

Rethinking Foreign Electoral Interventions*

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Abstract

Why do states intervene in some foreign elections but not others? Existing research suggests that the decision to intervene depends crucially on two features: first, that the intervention could swing the outcome of the election and second, that competing candidates have significant, divergent foreign policy preferences. Using the PEIG data set of U.S. and Russian electoral interventions between 1945 and 2000, this paper examines the extent to which electoral interventions appear to be motivated by these factors. My analysis supports a surprising answer: “not much.” Not only do electoral interventions frequently occur in contests where the intervention could not plausibly have been pivotal, failed incumbent-side interventions and successful challenger-side interventions do not produce any significant shifts in the foreign policy disposition of targeted states as measured by UNGA roll call votes. These results challenge our existing models of foreign intervention and underscore the need to theorize more about the causes of foreign meddling in the domestic politics of other states.

Key words: Foreign Intervention, Elections, Leadership Change, UNGA Voting, Foreign Policy

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1 Introduction

On January 6th, 2017, the CIA, FBI, and NSA released a report documenting Russia’s interference in the 2016 elections that indicated that the U.S. intelligence community was “highly confident” that Vladimir Putin sought to help Donald Trump win the presidency. During his campaign, Trump advocated for a number of foreign policies favorable to Russia: he condemned NATO as “obsolete,” and he touted an “America First” foreign policy that would scale back U.S. involvement in key Middle Eastern conflicts, like in Syria where the United States and Russia had been backing different sides. Trump’s foreign policy contrasted starkly with his opponent Hillary Clinton, who had been a prominent voice in promoting a liberal democratic order that Putin viewed as threatening to his own rule. While the report stops short of claiming that Russia’s interference swung the outcome of the election, it is plausible that Clinton would have won had Russia not intervened. Not only did Clinton win the popular vote, Clinton lost key states in the electoral college by less than one percentage point.

These two features – that the candidates had dramatically different foreign policy preferences and that an intervention could plausibly swing the outcome of the election – are fundamental to how scholars view foreign interference in other countries’ elections. While there is only a nascent literature on electoral interventions, political scientists have long identified efforts to promote leadership change as primarily a vehicle for changing a state’s foreign policy preferences (Coe 2012; Weisiger 2013). States are more likely to undermine leaders with whom they have dramatic policy disputes and will prop up an exiting regime if they fear that domestic challengers would be less friendly to their foreign policy interests (Findley and Teo 2006; Gent 2007; Lemke and Regan 2004).

Scholars of electoral interventions have drawn on this general interpretation of foreign-backed leadership change to derive intuitive conditions under which electoral interventions are likely to occur. First, Corstange and Marinov (2012) and Bubeck and Marinov (2017) argue that states will only intervene in elections where candidates have divergent foreign policy platforms. If the candidates do not differ on foreign policy, it does not matter if the state is overall friendly or hostile to the potential intervener’s interests since foreign policy is unlikely to change regardless of who wins. Second, Levin (2016b) adds that states only have an incentive to intervene in “close” elections. If there is a clear winner, regardless of whether the winner is the preferred candidate, states do not have an incentive to incur the costs of intervention since intervening would not change the outcome of the election.

Yet, while there are certainly prominent cases of electoral interventions that fit these arguments, there are also many examples that do not. For instance, the Soviet Union intervened in the 1973 Bangladesh elections in favor of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by placing

favorable articles in the Bangladeshi press, but there is virtually no chance that this intervention could have changed the outcome of that election. Not only was Rahman a prominent and popular leader of the Bangladeshi independence movement from Pakistan, he won the election with 73.2% of the vote. Rahman and his opponent also did not have significantly different foreign policy preferences. Because the Soviet Union had sided with Bangladesh in its independence movement and the United States and China had sided with Pakistan, the country's international alignment was not at stake in this election.

A similar story can be told about the U.S. intervention in the 1999 Israeli elections. The Clinton administration sent some of its top political strategists, including James Carville, Stanley Greenberg, and Bob Shrum, to advise Ehud Barak in the election against Benjamin Netanyahu. While Netanyahu had narrowly defeated his Labor Party opponent in the 1996 election, his popularity in Israel had significantly diminished in the lead up to the 1999 elections. Pre-election polls gave Barak a 15-percentage point lead over Netanyahu. In fact, Barak won the election in a landslide victory defeating Netanyahu by 12.2 percentage points.

To what extent are electoral interventions driven by the competitiveness of an election and the foreign policy positions of candidates? While it is difficult to test these arguments directly without fine-grained information on polling and party platforms for elections around the world, we can analyze these features indirectly. For instance, even though election outcomes are likely influenced by whether or not there is an intervention, we can make judgments about whether intervention could plausibly be pivotal since we have a lot of evidence about the size of effects other major predictors of election outcomes are. A positive, 2% change in GDP growth rate, which is widely considered to be one of the most important predictors of whether an incumbent party will win an upcoming presidential election in the American Politics literature, is usually associated with about a 5% increase in incumbent vote share in the post-1945 period.¹ Levin (2016b) estimates about a 3% increase in vote share for parties supported by a foreign electoral intervention. Thus conservatively, we can be confident that interventions in elections with more than a 10 percentage point difference between the first and second place party were unlikely pivotal.

Similarly, although there is no global data on candidates' foreign policy platforms, the logic of intervening when candidates have different positions implies that we should observe certain kinds of foreign policy shifts following failed and successful electoral interventions.² If a state intervenes to support an incumbent, for example, the conventional wisdom indicates that it is because the challenger had a less favorable foreign policy position than the

¹For a good summary of election forecasting models, see Silver (2011).

²The Manifesto Project is the closest data set to offering global coverage of candidate's foreign policy platforms, but it is restricted to coverage of 50 countries.

incumbent. This implies that interventions to aid an incumbent that fail should result in a negative foreign policy shift away from the intervener. By contrast, the conventional wisdom suggests that if a country intervenes to aid a challenger, it is because that challenger has a more favorable foreign policy than the incumbent. Therefore, successful challenger-side interventions should result in favorable shifts in the policy for intervening states.

