

## Interview with Dov Levin

*John Chin, managing editor of the journal, interviewed Dov Levin via zoom on October 6, 2020. Dr. Levin is an assistant professor of international relations at the University of Hong Kong. From 2016 to 2018, Dov was a post-doctoral fellow in the Institute for Politics and Strategy (IPS) at Carnegie Mellon University. He received his PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2014. Dov Levin is an expert on election interference and has published in leading academic journals on this topic. His first book, *Meddling in the Ballot Box: The Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions*, has recently been published by Oxford University Press. The interview has been lightly edited for concision and flow.*

**John Chin:** Dov, thanks again for time taking the time to speak with me. So you're one of the world's foremost experts on partisan electoral interventions. I'm just wondering, could you maybe clarify for our readers, just what are partisan electoral interventions?

**Dov Levin:** Basically when I talk about partisan electoral interventions, I am talking about a situation in which a foreign power intervenes in another country's elections in an attempt to determine who wins that election for a very costly message. This could either be covert and secret or overt and in public.

And it can involve multiple types of activities, for example campaign funding. The foreign power literally gives, in some cases, literal bags of cash to one of the sides contesting that election so that they have more money to run their campaign. It can also mean something like dirty tricks, things like releasing fake or real information where if you don't want to win the pool, at least it will be embarrassing to it.

It can also involve public and specific threats or promises. Like a few days before the election, someone coming and saying, if you vote for this guy, you will suffer. Or if you vote for this guy, you will gain additional increases in foreign aid. It can also mean campaigning assistance. In other words, training some members of that political party in various techniques of how to get out people to vote, how to mobilize voters, how to run better campaign ads or in some cases sending in campaigning experts to exactly give that undecided advice. In other cases, it can mean things like giving or taking foreign aid. Right before the election, cutting down on foreign aid if you don't want the government to win or increasing foreign aid right before the election to help the government. So those are some of the main tactics and what this type of intervention usually means in practice.

**John Chin:** Can you say a little bit about how you became interested in this topic?

**Dov Levin:** It was a sheer coincidence. I was a PhD student at UCLA and I was looking for a new dissertation topic after my two previous ones did not work out for various reasons. Because I am a history buff, I went to the main UCLA library and was looking for something to read in my spare time. And by sheer chance they had a new book on the shelf, in the new releases section, about Italy in the late 1940s, which prominently discussed one case of such an intervention. So I read the book and I said to myself, "oh, this looks like an interesting topic for a PhD dissertation."

Of course, I was worried. If this is such an interesting topic, I thought that there must be many other pieces of research on it. Then, I checked and I didn't find any. And I say, wow, this must be a good option. But, I have to ask my advisor and see if they think that this is indeed a good research topic and if they know about any past research on this that cannot be found through regular methods. So then I go to him and he says to me, "oh, that's actually a great topic on which almost nothing was done to my knowledge, you should try to write your proposal on

this.” And that’s how I launched my research and discovered this topic.

**John Chin:** I’m curious just to follow up on that: after having researched many, many dozens of more cases, does Italy 1948 stand out as sort of unique or different, or quite typical for this type of intervention? And maybe if you could just say a few words about that case for our readers who may not be familiar with what happened that year.

**Dov Levin:** The funny part is that Italy 1948 is an unusual case because we actually had interveners by both sides, both the United States and the Soviet Union. Both were intervening on different sides of the political map there. The Soviet Union intervened for the Italian communist party, the PCI, while the United States mainly intervened for the Italian Christian Democrats, the DC. So, funnily enough, the case which led me to discover this topic was actually a pretty unusual one. It was unusual in that the United States basically put in much more effort than they usually do. That is, the United States was really, really afraid in this case that the Communist Party of Italy, the PCI, would win the election and turn Italy communist and then cause it to move into the Soviet bloc.

So, the US basically threw everything in, including the kitchen sink, in order to stop it. They for example gave billions of dollars in today’s money in additional foreign aid. They also gave in today’s money, around \$80 million of campaign funding to the Christian Democrats. They were sending in hundreds of campaigning experts from the United States to help prepare campaigning materials and other stuff. So it was also a pretty massive effort on the side of the United States. And it was also very large in comparison to most electoral interventions that usually do not involve the magnitude of resources like that one did. Likewise, usually you have only one side intervening and not multiple sides intervening in an election on different sides.

