

**Frames of the Intervention in the 2016 US
Presidential Election:
Aiming the Backlash?**

**by
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Abstract

How do the differing frames built up around the foreign intervention in the 2016 United States presidential election shape the public backlash, or lack thereof, against the intervenor? Examining opinion pieces from an array of influential media outlets through a lens of problem identification and blame direction, this project identifies four recent broad frames of the 2016 intervention. Blame is pointed either inwards at domestic actors or outwards at Russia, and the problem identified is either the intervention against Clinton or the suspicion of Trump afterwards. A survey experiment exposing respondents to vignettes based on these frames, however, shows no effects on stances towards the intervenor, Russia. These findings, while difficult to interpret, suggest that the significance of frames of electoral interventions may lie elsewhere.

Keywords: electoral interventions; framing; public opinion; media analysis; 2016 US presidential election

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Introduction

After the discovery of the Russian intervention in the 2016 United States presidential election, understandings have been in flux. Various frames, purposive representations of reality highlighting particular key facts, have been constructed over time from ever-changing public information. How do the differing media frames built up around the 2016 intervention shape the backlash, or lack thereof, against the intervenor? Building on the limited literature on partisan foreign electoral interventions, and in particular on past study of reactions to them, this project examines one possibility: that the direction of blame in frames of the intervention shapes public stances, in this case American public stances, towards intervenors.

Using recent opinion pieces, this project identifies four broad extant frames of the intervention, separated by how the problem of the intervention is defined and where blame is primarily directed. Commentators identify the pro-Trump intervention itself as the problem, or instead attack as problematic the idea of suspecting and investigating Trump for possible involvement. Either way, they direct primary blame inwards towards domestic actors (respectively, Trump and his campaign or Democrats and investigators) or outwards towards Russia.

These frames, common in ongoing media commentary on the 2016 intervention, serve as the base for a survey experiment testing their effects on American public stances towards the intervenor, Russia. It was expected that the emphasis of these frames would matter: when the intervenor is made most blameworthy, people will be more willing to take action against it. Surprisingly, however, no effect could be detected. Exposure to the frames in the form of short opinion piece-style vignettes had no effect on overall stances towards Russia. The reason for this is unclear, but the results suggest that however the direction of blame matters in representations of partisan electoral interventions, it may not currently affect the backlash against Russia for its 2016 intervention. These findings in total add to existing knowledge of such interventions, exploring how they are represented and adding to knowledge of how the backlash against intervenors comes to be.

Literature Review

To understand the underlying phenomenon, states carrying out partisan interventions in foreign elections, Levin (2019) provides a useful starting point. For Levin, a partisan electoral intervention involves one sovereign state acting, overtly or covertly, to influence the results of an election in another sovereign state. This intervention must be a deliberate attempt to aid or undermine a particular side in the election, distinguishing partisan interventions from purely procedural/democratic support efforts. That is to say, while states often act within other states' elections, to be a partisan intervention, there must be a partisan effect intended. Non-partisan aid and advice on electoral management, for instance, does not count.¹ As well, to be recognized as a partisan electoral intervention by Levin's definition, one must have either a significant cost to the intervenor (financial or otherwise) or the potential for such a cost (Levin, 2019, p. 90). Covered activities can include, among other things, open threats and promises, major shifts in aid provision, funding of a particular side, and releases of damaging information (p. 91). Focusing only on the US and USSR/Russia, Levin found 117 known interventions from 1946 through 2000, covering one in nine competitive elections during the period (p. 94).

Some research has been done examining reactions to partisan electoral interventions. Part of this research is indirect: a current wave of large-N quantitative work. Levin (2016) estimated that when a great power intervenes in an election, there is an average of a three percent shift in votes in favour of the aided side (p. 200). Notably, interventions have been most effective when conducted publicly (p. 197); whatever the effect on public opinion, it does not stop votes from moving. Hansen and Lim (2019) theorize that the opinion-shaping effects of (dis)information-based online electoral interference techniques are shaped by domestic conditions, with polarization and an accepting media likely enhancing information tactics. Finally, most relevant to this study of reactions, Levin (2018) finds that successful overt partisan electoral interventions are

¹ That said, Bubeck & Marinov (2019) argue that the line between partisan and non-partisan methods is blurry and that efforts to support specific candidates and process-supportive interventions can be intertwined, as enhancing election fairness (via, for instance, election observation missions) tends to support opposition candidates. This is a valuable insight, one that indicates that the divide between partisan electoral interventions and non-partisan electoral support is one of intent and strategy more than of specific methods.

tied to increases both in the number of domestic terrorist acts and the chance of new domestic terrorist groups forming in targeted states (p. 8). This is likely due to perceptions of the aided electoral actors as illegitimate, dependent on foreign influence rather than domestic support (p. 4).

A few papers from before the current wave of research, however, are most directly relevant. Corstange and Marinov (2012) and Shulman and Bloom (2012) each use national survey data to explore public reactions to electoral interventions. Shulman and Bloom (2012) found a broad backlash against both Western and Russian involvement in the 2004 Ukrainian elections (p. 464-467). Corstange and Marinov (2012), looking at the 2009 Lebanese elections, found that emphasizing partisanship of the intervention by the United States polarized surveyed Lebanese citizens along partisan-religious lines, with citizens on the US-backed side supporting the US more and citizens on the US-opposed side opposing the US more (p. 662-667). The same was not true, however, of the intervention by Iran. Mention of its partisanship had little effect (p. 664-666).² Marinov (2013), with a very similar survey experiment, finds disapproval by educated voters of even friendly partisan intervenors. Said educated voters generally prefer non-partisan electoral process support (p. 1309-1313). More recent research by Tomz and Weeks (2020) provides further support for these findings and extends them to the United States, finding partisanship-moderated broad disapproval of intrusive interventions (p. 7-10). These results indicate a broad, if not entirely consistent, negative view of partisan intervenors, and indicate that partisanship shapes views of intervenors.

However, while contributing valuable insights, this strand is limited by its narrow focus. Shulman and Bloom (2012) investigate the perceived legitimacy of intervenors only. Corstange and Marinov (2012) and Marinov (2013), for their survey experiments, test simple frames in which a given country (Iran or the US) intervened for given reasons (partisan or purely process-supportive) (p. 661-662). In practice, though, the stories people tell of partisan electoral interventions are not so simple. Mistry (2011) demonstrates wide variation in the tone and contents of major contemporary and current

² Partisanship as a moderator is further supported by Bush and Prather (2020), who find that in cases of foreign partisan support (electoral or not), individuals in the targeted state are more supportive of economic engagement with states that support their favoured party than states that oppose it.

understandings of the US intervention in the 1948 Italian election, even among those understandings that focus nigh-exclusively on the CIA (p. 249-255). Beyond that, as Levin (2016) recognizes, partisan interventions involve not just an intervenor, but a (generally willing) recipient of support as well (p. 190). As can be seen with the continuing public debate over the Trump campaign's alleged role in the 2016 Russian intervention, recipients of support can play varied and significant roles in understandings of interventions.

To deal with this issue, this project draws from concepts of framing built up in communications scholarship. The information publicly available on the 2016 intervention is at once incomplete and overwhelming. "To frame," as defined by Entman (1993) "is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). It is to bring out particular elements as mattering, as probative of something. Complex issues are made simple enough to be understood, set in comprehensible frames that shape audience understandings and reactions (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 11-12).

Framing, as a concept, can help link parts of the literature on partisan electoral interventions together. Hansen and Lim (2018) argue that media coverage is significant in shaping public response to interventions. Mistry (2011), examining the US intervention in the 1948 Italian election, identifies what are essentially three frames found in media through which the intervention is often explained, and ties them to perceptions of the intervenor and its agencies. Fragmentation of media and the profusion of partisan news outlets limits the chance of a single frame growing dominant (see Baum & Potter, 2019, p. 749-751). The relationship between media coverage and public opinion on foreign policy is a complex web of causes and effects (Baum & Potter, 2008), but here, media framing of interventions is a credible shaper of public views, helping create the varied and complex reactions found in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

This project attempts to explain public foreign policy preferences regarding intervening states in the wake of partisan electoral interventions as a product, in part, of the frames through which interventions are understood in the press. Past research has shown a broad but complex backlash against intervenors, with public opinion of them growing more negative overall, but not evenly across the public. This project specifically attempts to explain in part the backlash, or lack thereof, against the intervenor as a result of particular information being made salient in media frames. Frames of electoral interventions explain them in various ways, defining the problem differently and making different actors more or less salient. Emphasizing the intervenor suggests that solving the problem is a matter of countering the intervenor, whereas a domestic focus will suggest otherwise.

