to 75%, on average.<sup>49</sup>

Foreign intervention not only sowed doubts about the current election, but also eroded faith in U.S. democracy (second graph in Figure 3). Although 15% lacked faith even when the foreign country refrained from intervening, that figure increased to 25% when the foreign country endorsed one of the candidates, swelled to 35% when the endorsement came with a threat, and reached 49% when the country took concrete action.

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<sup>49</sup> Figure 3 presents levels of distrust and other attitudes about democracy. The appendix contains complementary figures that re-express the values in Figure 3 as treatment effects, calculated as attitudes when the foreign government intervened, minus attitudes when the foreign government stayed out.

**Figure 3: Attitudes about Democracy, by Mode of Intervention**



Note: The figure shows the percentage of respondents who agreed with each statement. Sample sizes were 402 for stay out; 1,072 for endorsement; 887 for threat; and 587 for action, comprised of 146, 175, 130, and 136 for spread truth, spread lies, give money, and hack machines.

Finally, foreign intervention depressed future intentions to vote (third graph in Figure 3).

When the foreign power stayed out of the election, 12% of subjects said they would abstain from voting in future elections. Avoidance of voting rose to 16% when the foreign country merely expressed its opinion, to 22% when the country put future relations on the line, and to 23% when the foreign country actively intervened.

Overall, these findings suggest that foreign involvement could have profoundly negative effects on American democracy. Interference in a presidential election would cause Americans to distrust the immediate results, while also affecting—to a lesser degree—more distant outcomes such as faith in American democracy and participation in future elections. Moreover, our experiments indicate that foreign countries can adversely affect the American psyche even without taking active measures. By verbally endorsing a Presidential candidate, with or without threats, foreign powers have the potential to undermine confidence in the American political system.

We hypothesized that intervention would not only be corrosive on average, but also prompt different reactions depending on partisanship. Figure 4 shows how intervention affected attitudes about democracy among Republicans, Independents, and Democrats, relative to the baseline in which the country stayed out but the same candidate won. As before, the black dots are average treatment effects, and the thin lines are 95% confidence intervals.

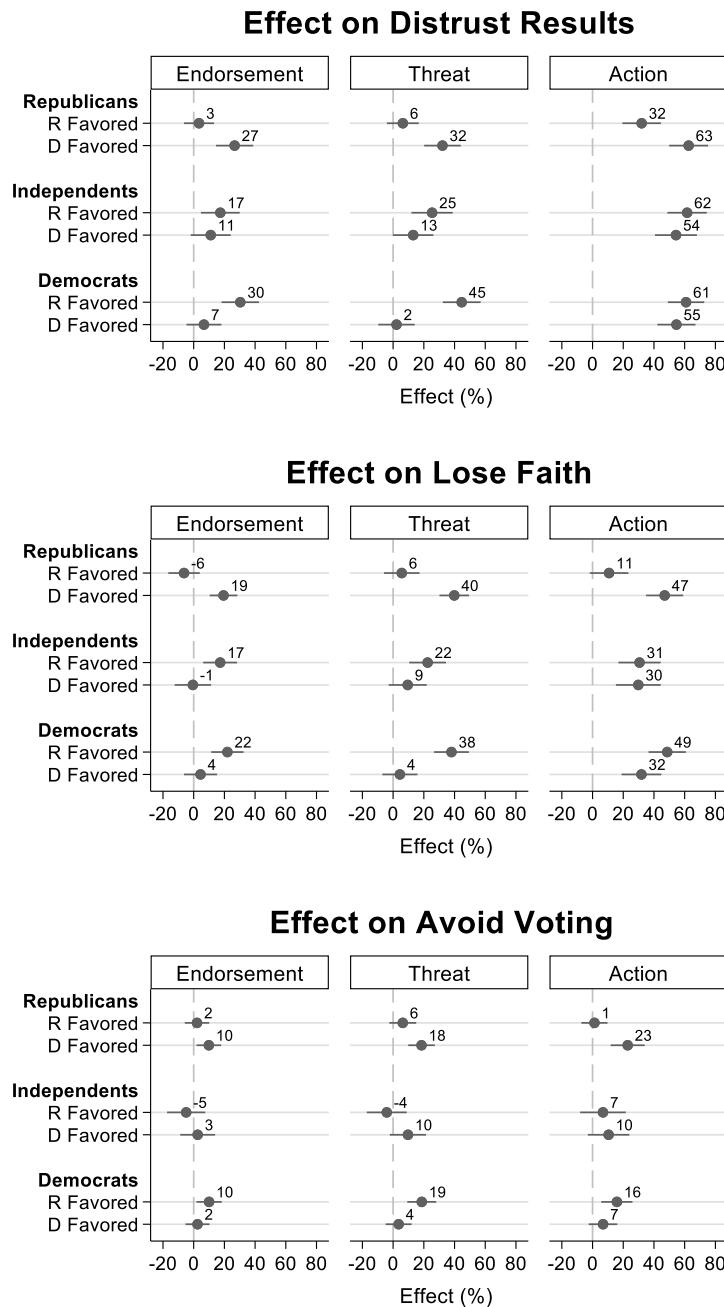
Figure 4 shows clear evidence of a partisan double standard. Consider, for example, reactions to foreign endorsements, shown on the left-hand side of each of the three panels. When a foreign country verbally endorsed the Democratic candidate (D Favored), Republican distrust of the outcome swelled by 27 points, skepticism about democracy increased by 19 points, and the intention to avoid voting in the future grew by 10 points. In contrast, when a foreign country