This paper tests these implications using the PEIG data set of U.S. and Russian electoral interventions between 1945 and 2000. The results of my analysis are surprising: electoral interventions frequently occur in contests where the intervention could not have plausibly been pivotal, and failed incumbent-side and successful challenger-side interventions do not produce any significant shifts in the foreign policy disposition of targeted states. While preliminary, these results do raise questions about the tractability of existing models of electoral interventions and highlight puzzles that warrant future investigation.

I divide the remainder of this paper into five parts. In the next section, I review the existing literature on state efforts to maintain or change leaders of other countries and detail existing arguments about the conditions under which electoral interventions will occur. I then derive the observable implications from these existing arguments that I test in this paper. The third section describes the data used in this study, the operationalization and coding of key variables, and my research methods. The fourth section presents the results from my statistical analysis: states frequently intervene in elections where there is little chance of swinging the results for their preferred candidate, and electoral interventions do not produce the foreign policy shifts existing theories predict. In the conclusion, I reflect on what these findings mean for existing models of electoral interventions and outline potential explanations for these surprising results.

2 Existing Arguments

Electoral interventions are one way that states can try to keep the leaders they like in power and remove the leaders they dislike. In this paper, I refer to electoral interventions as those aimed at helping a particular candidate win a national executive office. Corstange and Marinov (2012) and Bubeck and Marinov (2017) identify these kinds of interventions as *partisan* electoral interventions. These interventions differ from *process* interventions that seek to support the conduct of free and fair elections. There are many actions that states can take to help their preferred candidate win an election. Partisan electoral interventions, therefore, can include a range of activities, such as the provision of campaign funds and expertise to the favored side, the creation and dissemination of campaign materials in favor of the preferred candidate, and public threats about the imposition of sanctions or the

promise of aid conditional on the outcome of the election (Corstange and Marinov 2012; Levin 2016a,b).

While there is only a nascent literature on the causes of electoral interventions, scholars have studied other tools that states use to keep their friends in power and to undermine their enemies – for example, by imposing economic sanctions (Marinov 2005), intervening in civil wars (e.g. Findley and Teo 2006, Lemke and Regan 2004), providing aid to rebel groups (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011), and removing leaders through interstate war (e.g. Reiter 2009, Werner 1996). A major theme underlying these disparate literatures is that leadership change offers one way to alter the foreign policy preferences of a targeted state. Works on the bargaining model of war, for instance, treat regime change as one of the few ways to “solve” a commitment problem because it changes the preferences of an adversarial state. Coe (2012) suggests that states may have an incentive to initiate a war of regime change to install more friendly governments if the costs of deterring an unfriendly regime are high. Similarly, Weissinger (2013) argues that many of the longest and costliest wars result from dispositional commitment problems, where opponents believe the other side is undeterred from the costs of war. These kinds of conflicts become protracted precisely because each side feels that it needs to fight until it can remove the leader of their adversary because they believe it is the only way to change their opponents’ aggressive preferences and ensure a stable peace.

Typically, IR scholars assume that states primarily care about the foreign policies of other countries. Existing works, therefore, explain states’ interference in the leadership and institutions of other countries as a way to keep friendly states friendly and to bring neutral or unfriendly states into their sphere of influence (Owen 2002; Owen 2010). Scholars consistently find that states are more likely to intervene in civil wars on behalf of governments with whom they are allied and against governments with whom they have an ongoing dispute (Findley and Teo 2006; Gent 2007; Lemke and Regan 2004). As Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011) explain, providing aid to a rebel group is fundamentally a way to destabilize a state’s government. As a result, even if a state sympathizes with a rebel group for ideological, ethnic, or religious reasons, they are unlikely to provide material support to these groups unless they have a rivalry or ongoing dispute with the government in question. In other words, these kinds of sympathies are secondary to a states’ foreign policy interests. There is also evidence that states will try to prevent leadership change when they believe that it could hurt their foreign policy interests. Findley and Teo (2006), for example, find that states are also more likely to intervene in civil wars when a rival has intervened because they fear that the state would become unfriendly if the side supported by their rival wins.

An important assumption of these arguments is that leadership change will bring new

preferences to power that will either be more conducive or harmful to the intervener's foreign policy interests. If a potential new leader would not change the foreign policy orientation of their state, outside powers would not have an incentive to aid that leader coming to power or to prop up the old regime to prevent the leadership change. This premise may be warranted in the study of leadership change that occurs through interstate war or domestic revolutions.³ When a country removes the leader of their adversary at the end of a war, they typically replace them directly with leaders that have more friendly preferences or attempt to hard wire favorable preferences in the institutions of the defeated state, as the United States did with Japan at the end of World War II (Reiter 2009). Further, even though domestic rebellions are frequently not caused by grievances about an existing regime's foreign policies, studies consistently find that leaders who come to power through a civil war or revolution do behave differently on the international stage, for instance, by engaging in new conflicts abroad. This could be because these leaders face domestic incentives to initiate an international conflict to consolidate power at home (Downs and Rocke 1994; Enterline and Gleditsch 2000), or it could be because domestic rebellions tend to remove institutions that constrain an executives' ability to make such serious foreign policy changes (Colgan and Weeks 2015).

Elections, however, do not necessarily present the same potential for a dramatic shift in the foreign policy orientation of a state. Not only do domestic institutions like elections moderate the effect of leadership turnover on policy changes (Mattes, Leeds, and Caroll 2015; Smith 2016), competing candidates may not have foreign policy platforms that differ substantially from one another. Corstange and Marinov (2012) and Bubeck and Marinov (2017) recognize this distinction and argue that governments only have an incentive to intervene in a foreign election elections if competing parties have opposing views about their countries' relationship with them. If the candidates do not have competing foreign policy positions, then it does not matter who wins the election from the perspective of the potential intervener. They will get a friendly or unfriendly government regardless of the election outcome, so they do not have an incentive to incur the costs of intervention.

