49th Parallel An Interdisciplinary Journal of North American Studies

Back to index

Isolationism and Elections in American Politics

Stephen Brooks
Department of Political Science
University of Windsor (Canada)
and
Visiting Professor and Fulbright Scholar (2000)
Department of Political Science
University of Michigan

The Invisible Issue

> For most voters, listening to a presidential candidate talk about foreign policy is like taking a distasteful but required course in college. We know it's important, but we'd like it to be over as quickly and painlessly as possible.
> (Chris Suellentrop, "Everything You Want to Know about Foreign Policy and then Some," slate.msn.com/netelection/entries/00-05-02_81777.asp)

> Oh, I thought you meant some band. The Taliban in Afghanistan! Absolutely. Represssive.
> (George W. Bush in *Glamour* magazine, June 2000)

The United States is widely acknowledged to be the world's only remaining superpower. It is the only country to have truly global influence militarily, economically, technologically, and culturally. Its interests span the globe and its military presence is found in all of the world's major regions and even in space. In a very real sense its international stature has never been greater, with the exception of the post-WWII years before the economies of western Europe and Japan were rebuilt and the Soviet Union established itself as a nuclear and scientific-technological rival to the United States. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and the home of UN headquarters, the undisputed leader of NATO, and a chief advocate of trade liberalization throughout the world, the United States clearly plays an important role on the international scene.

How is it, observers of American politics often ask, a country with such an obvious stake in global affairs sometimes behaves as though it was a world unto itself, uninterested in and uninformed about happenings beyond its borders? Why is there such a gap between the *globalization* of America's interests and influence and the *isolationism* that appears to characterize the thinking of many Americans and their leaders when it comes to international affairs?

The year 2000 presidential primary campaign seemed to illustrate the isolationism of American public opinion. Foreign policy issues were almost entirely absent from the campaign, surfacing rarely and mainly in the campaigns of marginal candidates who had no hope of winning their party's nomination. The main contenders, the Republican governor of Texas, George W. Bush and the Democratic vice-president, Al Gore, seldom strayed beyond domestic issues. Their unwillingness to allow trade with China, defense, American relations with Russia, international human rights abuses, or any other issue involving the United States' relations with the rest of the world to creep into their campaigns was generally interpreted as a simple reflection of the electorate's

unconcern and distaste for foreign policy issues and external entanglements. Isolationism in American politics - - a stream in American political thinking whose headwaters reach back at least to George Washington's time - - appeared to be thriving in the age of globalization and American hegemony.

Resurgent isolationism, at the same time as America's global interests and influence are arguably greater today than at any point since the 1940s and 1950s, is paradoxical, not to say puzzling. In order to explain this apparent paradox one needs to understand the nature of isolationism throughout American history and the contemporary character of this impulse to ignore and avoid the rest of the world. It turns out that American isolationism is a complex and poorly understood phenomenon that is neither as widespread as many foreign observers believe (and sometimes lament) nor as simple as a desire to be spared the world's problems.

In point of fact, while isolationist sentiments do exist at both the mass and elite levels in the United States, it is quite wrong to characterize American public opinion as isolationist. I will argue that while the ignorance of most Americans when it comes to foreign affairs is undeniable, they are not indifferent toward the rest of the world and their country's place in it. The near invisibility of foreign policy issues during the last five presidential election campaigns, since Reagan's victory in 1980, masks the fact that foreign policy issues affect public opinion much as the perceived state of the economy does. If voters perceive that the economy has been doing badly during the period leading up to an election they will tend to take it out on the candidate running for the party that controlled the White House during this period.[1] Likewise, if voters sense that the world is becoming more threatening to their national interests then they are more likely to be receptive to candidates' discussion of foreign policy issues and blame the president's party for this state of affairs.

The Old Isolationism

The principle of remaining apart from the affairs and conflicts of the rest of the world has a long history in the United States, being famously expressed in Washington's farewell address and echoed in Thomas Jefferson's equally famous first inaugural address. "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations," declared Washington, "is, in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible." This advice was based on a combination of America's self-interest, as Washington perceived it, and a romantic notion of America's unique place in the history of mankind. This combination of interest and idealism is evident in Washington's warning against allowing passion and permanent attachments to cloud judgement in foreign affairs:

> ...[N]othing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations and passionate attachments for others should be excluded, and that in place of them just and amicable feelings toward all should be cultivated.
> The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.