endorsed the Republican candidate (R Favored), Republicans showed *no* statistically significant changes on any of these three dimensions (the effects were 3, -6, and 2 percentage points, respectively).

Democrats showed a similar double standard. When the foreign country endorsed the Republican (R Favored), Democrats became substantially more likely to distrust the results (30 point effect), lose faith in democracy (22 point effect), and avoid voting in the future (10 point effect). Upon learning of a foreign endorsement of a fellow Democrat (D Favored), however, they remained indifferent, exhibiting no significant changes in attitudes about democracy. Finally, endorsements caused Independents to sour on democracy, but not to the same degree as citizens who witnessed interference against their own party. Foreign threats produced similar patterns, as shown in the middle column of Figure 4.

The right side of Figure 4 presents treatment effects when the foreign country took active measures. Once again, voters responded asymmetrically, becoming especially negative about American democracy when the foreign country favored the opposing side. However, all estimates were positive, and most were significantly distinguishable from zero. On average, therefore, active intervention demoralized not only citizens whose party suffered, but also citizens whose party received assistance and emerged victorious. Thus, active foreign intervention undermined the democratic ethos even among citizens the intervention was designed to help.

**Figure 4: Effects of Intervention on Attitudes about Democracy, By Partisanship**



In sum, revelations of even modest forms of electoral intervention undermined confidence in American democracy while also pitting Republicans and Democrats against each other. Thus, whether or not a particular intervention ultimately changes the electoral outcome

(Levin 2016), foreign interference provides foreign countries with a potent weapon for weakening the United States.

#### *Foreign Electoral Intervention and Foreign Policy Preferences*

Finally, we investigated public support for retaliation against foreign interference in U.S. elections. We expected higher public support for nonmilitary options, such as diplomatic or economic sanctions, than for military responses such as threatening or initiating armed conflict. We further predicted that support for both kinds of retaliation would be stronger when the foreign country intervened actively rather than rhetorically, and when it supported candidates from the opposing party. Finally, we expected that support for retaliation against active interventions would diminish with uncertainty about which country was responsible.

To measure support for retaliation, we asked members of the stay out, endorsement, and threat groups to 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 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], threatening to use military force against [country], and launching a military strike against [country].