As was made clear in the literature review, however, events are not interpreted in a vacuum. Partisanship plays a major role in shaping responses to partisan electoral interventions. Partisans may reject frames that stand against their partisan position, limiting their influence. The role of partisanship must be taken into account to fully understand backlashes against electoral intervenors.

I propose that extant frames of partisan electoral interventions can be reasonably placed in a framework of two questions. The first is simple: how is the problem, if any, defined? What, in relation to the intervention, is promoted as the issue to be solved? The second question is that of who or what, not necessarily a single actor, is primarily to blame for the problem. As Levin (2016) highlights, electoral interventions tend to involve willing and cooperative partnerships between the intervenor and a domestic actor (p. 190). Representations of interventions, however, can and do vary from such a model. These two questions line up with three of Entman's (1993) four main functions of framing, the first question being problem definition and the second taking causal interpretation and moral judgment together (p. 52)

In general, I expect that frames negatively focused primarily on the intervenor rather than domestic actors, frames that make the intervenor more salient and direct blame in their direction, will lead to a greater willingness to act against the intervenor. The effect will likely be greatest, and possibly only existent, when it aligns with

partisanship. With Democrats broadly standing against Trump and Republicans broadly supporting Trump, Democrats will likely be influenced most by frames whose problem definition is consistent with Trump opposition and Republicans by frames consistent with Trump defense.³ That is to say, partisanship will serve as a moderator. This is in tune with prior research, which finds backlashes against partisan intervention, but backlashes shaped by partisanship.

³ In this case, the problem definitions found through media analysis later in this paper, the pro-Trump intervention being problematic versus suspicion of Trump being problematic, are broadly respectively Democratic- and Republican-aligned.

Methodology

This project, focused on frames about partisan electoral interventions, consists of two components. The first component, qualitative in nature, involves content analysis of news media opinion pieces to identify major extant frames of the intervention in the 2016 US election and their recurring elements. This portion is straightforwardly descriptive, and its purpose is primarily to support the core of the project: a survey experiment. In addition to the qualitative segment of the project, the core segment, a survey experiment, comes from a more quantitative angle. The goal is to understand how the frames explored in the first part impact public opinion, specifically stances towards the intervenor. The exact frames used are those identified through qualitative component of the study.

Case Selection

One major case is examined, selected to allow for depth while keeping the scope limited. The case is the high-profile Russian intervention in the 2016 American presidential election, a paradigmatic case for the current literature. It is an intrinsically important case (Gerring, 2017, p. 42), being the foremost modern example and having obvious global significance. While there are risks in depending on a high-profile case in a global superpower, the same attributes make it particularly attractive. The 2016 intervention has led to sustained, widespread public debate, ensuring that research materials are quite available. The accessibility of materials to an Anglophone North American researcher is also helpful. Finally, relatively high researcher knowledge of the situation in the United States helps strengthen the analysis.

Data Sources

The first section of this project is based on document analysis, primarily focusing on opinion pieces in national media outlets. The New York Times, the Washington Post, the CNN website, the National Review, and the Fox News website were examined. This selection of data sources helps keep the voluminous available research materials limited and under control, while focusing attention on arguments to the general public as they were made. It covers a range of formats and ideological biases while covering major

news and opinion sources. All outlets included have significant readerships. Only material from 2019 was examined, keeping material under control and making sure current-form frames could be prepared for the survey experiment.

Mass media opinion pieces meet several qualifications for use. They are practically accessible. One can gather a batch that is reasonably broadly representative of the population as a whole. They are reliable records of arguments made in the public sphere. Finally, being a means of distributing public frames of the 2016 intervention, they are valid for the purpose of trying to understand public frames after partisan electoral interventions.

The survey experiment component looks to the general public. Questioning members of the general public is appropriate when trying to understand the general public's views, and varied treatments in an otherwise standardized structured survey allow the effects of multiple arguments and frames to be examined.

Media Analysis

Procedures and Methods.

Opinion pieces were gathered to saturation with a snowball search method, limited to 2019 and to opinion sections. Search terms used included, but were not limited to, "election interference," "electoral intervention," "'Trump' 'Russia'," "Mueller," "Steele dossier," and other terms and names tied to debate around the intervention, as well as common phrases identified as research went on. New York Times, Washington Post, and CNN pieces were gathered on LexisNexis, National Review pieces were found using the site's internal search function, and Fox News materials were gathered both with the site's internal search function and with site-limited Google searches.

When handling the documentary evidence, I began by analyzing each opinion piece as a whole, identifying the general direction of the frame. The goal will be to determine the nature of the intervention problem identified (if any), and who/what is blamed for said problem. That is to say, how the problem is defined and where blame is directed. Analysis was conducted according to these two dimensions. Each aspect is relatively straightforward, even while tied to varied elements. The provision of agency,

and with it blameworthiness, is a key part. Recurring themes and arguments were tracked.

Expected observations.

This qualitative component of this project, the secondary component, is largely inductive in nature. That said, there were still some expectations. The primary expectation, the core of the framework, was that there will be substantial variation in both the issue taken as problematic (e.g. the intervention or its investigation) and the placement of blame. That is, not all frames would focus primarily or entirely on the danger of the intervenor, and not all frames would portray the intervention as necessarily either negative or real. Variation will likely be in substantial part by outlet, broadly along pro-/anti-Trump lines. A lack of significant variation in the overall universe of frames would stand against expectations.

Trade-offs and limitations.

There are significant limitations to this part of the project, justified usually by gains in practicality and focus. Research materials for content analysis have been kept restricted to media outlet opinion pieces, and only those from a few key national outlets (a small fraction of all opinion pieces), to keep the materials searchable in limited time. Furthermore, to examine the entire range of opinion pieces in those outlets is beyond the time and energy of one researcher. Working only until data saturation is reached improves practicality without losing too much validity.

A special note goes to the decision to only analyze one case. To explore only one case, although helpful for depth and accuracy, is to limit the project. A secondary case, selected from recent known partisan electoral interventions, could have helped by allowing the general framework to be checked against a lower-profile case that did not inspire it, enhancing understandings of when it is applicable. However, even without a second case, researchers should be able to identify what is and what is not applicable with regard to the media analysis, at least to some extent. There is no expectation, for instance, that all interventions will lead to the aided candidate's hotel chain being made salient in frames, but the general lens will likely be of broad value. The survey experiment component helps with the generalizability issue, although at the cost of time

and money. While the precise ideas expressed in one case may not be generalizable, there is no clear reason why the effects explored here would be limited to one case in one country.

Survey Experiment

Procedures and Methods.

For the survey experiment, a survey was launched through Lucid (<https://luc.id>) on June 11, 2020, requesting 500 Americans representative of the general population. Lucid set two exclusion criteria for the purposes of fulfilling its order: respondents who did not consent at the start (and thus did not complete the survey in full) were not counted, nor were those who completed the survey in under 60 seconds.⁴ Those surveyed were divided into five groups through simple randomization, each participant having equal odds to be in each group. This randomization allows comparison groups that are similar to each other, effectively controlling for variables aside from the treatment.

Each subject was given a vignette, crafted for this study and based on extant opinion pieces, to read based on their group. Four groups received vignettes based on opinion pieces about the 2016 intervention, while one group received a control vignette about popular culture. The axes on which the treatment vignettes vary are direction of blame (Russia or internal) and problem definition (whether the intervention itself or the investigations surrounding it). These are a vignette identifying the intervention as a problem and directing blame inwards towards Trump, one identifying the intervention as a problem and directing blame outwards towards Russia, a vignette portraying suspicion of and investigations of Trump as a problem caused by his domestic opponents, and a vignette asserting that said suspicion and investigations are spurred by Russian disinformation against Trump. The control vignette imitates the limited discourse around

⁴ The 60 second exclusion threshold, meant to limit the impact of non-readers rushing through the survey, was not known to the researcher before data collection began. Data from sub-60 participants was given, but a decision was made to abide by Lucid's standards and exclude them, both to support data quality and to preserve consent. Consent was likely given under the assumption that completions would be recognized by Lucid.

the upcoming film Avatar 2, a topic unlikely to manipulate beliefs regarding the 2016 intervention. Appendix A includes the five vignettes.