Washington held steadfastly to these principles when he resisted the strong current of public opinion that clamoured for an American alliance with revolutionary France and a declaration of war against England. As de Tocqueville observes, it required the

immense prestige of Washington to resist the passions that would have had the young republic take sides in this Old World struggle, but not even Washington's great stature could spare him from vicious public attacks.[2]

When Washington and his contemporaries turned their minds to international affairs and the dangers of foreign entanglements they quite naturally had Europe in mind. "Europe," said Washington, "has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation." Jefferson made the same point in his first inaugural address (1801), where he observed that America was "Kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe." In a letter to Baron von Humbolt, written several years after leaving the presidency, Jefferson elaborated on this theme and anticipated the Monroe Doctrine's principle of the non-interference of European powers in the hemispheric affairs of America. "The European nations constitute a separate division of the globe; their localities make them part of a distinct system; they have a set of interests of their own in which it is our business never to engage ourselves. America has a hemisphere to itself."[3]

These sentiments were formalized in President James Monroe's 1823 message to Congress. Monroe repeated the admonitions of his predecessors against American involvement in the quarrels of the Old World. But he framed American isolationism in the distinctive context of America's special interest in and responsibility for the hemisphere of the New World. "[W]e should consider any attempt on [the part of European powers] to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety."

Two decades later President James Polk restated the Monroe Doctrine in his 1845 annual message to Congress. Polk is remembered as the president of "Manifest Destiny," under whose watch the territory of the United States was greatly enlarged as a result of American annexation of Texas and expansion west to the Pacific coast. Whereas the Monroe Doctrine enlarged the circle of American vital interests to include other independent countries in the Western hemisphere, Polk and the concept of Manifest Destiny involved a somewhat narrower conception of American interests, linked to a sort of providential mission to expand American territory across the continent. But both the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny need to be veiwed in the shadow of the European powers' presence and ambitions in the hemisphere of the Americas. Both were expressions of an American isolationism that was based on a fundamental rejection of Old World influence and an affirmation of what was seen by Americans as their unique role in world history.

This role - - really a sense of providential msision - - seldom has been expressed as clearly as in President McKinley's 1898 speech after the Spanish-American War, explaining why the United States should retain the Philippines. "We will not renounce," he declared, "our part in the mission of our race, trustee, under God, of the civilization of the world. And we will move forward to our work, not howling out regrets like slaves whipped to their burdens, but with gratitude for a task worthy of our strength, and thanksgiving to Almighty God that he has marked us as his chosen people, henceforth to lead in the regeneration of the world." This sounds, of course, very much like Kipling on the Whiteman's Burden. And it appears to mark quite a departure from the isolationism of Washington, Jefferson, Monroe and Polk.

In fact, however, the willingness, even eagerness, of the United States to intervene in Pacific affairs under McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt - - the Great White Fleet of American warships was launched under Theodore Roosevelt, himself a hero of the

campaign in the Philippines and perhaps the first imperialist to occupy the White House - - did not signify the end of isolationism in American politics. As Henry Steele Commager observes, "it has long been one of the paradoxes of American policy and public opinion, that American isolationism has been directed to Europe alone, and that the most ardent isolationists have customarily been those most eager to intervene in Far Eastern affairs".[4] This was written half a century ago, but until the débâcle of Vietnam it remained true that the struggle between isolationist and internationalist ideas in American foreign policy was focussed chiefly on America's relationship to Europe.

Throughout the twentieth century isolationism and internationalism waged war in American public opinion. The inability of President Wilson to persuade Congress to ratify American participation in the League of Nations signalled a clear defeat for Wilson's idealistic internationalism. Before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor American, public opinion was strongly opposed to the United States becoming involved in World War II. Only one month before Pearl Harbour not quite one-fifth of Americans agreed that the United States should take steps, at the risk of war, to prevent Japan from becoming too powerful militarily.[5] Pearl Harbour and American involvement in World War II represented a watershed. In the wake of the Allied victory a majority of Americans supported their country's entry into the United States. American participation in NATO and the assumption of the role of leader of the Free World during the Cold War indicated that the pendulum of public opinion had swung toward internationalism.