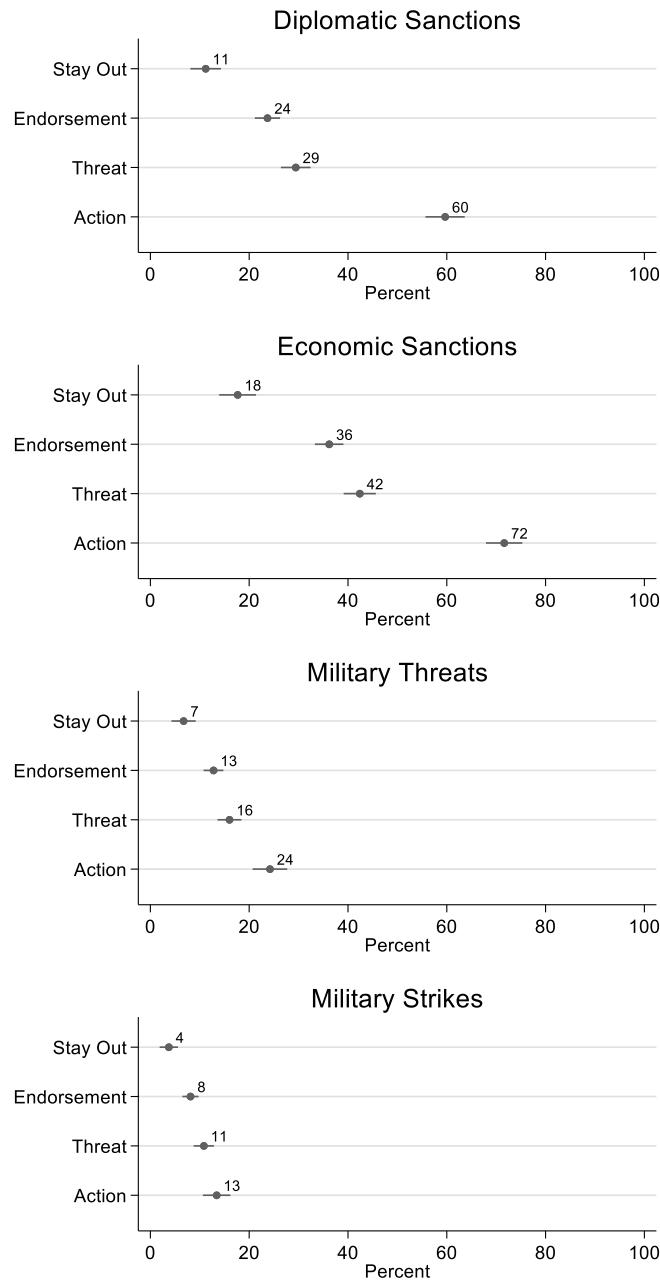
Figure 5 shows the percentage of respondents who supported each policy option, conditional on whether and how the foreign country intervened.<sup>50</sup> Each dot represents the mean level of support, averaging over the other features in the experiment. (Later, we test whether these conclusions depend on certainty about the identity of the foreign country.)

The figure reveals several striking conclusions. First, citizens resoundingly rejected military responses to foreign electoral intervention. Even in the face of active efforts to fund candidates, manipulate information, or hack into voting machines, only 24 percent wanted to make military threats, and only 13 percent called for military strikes. Second, diplomatic and economic sanctions received majority support *only* when the foreign country engaged in active intervention. This is surprising, given that verbal statements triggered public ire and undermined confidence in democracy. It appears, therefore, that foreign countries could undertake destructive verbal interventions (with or without threats), secure in the knowledge that none of the retaliatory measures we studied would attract support from a majority of the American public. Furthermore, adversaries could wage active interventions without running the military risks that conventional kinetic attacks would bring.

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<sup>50</sup> The appendix shows these figures broken down by country and by different modes of active intervention. Responses were similar regardless of which country we named and the specific form of foreign activity.

**Figure 5: Support for Foreign Policies, By Mode of Intervention**



We also hypothesized that support for retaliation would depend on partisanship. Figure 6 tests this hypothesis by splitting the sample into Republicans, Independents, and Democrats. Within each group, the figure shows how each type of foreign intervention affected support for tough policies (diplomatic sanctions, economic sanctions, military threats, or military strikes),

relative to baseline support for those same policies when the foreign country stayed out entirely.

The dots in Figure 6 are average treatment effects, integrating over the other dimensions of the experiment.

