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Waging Electoral Warfare

In a world of multiple forms of conflict, is there such a thing as electoral warfare? Marco Montanari believes so. Today, he outlines the concept behind this type of 'combat', to include its historical development and organizing principles.

By Marco Montanari for ISN

[Democracies](#) do not go to war with each other – or so it has been argued since [1795](#). But what if politics is, as Michel Foucault once claimed, the [continuation of war by other means](#)? And what if the boundaries between “violence” and “legitimate force” are blurred as they are in the German word [Gewalt](#)? That might enable us to imagine a “peaceful war” involving several aspects of the modern state, including elections. Whenever states engage in a “bloodless military confrontation” over elections, they are actually waging *electoral warfare* (EW). Indeed, the ‘existence’ of EW also suggests that international relations possess an *electoral dimension* that must be acknowledged and analyzed without prejudice.

Organizing Principles

In a democracy, a selected group of individuals – the electorate – decide at regular intervals which political party or coalition will hold power in a given society. And while candidates are expected to ‘play by the (electoral) rules’, there are powerful incentives for them to interfere with elections in order to boost their chances of success. Not surprisingly, electoral fraud is as [old](#) as elections themselves, and has been increasingly framed within [military-like metaphors](#). Consequently, major powers – like election candidates – have also sought to interfere in the electoral processes of sovereign states in pursuit of their national interests.

If properly carried out, EW enables its user(s) to: i) *remove* undesired leaders; ii) *replace* them with desired ones; and iii) *legitimize* this replacement in the eyes of both internal and international audiences. This is accomplished without the inconvenience of waging a war, organizing a coup d'état or nurturing a rebellion. In addition, EW does not imply that elections in many parts of the world are fraudulent. First, major powers wage EW only if it is *politically advisable* and *technically feasible*. Second, EW is a flexible instrument, ranging from assisting friendly political forces with training programs to the outright falsification of election results. Further, some States have developed counter-EW techniques, enabling them to successfully resist intrusions in their electoral processes.

The Evolution of EW

The antecedents of modern EW can be traced to 1859 and the decision made by Europe’s leading

powers to monitor plebiscites in Moldova and Wallachia. The Entente troops also monitored the post-WWI plebiscites stemming from the Treaty of Versailles. Following the Second World War, many European powers abstained from EW, with the notable exception of the United Kingdom observing some Commonwealth elections, and West Germany [influencing](#) Spain and Portugal's first democratic elections through the CDU-, SPD- and FDP-sponsored *Stiftungen* (foundations). Yet, while it is possible that some instances of covert European EW remain buried in state archives, it is reasonably safe to assume that the major European powers never devoted systematic attention to this practice.

By contrast, the European Union (EU) has systematically engaged in [electoral interventions abroad](#) since 1993, when the first EU Election Observation Mission was launched in Russia. However, Brussels' electoral 'vision' remains [deeply entrenched](#) within idealist theories of IR, given that it sees the [promotion of democracy and human rights per se](#) as [coinciding with the promotion of its interests](#). Accordingly, the EU could be considered, at best, an unaware player of EW.

Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union engaged in EW mainly through the [International Department of the CPSU Central Committee](#), the organization tasked with financing communist and pro-Soviet parties abroad. Russia has continued this tradition with a rather poor record and some [resounding failures](#). While Kyrgyzstan can be considered a successful story, Abkhazia proved a tough nut to crack for Russian EW, notwithstanding the presence of Moscow's troops in the country. On the other hand, Moscow has developed anti-EW [techniques](#), which have [raised alarm](#) in the US regarding their effectiveness and potential for emulation.

Enter the USA

Unlike the aforementioned major powers, the United States has devoted systematic attention to EW. In doing so, it has become the major hegemonic player in this highly sophisticated field in the same way that it dominates the use of precision-guided munitions and drones in conventional warfare. Washington's development of EW capabilities can be traced over three distinct generations.

Between 1900 and 1932, the United States' EW campaigns were mainly, but not solely, military endeavors outsourced by the Department of State (DoS) to the US Marine Corps (USMC). Their only focus was Latin America and all required pre-existing US political hegemony over the target country. As codified and detailed in the eponymous chapter of the [Small Wars Manual](#), the USMC carried out 12 "election supervision" missions over this time period, with great success. Indeed, USMC Major-General Smedley Butler, who conducted some of these operations, candidly [declared](#): "Wherever we supervised [elections] our candidates always won".