Internationalism remained ascendant until the mid- to late-1960s, when mounting American casualties abroad and domestic unrest during the protracted Vietnam campaign produced a popular backlash against the United States playing a role that a generation of Americans had come to accept as normal. Public support for American military involvement fell dramatically during the second half of the 1960s, across virtually all major segments of the population, but particularly among the most highly-educated.

Since American withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973, the struggle between isolationist and internationalist views of America's proper role in the world has revolved around a handful of main issues. These include threats to national security, trade, international human rights, and humanitarian interventions. The national security issue has evolved from its older and simpler Cold War dimensions to something more complex whose contours are still unclear.

In this post-Vietnam, post-Cold War America, it appears that isolationism continues to find fertile soil. Indeed, some suggest that it has experienced a resurgence and that Americans today are less interested in the rest of the world and less willing to shoulder international responsibilities than at any point since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Isolationism Today

Has the pendulum of American public opinion swung decisively in the direction of isolationism? There is quite a lot of impressionistic evidence to suggest that this may be so. Bill Clinton's successful 1992 challenge to incumbent president George Bush featured the campaign slogan, "It's the economy, stupid." Bush was widely portrayed by his critics as a leader whose strengths were in foreign affairs and who had too little interest in domestic issues. Foreign policy issues have occupied a distinctly minor place in the last several presidential campaigns. Indeed, one has to go back to 1980 to

find an election where America's role in the world was a prominent campaign issue. The inability of the Carter administration to win the release of American hostages in Iran was perceived by many Americans as a sign of serious weakness. Carter's Republican opponent, Ronald Reagan, capitalized on this perception of weakness through his promise to restore America's international strength and national pride.

The year 2000 presidential campaign has been marked by the same inattention to foreign policy questions that has been typical of all elections since 1980. Early in the primaries phase of the campaign, George W. Bush's inability to name the leaders of other countries became fodder for late night talk show jokes. Revealingly, however, Bush's apparent ignorance of the international scene never became a campaign issue, at least not at the level of voters. The pundit-ocracy of American journalism believed this ignorance to be a problem for Bush, but the real proof that it did not matter was seen from the fact that his Democratic rival, Al Gore, did not attempt to turn Bush's lack of knowledge into an issue.

It should be said, however, that Bush's campaign website devoted more attention to foreign policy issues than Gore's, although in both cases foreign policy was buried under a small mountain of information explaining the candidates' positions on domestic matters. Foreign Policy was almost at the bottom of the Gore website's list of issues, just before "Rural communities" and after - - in this order - - education, health and health care, economy, families, seniors, fighting for America (e.g.s., "fighting for women," "fighting for students"), government, crime, the environment, and technology. Bush's website featured education and taxes as its first issues, but unlike Gore's it then devoted a section to defense and, in its section on agriculture, included position statements on the Kyoto Protocol and international trade. The obligatory section devoted to foreign policy, *per se*, was placed at the bottom of the Bush home page.

In an age and a society where careful politicians seldom open their mouths before the results of surveys and focus group sessions are in, the low profile of foreign policy issues in the candidates' year 2000 campaigns merely reflected the reality of Americans' low level of interest in these matters. This may be illustrated from an examination of newspaper issue coverage, generally a good barometer of the issues that are on the public agenda. *Voter.com* provided a daily record of the main issues covered in a broad sample of American newspapers. Its record for May 10, 2000, a fairly typical news day, included 59 stories from about two dozen newspapers. Only 4 of these stories dealt with foreign policy or defence.

There is, of course, the possibility that the more educated and informed strata of the population were more interested in foreign policy issues than the general population. But while there is no doubt that "elite" media organs like the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and public broadcasting paid more attention to foreign policy than more down-market mass media, it is not clear that their more educated and better informed readerships/viewers/listeners cared more about these issues than their middle-brow fellow citizens.