Once again, we found clear evidence of a partisan double standard. The first two rows in each graph in Figure 6 show how Republicans responded to interventions on behalf of a Republican candidate (R Favored), and to interventions on behalf of a Democratic candidate (D Favored). In every case—regardless of the mode of intervention or the method of retaliation—Republicans always reacted more strongly to “D Favored” scenarios than to “R Favored” scenarios. Most of the differences were substantively large and statistically significant.

Democrats responded hypocritically, as well. The bottom two rows of each graph give the average treatment affects among Democrats when the foreign country backed a Republican (R Favored), and when it backed a Democrat (D Favored). With only one exception, intervention had a bigger effect on Democratic support for tough policies in “R Favored” scenarios than in “D Favored” scenarios.<sup>51</sup>

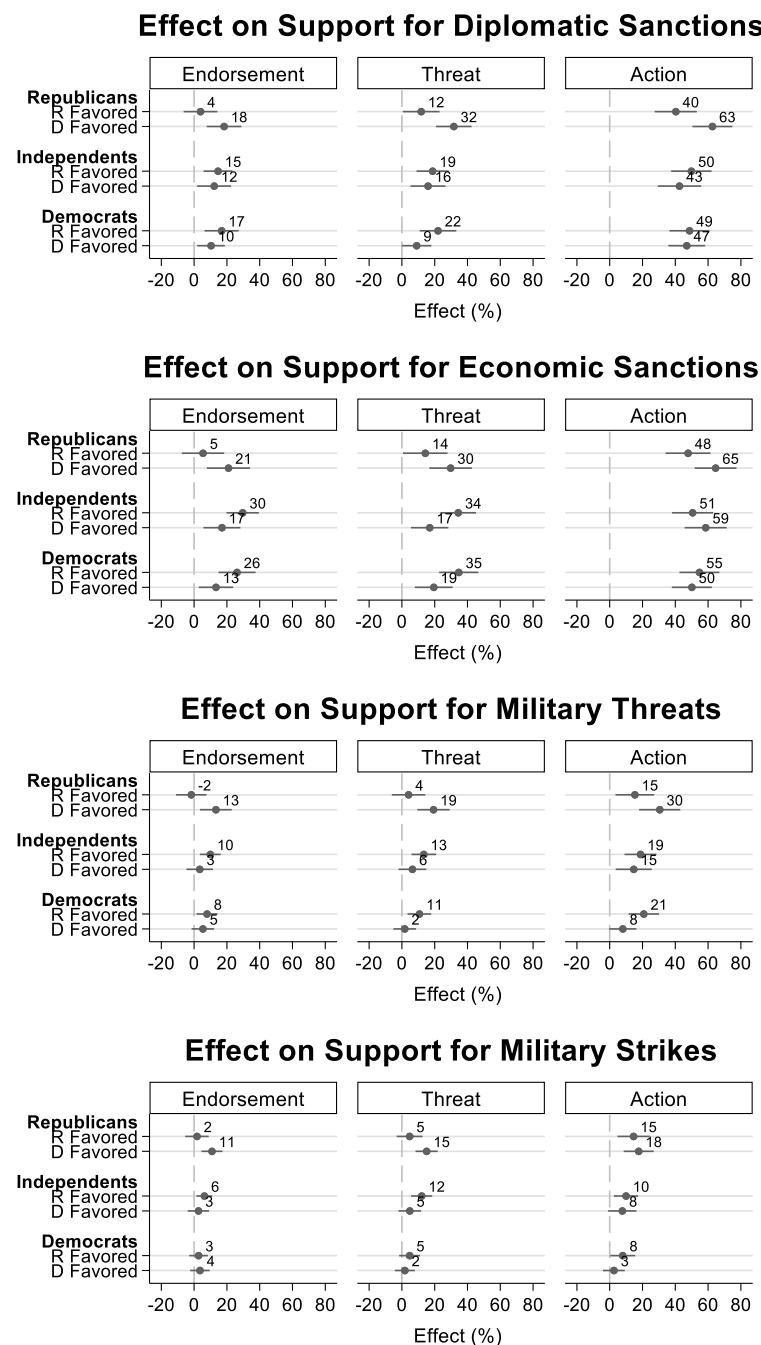
These patterns not only accord with our hypotheses, but also suggest what kinds of retaliatory policies might—or might not—be politically feasible after an electoral intervention. According to Figure 6, electoral interventions are less likely to spur retaliatory sentiment by members of the winning party 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

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<sup>51</sup> The one exception was the effect of an endorsement on support for a military strike.

would be less willing to go along. Knowing this, foreign countries should feel even more confident that they could intervene with relative impunity.