**John Chin:** I’m curious if perhaps you could maybe speak a little bit about your journey from being a student to becoming a scholar. Did you always know that you wanted to become a researcher, pursue a PhD? Did you sort of come across that as an undergraduate?

**Dov Levin:** Well, basically when I finished my undergraduate degree, I was not sure whether I would go into academia or not. I was thinking a lot about doing it, but was not really certain if I would do well in it or if I would like it. So, what I did is that I decided to do is to first do an M.A. at the university of Haifa in Israel where I went as an undergraduate. My assumption was that this would be basically be a testing and training period. If it worked well and I actually liked doing research and teaching, then that meant that I should go into academia and do the PhD. So I did my MA in Haifa and I found a very good and decent advisor there. And I found that I liked to do research and, after a few painful experiences when I first started teaching, I was able to eventually do a pretty good job in teaching students as a TA. So, I saw that I could produce good research and do decent teaching. I said to myself, “well, that shows that I could actually be an academic” and actually would like the job. I decided then to apply for a PhD and UCLA was kind enough to accept me.

**John Chin:** So you started studying electoral interventions while a PhD student at UCLA. That means you’ve been studying these interventions for the better part of a decade. I’m wondering what have you discovered along the way that surprised even yourself or contradicted some of your initial ideas?

**Dov Levin:** Well, first, I did not expect it to be that common. When I found the 117 cases of such

interventions by the Soviet Union or Russia and the United States, that was much more than I expected. I came to my [dissertation] proposal defense with an initial list of about 40 to 50 possible electoral intervention cases- near the borderline number of cases one needed usually in order to do a statistical analysis. So I was not sure if I'd have enough to do an analysis in my dissertation. My committee members were not sure if I had enough either and were giving me advice what to do if I don't have enough data to do statistics. And then when I finished collecting the data, after a whole hard year of work, and found that I had 117 such cases (what is now my PEIG dataset), I was pretty surprised.

So that was one surprise which I did not expect when I began working on it sometime in late 2010. And another surprise from my point of view was that most of these interventions are not some kind of a proxy war between two foreign powers. My initial assumption was that these interventions would be like in Italy 1948, where two powers intervene on different sides. In the 1948 Italian election, it was the Christian Democrats versus the communists, but it could also be almost seen as the United States versus the Soviet Union in the ballot box. So that's what I thought many of these elections would be and I actually found in practice that in most cases, one side receives such an intervention on its behalf and no one intervenes for the other side.

So I think those were the two main surprises. Naturally I was also very surprised that suddenly this stuff happened in the United States in 2016. I never expected that I would be commenting on such an intervention in a US election. I knew it had occurred here in the past, but I did not expect it to be happening in the US again any time soon.

**John Chin:** To that point, you are at the university of Hong Kong now as an assistant professor, but before that you were a post-doctoral fellow in IPS. And I recall during your time here that you taught several classes, including one on "So You Want to be President of the United States" in the fall of 2016. Does a memory from one of those classes stick with you? What would you tell some of your students who took your class with the hindsight of a few years?? If you had that class in front of you again, what would you say to them?

**Dov Levin:** One important memory from that [2016] class was, of course, the surprising victory of Donald Trump. I did not expect him to win- and I was basically in agreement on that with almost the whole political science profession. So now I knew I would have to come to my next class and explain to them how did this exactly happen. Thankfully, I did inform my students in the weeks beforehand that many of the election prediction models of senior political scientists were much closer than what the pre-election surveys were expecting and some of these models predicted a nail biter. And when elections are very close in their key characteristics, surprises can happen. So then I did the post-election class explained that point and it went pretty well despite this very big surprise.

We now have clear evidence based on my research and what came out since 2016, that basically the Russian intervention played an important role in this unexpected victory by Donald Trump. Something I did not know at the time, but that I discovered while I was preparing my book on such electoral interventions was that, based on pre-election surveys and other lines of evidence, one reason why he won was because of the Russian intervention on his behalf.

The pre-election leaks by WikiLeaks played a big role in shifting public opinion in his favor. I found that some of those exposés reduced, for example, the impact of the Access Hollywood tape on the American public's voting intentions. So something that I did not know at the time that I'd be happy if my class would know is that this Russian intervention played such an important role- as my pre-2016 published research found was the case in many other elections. I did not know that in 2016 and I was caught by surprise as everyone else, but now I

know, and if I could go back in time, that is what I would inform them.