This conclusion is suggested from an examination of National Public Radio's "Election 2000" website. NPR is a network of listener contribution-supported radio stations across the United States. Its demographic is considerably more affluent, educated, and informed than that of the general population. On March 12, 2000 its discussion board listed eleven topics about which listeners had sent e-mail messages. The number of messages concerning foreign policy was tenth out of eleven. There were 1,633 messages concerning gun control, 1,731 concerning Hillary Rodham Clinton's decision

to run for the U.S. Senate, 1,089 dealing with candidate debates during the primaries, 185 on the issue of presidential character, *and a mere 25 on foreign policy*. It seems that the elite segment of American public opinion was not more interested in the world outside the United States than was the populace as a whole.

Foreign policy did, however, surface in a curiously American form during the 2000 presidential primaries, and in a way that captured the attention of both the mass and elite segments of public opinion. The issue was the fate of a six-year old Cuban boy, Elian Gonzalez, who washed up on the shores of Florida. He was the sole survivor of a group of Cubans, including his mother, who attempted the roughly 150 kilometer passage between Cuba and the United States. For several months, including the decisive first months of the primary season, the issue of whether the boy should be returned to his father in Cuba or be allowed to remain with family in Miami dominated the mass media. The prominence of this story ended only after the boy was forcibly removed from his uncle's home in Miami in a wee-hours raid orchestrated by the federal Department of Justice.

On the face of it, this might not appear to be a foreign policy story. But in the special circumstances of American politics, characterized by a large and politically influential Cuban-American community in south Florida (the fourth largest state in terms of primary delegates and therefore a valued prize for any presidential candidate), the history and continuing importance of Cold War antagonism between Cuba and the United States, and the fragmented system of governance in the United States that enables many politicians and institutions of government to become involved in foreign policy matters, the fate of this Cuban boy quickly became a matter of foreign policy. It was not merely or even mainly about a boy tragically separated from his mother and whether he should be reunited with his Cuban father. It was about U.S.-Cuba relations. It was about political freedom in the United States versus repression in Castro's Cuba. It was about escape from the last remaining reminder of the Cold War on the doorstep of the United States. It was defined, by the Cuban-American community and many others, as a foreign policy issue.

Neither Bush nor Gore appeared particularly keen on trying to make political capital out of this issue. Bush took the position that the boy should be allowed to remain with family in the United States; that, in other words, this was indeed a foreign policy issue rather than primarily a straightforward issue of parental custody rights. Gore, as the vice-president of an administration that called for the repatriation of the boy to Cuba, was in a more awkward position. Shortly before the Cuban boy was captured by the Justice Department's agents, Gore had attempted to straddle the fence, stating that the boy's dubious claim for refugee status should be considered. In the end, the removal of the boy from the politically volatile setting of Miami and the inexorable workings of the news cycle - - a sort of Elian fatigue had set in, just as O.J. Simpson fatigue and Lewinsky-Clinton fatigue and all the other news story fatigues had also set in with time - - caused the issue to drift from the centre of public attention.

Aside from the controversy over the fate of Elian Gonzalez, foreign policy issues were *nearly* invisible during the 2000 presidential primaries. It would be going too far to say that they were entirely absent from the campaign, but it is revealing to see who, representing what interests and ideas in American society, raised them and how they were framed.

One of the candidates who made foreign policy matters a priority of his campaign was the Republican Gary Bauer. Bauer was the president of the Family Research Council, a

socially conservative think tank whose inspiration comes from the religious right in American society. For many years now the religious right has objected to American trading relations with China on the grounds that the Chinese authorities not only do not respect freedom of religious choice, but actively persecute some people and groups on religious grounds, including Christians. Moreover, organizations like the Family Research Council advocate that American foreign aid decisions should be influenced by the abortion laws of recipient states and that countries with liberal abortion laws should not receive U.S. aid.

Outside observers of American politics often associate an American concern with human rights abuses with liberal-Democrats. This is fair enough, but fails to recognize that socially-conservative Republicans also have an international human rights agenda. Whereas the rights abuses that tend to matter to liberal-Democrats involve women, child labour, and political prisoners, those that concern socially-conservative Republicans involve religious freedom - - particularly of Christian denominations - - abortion, and family policy.