**Figure 6: Effects of Intervention on Support for Foreign Policies, by Partisanship**



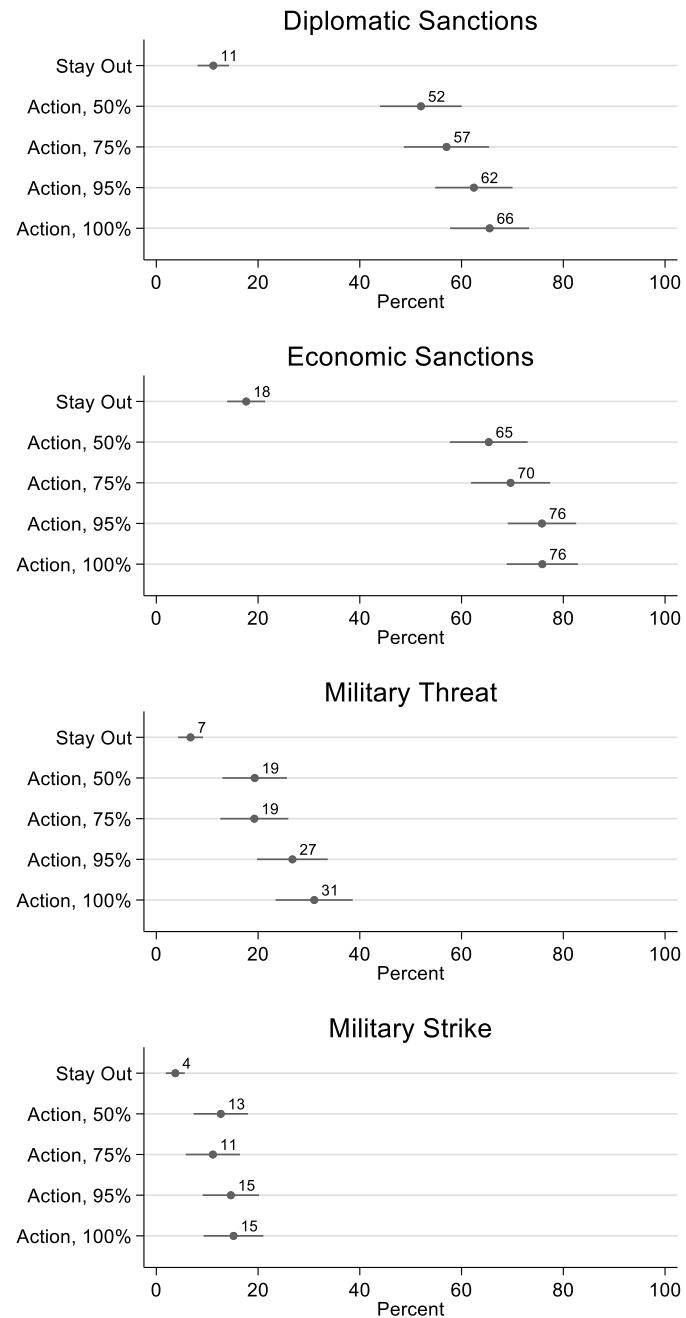
Finally, we conjectured that support for hostile foreign policies would increase with the level of certainty about which country was culpable. To test this possibility, we compared support for retaliation when respondents were 50%, 75%, 95%, or 100% certain of the identity of the country that actively intervened. (Recall, from Table 1, that we did not raise doubts about the identity of the country that publicly voiced its preferences in the endorsement and threat conditions, because such expressions are by definition overt, leaving no ambiguity about who made the statement.)