But while '1st generation' EW was effective in the US' 'backyard', it was *de facto* useless in terms of gaining the upper hand under hostile circumstances. Moreover, in the aftermath of WWII, the US found itself in a difficult position. While Washington pledged to support free and fair elections, it was nevertheless worried about the growing strength of communist parties in Europe. This was particularly true in [Italy](#) and [France](#), where communist parties scored very well in the first post-war elections. In response, Washington developed a '2nd generation' of EW that was: i) a covert activity, jointly administered by the DoS and CIA; ii) focused upon the 'free world'; and iii) not dependent on pre-existing US political hegemony over the target country. As formulated by George Kennan's still partly classified [memorandum](#), and encapsulated by the National Security Council (NSC) [Directive 10/2](#), '2nd generation' EW provided the US with the wherewithal to engage in covert activities to preclude further communist electoral victories.

Washington's use of EW throughout the Cold War should not be underestimated. In 1976, for example, the US Congress' [Church](#) and [Pike](#) Committees described clandestine electoral support as the [largest category of CIA covert activities](#). However, in the aftermath of the [1967 CIA Scandal](#) severe limitations

were imposed on CIA covert actions, including EW. It was time for something else.

From 'covert' to 'overt'

The origins of '3rd generation' EW can be traced to the 1967 Scandal and Congressman Dante Fascell's (D-FL) proposal to create an "Institute of International Affairs". It was envisaged that this organization would assume responsibility for some of the CIA's covert activities and conduct them overtly and without the US government's direct involvement. Ten years later, the success of the German experience in Spain and Portugal pushed George Agree to promote the 'Stiftung' model. Finally, in 1982 Allen Weinstein drafted the [Democracy Program](#), the report which inspired the Regan administration to establish the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) the following year. The cornerstone of '3rd generation' EW had been set. On September 21, 1991, Weinstein would have confessed to the *Washington Post*, referring to the NED: "A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA".

The NED – a bipartisan, non-profit private organization that's mainly funded by Congress– is tasked with "promoting democracy abroad". It does this by financing four organizations: i) the [Solidarity Center](#) (AFL-CIO); ii) the [CIPE](#) (US Chamber of Commerce); iii) the [NDI](#) (Democratic Party); and iv) the [IRI](#) (Republican Party). These organizations, in turn, take care of "advancing democracy worldwide" by organizing and funding the complex set of activities associated with EW. In the field, US Ambassadors coordinate these activities with organizations like USAID and the US Institute of Peace (USIP). For their part, this diverse network of governmental and non-governmental agencies works with an equally diverse of 'local' actors to advance Washington's interests.

At the head of the chain is the Department of State, the final arbiter of the United States' current raft of EW activities. These include electoral assistance and election monitoring, as well as more sensitive activities like 'black' and 'white' propaganda and party creation/splitting. However, the sum total Washington's vast EW toolbox counts for very little without a degree of control or influence over the target country's election managing body (EMB). Without this, the effectiveness of EW is greatly reduced, while retaining control of its own EMB is one of the most effective counter-EW measures a target State can pursue.

Ballots Not Bullets

'3rd generation' electoral warfare – defined as overt activities conducted worldwide by an array of organizations under the watchful eye of the Department of State – has become one of the most successful endeavors in US foreign policy history. The final outcome of Nicaragua's presidential elections in 1990 is a case in point. What the Contras and covert military operations were unable to achieve in a decade – namely, the removal of Daniel Ortega from power – was fulfilled in few months by a political coalition [built and supported by Washington's EW technologies](#). The same could also be said of [US 'involvement'](#) in the 1996 Russian and 2004 Ukrainian presidential elections, when Russian communists were prevented from returning to the Kremlin, and pro-Russian forces were excluded from power in Kyiv. Indeed, even in the face of an occasional US own-goal – such as the reelection of Daniel Ortega in 2006 – the overall effectiveness of 3rd generation EW remains spectacular.

Moreover, as long as [ballots are the successors of bullets](#), EW is the "rightful and peaceful" successor to conventional warfare. Indeed, the episode of Korah's rebellion (Numbers 16: 18-35) bears disturbing similarities with elections: the competing groups do not kill each other, but wait instead for the Lord to decide the rightful political leader. The bloodless, divine violence that ends the dispute is nonetheless terrifying: Korah and all of his followers are swallowed by the earth. EW works in much the same way: no blood is (normally) spilled, yet the outcome is grandiosely violent. Losers become winners, and vice versa, at the pleasure of an external power, and millions of haves and have-nots

pay the price, or reap the benefits. Either the losers bow to an inconvenient fate, or revolt. If they revolt, they will bear the moral stigma of opposing a “people’s will” that is, in fact, nothing but an external power’s will in disguise. Remodeled along these lines, the question of war among democracies acquires a new dimension, the *electoral dimension of IR*.

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