Bauer was one of the most prominent Republican candidates to raise the issue of international human rights. In fact, however, his run for the Republican nomination was cut short early in the primary season because of lack of money. Indeed, as often happens in American politics, his candidacy was never about actually winning his party's nomination - - this was wildly improbable - - but about ensuring that issues that matter to the religious right received attention in the campaign and that the eventual Republican presidential nominee would have to respond to their concerns.

Foreign policy was a priority issue for another Republican who eventually would leave the party's primary race to run as a candidate for the Reform Party. This was Pat Buchanan, a well-known political commentator, writer, and former member of Republican White House staffs. Like Gary Bauer and the social-conservative wing of the Republican Party, Buchanan advocated linking American trade policy to respect for religious freedom and a trading partner's abortion policy. He went further, however, in proposing a sort of America First economic protectionism that these days has few influential supporters in the United States, outside of organized labour. Buchanan was, and is, also opposed to American participation in international organizations like the United Nations, or at least takes the position that American involvement in such organizations should not be at the cost of any loss in national sovereignty.

This theme of American sovereignty threatened by international organizations in the "New World Order" resonates powerfully on the extreme right of American politics. The so-called Patriot movement, militia groups in the United States, and right-wing talk radio see the United Nations and most other international forums that are based on supra-natioanl decision-making as part of a conspiracy to undermine freedom and the American constitution. But despite occasional claims to the contrary, the influence of the extreme right in American politics is not particularly great. It certainly plays a much weaker role in electoral politics, including presidential campaigns, than does the religious right for whom social and morality issues are foremost.

On the Democratic side during the 2000 primary campaign, the issue of international human rights abuses surfaced mainly through organized labour's concern that countries like China rely on repressive and exploitative labour practices. Labour's position is that America's willingness to trade with countries that restrict unionization, fail to provide elementary safety protection for workers, permit exploitative wage and working conditions and, in short, fail to respect the sort of workers' rights that exist in developed

countries, should be restricted. Organized labour is an important constituency for any Democratic presidential candidate. But while both of the Democratic frontrunners, Vice-President Al Gore and Senator Bill Bradley expressed sympathy for labour's human rights concerns, they both supported the United States's extension of most-favoured nation trading status to China. (As an aside, when the vote on this issue came up in Congress in June 2000, Democrats were much more reluctant than Republicans to support MFN status for China. The bill extending this status to China passed chiefly due to Republican support.)

Are Americans Really Isolationist?

Foreign policy issues have not played a prominent role in a presidential campaign since 1980. The year 2000 presidential primaries seemed to provide just another confirmation that foreign policy has become the invisible issue of American politics, conspicuous by its absence. It was chiefly left to marginal candidates representing relatively weak constituencies to raise issues of foreign policy during the campaign. Indeed, it is probably fair to say that foreign policy would barely have pierced the mainstream of media coverage of the primary races had it not been for the curious case of Elian Gonzalez (and the fact that there was a Cuban-American community to frame his story as a foreign policy issue) and George W. Bush's embarrassing ignorance of world affairs.

It is a mistake, however, to conclude that Americans are isolationist, if by this term we mean that they believe their country should remain free of foreign entanglements and minimize its dealings with the rest of the world. These sentiments characterized the Old Isolationism. They do not aptly describe contemporary public opinion in the United States. As Brett Schaefer of the Heritage Foundation writes, "The American people are not isolationist; rather they are largely indifferent to foreign policy issues, focusing instead on more immediate domestic concerns ... They still want a strong America, although one that relates foreign policy problems to domestic concerns ... but they understand the need for the U.S. to remain engaged in global affairs."[6]

Indifference rather than isolation: some may suggest that this is a distinction without a difference. But in fact there is a real difference between the general indifference that tends to characterize American public opinion when it comes to world affairs and the active hostility toward the world outside their borders - - in particular toward Europe - - that characterized the Old Isolationism. American public opinion is, in fact, far more nuanced than the misleading caricature of the New Isolationism suggests, containing both internationalist and isolationist impulses. In order to demonstrate this we will examine the results of surveys conducted between 1995 and 1998.