We found some evidence for this hypothesis, but less than expected. Figure 7 shows how support for each policy varied by the level of certainty, averaging over the other dimensions of our experiment. (For reference, we also include support for the same policies in the stay out condition.) To our surprise, most citizens wanted to levy diplomatic and economic sanctions against the foreign country named in our experiment, even when only 50% sure that the named country had perpetrated the active intervention. Support for nonmilitary retaliation rose steadily with certainty, but the differences between 50% to 100% certainty were relatively small: 66–52=14 points for diplomatic sanctions, and a 76–65= 11 points for economic sanctions. The patterns for military threats were similar, albeit with lower baseline levels of support.

The bottom graph in Figure 7 shows, surprisingly, that certainty had no appreciable effect on support for 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 were reluctant to retaliate with military force, even when they know with certainty which foreign country had actively interfered in an American election. Overall, our findings about uncertainty 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.

**Figure 7: Support for Foreign Policies, By Level of Certainty**



In summary, our data revealed that Americans are reluctant to retaliate against even the most objectionable forms of foreign intervention in U.S. elections. Americans overwhelmingly rejected military responses to foreign interference, even when a foreign country took active measures such as funding candidates, manipulating information, or hacking into U.S. voting machines, and even when the identity of the foreign attacker was known with certainty.

Voters were more supportive of nonmilitary responses such as diplomatic and economic sanctions, but majorities endorsed these measures *only* when the foreign country had engaged in active forms of intervention. Pointedly, we never observed majority support for the kinds of retaliation that stand the best chance of deterring adversaries from interfering in the first place. Although active interventions did cause most Americans to seek diplomatic and economic sanctions, 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.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Despite the growing importance of election interference for contemporary politics (Bubeck and Marinov 2017; Levin 2016, 2019), we know relatively little about how Americans judge foreign meddling in U.S. elections. In this paper, we used survey experiments to investigate three fundamental questions about how Americans would respond to revelations of foreign electoral intervention.

First, when would U.S. citizens tolerate foreign involvement in American elections, instead of condemning external efforts to tip the scales? In our experiments, American tolerance of

intervention was conditional on the intended beneficiary. Both Democrats and Republicans exhibited a clear double standard, disapproving more strongly of foreign efforts to help the opposition than of otherwise identical efforts to help a candidate from their own party.

The polarizing effects of foreign electoral intervention are, therefore, more widespread than previously appreciated. In a seminal paper, Corstange and Marinov (2012) found that when outside parties took sides the Lebanese election of 2009, the domestic public split along partisan lines. Corstange and Marinov expected this type of reaction in “fragile and unconsolidated” democracies such as Lebanon, but intimated that such a response might not be plausible in “consolidated democracies.” We found, however, that foreign interference polarized the public even in one the world’s oldest democratic nations. Hence, the divisive effects of electoral intervention are not limited to fragile democracies; they arise in highly established democracies, as well.

Our findings about partisan polarization shed new light on past interventions, while also portending sharp political cleavages in the future. Following the 2016 election, Republicans were far more likely than Democrats to deny that Russia intervened, or to acknowledge Russian meddling but dismiss it as inconsequential. Our experiments suggest that such reactions arose not from principled differences between the parties, but instead from a pervasive tendency to apply politically biased standards when judging the behavior of other countries. Having randomized which party the foreign power favored, we found that *both* Democrats and Republicans were far more willing to tolerate foreign support for their own party than for the opposition. Thus, if a foreign country took the Democratic side in a future election, the political reaction would likely be the reverse of 2016, with Republicans denouncing and Democrats condoning the foreign interference.

Our experiments further showed that public tolerance depended not only on the intended beneficiary, but also on the type of intervention. We hypothesized that citizens would object more strongly to active meddling than to rhetorical support. Our findings clearly supported this hypothesis. Although many citizens denounced foreign endorsements with and without implicit threats, they were more willing to condemn active steps such as donating money to a campaign, disseminating embarrassing information about a candidate, or hacking into voting machines. These findings underscore the importance of distinguishing different types of electoral interventions, to see how Americans would respond to the wide variety of tools foreign countries could employ in U.S. elections.