Another important factor for states to have an incentive to interfere in a foreign election is that the intervention must be able to sway the outcome of the election. The game theory literature on third-party intervention in war makes this assumption explicitly (Morrow 2000, Gent 2008). Potential interveners will only select into conflicts where their intervention will affect the outcome of the conflict. In the context of elections, it is even more important that the election is a tight race. If there is a clear winner, states again would not have an incentive to incur the costs of intervening, even if they preferred a different candidate

³Recent work by Downes and O'Rourke (2016) and O'Rourke (2018) challenge this premise, demonstrating that Foreign Imposed Regime Change (FIRC) often does not produce improved foreign policy outcomes for interveners.

because intervening would not change the election’s outcome. Further, Levin (2016b) points out that electoral interventions often require local actors to cooperate. Unless the election is reasonably close, domestic actors would not want to incur the “sovereignty costs” involved with the *quid pro quo* nature of accepting a foreign powers’ help. Overall then, Levin (2016b) argues that “we should expect most cases of electoral interventions to occur in marginal elections: those in which the result is highly uncertain or one side lags but remains electorally viable” (191).

2.1 Observable Implications of Existing Models of Electoral Interventions

Does the divergence of candidates’ foreign policy platforms and the competitiveness of an election drive electoral interventions? While intuitive, existing models of electoral interventions are difficult to test directly using large-N cross-national data. For one, we could not use indicators of a countries’ general foreign policy preferences prior to the election – like UN General Assembly ideal points, whether states have ongoing disputes, or if countries share an alliance – to test argument relating to divergent policy platforms because these indicators do not capture whether the existing government and its challengers have *different* foreign policy preferences. As Bubeck and Marinov (2017) explain, what matters is not whether a government is friendly or unfriendly to a potential intervener’s interests. It is whether or not their challengers are viewed to be more or less friendly to the intervener. This argument suggests that there are circumstances where foreign governments would want to intervene in states with adversarial governments as well as in like-minded states. Therefore, we would not necessarily expect foreign governments to be more likely to intervene in states with which they have ongoing disputes than they would be to intervene in countries with which they have friendly relations.

There are also serious challenges to testing whether the competitiveness of an election predicts electoral interventions. For one, election outcomes are affected by whether or not an outside power intervenes in them. We might expect, based on existing theory, that elections where there was a large margin of victory would be unlikely to have attracted foreign interventions while elections that were very close to have attracted interventions. It is possible an election’s outcome only ended with a landslide victory for one side because an outside power intervened in what would have otherwise been a close election. But what if the existing theory is wrong and states do have incentives to intervene in elections where they do not hope to swing the outcomes? In the case I described, we would not be able to tell if outside power intervened because the election would have been close without the intervention or if foreign governments intervene even when they do not expect influence the

outcome of the election⁴

We can, however, test the plausibility of both arguments about the causes of electoral interventions indirectly. First, Bubeck and Marinov (2017)'s argument has observable implications about shifts in the foreign policy dispositions of targeted states following certain kinds of electoral interventions. According to their argument, if a government intervenes on behalf of a challenger, it would be because the challenger had a more favorable foreign policy platform than the incumbent did. This implies that successful challenger-side interventions (i.e. those where a government aids a party or candidate competing against the incumbent) should lead to a more favorable foreign policy for the intervening state following the election. By contrast, if a state intervenes to support an incumbent, Bubeck and Marinov (2017) argue that it would be because the challenger had a less favorable foreign policy position than the incumbent. This means that failed incumbent-side interventions should lead to an unfavorable foreign policy shift for the intervening state.

H1: Elections with successful challenger-side interventions are more likely to produce favorable foreign policy shifts for the outside intervener than other kinds of elections.

H2: Elections with failed incumbent-side interventions are more likely to produce unfavorably foreign policy shifts for the outside intervener than other kinds of elections

Importantly, Corstange and Marinov (2012) and Bubeck and Marinov (2017) do not predict clear shifts in foreign policy following successful incumbent-side interventions and failed challenger-side interventions. If a country intervenes successfully on behalf of an incumbent, this would mean that the intervener should avoid an unfavorable shift in foreign policy following the election. But we would not necessarily expect any positive change in the foreign relations between the target state and intervener because the incumbent would continue its previous policies. In this way, the the argument about candidates having divergent foreign policy preferences is different from other ways we might think states would use electoral interventions to advance their foreign policy objectives, such as using them as a way to curry favor with one of the candidates. Similarly, Corstange and Marinov (2012) and Bubeck and Marinov (2017) also do not predict unfavorable foreign policy shifts following failed challenger-side interventions, even though we might expect incumbents to punish the

⁴One might suggest that a way to circumvent this problem would be to collect pre-intervention election polling data, but this approach also faces serious challenges. Not only would it require an immense, time-consuming effort to track down electoral polls for every election in the world, there would likely be pervasive, non-random missing data that could bias any statistical analysis. Further, how would researchers know which polls to rely on? Could we be certain that those polls were not biased? Finally, as the 2016 U.S. presidential election demonstrates, even the best administered polls can be wrong.

foreign power for intervening against them.

Further, since we have a lot of information about what affects election outcomes and the size of these effects, we can judge whether it seems plausible that an intervention could have swung the election's result. Real GDP growth rates, for instance, are commonly cited as one of the most important predictors of electoral outcomes. Existing research shows that when economic growth rate is 1.8%, there is a 50-50 toss up whether the incumbent will win accounting for all other electoral factors. Increasing the growth rate to 3.8% – indicating a very strong economy – only predicts that the incumbent would win with a 5% margin of victory. This means that changing one of the strongest predictors of incumbent victory could swing the outcome of the election if there is within a 10% margin of victory between the first and second place parties or candidates. Given that Levin (2016b) finds that electoral interventions increase the supported candidate's vote share by about 3 percentage points, using a 10% margin of victory is a very conservative cutoff for distinguishing elections where interventions are plausibly pivotal from those where interventions are not.

These indirect tests may not be ideal, but they are an important step in advancing our understanding of electoral interventions. If these indirect tests yield results supportive of the existing, but untested models, we can have more confidence in these models. However, if we find that states frequently intervene in elections where it does not appear they could have changed the outcome or if we do not observe the changes in foreign policy that our models would expect, it will underscore the need to refine these existing models and develop new explanations for electoral interventions. In many ways, these tests will help us identify new puzzles surrounding electoral interventions worth investigating. Finally, examining the effects of electoral interventions is an important and interesting question in and of itself for furthering this research agenda. In the next section, I describe the data I use to test the implications of existing models and the operationalization of key variables.