Afterwards, all subjects were given five 5-point Likert scale questions about views of and policy responses to Russia, as well as one decoy question about popular culture. Appendix B includes the full battery of questions. This structure allows differences in foreign policy views to be identified across groups that, while otherwise similar, were exposed to different frames of the Russian intervention, thus making the effects of the frames clear.

Measurements.

In this experiment, subjects are primed with either a control vignette, or one of four vignettes written to resemble opinion pieces such as those examined in the prior component. The independent variable in this study is categorical and between-participants: the vignette presented.

One dependent variable is used. It is a composite ordinal statistic averaging by mean the answers (each on a 1 to 5 scale, from least to most Russia-supportive) to five policy/attitude questions regarding Russia and potential policies regarding it, three negative questions and two positive. The five statements are, in order, "Economic sanctions should be laid against Russia," "The US should increase international cooperation with Russia," "America should do more to protect Eastern European countries from Russian aggression," "To ensure Russia does not feel threatened, America should limit NATO expansion," and "Russia is the country most threatening to American security."

Partisan affiliation (categorical) is also tracked, using data provided by the survey provider, Lucid. Data was shifted from Lucid's 10 category system of degrees and leans to three categories: Democrat (covering strong, not very strong, and independent Democrats), Republican (strong, not very strong, and independent Republicans), and Other (covering all self-affiliated with neither party, including leaners).

To analyze the data, two multiple linear regression models are used. One, handling H1 to H4, were conducted using test group as an independent categorical variable and using policy/belief as a dependent variable. The other, testing H5, adds

partisan affiliation and includes an interaction effect between treatment group and partisan affiliation. In both models, Independent/Other/None and the control group are used as reference categories for their respective variables. Results are reported in full.

Expected observations.

H₁: Exposure to a frame defining the pro-Trump intervention as a problem and blaming Russia will lead to more negative policy positions against Russia, compared to the control vignette. (Null hypothesis: No difference between treatments)

H₂: Exposure to a frame defining suspicion of Trump as a problem and blaming Russia will lead to more negative policy positions against Russia, compared to the control vignette. (Null hypothesis: No difference between treatments)

H₃: Exposure to a frame defining the pro-Trump intervention as a problem and blaming internal actors will lead to less negative policy positions against Russia, compared to the control vignette. (Null hypothesis: No difference between treatments)

H₄: Exposure to a frame defining suspicion of Trump as a problem and blaming internal actors will lead to less negative policy positions against Russia, compared to the control vignette. (Null hypothesis: No difference between treatments)

H₅: The effects of vignettes will be lower for members of the party they are opposed to (e.g. Republicans for vignettes identifying the pro-Trump intervention as a problem) than for those of other party affiliations. (Null hypothesis: No difference in effect across parties)

H₁ and **H₂** are straightforward: placing blame on Russia, whatever Russia is blamed for, should encourage action against Russia. **H₃** and **H₄** are similar: decentering Russia and focusing on internal actors, making the issue one of domestic politics, may discourage foreign policy solutions such as sanctions. Domestic issues suggest domestic solutions. **H₅** is built on the well-established role of partisanship as a moderator of opinions on partisan electoral interventions. Partisans are expected to be moved less by frames whose problem definitions favour their opponents than by those that favour their own side. A vignette portraying as problematic the act of suspecting Trump would have less of an effect on Democrats, for instance. Note that these

hypotheses were finalized after completion of the media analysis component, allowing them to be built on observed frames.

Trade-offs and limitations.

The single-case trade-offs noted for the qualitative component also apply here. As well, this survey experiment takes one major risk for the sake of validity. It is built around trying to influence opinions on a matter that has garnered mass attention for years. There is the risk that beliefs regarding the intervention in the 2016 US election are, for many, highly ossified, well-set and difficult to influence. Corstange and Marinov (2016) ascribe their lack of significant results regarding Iran in the 2009 Lebanese election to this issue: regardless of how their question framed Iran's intervention, subjects likely saw the intervention as partisan already (p. 667). That said, while it is likely that the average American has a settled idea of whether Russia intervened to support Trump, the finer details, such as the precise roles of the intervenor and the recipient of aid, are still unclear and much-debated. It is differences in these details that this experiment will focus on. Taking on such a well-known case is still a risk, but the benefits in validity for using a real case rather than a hypothetical, allowing a stronger assumption of real-world effects, are worth it.

The choice to use realistic vignettes comes with significant trade-offs. Even with similarly structured vignettes, length and detail bring variations that add risk: measures may catch the effects of unidentified variations rather than expected variables, obscuring the former under the latter. This approach is appropriate for the greater research question, one of differing frames rather than of specific elements, however. As well, care has been taken to limit cross-vignette variation, including making the vignettes similar in length and structure.

The Intervention Into the 2016 United States Election

The United States presidential election of 2016 was subject to a high-profile semi-covert Russian intervention. Alongside the anti-Clinton and pro-Trump messages of foreign-oriented Russian state media outlets RT and Sputnik, an extensive covert campaign on social media, numerous accounts both human and automated creating and propagating propaganda, was identified by US officials and social media platforms alike. The centre of the intervention, however, was a hacking campaign targeting a number of largely Democratic-aligned individuals and organizations, followed by the mass release of internal Democratic/Clinton emails and other data (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; Mueller, 2019; McCombie, Uhlmann, & Morrison, 2020). Early in 2017, US officials publicly identified Russia as behind these operations (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). A number of investigations, criminal and otherwise, have probed various aspects of the intervention. The findings and processes of said investigations have been matters of mass public interest.

Public debate around this intervention continues even now, and throughout 2019, several major events drove coverage and commentary. The opinion pieces studied here generally, though not exclusively, surround three intervention-tied moments: the completion of Special Counsel Mueller's investigation into the intervention, the buildup towards the impeachment of President Trump, and the completion of Department of Justice Inspector General Horowitz's investigation into an early investigation. Some context is necessary.

In May, 2017, Robert Mueller was appointed as Special Counsel to handle the investigation of, broadly, the Russian intervention in the 2016 election and any possible coordination between the Russian government and the Trump campaign. This investigation resulted in several charges, many against Russians alleged to have participated in the intervention, and convictions, largely of Trump campaign affiliates who illegally undermined the investigation (Mueller, 2019). Mueller submitted his final report to Attorney General Barr on March 22, 2019, and a mere two days later Barr released a letter purporting to summarize the investigation's principal conclusions. In it, Barr emphasized that Mueller had not found conspiracy or coordination between Russia and

the Trump campaign, and he announced his own conclusion that Mueller's evidence did not support an obstruction of justice charge against Trump (Barr, 2019).

It took another month for the full report to be released, at least in partially redacted form. The full report is an extensive overview of the Russian intervention, contacts and connections between Russia's government/affiliated entities and the Trump campaign, and the possibility that Trump himself obstructed the investigation (Mueller, 2019). Its tone is substantially different from that of the Barr letter. Notably, Mueller repeatedly referenced Congress's role in determining whether a President had obstructed justice, and he highlighted the possibility of mutual friendly responsiveness between the Trump campaign and Russia without formal cooperation (Savage, 2019). Public debate surrounded both the legitimacy of Barr's summary and the overall contents of Mueller's report.

Later, in September, a whistleblower report from within the US State Department came to public attention. The whistleblower alleged that Trump had used his office to pressure Ukraine into interfering in the 2020 presidential election, demanding an investigation of probable Democratic nominee Joe Biden and a probe of the US investigations into Russian interference. This report, soon partly confirmed by the Trump administration, sparked an official impeachment probe in the House, followed by much public debate over whether to impeach Trump and, if so, what for. The eventual impeachment report and articles, delivered on December 16th, focused first and foremost on the matter of Ukraine (Kiely, Robertson, & Gore, 2020).