**John Chin:** You mentioned your recent book, “Meddling in the Ballot Box: the Causes and Effects of Partisan Electoral Interventions,” which Oxford University Press has recently published. Speaking to your chapter on the US elections in 2016 and related research, did it matter whether Russia’s intervention was overt or covert? That is, whether the voters knew about it or not at the time that they were voting, do you think things would have been different in terms of political effects of intervention, if more was known about the Russian intervention earlier on?

**Dov Levin:** Well, there was already some exposure of the intervention in the lead up to the election. In other words, there was already pretty clear evidence in the lead up that there was a Russian intervention and it was designed to assist one of the sides. I find in my research that one thing that could reduce the effectiveness of covert electoral interventions was their unplanned exposure. So basically the fact that it was exposed and by mid-October more and more Americans were clearly understanding that those WikiLeaks leaks were not coming from some disgruntled employee in the DNC, but they were coming in fact from Russia were reducing its overall impact. This led a certain share of the populace to backlash against it, and to become more supportive of Hillary Clinton in reaction to these leaks.

So, there was already probably some backlash that was reducing its effect, but it was not as large as it could have been if there was more credible information out on it. In other words, there already was some backlash, but not enough to eliminate all of its effects. I, for example, expected when the information about the Russian intervention began to come out in June 2016 that the exposure would lead this meddling to have no effect, but clearly there was not enough information to convince everyone before the vote.

**John Chin:** There’s always a lag in publishing, so you’ve continued to do research beyond what has hit the presses. Could you speak a little bit about some of your more recent research, even beyond the book?

**Dov Levin:** I can discuss another research project of mine, aside from that of my book which is focused mostly on where and why this stuff occurs and whether and how it affects election results. Let’s say there was an intervention that affected the election results in that country and determined who won, what would be the effects on that country afterwards? So in one piece I published, which focuses on the effects on the target’s democracy, I find that when such covert electoral interventions work, when the preferred side comes to power, they significantly increase the probability of a democratic breakdown in the target. In another piece I published, I find that when such interventions are public knowledge, when they’re done overtly, they increase the probability of terror attacks of new terrorist groups arising in the target and the overall number of terrorist attacks. These are pretty negative effects on the target in real life terms. If these types of interventions were cigarettes, they’d tape on them warning large signs that this form of meddling is bad for the target’s welfare.

**John Chin:** Do you see any trends in electoral intervention in recent years? Is it becoming more common or less common, compared to what it was in Cold War years or since 2000, which is when your published dataset ends?

**Dov Levin:** I have not collected yet the post-2000 election data in a systematic manner. From what we already know from the 1990s, it seems to have continued more or less the same way. And

from preliminary data I have from the first two decades of the new millennium, such meddling seems more or less to be continuing at the same rate. This type of stuff has been continuing without much interruptions since the end of the Cold War. It's not like what is sometimes described in the media when they talk about 2016, that around late 2015, like in some mediocre superhero movie, Vladimir Putin went into a secret subterranean cave in Siberia, and defrosted an ancient evil locked in there since 1989 and released it back again to the world. This kind of meddling was continuing without interruptions for the whole post-Cold War. And from what I know there was no major decreases or changes from the preliminary evidence available.

**John Chin:** You commented on some of your research showing the negative effects for the target country of interventions, the risk of democratic breakdown going up and the risk of terrorist violence going up. If you apply that line of thinking to the United States in 2020, that may be troubling for many readers. There's plenty of angst in the US about democratic erosion, and the possibility of electoral violence this year. Do you think that your findings basically suggest those kinds of potential outcomes for the United States?

**Dov Levin:** Naturally, my research on this topic is statistical and like much of the social sciences it is probabilistic. It shows that there's an increased risk of this happening as a result of the meddling. It doesn't mean that it's a guaranteed outcome. We can think about it just like smoking a pack of cigarettes every day- we know for a medical fact that many people who do that will get lung cancer. That said, every few months we hear about that 95-year-old person who's been smoking for sixty years and never got sick a moment in his life or got cancer.

So I wouldn't say that it is certain that either outcome would happen in the United States. I wouldn't say that anyone needs to now run into a nuclear bomb shelter or something like that. I would just say that my research indicates that the probability of those negative events happening given the intervention in 2016 is somewhat higher. So it may not happen. I certainly hope it doesn't happen. All my research shows is that the probability of such negative events would be higher than it would have been otherwise.

**John Chin:** Yes, let's hope it doesn't happen. I'm curious, you made the reference about Putin not being like a superhero movie villain and starting things in 2015, but was 2016 unusual? Is it unprecedented for a major power, like the US, to meddle in Russia's elections or vice versa, or has something like that happened in the past?