3 Data and Methods

This study relies on countries' yearly voting records in the UN General Assembly and the PEIG data set of electoral interventions to test the arguments above. The PEIG data set, introduced by Levin (2016a), collects information on U.S. and Russian partisan interventions in global elections that play a role in the selection of the executive head of state between 1946 and 2000.⁵ Because we are interested in whether shifts in foreign policy are favorable or

⁵Parliamentary and Presidential systems are included. Importantly, PEIG only includes information on what Levin (2016) describes as a competitive election, i.e. those where multiple parties are allowed to run and no single party receives more than 75% of the vote.

unfavorable to potential interveners, the unit of analysis is the U.S. or Russian dyad year. I restrict my attention to dyad years surrounding elections because we want to know whether elections with interventions produce foreign policy shifts distinctive of elections without interventions, not relative to dyad years where there were no elections. Thus, my total sample covers U.S. and Russian dyads surrounding 942 elections in 151 countries around the world.⁶

3.1 Measuring Foreign Policy Shifts

The data on UNGA voting records comes from Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten (2017). While voting in the UNGA may not capture specific foreign policy actions, relying on UNGA voting records is the most widely used method to capture a country’s latent foreign policy preferences and international alignments. Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll (2015) argue that “behind the disparate topics on which votes occur is an underlying dimension of international cooperation and conflict that reflects the broader foreign policy positions of states, large and small” (284).

Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten (2017) use a spatial voting model to estimate countries’ ideal points that capture states’ positions vis-a-vis the U.S.-liberal order. This measure captures a state’s East-West orientation during the Cold War, and it captures a state’s support or opposition to the Western liberal order following the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁷ Because the agenda of the UNGA can vary substantially from year to year, the authors use votes that occur in multiple sessions as “bridge votes” that anchor the preference space over time. So, unlike other measures of preference similarity that rely on UNGA voting records, this measure does not depend crucially on the what issues appeared in the agenda each year. This means that we can draw more meaningful conclusions that changes in a country’s ideal point from one year to the next reflects a genuine change in a country’s foreign policy orientation.⁸

I analyze three specifications of my dependent variable: the change in distance between the dyad’s ideal points from the year prior to the election to the year of the election ($\Delta_{t-1,t}$ *UNGA Distance*), the change in distance from the year prior to the election to the year after the election ($\Delta_{t-1,t+1}$ *UNGA Distance*), and the change in distance between the dyad’s ideal points from the year of the election to the year after the election ($\Delta_{t,t+1}$ *UNGA Distance*).

⁶Some of these dyads are dropped depending on model specification due to coverage of certain variables.

⁷The major axis of disagreement in the post-Cold War era was support or opposition to the liberal order advocated by the West. However, states outside of the Western bloc shared little ideological cohesion beyond their opposition to the West.

⁸I have also ran my analysis using the S score affinity measure and a raw measure of the percentage of time a country votes with the United States or Russia, and the results do not change substantively.

Because the vast majority of voting in the UNGA takes place in November and December,⁹ we can attribute a country’s UNGA ideal point for the year of an election to the elected leader. Consequently, I view the change in distance between the dyad’s ideal points from the year prior to the election to the year of the election ($\Delta_{t-1,t}$ *UNGA Distance*) and to the year after the election ($\Delta_{t-1,t+1}$ *UNGA Distance*) as the two most theoretically appropriate operationalizations of my dependent variable. I am currently working on identifying the leaders in Archigos data set (Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009) that come to power through the elections in the PEIG data set so that I can measure the dependent variable around the time that elected leaders take office to reduce the noise in my analysis.

To operationalize these dependent variables, I first calculated the absolute distance between the target country’s ideal point and the ideal point of the potential intervener (the United States or Russia) in the year before the election, the year of the election, and the year after the election. I then subtracted the distance between the dyad’s ideal points between the most recent (or latest) year in the DV specification from the earliest year in the DV specification. Thus, positive values in these measures indicate that the target country’s ideal point moved closer to the U.S. or Russian ideal point over the time period specified. Negative values, on the other hand, indicate that there was an unfavorable shift in foreign policy away from the United States or Russia.

One may worry that UNGA voting records are not sensitive enough to capture the types of changes in foreign policies that we might expect following electoral interventions. After all, a country may intervene in another’s elections in hopes of getting concessions on a few important areas, rather than an overall reorientation in the state’s international alignment. There are, however, two important features of the data that help assuage this concern. First, we are restricting our attention to U.S. and Russian electoral interventions. Major powers typically care more about states’ overall alignment patterns, and it is well-documented that the United States uses foreign aid to buy other countries’ votes in the UNGA (Carter and Stone 2015). Second, many studies have shown that UNGA voting records are fairly sensitive to changes in a state’s foreign policy. Mattes, Leeds, and Carroll (2015), for example, are able to detect significant shifts in a states’ UNGA ideal when there are changes in leaders’ domestic support bases. Smith (2016) also finds that leadership turnover – especially in countries with small winning coalitions – produces significant changes in a states’ UNGA voting record.

⁹Only 10.1% of votes took place between January and October during the 1946-2000 period (Streznev and Voeten (2013)).

3.2 Identifying Electoral Interventions

I rely on the PEIG data set to identify U.S. and Russian partisan electoral interventions around the world between 1945 and 2000. The PEIG data set defines an 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” (Levin 2016a, 3). Some of the main activities PEIG codes as an intervention includes the provision of campaign funds to one side,¹⁰ public threats or promises made by the intervening state that are conditioned on the outcome of the election,¹¹ the overt or covert dissemination of propaganda,¹² and the design of other campaign related materials for the preferred side.

Importantly, the PEIG data set excludes activities like regular election monitoring, the United States or Russia making positive or negative statements about a candidate without concrete threats or promises, the provision of aid to support the conduct of free and fair elections, or invitations to the preferred candidate to visit the intervening country (Levin 2016a, 4). While states may sometimes engage in these latter activities with the hopes of giving the preferred side a boost, it is not always the case that they are aimed at influencing the outcome of the election. Attempting to disentangle when these activities are or are not aimed at supporting a particular side would likely be arbitrary. We can therefore think of PEIG as capturing the most “serious” electoral interventions where the intervening country put in high effort to swing the outcome of the election. If anything, these cases represent the “best” cases for testing the theories articulated above since the interventions involve higher costs.