Amidst this debate, Department of Justice Inspector General Michael Horowitz released his report on the early FBI investigation of potential coordination between Russia and the Trump campaign. This report determined the investigation to be in and of itself legitimate in origin but found that applications for surveillance on one former Trump campaign associate were significantly flawed, with numerous procedural errors and one falsified email. No substantial evidence was found to attribute this to political bias (Horowitz, 2019). Still, with the investigation of Russian interference criticized, there was much to argue about.

Frames of the 2016 Russian Intervention

In the hundreds of intervention-related opinion pieces published in 2019 alone in those outlets examined, several distinct frames are visible. In their variation, they broadly fit along the two lines expected, generally identifying either the intervention itself or suspicion of Trump as a problem that demands response and placing primary blame on different targets. These axes serve as somewhat effective ways to group frames with similar emphases, although the frames within each group diverge substantially in their finer details.

That said, the framework does not capture the full variety in Russian intervention-related opinion pieces and their overarching frames. Importantly, these are not disconnected sets, wholly separate frames of the 2016 electoral intervention. The strongest positions and their common elements are easiest to identify, but many opinion pieces give more mixed portrayals. Writers portray the issue differently at different times, and individual pieces may make salient aspects of multiple identifiable frames. The approach used here, however, captures the broad strokes of media debate and effectively focuses attention on the direction of blame, creating a useful base for the survey experiment. Rather than capturing every variation in framing, this approach primarily brings out the ways culpability is assigned.

The Intervention as Problem

Throughout 2019, many opinion pieces found in CNN, the New York Times, the Washington Post and sometimes the National Review opinion sections, unsurprisingly framed the intervention itself as a problem. These pieces accept that Russia intervened against the Clinton campaign and in favour of the Trump campaign, and that the intervention and/or its results are a problem. Where they differ, outside of specific details, is in whose role they emphasize and how they approach the thorny issue of culpability. Some opinion pieces emphasize the intervenor, pushing attention and blame towards Russia. Others point towards Trump and his campaign, giving him the primary role in the intervention.

Russia-oriented Framing

One particularly widespread frame takes the intervention as problematic and portrays Russia as primarily or wholly at fault. Trump and his campaign are given a limited and/or wholly subordinate role, if any, making the issue one of foreign policy more than of domestic politics. Russia is given agency and moral culpability, and is made the centre of the 2016 intervention. Framing of this sort varies in details, particularly regarding the exact place of Trump in the intervention, but together, it emphasizes the foreign side of foreign intervention, implicitly or explicitly suggesting policy responses accordingly.

The intervention can be framed with little to no reference to Trump. The New York Times editorial board (2019a), for instance, responded to Mueller's report by making salient many of Russia's actions identified within, explicitly avoiding the question of Trump's culpability and calling for a unified bipartisan focus on national electoral security. Brazile (2019), for Fox News, similarly removes partisanship from the matter, highlighting both Democratic and Republican statements and actions against Russia while making only momentary references to Trump. A strict national security view like these focuses attention outwards.

Another approach, taken most notably by CNN editor Chris Cillizza (whose work is a substantial portion of the corpus of writings analyzed), centres the Russian intervention while largely finding Trump blameless, mostly portraying him as unaware of the intervention and unwilling to accept that it matters. Here, electoral interference is the central problem, but there was no collusion. As Cillizza puts it, "Trump's inability to admit that [...] means that the US will almost certainly be less prepared for future attempts at election interference by Russia and other ill-intended foreign powers. And that's scary" (Cillizza, 2019a). Intelligence community conclusions that Russia intervened to aid Trump are rejected because "they didn't fit [Trump's] feel for what had actually happened" (Cillizza, 2019b), and Trump's disbelief in the intervention "almost certainly guarantees that what happened in 2016 won't be an exception. It will become the rule" (Cillizza, 2019c). Cillizza is not alone, with Goldberg (2019) taking a similar stance for the National Review, but he is the primary proponent. For this approach, Trump's statements of disbelief are often brought up, consistently taken at face value.

As a result, the Russian intervention is wholly Russian, and Trump's main effect is to impede preparation for the next Russian effort.

Another approach that directs blame towards Russia is to identify Trump as strictly subordinate in the Trump-Russia/Trump-Putin relationship, a knowing or unknowing puppet held by various means. For D'Antonio (2019), for instance, "it is alarming to see an American president dominated by a Russian leader in the way Trump is being played by Putin," who "holds the keys to Trump's self-image." Trump can be, in these pieces, a Russian asset and/or strangely attached to Russia, "putty in Putin's hands" (Vinograd, 2019), without any need for bargains or mutual benefit, a tool rather than an agent of his own. Writers note meetings between Trump campaign members and Russians, along with statements and policies friendly towards Russia.

Trump-oriented Framing

Other opinion pieces portray Trump and his campaign as particularly blameworthy for the 2016 intervention. These pieces take the intervention and its results as a problem, and they accept that Russia intervened in favour of Trump. Where they differ from those framing the intervention as fundamentally Russian is their domestic focus. They locate the issue at hand as one of domestic actors, pointing towards (and sometimes explicitly advocating) domestic solutions. If Trump is the problem, then removing Trump, an act many of these pieces advocate, will theoretically solve the problem more than any foreign policy choice could.

One incident is mentioned particularly often in opinion pieces that portray Trump as centrally culpable for the 2016 intervention: the "Russia, if you're listening" remark. In a July, 2016 press conference, in the middle of his presidential campaign and amidst questions about Russian interference in the election, Trump remarked, "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find [Clinton's] 30,000 emails that are missing" (quoted in Parker & Sanger, 2016). This public request, a reference to Clinton's use of a personal server while Secretary of State, was followed by a tweet: "If Russia or any other country or person has Hillary Clinton's 33,000 illegally deleted emails, perhaps they should share them with the FBI!" (Trump, 2016). Mere hours after Trump's initial statement, according to Mueller (2019), Russian intelligence officers began attempting to access email accounts within Clinton's personal office (vol. 1, p. 49).

Although Trump later claimed that his remarks were in jest (Mueller, 2019, vol. 2, p. 19), the combination of his open request for a foreign electoral intervention and the immediate timing of Russian action afterwards attracts suspicion. In the opinion pieces focusing on Trump's culpability, the invitation to intervene is often made salient. The New York Times editorial board (2019b), in the lead-up to impeachment, used the remark as an example of Trump "working to subvert [an] election,". For Rampell (2019), it is one of numerous examples of Trump "selling out U.S. democracy," and for Ghitis (2019), "it was a despicable move to solicit assistance from a hostile power to influence an American election." The effect is to put Trump broadly in charge of the intervention, or at least to position him as a major participant. His request, in these tellings, is a driving force.

Beyond the "Russia, if you're listening" remark, Trump and his staff are granted agency, portrayed as actively making choices of their own and not as subordinates to the intervenor. Trump-oriented pieces often focused on the inner workings of the Trump campaign more than the actions of Russia, particularly around the release of the Mueller report. Wheeler (2019), for instance, explored the doings of campaign staff as shown in indictments, arguing in part that Trump could be (in legal terms) a criminal conspirator. Motive and mentality play parts in assigning blame to Trump as well, as in Sachs (2019), where Russia intervened but Trump is the one with "overarching motives" of victory and greed, and in which the solution to the problem is to impeach Trump.

Bargains and Partnerships

Between the pieces pointing clearly towards Trump and those aimed clearly at Russia, a number of writers find bargains of mutual benefit between the intervenor and the aided candidate. Talk of quid pro quo relationships and deals gives both Russia and the Trump campaign some agency, but one side or the other is generally made the active partner, taking actions. Perhaps contacts between Trump campaign members and Russian figures indicate that Trump's campaign actively colluded with Russia (e.g. Cillizza, 2019d), or perhaps they show that "Russians lured the Trumpites" and actively pitched a bargain (Frankel, 2019).

Suspicion as Problem

Not all pieces about the Russian intervention against Clinton frame it as a major or even real problem. A number of pieces, largely but not exclusively in the conservative and Trump-leaning outlets examined (the National Review and Fox News), contest interpretations that primarily identify the intervention as problematic, instead positioning continuing investigations of and allegations against Trump as the true issue. That Trump is under a cloud of suspicion is the problem, but who is to blame varies.