Those who argue that American public opinion is isolationist usually base their argument on one or a combination of several alleged characteristics of the public mood. These include the following:

- the United States should not bear responsibility for world leadership;
- the United States should withdraw from or limit its participation in the UN and other multilateral organizations;
- the United States should not send troops or use military force abroad except when its vital interests are directly affected;
- American foreign aid should be cut back;

- the United States should spend more on defence of its own territory, not defending the rest of the world.

According to Steven Kull and I.M. Destler in *Misreading the Public*,[7] a study published by the liberal Brookings Institution, each of these claims about American public opinion is false, or at least misleadingly simplistic. Based on a survey of about 1,200 Americans carried out in 1996 and several other polls, they conclude that Americans are, in actual fact, more internationlist than isolationist. They report the following findings:

- About three-quarters of Americans say that the U.S. should do its fair share in multilateral efforts, compared to only 12% who say that the U.S. should withdraw from the world and 13% who say that it should assume the role of the preeminent world leader. Two-thirds of respondents said that they would vote for a congressional candidate who also believed that the appropriate U.S. role in the world is to do its fair share in international efforts.

- Eighty per cent of respondents agree that "Because the world is so interconnected today, the United States should participate in UN efforts to maintain peace, protect human rights and promote economic development. Such efforts serve U.S. interests." Seven out of ten disagreed that "[UN] efforts only make a minimal difference with little benefit to the United States. Therefore it is not in the U.S. interest to participate in them." Only 9% of respondents to a 1997 CNN/USA Today poll agreed that the U.S. should give up its membership in the U.N. and those who favoured the U.S. paying its UN dues in full outnumbered those opposed to this by a ratio of between 2 and 3 to 1, according to various polls taken between 1996 and 1998.

- The vast majority of Americans - - 89% of respondents - - agree that "When there is a problem in the world that requires the use of military force, it is generally best for the United States to address the problem together with other nations working through the UN, rather than going it alone." When the question was rephrased to read, "It is better for the United States to act on its own rather than working through the UN, because the United States can move more quickly and probably more successfully," those disagreeing outnumbered those agreeing by more than 2 to 1 (66% v. 29%).

- While 86 per cent of Americans surveyed in 1996 agreed that "Taking care of problems at home is more important than giving aid to foreign countries," only 8 per cent said that the United States should eliminate foreign aid entirely and the vast majority expressed support for various forms of foreign aid (86 per cent for food and medical aid; 76 per cent for economic assistance).

- About one-quarter of Americans agree that their country should spend enough on defence to defend either the U.S. only or the U.S. and other countries on its own, compared to 71 per cent who agreed that the U.S. should spend enough to protect itself *and* join in multilateral efforts to protect others.

This hardly seems the picture of an isolationist people. In order to counter the predictable, and reasonable, charge that people often lie to pollsters, giving them answers that they think are more socially or politically respectable than what they truly believe, the Brookings researchers carried out focus groups in Boise, Idaho. Boise was chosen based on the widespread belief that isolationist opinion is probably as great or greater in the region of the Rocky Mountain states than anywhere else in the United

States and, moreover, the congressperson representing Boise was known to be an outspoken critic of the UN. The results of these focus groups simply corroborated the findings of the surveys. Support for American engagement in the world and through multilateral organizations was found to be high.

The obvious question is how American public can be so terribly misread by those, including many if not most members of Congress, who believe the popular mood to be mainly isolationist? The Brookings researchers place most of the blame on members of Congress and policy-makers in the executive branch, whom they accuse of tending to seek little information on the public's foreign policy preferences, of irrationally dismissing poll results that they believe to be counter-intuitive, of listening most attentively to vocal groups that, in the main, are opposed to international engagement, and relying on mainstream media reporting on public opinion which, in turn, tends to be based on the reported perceptions of politicians (who believe, erroneously the Brookings researchers claim, that the American public is opposed to international engagement).

The picture the Brookings study paints is of a pro-engagement public waiting to be mobilized by politicians capable of packaging American involvement abroad and participation in multilateral organizations and operations in ways that tap into the strong but latent idealism and sense of morality that they believe emerges from their survey data and focus groups. At the same time, however, they acknowledge a vital truth: "[I] international issues tend not to be prominent in congressional elections ... [T]he electoral market does not reward members who correctly read and respond to general public attitudes on international issues. Nor does it punish members who do not."[8] Or as former House Speaker Tip O'Neil once famously said, "All politics are local."