PEIG not only collects information on whether an electoral intervention occurred, but also whether the intervention aided the incumbent or a challenger. Here, an incumbent is defined as the party and/or candidate that held the highest executive position before the election or who received an endorsement from the person holding the executive position at that time (Levin 2016a). The president is considered the highest executive position in presidential and semi-presidential systems, while the Prime minister is considered the highest executive position in parliamentary systems. In countries that install neutral non-partisan caretaker governments before elections, PEIG coded incumbency based on the pre-caretaker

¹⁰For example, the United States provided campaign funding directly to many moderate Italian parties in the 1948 elections.

¹¹As Marinov and Corstange (2012) cite, the victory of rightist Violeta Charmorro in the 1990 elections is largely credited to U.S. threats of sanctions if Daniel Ortega won the election

¹²The Mitrovkhan Archive provides evidence that U.S.S.R. Secret A team distributed anti-Regan pamphlets on college campus during the 1984 election

executive. Any party or candidate that is not considered the incumbent is considered a challenger.

I extend the PEIG data set by collecting information on whether or not the intervention succeeded. I consider an electoral intervention to be successful if the aided candidate wins the election. Successful incumbent-side interventions therefore refer to cases where an outside power provides aid to the incumbent party or candidate and that party or candidate wins the election. Failed incumbent-side interventions refer to cases where aid is provided to the incumbent party or candidate, but the party or candidate loses the election. Since there can be multiple challengers in an election, a challenger-side intervention is only considered as successful if the party or candidate that received aid wins the election. There are rare instances where the United States or Russia provided aid to multiple parties either to prevent an incumbent from being re-elected or to prevent a specific challenger from winning the election. For example, the United States provided campaign funding to many of Jean-Bertrand Aristide's political opponents in the 1990-91 Haitian general elections. While cases like the U.S. interference in the Haitian general elections are very rare, I code these interventions as successful as long as the candidate or party the U.S. or Russia intervened against does not win the election.

What is the distribution of failed and successful electoral interventions? Of the 115 electoral interventions identified by PEIG, approximately 63% succeeded in getting the supported candidate or party elected. The majority of successful electoral interventions were interventions aimed at aiding the incumbent: 47 out of 61 (about 77%) incumbent-side interventions were successful compared to 26 out of 54 (about 48%) of challenger-side interventions.

3.3 Control Variables

Following Achen (2005) and Clarke (2005), I only include control variables that are potentially correlated with both UNGA voting records and the type of electoral intervention into the state. Omitted variable bias is a threat when we believe there is a third unobserved variable that is correlated with both the treatment and the outcome variable, such that we may inappropriately believe there is a causal relationship between the treatment and outcome variables. To guard against such spurious findings, I control for the potential target country's regime type, the size of its winning coalition, and its alliance ties with the United States and Russia. I also include a dummy variable for elections that take place during the Cold War.

I control for the potential target country's regime type and the size of its winning coalition because these variables may affect an intervener's ability to influence the outcome of an

election, as well as the extent to which the executive can reorient its foreign policy. Not every election in the PEIG data set occurs in an established democracy. Instead, the requirement to appear in the PEIG data set is that it is an election where multiple parties are allowed to run and no party or candidate receives more than 75% of the vote. Therefore, we are analyzing elections in both highly democratic regimes, as well as those in nominally autocratic or hybrid regimes. Marinov and Corstange (2012) hypothesize that electoral interventions are more likely to occur in unconsolidated democracies because it may be easier for outside governments to work around or corrupt these institutions. Thus, foreign governments may not only be more likely to intervene in these elections, interventions in these elections may also be on average more successful. At the same time, Mattes et al. (2015) finds that leadership turnover in democratic regimes is less likely to result in dramatic foreign policy shifts than turnover in autocratic regimes. This variable, *Regime Type*, is coded from the PolityIV dataset, where higher numbers indicate that a country is more democratic.¹³

I control for the size of the potential target country's winning coalition for a similar reason. Smith (2016) finds that leadership turnover in countries with small winning coalitions is more likely to result in significant foreign policy realignments than countries with large winning coalitions. This is because leaders in systems with small winning coalitions are beholden only to the foreign policy interests of these small number of supporters, and when the leader changes, the new leader is more likely to represent new interests. States may have stronger incentives to intervene in systems with small winning coalitions because the leadership change can result in such significant foreign policy shifts. By contrast, states may have weaker incentives to intervene in systems with large winning coalitions since a new leader coming to power is less likely to result in meaningful changes in the country's foreign policy alignment. Data for *Winning Coalition* comes from Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003). Here, larger values represent systems with larger winning coalitions.

There are many different ways that we might expect that the potential target having an alliance with the intervener may affect the intervener's willingness and ability to interfere in an election, as well as how the target would change its foreign policies following the election. For one, because breaking an alliance can involve large reputation and audience costs (Gibler 2008; Leeds 1999; Miller 2013; and Morrow 2000), potential interveners may be less worried that leadership change in allied countries would result in a major realignment of the states' foreign policy. But on the other hand, allied states are likely to be considered more strategically important to potential interveners. A radical change in an allied state's foreign policy would likely be considered more costly, so the potential intervener would have

¹³I re-code cases that the Polity data set identifies as "interregnum" so that a country does not appear to be more or democratic when it gets the score of '0' in the Polity 2 variable during these periods. I then also update the imputation used in the Polity 2 variable to account for this adjustment.

strong incentives to prevent a leader advocating changing the country’s foreign policy from coming to power. It is also possible that states would have a greater ability to intervene in allied states. Because many forms of electoral interventions require either strong knowledge of the target’s political climate or active cooperation from a domestic actor, states may have better access for intervening in countries with which they have an established, cooperative relationship. *Alliance* is a dummy variable coded from the ATOP data set, where a 1 indicates that there was an offensive or defensive alliance between the dyad’s members.

Finally, we may expect that the motives and the effects of electoral interventions to have changed over time, particularly during the post-Cold War period. Because the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in an intense security competition during the Cold War, these states may have been more sensitive to slight changes in a state’s foreign policy orientation. The United States and Russia may have been motivated to intervene to win small, but favorable foreign policy shifts and to prevent unfavorable shifts in other countries during the Cold War than they were in the post-Cold War period. Therefore, the United States and the Soviet Union may have devoted more resources to their interventions during the Cold War as well, which could make these interventions more likely to succeed. It is also possible, moreover, that the United States became more willing to intervene for normative values – like promoting democracy or punishing those with weak human rights records – after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In these cases, we might expect an electoral interventions to be less likely to have any effect on foreign policy. The dummy variable, *Cold War*, is coded as a 1 for all years between 1945 and 1989 and a 0 for 1990 through 2000.