To portray suspicion of Trump as the problem, these pieces often attempt to show why it is a problem, making particular facts (true or false) salient and arranging them in such a way that said suspicion is made illegitimate, or at least incorrect. This adds further variation. Recurring elements include Mueller's report (particularly as interpreted by Barr) and the lack of any charged criminal conspiracy between Trump and Russians, Horowitz's report and problems in the surveillance of one campaign associate, and, as detailed below, the Clinton campaign's use of a private investigator.

Russia-Oriented Framing

Some pieces published in the National Review and on the Fox News website still position Russia as blameworthy, even as they reject the common conception of the 2016 intervention, a Russian intervention in favour of Trump. They identify an underlying problem, belief in and investigation of Trump-Russia coordination, and position it as a likely product of Russian disinformation, spread knowingly or unknowingly by the Democratic party and/or the FBI to undermine Trump.

These claims that the real Russian intervention was against Trump revolve around the so-called Steele dossier, a collection of memos written by a private investigator. Christopher Steele, a former intelligence officer, was hired mid-2016 on behalf of the Democratic party to collect information on possible Trump-Russia ties. Taking information from a number of sources, particularly Russians, he wrote a series of loose briefs on rumours and fragments of intelligence. Although this dossier circulated within political and law enforcement circles, its role in official investigations of Trump was limited: law enforcement access postdated their launch and the dossier garnered little evidentiary support, but it did help allow surveillance against one former Trump

campaign advisor (Horowitz, 2019). After the publication of several of the memos by BuzzFeed News (Bensinger, Elder, & Schoofs, 2017), however, the dossier's allegations of campaign-Russia contacts and sexual blackmail material settled solidly into the public conversation.

In the opinion pieces framing the 2016 intervention as Russia against Trump, laying partial or primary blame on Russia, the Steele dossier is key. It is portrayed as central to FBI decisions to investigate Trump, the primary or sole basis of counterintelligence investigation and surveillance actions. To Jarrett (2019b), writing for Fox News, "James Comey's FBI exploited the uncorroborated 'dossier' to launch its criminal investigation of Trump" and "hornswoggle[d] the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court" with it. Similarly, McCarthy (2019b), for the National Review, says that "the Obama administration made the dossier the centerpiece of its Russia investigation."

The dossier's central role, in this frame, makes its provenance particularly important. Specifically, Steele's use of Russian sources is made greatly meaningful, used as evidence both of the dossier's falsehood and of a Russian intervention against Trump. For Fox, McEnany (2019) asserts that Steele "dug up Russian dirt" for a "defamatory dossier full of Russian lies" sourced from "a former Russian intelligence chief and a top adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin," creating memos "full of Russian disinformation." Others, such as McCarthy (2019a) and Bongino (2019), portray it as merely a likely or probable disinformation effort, specifically due to the Russian sources. McCarthy (2019a), for instance, highlights specific Russian sources as "underscor[ing] the possibility that Steele was duped, and that the dossier is a Russian disinformation operation."

The result is a frame, or set of frames, that rejects and reverses common understandings of the 2016 intervention. There was an intervention conducted by Russia, most likely, but it was not in Trump's favour. Rather, for these opinion pieces, a Russian disinformation effort against Trump, perhaps with Democratic cooperation but certainly using the Democrats, led to innocent people being investigated and the Trump campaign and presidency being placed under a cloud of suspicion. McEnany (2019) puts the core of this representation most clearly: "Russian lies were provided to a former British spy, who then gave information to the Clinton campaign and the Democratic

National Committee," and thus "despite all of the attention being focused on the bogus and now debunked charge of Trump-Russia collusion, it was indeed Hillary Clinton's campaign that obtained Russian 'dirt' on a presidential candidate – Donald Trump." Blame can be placed on both parties in this alleged plot, but it is a plot centrally driven by Russia, with domestic actors playing a secondary role.

Domestically Oriented Framing

Domestic suspicion of President Trump, when taken as a problem in its own right, is not hard to blame on those who suspect Trump was involved in the 2016 intervention. Opinion pieces framing the intervention in such a way, generally (but not exclusively) found in the conservative outlets examined, vary substantially, including in the exact actor(s) blamed. They may target the Democratic Party, elements of the US government, or both. They can all be taken together, though, as focusing inwards rather than outwards, making the problem one of domestic politics rather than foreign policy.

At the core of these frames, in most cases, is a simple idea: there was no collusion between Trump and Russia. The lack of any criminal conspiracy charges is commonly used to demonstrate this. Unlike Cillizza, who centres a Russian intervention in favour of Trump while portraying Trump as clueless and unknowing, these approaches look away from the intervention. If Trump was not involved, from this perspective it is problematic to suspect him, and continuous investigations interfere with proper legal governance and severely damage an innocent man's reputation.

The specific domestic actor, or actors, assigned blame varies. Targets include the Democratic Party and associated individuals, portions of the US government (particularly intelligence and law enforcement, and sometimes referred to as the 'deep state'), and the media that covered Trump-Russia issues. All of these are united, in these pieces, by an alleged interest in undermining Trump's rule. Some writers distribute blame quite widely. Kirk (2019), for instance, declares that "the real collusion taking place is between Democratic politicians, much of the media, and the entrenched federal bureaucracy of the deep state," redirecting the idea of collusion to apply to those seen to question Trump. Others focus in on single actors, attacking law enforcement investigators or targeting Democratic Congressional oversight.

Malice is not necessarily imputed. Shortly after the Barr statement, Brooks (2019), for instance, declared that "many Democrats made grievous accusations against the president that are not supported by the evidence," but portrayed it as a straightforward mistake driven by a post-Watergate culture of scandal rather than as a deep wrongdoing itself. However, even outside Trump-favouring outlets, when this frame is used, the possibility of active malice is at least raised. Jennings (2019), for CNN, suggests investigating "whether [Obama's White House] invented the collusion narrative," and Abernathy (2019), for the Washington Post, calls for journalists to "delve into a story that might actually be worthy of Watergate comparisons": whether the FBI investigated Trump due to "loathing of the candidate."

In domestically focused pieces, the Steele dossier often shows up, but not necessarily for the same conclusions found in Russia-oriented pieces. Rather than the Democrats assisting (knowingly or not) in the dissemination of Russian disinformation, the dossier can be domestic disinformation, exploited by malicious investigators. For example, Jarrett (2019a) refers to "the fictitious anti-Trump 'dossier' funded by Clinton and the Democrats" used by the FBI to "advance a malicious investigation," while Hanson (2019b) sees "apparent but transient palace-coup attempts" by government officials dependent on a centrally Clinton-funded fake dossier. It can also be used to counter the notion of Trump-Russia cooperation, as Hanson (2019a) elsewhere attempts, portraying it as both ironic Clinton-Russia cooperation and as proof that Russia "wanted to cause chaos in 360-degree fashion" rather than back one side.

Other writers, at times, take the dossier as a Russian intervention against Trump, but place domestic actors in the lead. They generally emphasize the allegation as a reversal of common understandings: instead of Trump, Clinton. For example, Hannity (2019) calls Steele's reports "Hillary's bought and paid for dirty Russian dossier" as a way to centre Clinton, asserts that her actions were the "two actual real examples of collusion," and places the entire matter at the core of a claim of "deep state" malfeasance in which Russia helped but domestic actors were always in command.

Overarching Findings

Across the hundreds of opinion pieces from 2019 published in the Washington Post, the New York Times, CNN, Fox News, and the National Review, a small set of

recurring frames are visible. While details varied between writers and times, by looking through the axes of problem definition and blame assignment, four broadly recurring frames emerged: the intervention as Russia’s fault, the intervention as Trump’s fault, undue suspicion of Trump being Russia’s fault, and undue suspicion of Trump being the fault of domestic enemies. Table 1 (below) shows how these frames are products of two separate axes.