We also used experiments to investigate a second fundamental question: when would news of foreign electoral intervention undermine confidence in democratic institutions? In our experiments, voters who learned of foreign intervention were substantially more likely to distrust the results of the election, lose faith in American democracy, and abstain from participating in future elections. Reactions were not symmetric across the population, however. Instead, foreign interference led to partisan splits about the state of U.S. democracy. When a foreign country favored the candidate from the opposing party, confidence in democracy plummeted, but public faith was more resilient when a foreign country sided with their preferred candidate. Thus, foreign involvement can have profoundly negative and divisive effects on confidence in American democracy.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> 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

Finally, we studied how election interference changed public attitudes about foreign relations. Regardless of the form of electoral intervention, citizens in our experiments were not willing to respond with military threats or military strikes. This is remarkable, given that many prominent observers characterized the Russian intervention of 2016 as an act of war, the electoral equivalent of 9/11, and a direct attack on institutions at the heart of American democracy. Our experiments suggested that even active forms of electoral intervention would not spur the American public to take up arms to defend their democracy.

We did find majority support for diplomatic and economic sanctions, but only when the foreign government actively interfered by funding parties, manipulating information, or hacking into voting equipment. Foreign endorsements (including ones coupled with economic and military threats), on the other hand, failed to generate majority support for any reprisals. Finally, consistent with our findings about a partisan double standard, both Democrats and Republicans were markedly less willing to retaliate when the foreign power favored their own party than when the foreign power backed the opposition. These patterns suggest that foreign countries could interfere in American elections without triggering widespread public demands for tough retaliation.

Future studies could extend our approach in a several ways. One could, for example, introduce ambiguity about whether foreign countries meddled in elections. We asked how Americans would respond to clear revelations of foreign intervention. To find out, we presented the existence or absence of foreign intervention as a fact, while allowing some uncertainty about

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diminished faith in democracy and lowered levels of political participation, this could weaken democratic norms and practices.

the identity of the perpetrator. Follow-up experiments could present inconclusive evidence about whether a foreign country intervened, perhaps combined with partisan attempts to politicize whether external intervention took place. One could compare levels of polarization in those scenarios to what we found in our experiments.<sup>56</sup>

Future experiments could also vary other features of the intervention. We focused on partisan interventions in which the foreign country promoted one candidate at the expense of another. Foreign countries could instead intervene evenhandedly by undermining or supporting both sides in the contest. Using experiments, one could compare public tolerance for partisan versus evenhanded interventions; assess how the two types of incursions would affect confidence in democracy and willingness to retaliate; and study whether Democrats and Republicans would unite against foreign meddling that did not try to give one side an advantage. It would also be instructive to conduct experiments about multipronged interventions that not only take sides but also attempt to modify electoral procedures (Bubeck and Marinov 2017).

Finally, future research could explore the effects of election interference in other countries. We found that foreign electoral intervention divided the American public along partisan lines. How would citizens react in countries with stronger (or weaker) levels of partisan identification, or in countries where parties are programmatically more (or less) distinct than the Democratic

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<sup>56</sup> Uncertainty could affect not only levels of party polarization, but also aggregate levels of public tolerance. Shulman and Bloom (2012) hypothesized that highly salient (“transparent” and “intelligible”) interventions would provoke more public resentment than ambiguous interventions. One could test this hypothesis experimentally by varying salience while holding the partisanship of the intervention constant.

and Republican parties in the United States? Would reactions depend on the age of the democracy or the nature of the electoral system? This article could serve as a blueprint for follow-up experiments to assess responses to election interference not only in the U.S., but also in other democracies around the world.

In the meantime, our findings suggest that electoral intervention can be highly effective weapon. Previous research has shown that foreign powers can use electoral intervention to boost the chances of their favored candidate (Levin 2016). Our experiments add that electoral intervention can polarize the electorate and diminish faith in democratic institutions without running the risks of conventional military intervention.

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