It is a simple matter to show that poll results, including polls on foreign policy issues, are significantly affected by question wording and context. For example, while the Brookings study found widespread support for American foreign aid, this becomes widespread support for *cuts* to foreign aid when these cutbacks are linked to a domestic self-interest objective like deficit reduction.[9] Likewise, public support for American military engagement abroad tends to fall off significantly when respondents are asked about actual messy conflicts like Kosovo[10] or Bosnia.[11] Polls and focus groups provide, at best, an uncertain and contradictory guide to American public opinion on foreign policy and, at worst, a misleading picture of the public mood.

It is the *apparently* low salience of foreign policy for most Americans that is the key to understanding the role - - or non-role - - that foreign policy issues play in American elections. This appearance is deceiving.

Most Americans are not isolationist in the old sense of the term, the isolationism that waxed and waned in strength from Washington's presidency to America's entry into World War II. But neither are they unconditional and enthusiastic internationalists. *They are, rather, conditional internationalists who are mainly indifferent toward foreign affairs but for whom America's role in the world matters.*

Presidential Campaigns and the Foreign Policy (Non-)Issue

The paradox of a population that is largely indifferent toward foreign affairs but for whom America's role in the world matters may be observed in presidential elections. Since the emergence of American involvement in Vietnam as a public issue during the 1960s, foreign policy has been a key issue in presidential elections on only four occasions. Two of these, 1968 and 1972, involved American involvement in Vietnam. The first,

1964, involved the Cold War and the fourth election, 1980, involved the taking of American hostages by Iran and the inability of the Carter administration to win their release. This is not to suggest that foreign policy, particularly issues of trade and defence, have not arisen during other election years. But they were not decisive to the outcome of these elections.

In order that a foreign policy issue assume decisive importance during an American presidential election, there must be a widespread popular sense that the vital economic or security interests of the nation are at stake. Of course both the Republican and Democratic candidates for the White House will come out in favour of protecting the economic and security interests of the United States, so foreign policy will assume the form of what students of elections call a *valence issue*. The candidates are in broad agreement on the goal, but compete with one another to be thought of as the candidate most likely to accomplish that goal. Each candidate attempts, in other words, to make the issue his: to be identified in the public mind with the achievement of a goal that most everyone agrees to be desirable.

In 1964, the Democrats succeeded in portraying Republican Barry Goldwater as an unstable warmonger who might draw the United States into nuclear war. This was a time when Cold War fears ran high and the possibility of a nuclear confrontation, narrowly averted during the Cuban missile crisis of 1963, was considered very real. The American public saw the Soviet Union as a serious threat to the United States, but they also feared a military confrontation with the world's other superpower. They were, in short, uneasy about American security and rejected a candidate who was successfully portrayed by his opponents as likely to destabilize an already fragile Cold War balance of terror.

The1968 and 1972 campaigns were, of course, largely about American involvement in Vietnam and under what terms it could be ended. Polls corroborated what the scenes in the streets and on the campuses suggested: by 1968 the war had become unpopular with a majority of Americans. This unpopularity cut across all socio-economic ranks, although it was most intense among the more educated strata of the population. The nightly reporting of American deaths on the television news undermined popular support for a war that America did not appear to be winning and whose official justification, the containment of communism, in a part of the world that few Americans had any association with or knowledge of, probably seemed no better than a cold abstraction to most people. As in 1964 there was a sense that America's well-being was jeopardized by events elsewhere. In order to be successful a presidential candidate would have to convince voters that he would find a way to extricate America from Vietnam, although simple retreat and its attendant humiliation was not an option.

As the incumbent president during the escalation of the Vietnam War, when the American death toll reached the thousands, Lyndon Johnson found it impossible to portray himself as a candidate who could plausibly bring the war to a publicly acceptable conclusion. His early withdrawal from the 1968 primaries was certainly due to the taint of Vietnam. His vice-president and the Democratic presidential candidate in 1968, Hubert Humphrey, automatically began the campaign with a serious liability, having been part of the administration during the escalation of what had become an unpopular war. The widespread popular unhappiness of Americans with what had become a protracted war whose goals they found to be unclear or at least unconvincing, ensured that foreign policy would be a campaign issue. The fact that the Democrats controlled the White House at the time of the 1968 election tended to undermine their candidate's credibility on this issue.