**Dov Levin:** Well, they're not actually unprecedented when it comes to American history. Before 2016, there were at least five other such cases of interventions in US elections by various powers, from Revolutionary France, to Britain, to Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union itself in two different occasions.

Many of those interventions were done covertly and have used similar tactics to those that were used in 2016. For example, in the 1940 US elections Nazi Germany intervened against FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] because they didn't want him to win a third term because they were afraid that if he would win a third term, he would get the US into a war against Nazi Germany and save the world. One of the main ways they intervened against him was basically bribing an American editor at American newspaper to publish an "exposé" five days before the US elections in 1940 that was basically a Polish government document that supposedly showed FDR [Franklin D. Roosevelt] in a really bad light.

They have occurred in multiple past US elections, and they literally go all the way back to the earliest days of the American republic. The first competitive national election in US

history was in 1796, in which John Adams was running against Thomas Jefferson. As you may remember from high school, George Washington ran unopposed in the first two elections. And in that [1796] election Revolutionary France intervened against John Adams in various ways. The United States has suffered from these things multiple times throughout its history, with 2016 being just the most recent case.

**John Chin:** What is the evidence for 2020 becoming the most recent case? Do you have a sense based on from the headlines coming out and various intelligence reports? How credible do you take some of these reports coming out about Russian attempts to interfere in elections again, and perhaps even other countries like China are also trying to meddle in the US election? Are you seeing similar echoes of 2016 this year or do things seem different to you?

**Dov Levin:** It seems so far that there is some but not conclusive evidence that Russia is intervening in this election. We have some evidence again, based on US intelligence notifications that Russia has been again spreading “fake news” and propaganda. And we have also some evidence that it was also trying to leak phone conversations from 2015 of Joe Biden with some Ukrainian officials that supposedly make him look in bad light. In contrast, there is no evidence that any other country is intervening in this election.

**John Chin:** Interesting. What do you think any Russian intervention means for Trump’s reelection chances in 2020? Do they help or hurt Trump’s reelection at this point?

**Dov Levin:** It doesn’t seem to me, from what we seem to know so far about the Russian intervention in 2020, and again we still don’t have conclusive evidence that it’s happening, but it doesn’t seem to be at the same magnitude of 2016. It doesn’t look to me like it would be the kind of thing that would make the difference in 2020. That said, I am on record predicting that the Russian intervention in 2016 would have no significant effects. So, I wouldn’t buy lottery tickets based on my predictions.

**John Chin:** Fair enough. I think plenty of political scientists’ prediction records have proven less than perfect. Going back to the big picture again, what do you think the biggest myths or misconceptions might still be out there about electoral intervention in general, or in the United States in particular, that you would just like to dispel?

**Dov Levin:** One thing is the idea that the 2016 was unprecedented. As I mentioned beforehand, it was not unprecedented in the United States or in the rest of the world. It was also not unprecedented when it comes to that form of electoral intervention, which is pretty common. This form of intervention, which I call “dirty tricks” is actually the third most common method used since WW2. The only difference is that in 2016 it was used in a digital form, while in the past it was used in a non-digital form. It is also a pretty common electoral intervention tool by Russia. And so, there was very little that was unprecedented about 2016. So that would be one thing that I would mention in this regard.

**John Chin:** A final question here is if you had the ear of top US policymakers (or even Russian policymakers for that matter), what would you tell them about whether electoral intervention is a good instrument in their foreign policy toolkit? Like if, and when, it should be done? What sort of advice would you give from a policy perspective about electoral interventions?

**Dov Levin:** Well, I would just say like the old anti-drugs commercial, just say no.

I would say that these types of interventions, while they are many times effective in determining who wins in the target, have pretty nasty side effects on their target. They increase the chances of democratic breakdown. They increase the probability of terrorism and other negative effects. If you care about the welfare of that country and you wish it well, this is not a good tool for this purpose.

The negative effects that I'm finding exist also when such interventions are done by democratic countries, not just by Russia. So even interventions by the United States or by other democratic countries would also frequently have such negative effects.

My policy advice is to avoid such interventions as much as possible, given the harm that they frequently cause their targets. If you do them in very very special emergencies, like the second coming of a Hitler in a foreign country or something like that, it's permissible. But barring that very special exception, just say no.

**John Chin:** Okay. I think that's a pretty good note to end on.