Table 1: Major Frames of the 2016 Electoral Intervention

	Problem: Election Interference	Problem: Undue Suspicion of Trump
Internal Blame	Trump/Campaign Solicited Intervention	Democrats/Government Defamed Trump
External Blame	Russia Intervened in US Election	Russian Disinformation Defamed Trump

As seen in Table 1, these frames take a 2x2 form, two binary options largely defining most pieces. Most pieces either define the problem of the 2016 election as the Trump-favouring election interference, or define the problem as undue and illegitimate suspicion of Trump. Neither approach necessitates a focus inwards or outwards. Those identifying the problem as the intervention may portray Trump as leading by soliciting Russian aid or may place Russia in charge of Trump. Likewise, those asserting that Trump is wrongfully suspected of involvement may allege that Russia defamed Trump or may attack the President’s domestic critics and investigators.

These frames are related to each other, particularly those that share a definition of the underlying problem. They draw from overlapping sets of facts, making some of the same events (the Mueller report, in particular) salient. Those that take the same problem oft share more, with, for instance, many suspicion-focused pieces mentioning the Steele dossier and several intervention-focused pieces noting meetings between Trump affiliates and Russians. To an extent as well, the blame assignment axis is a continuum, opinion pieces blending an internal focus with moments of external blame or vice versa.

Focusing on problem definition and blame assignment does not cover all major variation. Beyond differences in the exact facts made salient, Entman (1993) noted a third element frames can promote beyond problem definitions and causal interpretations:

treatment recommendations. One could examine frames of the 2016 intervention with a focus on the solutions and responses suggested in opinion pieces. However, opinion writers in this area less consistently propose solutions than they describe problems, and to an extent, one can reasonably expect solutions offered to depend on and flow from the problems they are meant to solve.⁵

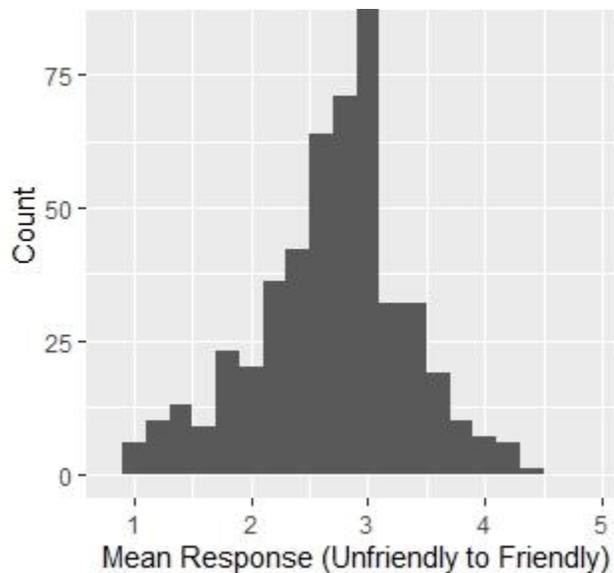
Overall, the problem and blame approach applies well to opinion pieces about the 2016 intervention. It clarifies the vast collection of opinion pieces and brings particular frames to light, focusing in on overarching themes that broadly differ. It cuts through much of the piece-by-piece variation to bring out major commonalities and differences. It helps identify and show a small set of recurring frames, allowing deeper qualitative analysis of their content while setting the stage for wider quantitative examination of their effects. The approach, in the end, provides a working base for a survey experiment.

⁵ This is not always true, as Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) famously argued.

Survey Experiment Results

On June 11, 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey experiment was launched. 830 responses were gathered, of which 75 were removed for not consenting at the start of the survey and 261 more were removed for falling underneath survey provider Lucid's 60 second breakpoint for acceptance. 494 responses remained, underneath but close to the 500 aimed for. Simple randomization resulted in approximately even treatment groups, with 96 in control, 108 in intervention/internal, 98 in intervention/external, 99 in suspicion/internal, and 93 in suspicion/external. 218 respondents were Democrats, 199 were Republicans, and 77 were independent or affiliated with another party.

Figure 1: Positions on Russia



All dependent variable responses were converted to the same 1-5 scale where the least Russia-friendly response is 1 and the most friendly is 5, with 3 being “neither agree nor disagree”. Per respondent, means of all responses were found, creating a new index variable. Figure 1 (above) shows the distribution. The mean for this index variable across all respondents is 2.695, median 2.8, with the lowest result being 1 and highest being 4.4. First quartile is 2.4, and third quartile is 3. For comparison, the decoy question about movies improving every year received a mean response of 2.822 on a disagree-agree scale, with a median of 3.

Table 2: Effects of Treatment and Party on Stance Towards Russia – Coefficient (Standard error)

	<i>Dependent variable: Russia-friendly policy stances</i>	
	(1) Impact of Treatment	(2) Interaction between Treatment and Party
Treatment: Intervention/External	-0.108 (0.092)	-0.081 (0.245)
Treatment: Intervention/Internal	-0.103 (0.090)	0.043 (0.227)
Treatment: Suspicion/External	-0.087 (0.094)	0.212 (0.229)
Treatment: Suspicion/Internal	-0.108 (0.092)	-0.067 (0.254)
Party: Republican		0.113 (0.202)
Party: Democratic		-0.105 (0.205)
Int/Ext * Republican		0.109 (0.280)
Int/Int * Republican		-0.010 (0.262)
Sus/Ext * Republican		-0.286 (0.272)
Sus/Int * Republican		-0.075 (0.288)
Int/Ext * Democratic		-0.123 (0.280)
Int/Int * Democratic		-0.357 (0.266)
Sus/Ext * Democratic		-0.387 (0.267)
Sus/Int * Democratic		0.009 (0.287)
Constant	2.777 ^{***} (0.066)	2.767 ^{***} (0.180)
Observations	494	494
R ²	0.004	0.087
Adjusted R ²	-0.004	0.061
Residual Std. Error	0.643 (df = 489)	0.622 (df = 479)
F Statistic	0.501 ^{***} (df = 4; 489)	3.279 ^{***} (df = 14; 479)

Note: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

Table 2 (above) shows the multiple linear regression results for both models, the first testing **H₁** through **H₄** and the second testing **H₅**. The control vignette is used as the reference category for treatment, and independent/third party is the reference category for partisanship. None of the null hypotheses can be rejected.

Model 1, a model including the treatment group as sole independent variable, shows that no treatment group has a significantly different stance on Russia than the

control group. Their effects are indistinguishable from no effect. H_1 through H_4 are unsupported, and the nulls of no treatment effect cannot be rejected on the basis of this evidence.

Model 2 includes an interaction term between treatment and party affiliation, testing H_5 . No significant interaction effect could be found, indicating that the effects (or lack thereof) of the treatment vignettes do not vary by party affiliation. The null of no difference in effect between parties cannot be rejected.⁶

⁶ Appendix C contains the results of an exploratory additional model for the sake of completeness, a version of model 2 with Republican rather than Independent as the reference category for party. No comparisons are significant at the $p=0.05$ level.

Discussion

Through the use of a lens focused on problem definition and blame provision, a small set of largely distinct frames of the intervention in the 2016 US election became apparent in related opinion pieces. However, despite reasonable theoretical expectations, the survey experiment did not show evidence that said frames shape policy positions regarding the foreign intervenor, Russia. No frame, however the problem was defined or wherever blame was directed, whether or not Russia was the focus of negative attention, showed any effect on stances towards Russia. To understand what happened, it is helpful to explore the results in more depth, focusing on three issues: the lack of effect, the implications of no effect, and the value of the problem and blame lens in this context.

Why No Effect?

It is difficult to precisely determine why none of the treatment vignettes about the intervention in the 2016 US election shaped policy positions regarding one of the actors most associated with the intervention. Prior work on electoral interventions has found opinion and policy view effects with more subtle treatments (e.g. Corstange & Marinov, 2012). Why did this one fail? Exploring the data will help explore the possibilities. Please be aware that all statistical analysis past this point is purely exploratory, and was not planned before the hypotheses were tested.