Four years later the Republicans controlled the White House and Richard Nixon was standing for re-election. American forces were still in Vietnam and the war was again a major campaign issue. Polls showed that Americans who believed that it had been a mistake to send troops to Vietnam outnumbered those who thought that it had been the right decision by a two to one ratio.[12] If the argument advanced here is correct - - namely, that foreign policy tends to assume the form of a valence issue in American elections and the party in the White House is likely to be blamed if there is a sense that things are going wrong on the foreign policy front - - the public's dissatisfaction with the war in Vietnam should have worked to the advantage of the Democratic presidential candidate.

It did not. The reason for this involved a combination of weaknesses of the Democratic candidate, George McGovern, including what was perceived by many to be his excessive soft-ness on national security issues, and the credibility of Nixon's promise to ensure an end to the war that would bring both peace and honour. Nixon understood that, as much as most Americans wanted their country out of Vietnam, they would not accept a withdrawal that left their country looking humiliated in their eyes and those of the world. Some sort of damage control was necessary so that peace could be sold as something other than outright defeat of one of the world's superpowers. Nixon's credibility was enhanced by his reputation as a president who was skillful in foreign affairs, under whose watch relations with China were moving toward normalization and who launched détente with the Soviet Union.

The next election in which foreign policy would figure importantly was in 1980. The 1979 capture of American hostages in Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini and the apparent inability of President Jimmy Carter to secure their release through either diplomatic or military means was widely seen as symptomatic of unacceptable decline in the global power and prestige of the United States. Republican candidate Ronald Reagan's promise to make America strong again and restore Americans' pride, and to bring about the immediate release of the hostages, resonated powerfully with an electorate that was easily persuaded that the ineptitude of the Democratic incumbent was at least partly to blame for the Iranian problem. Both Carter and Reagan promised an end to the hostage crisis and a restoration of American strength, but Carter simply lacked credibility on this valence issue.

The presidential election of 1964, 1968, 1972 and 1980 demonstrate that foreign policy can matter in American elections. I would suggest, however, that when foreign policy assumes the stature of a major issue it does not take the form of a position issue, where the candidates are clearly distinguishable by the different positions they take on an issue like trade, defence spending, international human rights violations, etc. As is also true of the economy issue, foreign policy tends to assume the form of a valence issue where the candidates attempt to be associated in the public mind with goals and conditions that are widely thought to be desirable. This certainly is true of the 2000 presidential campaign, in which the foreign policy differences between Gore and Bush are generally acknowledged to be insignificant.

Conclusion

The low profile of foreign policy issues in most presidential elections since the end of the Vietnam War reinforces the view that American public opinion is isolationist, indifferent toward the rest of the world and generally hostile toward American engagement in international affairs. This impression is false, or at least only partly true. As I have tried to show, while Americans are indeed indifferent toward foreign affairs

they are not indifferent toward their country's role in the world and circumstances affecting what they believe to be the vital economic and security interests of the United States. When these interests appear to be threatened or the public perceives a serious incongruence between the image they have of America as strong and respected and the reality of the global situation - - as in 1980 - - Americans can be mobilized around issues of foreign policy. What some call neo-isolationism is only the mask that public indifference wears until it is shaken loose by external circumstances, to reveal the willingness to engage with the world that is the true face of American public opinion.

Endnotes

1. This is refered to by students of elections as retrospective voting.

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Volume I (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 235-36.

3. Quoted in Henry Steele Commager, ed., Living Ideas in America (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 655.

4. Ibid., 667.

5. Robert S. Erikson and Norman R. Luttbeg, American Public Opinion (New York: Wiley, 1973), 50-51.

6. http://zeus.townhall.com/heritage/issues96/chpt20.html

7. Steven Kull and I.M. Destler, Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1999).

8. Ibid., 237.

9. Princeton Survey Research Associates, August 17-20, 1995.

10. See www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/Indkosovo.asp

11. See http://zeus.townhall/com/heritage/issues96/chpt20.html

12.www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/Indkosovo.asp