4 Results

Below I present the results for two major sets of analysis: (1) regression analysis examining the effects of electoral interventions on targeted states’ foreign policies and (2) a plausibility probe of the extent to which interventions may have been able to swing the outcomes of targeted elections. I plan to extend both sets of analysis after I finish collecting new data on these elections and interventions.

4.1 How do Electoral Interventions Affect Targeted State’s Foreign Policies?

To analyze the effects of different kinds of failed and successful electoral interventions on a states’ foreign policy disposition, I use an OLS regression. OLS regression is appropriate because all specifications of the dependent variable – $\Delta_{t-1,t}$ *UNGA Distance*, $\Delta_{t-1,t+1}$ *UNGA Distance*, Δ_{t,t_1} *UNGA Distance* – are continuous and normally distributed. All models

include country and year fixed effects, which means that these models estimate the effects of an electoral intervention on within-country variation in the distance between that country’s UNGA ideal point and the ideal points of the United States and Russia. I also estimate these models with robust standard errors that are clustered on the target country to account for the non-independence of observations for each state.

Table 1 reports the results of this analysis. Models 1, 3, and 5 report the results of simple models that includes the main variables of interest – *Incumbent Success*, *Incumbent Failed*, *Challenger Success*, and *Challenger Failed* – for the three specifications of the dependent variable. Models 2, 4, and 6 include the control variables. In all of these models, a positive coefficient means that there was a favorable shift in foreign policy towards the intervener in the target country, while negative coefficients mean that the target country’s ideal point moved further away from the intervener.

As a reminder, if states intervene when competing candidates have divergent foreign policy preferences, we would expect failed incumbent-side interventions to produce a *negative* foreign policy shift for the intervener and successful challenger-side interventions to produce a *positive* foreign policy shift following the election. However, as we can see from Table 1, I do not find evidence for the expected foreign policy shifts. While failed incumbent-side interventions are consistently correlated with unfavorable foreign policy shifts for the intervener, the predicted effect is not significant at the 0.1 level. Similarly, interventions that succeed in getting a challenger elected do not produce favorable foreign policy shifts for the intervener across models. Not only do the effects fail to reach standard levels of significance, the sign of the coefficient on this variable flips from negative to positive across different specifications of the model. Overall, there is limited evidence for the hypothesis that failed incumbent-side electoral interventions produce negative shifts in foreign policy for the intervening state and virtually no evidence that successful challenger-side interventions lead to favorable foreign policy changes. I address what we should make of these findings in more detail in the conclusion.

How do successful incumbent-side and failed challenger-side interventions affect the target country’s foreign policy? Even though existing models of electoral interventions do not make predictions about the kinds of effects we would expect to observe following these types of interventions, documenting these effects is still important. The coefficients on successful incumbent-side interventions in the first four models reported in Table 2 are positive, which suggests that successful incumbent-side interventions lead to favorable foreign policy changes for the intervening state. While these specifications of the dependent variable for the first four models are the most theoretically appropriate in my view because the majority of UNGA voting takes place in November and December of each year, it is important to note that

the coefficient on this variable flips to negative in the fifth and sixth models presented in Table 1. Like successful challenger-side and failed incumbent-side interventions, the effects of successful incumbent-side interventions do not reach standard levels of significance across any of the models. Overall, the evidence suggests that there is not a strong relationship between successful incumbent-side interventions and foreign policy change.

Surprisingly, the results in Table 1 do provide some evidence that failed challenger-side interventions correspond with the targeted state adopting a more favorable foreign policy to the intervener. This effect is not only significant in the first three models presented in Table 1, but also substantive. Models 1 through 3 suggest that when a country intervenes to support a challenger but the aided party fails to win the election, the targeted country's ideal point moves between 0.21 and 0.26 units closer to the ideal point of the intervening country. For perspective, the 0.24 shift resulting from a failed challenger-side intervention in model 1 corresponds to about 85% of the standard deviation of $\Delta_{t-1,t}$ *UNGA Distance* and about 8% of the total range that $\Delta_{t-1,t}$ *UNGA Distance* spreads. While the coefficient on *Challenger Failed* is positive across models 4, 5, and 6 as well, the variable does lose significance. One possible explanation for these findings is that incumbents who are intervened against may adopt more favorable policy positions to ward off future interventions.

Only two of the control variables have a statistically significant effect on the direction of foreign policy changes: the Cold War indicator and the indicator for an alliance. Elections during the Cold War are significantly more likely to produce negative shifts in foreign policy away from the United States or Russia than in the post-Cold War period. This is likely because Russia's ideal point moves much closer to that of the United States after the end of the Cold War. Therefore, many countries that had previously aligned with the Soviet Union could move closer their ideal points closer to the United States without necessarily moving farther away from Russia. Elections that occurred in countries allied with the United States or Russia were also significantly more likely to result in unfavorable foreign policy shifts away from their ally. This suggests that even though allied countries may have a high degree of shared interests overall, new leaders in countries allied to the United States and the Soviet Union were more willing to vote differently from these superpowers on occasion without fear of punishment. Small states, without formal alliances, by contrast may have been more worried about losing aid or provoking punishment from either superpower for an unfavorable reorientation.