One particularly intuitive and likely possibility is that over years of continuous debate and news about the 2016 intervention, opinions have hardened and are now difficult to change. With this in mind, using vignettes based on real, extant material may have limited their effect, as they introduce little in the way of new information and ideas. This fits the lack of treatment effects, consistent with the idea that participants entered the survey having already reached positions on Russia and the intervention. However, not only did treatments fail to influence treatment-related responses, but the control failed to influence the directly related decoy question responses as well. The control vignette, written in the style of some published comments on Avatar 2 (a topic discussed relatively little in major outlets), asserted that films were improving over time, an issue directly asked about as a decoy. Table 3 (next page) shows the results of a regression

like that used to test H_1 through H_4 , but with a binary control/treatment independent variable and with the dependent variable being the decoy question. Some caution should be taken in interpretation, as the decoy question was not written with intent to analyze its responses, but the results are noteworthy nonetheless. The effect here is similarly lacking compared to the main analysis, despite there being less reason to expect ossified opinions.

Table 3: Effect of Control Treatment on Decoy Question Responses

Dependent variable: Every year's movies are better than the last (1-5)

Control	-0.141 (0.133)
Constant	2.849 ^{***} (0.059)
Observations	494
R²	0.002
Adjusted R²	0.0003
Residual Std. Error	1.168 (df = 492)
F Statistic	1.126 (df = 1; 492)

Note: * p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

As well, as seen earlier, opinions about Russia are remarkably neutral in the sample. 50% of respondents fall within the 2.4 to 3 range (somewhat negative to neutral stances towards Russia), the first quartile to the third quartile. A t-test shows a significant difference in means between the Russia policy average and the more neutrally-answered decoy question ($p < 0.05$), but the overall tendency towards “neither agree nor disagree” answers (the most common for all but one question) suggests that whether or not respondents had strong and hardened views on the 2016 intervention, they generally had few strongly-held opinions on Russia-related policy to dislodge.

It is also possible that the presentation of the treatment vignettes limited their effectiveness. All were presented with a clear statement that the vignette was an opinion piece. Outside the experimental setting, political opinion writing is less clearly denoted. People often have difficulties distinguishing between factual and opinion

statements (Mitchell et al., 2018), and opinion pieces are routinely seen in contexts (especially, but not exclusively, online) that make them difficult to distinguish from news reporting. When headlines floating around social media are explicitly marked as opinion, Edgerly and Vraga (2020) find that they are taken as less credible and that people have a greater intent to verify their assertions (p. 11-15). That said, while the presentation likely dampened any effect, it is unlikely that presenting the opinion vignette as an opinion piece was sufficient to eliminate an effect. Past research has shown op-eds, presented in close to their original format with opinion markings, can have a significant effect on directly related policy opinions (Coppock, Ekins, & Kirby, 2018). As well, it is not clear how this explanation interacts with the failure of the control vignette to affect views of cinematic improvement. Popular culture commentary is more distinguishable from reporting than political commentary is, yet it is still significant.

Data quality may have played a role here. It is difficult to ensure that respondents carefully read material online. Each respondent had to read three substantial text segments (briefing, random treatment, and debriefing) and answer six Likert questions. 261 responses were removed for falling under survey provider Lucid's 60 second breakpoint for acceptance, most coming from late in the survey's lifespan. This removal eliminated many respondents who rushed through without reading, but even with that exclusion, 60 seconds is very little time to read and understand the material. That said, raising the breakpoint to 90, 120, 150, and 180 seconds does not make any effect significant, either for the treatments on political opinions or for the control on film opinions. This is consistent with research indicating that respondents who rush through surveys add random noise rather than systematic bias (Greszki, Meyer, & Schoen, 2015; Börger, 2016).

Last, but not least, the simplest possibility is that even with all proposed impediments removed, there is no effect. That is, that exposure to these frames of who is to blame for the problem of the 2016 intervention does little to shape related foreign policy positions. This would be surprising, but not incomprehensible. The connections between problem definition, causal interpretation, and actual solutions are not necessarily direct in this area. Focusing on Russia as blameworthy may not be strongly tied to Russia-centred solutions, though this fails to explain the control vignette's lack of effect on the decoy question. As well, and more consistent with that issue, it may be that

exposure alone with little time to think does little to change stances, particularly with no specific solutions proposed in the treatment vignettes.

Implications of No Effect

Unexpectedly, exposure to the various frames of the 2016 intervention did not shape stances towards Russia. However the problem was defined and wherever blame was directed, there were no effects. It is possible, then, that the direction of blame does not matter for foreign policy responses to electoral intervenors. That is, whether one primarily blames the external intervenor or internal actors for the problem identified has little to do with one's policy stances towards the external intervenor. By this interpretation, the differing treatments successfully affected how respondents conceived of the intervention, shifting their personal views of problem and blame to some extent, but this did not change responses to the dependent variable questions.

However, such a situation where the treatment succeeded without shifting the dependent variable is unlikely. It is not difficult to find a reason why variation in the direction of blame could be irrelevant to stances towards Russia for those who take Russia's intervention as a problem. Solutions (election security policies, sanctions against the intervenor, etc.) may be suggested based on the problem rather than who is most blameworthy. The suspicion treatments, however, used a problem definition for which Russia is not necessarily significant, and whether or not Russia was made significant and blameworthy, they had no effect. For the suspicion treatments to have shifted views of whether Russia did wrong without shifting views of Russia strains credulity. Tomz and Weeks (2020) previously tied description of intrusive electoral interventions to support for non-military forms of retaliation, albeit with deliberately unambiguous scenarios (p. 6, 11-15).

A more likely explanation is that exposure to the major frames of an electoral intervention does not shape stances towards the intervenor. This is not to say that the frames are unimportant; people clearly defined different problems of the 2016 intervention and directed blame towards different actors, and it is difficult to imagine the differences seen in opinion pieces not somehow mattering. Rather, while these frames are themselves reactions to electoral interventions, they may not then shape the

backlash against intervenors. Exposure to the frames might not shape beliefs about blameworthiness. Their significance might lie elsewhere.

Finally, the treatment may have failed, concealing a real effect. For a multitude of reasons, some noted earlier (e.g. topic oversaturation, data issues, opinion presentation), the four treatments may have failed to manipulate the intended variables, thus failing to shape stances towards Russia. If this is true, a similar study of a different and less important case, a study taking the lessons of this one into account, may find a link.

The control vignette's lack of effect on answers to the decoy question should be noted, albeit with caution. While the question was not written for the purpose of analysis and was not set up to be comparable to those used for the dependent variable, it was written to be directly related to the control vignette. The failure to shape decoy question responses cannot be taken as strong evidence, but it is suggestive of a broad treatment failure. More and stronger evidence is necessary, however.

What of the Problem and Blame Lens?

The problem and blame lens for analyzing frames of electoral interventions, despite the failure of the survey experiment to support related hypotheses, is still valuable. Focusing on problem definition and the direction of blame, even without tying it to variation in public views of intervenors, helps illuminate an area not yet well explored: how electoral interventions are represented in target states. Mistry (2011) shows a complex set of representations of the 1948 Italian case, but not in a systematic way. Highlighting problem definition and blame direction simplifies a varied corpus of writings, allowing a few general frames to be found in systematic searches.

That there was substantial variation along the axes of problem and blame in the 2016 case is worthy of further examination. Opinion pieces about the intervention noticeably differ in what they define as problematic and where they direct blame. Why do even those that agree on the problem direct blame towards different actors? How do these differences in framing matter? What are the implications of pointing blame inwards rather than outwards? These questions, well worth exploring, are opened up by this simple framing-based lens.

Conclusion

This project was an attempt to link two previously separate strands of research on partisan electoral interventions, the literature on public opinion of intervenors and Mistry's (2011) identification of various interpretations of an intervention, to generate and answer a novel research question: How do the differing frames built up around the foreign intervention in the 2016 United States presidential election shape the backlash, or lack thereof, against the intervenor? Examining opinion pieces about the intervention through a lens focused on problem definition and the direction of blame, four broad frames were identified. A survey experiment built on these frames brought a surprising result: exposure to the frames identified had no effect on stances towards the intervenor. That some attacked Russia while others did not had no impact on views of and policy positions towards Russia.

What the surprising lack of effect means is unclear, largely due to its cause being unclear. However, it does call into question hypotheses that the frames of an intervention, and their expression in opinion pieces in particular, shape the backlash against intervenors. The results may possibly have been a fluke driven by particular traits of the case and failings of the experiment, but the complete lack of effect suggests that however these problem- and blame-based frames matter, they do not themselves shape the backlash against intervenors. How the observable variation does matter, though, is unknown.