Table 1: OLS Regression of Δ Dyad Distance in UNGA Ideal Points

	$\Delta_{t-1,t}$ UNGA Distance		$\Delta_{t-1,t+1}$ UNGA Distance		$\Delta_{t,t+1}$ UNGA Distance	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Incumbent Success	0.054 (0.081)	0.069 (0.085)	0.048 (0.107)	0.041 (0.090)	-0.003 (0.070)	-0.031 (0.052)
Incumbent Failure	-0.108 (0.090)	-0.086 (0.058)	-0.182 (0.127)	-0.114 (0.092)	-0.076 (0.056)	-0.031 (0.057)
Challenge Success	-0.009 (0.058)	0.002 (0.057)	-0.016 (0.085)	0.005 (0.085)	0.007 (0.063)	-0.008 (0.062)
Challenge Failure	0.237** (0.114)	0.214* (0.119)	0.262* (0.141)	0.219 (0.138)	0.038 (0.045)	0.020 (0.044)
Polity		0.001 (0.004)		-0.001 (0.006)		-0.002 (0.004)
Winning Coalition		-0.011 (0.081)		0.011 (0.117)		0.025 (0.077)
Cold War		-0.187** (0.088)		-0.354*** (0.114)		-0.135** (0.056)
Alliance		-0.106*** (0.014)		-0.185*** (0.019)		-0.078*** (0.013)
Country FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,626	1,449	1,617	1,450	1,678	1,503
Adjusted R ²	0.035	0.056	0.015	0.058	0.043	0.065
Residual Std. Error	0.276	0.271	0.389	0.376	0.244	0.242

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

4.2 How Frequently are Elections Plausibly Pivotal?

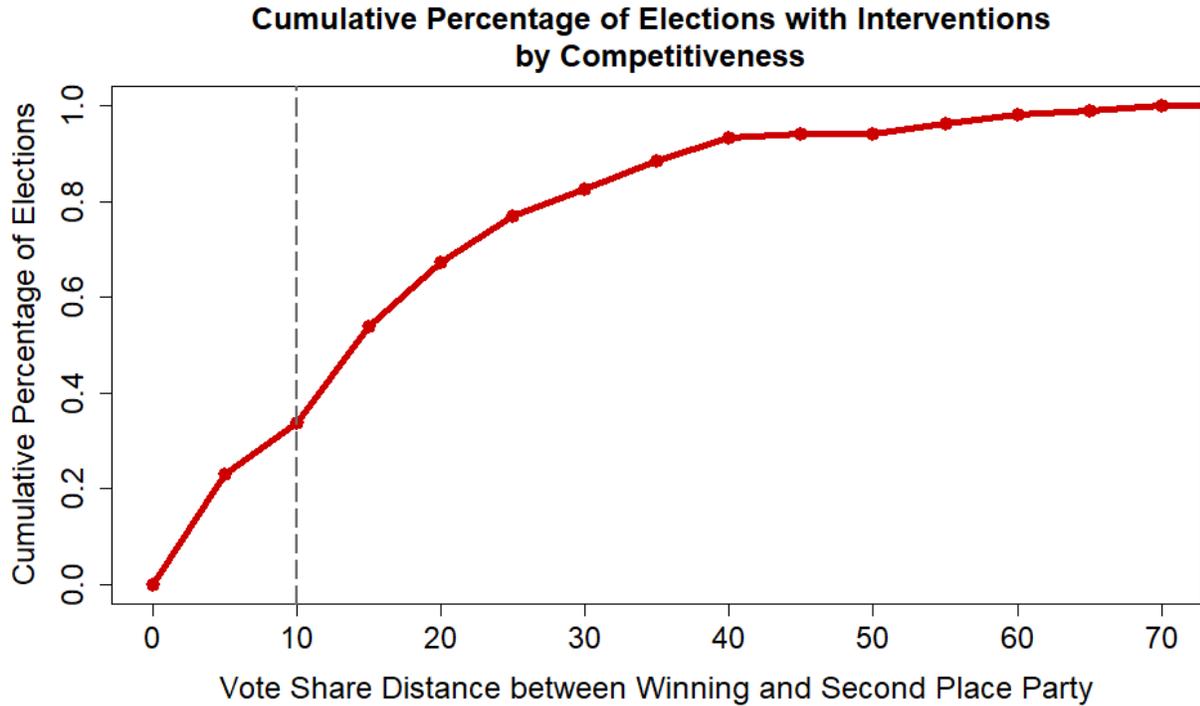
Overall, there is little evidence of the changes in targeted states' foreign policies we would expect if outside powers intervene when leaders have divergent foreign policy preferences. But is there evidence that suggests states only interfere in elections where they can swing the outcome of the election? As a reminder, Levin (2016b) argues that states are only motivated to intervene in “close” elections, where intervening could potentially change who wins the contest. If there is a clear winner – regardless of whether that winner is the preferred candidate or party – states would have little incentive to incur the costs of intervention. The clear winner would be elected, regardless of what the intervener does.

As discussed above, it is difficult to test this argument directly since we do not know what the counterfactual election results would be for cases where outside powers do intervene. An election, for instance, may not appear to be very competitive only because an outside power intervened. Yet, we can examine whether electoral interventions are plausibly pivotal. Having a healthy growth rate of about 3.8% predicts that the incumbent would win with 5% margin of victory in U.S. presidential elections. This means that changing one of the strongest predictors of whether incumbents win a presidential election could change the outcome of an election if there is within a 10% margin between the first and second place candidates or parties. Conservatively, then, we can say that interventions in elections where there is greater than a 10% margin are not plausibly pivotal.

I am in the process of transcribing data from handbooks authored by Nohlen and co-authors that collect information on elections around the world, including the official vote shares for competing parties and candidates. The coding of the data straightforward: it reports the percentage of the votes casted in the election for the candidates. There were a few cases in parliamentary systems where the precise vote share was not known, but the seat share was known. In these cases, I rely on the seat share as long as the system was elected according to a proportional representation rule. Importantly, I did not combine vote shares for political parties that form a coalition together following the election. I only record the combined vote share for parties if the parties nominate the same candidate or explicitly form an electoral union prior to voting. Currently, I have transcribed the data for all PEIG elections with outside interventions, but have not finished transcribing the data for all of the elections without U.S. or Russian interference.

While the data collection for a full test is not yet complete, we can still examine whether electoral interventions by and large occur in contests where an intervention could plausibly swing the outcome of the election. After all, Levin's (2016) argument portrays the closeness of an election as a *necessary* condition for states to have an incentive to intervene. Figure 1 illustrates the cumulative proportion of electoral interventions by the percentage point

Figure 1: Cumulative Percentage of Intervened in Elections by Competitiveness



difference between the first and second place parties. As you can see, only 34% of electoral interventions occurred in contests where the second place party or candidate received within 10 percentage points of the vote share that the winning party received. So, it seems implausible that the vast majority of electoral interventions could have been pivotal.

Once additional data collection is completed, future analyses will separate out presidential and parliamentary systems and compare the competitiveness of elections without interventions to the competitiveness of elections with interventions. Overall, the initial evidence does not support Levin’s conjecture that foreign powers are only likely to intervene in elections where they can swing the outcome of the election.

5 Conclusion

In the wake of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, it is likely that scholars will increasingly turn their attention to the study of foreign electoral interventions. The nascent literature that has already emerged builds on insights from other works on regime change and leadership turnover in international politics, which treats changing the leader of another country as fundamentally a way to change that state’s foreign policy preferences. Corstange and Marinov (2012), Bubeck and Marinov (2017), and Levin (2016) build on this

conventional wisdom to derive intuitive conditions under which foreign powers will have an incentive to intervene in the elections of other countries. Corstange and Marinov (2012) and Bubeck and Marinov (2017) suggest that states will be incentivized to intervene in elections where candidates have divergent foreign policy preferences, and Levin (2016) proposes that states will only want to intervene in close elections where the intervention could potentially change the outcome of the election.

This paper analyzed the extent to which these two features – the divergence of candidates’ foreign policy preferences and the competitiveness of the election – appear to explain the patterns of U.S. and Russian electoral interventions between 1945 and 2000. Because of the difficulties of testing these two arguments directly, I rely on indirect tests by examining the effects of electoral interventions on the distance between the foreign policy positions of target countries and the potential interveners and by determining how frequently electoral interventions could be plausibly pivotal. The results of these tests are surprising. Only 34% of electoral interventions occur in contests where there was less than a 10% difference in the vote share between the first and second place parties. Further, there is no strong evidence that failed incumbent-side interventions produce the negative foreign policy shifts away from the intervening state or that successful challenger-side interventions results in positive foreign policy changes – shifts we would expect to observe if foreign governments intervene when candidates have divergent foreign policy preferences. Finally, while existing models of electoral interventions do not make clear predictions about foreign policy orientations after successful incumbent-side and failed challenger-side interventions, I find no evidence that successful incumbent-side interventions produce any meaningful foreign policy shifts, but sizable evidence that failed challenger-side interventions lead to a positive change in the target country’s foreign policy for the intervening state.

How should we interpret these results? While the tests presented here are preliminary and additional data collection is in progress, these results do raise questions about the tractability of existing models. They also help us identify new puzzles that warrant additional investigation. So, what might explain these initial results, and where should we go from here?

One explanation for why we did not find a strong relationship between electoral interventions and foreign policy changes is simply that electoral interventions do not work. Even if states intervene with the hopes of securing favorable foreign policy concessions, there may be a severe principal-agent problem where the intervener is unable to prevent the candidate they aided from shirking on their policy commitments once they enter office. Aided leaders may want to distance themselves from the intervener in order to avoid appearing to be a puppet.¹⁴ For example, regardless of whether the Trump campaign actively colluded Russian

¹⁴One question that arises with this explanation is why the intervening power would not have been able to

operatives during the 2016 election, Trump is certainly under pressure to distance himself from Putin while the Russia investigation is still ongoing. As a result, even though Trump denies that Russia interfered in the election in any way, he has not sought to remove the sanctions Barack Obama put in place against Russia for its electoral interference. Importantly, while this explanation could explain why successful challenger-side interventions are not correlated with foreign policy concessions for intervening states, it cannot explain why we fail to observe significant, negative foreign policy shifts following failed incumbent-side interventions.

There may also be other processes that complicate the effect of the intervention, even if states do intervene when candidates have divergent foreign policy preferences. Wolford (2012), for instance, argues that leaders who fear that foreign powers will seek to remove them will adopt friendly foreign policy positions to prevent the outside state from intervening against them. In the context of an upcoming elections, incumbents may adopt more favorable policy stances to either fend off the threat of third party aiding their challengers or even to attract an outside intervention on their behalf. If incumbents do strategically adopt friendly positions in the run up to elections in order to *prevent* outside intervention, then our test may be biased against finding that any electoral interventions results in negative foreign policy shifts. This is because elections in the control group – those without an electoral intervention – may be associated with negative shifts in foreign policy as well if incumbents revert back to less friendly foreign policies after successfully warding off a foreign intervention aiding their challenger. This could be one reason why we do not find that failed incumbent-side interventions produce statistically-significant foreign policy shifts. However, this dynamic would also bias the test in favor of finding that successful challenger-side interventions produce positive changes in foreign policy orientation for the intervening state, but there is no evidence that successful challenger-side interventions have this effect. Additional in-progress data collection will help disentangle these dynamics.

Finally, it is possible that state use electoral interventions to pursue objectives other than changing a states' foreign policy orientation. For instance, states may intervene abroad to change how certain domestic groups are treated (Saideman 1997). These other motivations are significantly undertheorized in the international security literature, but their existence do complicate tests examining the effects of electoral interventions on states' foreign policy alignments. Afterall, even if states often use electoral interventions to change or prevent negative changes in other countries' foreign policies, these effects would be much harder to detect if states systematically used interventions for other, additional purposes.

anticipate this challenge prior to intervening. If the foreign power can anticipate that the candidate it aids may have an incentive to shirk once he or she is elected, the government should be dissuaded from intervening in the first place unless it believes it has the tools available to exercise control over the agent.

The desire to prevent ideological contagion is a particularly promising motivation for the results found here. Research in comparative politics and in other social science disciplines have found that political ideologies tend to spread throughout regions (Chen and Suen 2016; Weyland 2014). While these contagion effects have been studied primarily in the context of domestic revolutions, there is qualitative evidence that states fear electoral contagion as well. In CIA documents describing U.S. electoral interventions during the Cold War, analysts frequently drew connections between the success of communist and socialist parties in foreign elections to their success elsewhere, and agents were especially fearful that these leftist dominos could inspire communist parties in the United States (e.g. CIA Memorandum, 1951). By intervening to support right-wing parties and candidates abroad, the CIA believed that it could undermine the appeal of communism. This desire may explain why the United States and the Soviet Union frequently intervened in elections where their intervention was unlikely to change the winner: they may have instead cared about the size of the defeat or victory for their preferred candidates because they hoped to cement the superiority of their respective regimes.

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