Even with a lack of clarity about the significance of the issue, this project makes a significant contribution to the limited knowledge of how partisan electoral interventions are represented. Using a simple framing-based lens and focusing on problem definition and blame direction allowed a newly systematic examination of frames of an electoral intervention, one that helped identify four distinct frames of the 2016 intervention. That this lens works allowed deeper examination of each frame, and in working, it opens up new paths of research. Examining the direction of blame is a fruitful path, a first step beyond Mistry (2011) and towards a truly systematic understanding of the framing of partisan electoral interventions. While frames of the intervention may not have had the hypothesized effect, the lack of effect extends knowledge as well, helping in

understanding what does and does not shape the backlash against partisan electoral intervenors.

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Appendix A.

Treatment and Control Vignettes

Suspicion/Internal

Our country has been attacked.

Before he was even elected, President Donald Trump was smeared, accused of collusion with meddling Russians. These rumors originated from a dubious dossier suborned by a private investigator employed by the Clintons, likely containing Russian disinformation itself. Through this dossier, salacious lies were spread around the corridors of power in DC, tales of blackmail tapes and secret dealings. Atop these lies, paid for and spread by the Democrats, investigations were launched and Trump's name was dragged through the mud.

Mueller's probe amounted to nothing more than exoneration. After two years of secrecy and stalling, he found nothing to back up Democrat and deep state claims of Russiagate collusion. No collusion charges, no matter how hard he tried. Russians tweeted and hacked, but on their own. Mueller found Trump innocent.

How did this sham of an investigation drag out for two years? Ask the Democrats. Their Steele dossier of lies sparked the probe, a smear bought and paid for with Democratic cash. It was Obama's Department of Justice that used these lies to start spying on Trump's campaign, and if Russia was involved, then the real collusion is that of Clinton.

After hounding an innocent man for years, it is well past time for the Democrats and their FBI collaborators to give up on their fraud. Their hysterical efforts have failed, and will keep failing. This problem must be dealt with.

Suspicion/Russia

Our country has been attacked.

Before he was even elected, President Donald Trump was smeared, accused of collusion with meddling Russians. These rumors originated from a dubious dossier of

Russian disinformation, suborned by a private investigator employed by the Clintons. Through this dossier, salacious lies were spread around the corridors of power in DC, tales of blackmail tapes and secret dealings. Atop these lies, produced by Russia and spread by the Democrats, investigations were launched and Trump's name was dragged through the mud.

Mueller's probe amounted to nothing more than exoneration. After two years of searching, there were no collusion charges. Not only that, but the dossier could not be supported, could not be corroborated. For a dossier that was later proven to have been instrumental in spying on a Trump campaign affiliate, the lack of support is striking.

How did this investigation drag out for two years? Ask the Democrats. They believed Steele's dossier of Russian disinformation, built on questionable sources and always too perfect to be true. The real Russian intervention was against Trump.

After hounding an innocent man for years, it is well past time for the Democrats and the FBI to give up on this wild goose chase. Their efforts have failed, having been built on the real intervention: Russia's lies. This problem must be dealt with.

Intervention/Internal

Our country has been attacked.

Trump's actions in the 2016 election harmed all of us. Online bots and trolls spread disinformation and confusion. Russian hackers stole and released Clinton emails, Trump's partners helping install him. At Trump's request, American democracy was attacked, and now an American president sits in the White House on a foundation of Russian interference.

Mueller's probe showed the danger we are in. Numerous Trump campaign officials were indicted for trying to hide the bargain between Trump and Russia, and Russian agents were indicted for crimes against American elections. Mueller showed a pattern of connections and Russia-friendly statements that should alarm anyone. Trump himself, though uncharged, likely obstructed Mueller's probe to conceal his campaign's active cooperation with the intervenor.

The record shows that Trump used Russian help. “Russia, if you’re listening,” he famously asked in a campaign speech, “I hope you’re able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing.” A mere hour later, Russia responded, hacking into Democratic systems, stealing emails to disruptively disseminate. Trump campaign officials had meetings with Russian agents, gathering dirt and cooperating.

Our security is important. Trump’s strategy has paid off for too long. Trump stands in the White House, brought in with Russian interference, and little stands in the way of another intervention. This problem must be dealt with.

Intervention/Russia

Our country has been attacked.

Russia's actions in the 2016 election harmed all of us. Online bots and trolls spread disinformation and confusion. Russian hackers stole and released Clinton emails, helping install an easily-manipulated Trump. On Putin's orders, American democracy was attacked, and now a Russian puppet (knowing or not) sits in the White House.

Mueller's probe showed the danger we are in. Numerous Russian agents were indicted for crimes against American elections, and Trump campaign officials for trying to hide it. It's not clear whether Trump himself knew, whether he is Putin's pawn or merely convinced he won on his own, but Mueller showed a pattern of connections and Russia-friendly statements that should alarm anyone.

The record shows that Russia used Trump. Russians lured the Trumpites to meetings to aid and assist them, to help a Russia-loving candidate take the presidency. Russian disinformation online caused chaos and helped the Russia-friendly Trump into the White House. Trump has been useful to them, downplaying their actions and praising them at every turn, pushing policy in their favour and stalling probes into their actions.

Our security is important. Russia’s strategy has paid off for too long. Trump stands in the White House, brought in by Russian interference, and little stands in the way of another intervention. This problem must be dealt with.

Control

Does anyone remember that 2009's Avatar has four upcoming sequels?

James Cameron's Oscar-winning blockbuster is itself barely remembered today. Despite standing for almost a decade as the highest-grossing film of all time, it had little cultural impact. Nobody analyzes it, nobody quotes it, few reference it. It was visually stunning, sparking a momentary rush for 3D films (now themselves largely a footnote in cinematic history), but in this time of massive spectacle blockbusters, who still cares?

Yet the forgotten megahit is a franchise. Four upcoming sequels, announced years into its irrelevancy. Plot details slip out, marketing keeps pushing along, and producers try to build hype for 2021's Avatar 2, but nothing makes a splash. Not even saying there will be water in the movie.

Blockbusters have changed. An entire franchise, a cinematic universe, took the world by storm and laid out a 20-something-movie story between the time of Avatar and its first upcoming sequel. First. First of four. The original ran on its visuals, its dialogue and plot broadly functional but nothing noteworthy. Its modern competition brings striking visuals, snappy dialogue, plots followed and dissected fervently by fans. How can it survive?

Mark my words: Avatar 2 will land with a thud. It will be forgotten within months of release, but for how easy it is to laugh at its coming successors.

Appendix B.

Survey Questions

Set in a 5 point Likert scale, from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree,” with “Neither agree nor disagree” as the centre.

- "Economic sanctions should be laid against Russia."
- "The US should increase international cooperation with Russia."
- "America should do more to protect Eastern European countries from Russian aggression."
- "To ensure Russia does not feel threatened, America should limit NATO expansion."
- "Russia is the country most threatening to American security."
- Decoy: "Every year's movies are better than the last."

Appendix C.

Treatment-Party Interaction Model, Republican as Reference

Table C1: Treatment-Party Interaction Model, Republican as Reference

	Dependent variable: Russia-friendly policy stances
Treatment: Intervention/External	0.028 (0.136)
Treatment: Intervention/Internal	0.033 (0.130)
Treatment: Suspicion/External	-0.073 (0.147)
Treatment: Suspicion/Internal	-0.142 (0.136)
Party: Independent	-0.113 (0.202)
Party: Democratic	-0.218 (0.136)
Int/Ext * Independent	-0.109 (0.280)
Int/Int * Independent	0.010 (0.262)
Sus/Ext * Independent	0.286 (0.272)
Sus/Int * Independent	0.075 (0.288)
Int/Ext * Democratic	-0.231 (0.192)
Int/Int * Democratic	-0.347* (0.190)
Sus/Ext * Democratic	-0.102 (0.200)
Sus/Int * Democratic	0.084 (0.191)
Constant	2.880*** (0.093)
Observations	494
R2	0.087
Adjusted R2	0.061
Residual Std. Error	0.622 (df = 479)
F Statistic	3.279*** (df = 14; 479)
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01