

Elections and Foreign Policy:

Strategic Politicians and the
Domestic Salience of International Issues

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Abstract

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In this paper I develop a model of candidate attention to foreign policy issues. Using the foreign policy content of nomination acceptance speeches as a common window on candidate behavior, I show that a significant proportion of the variation in foreign policy attention can be explained by just three factors: American involvement in international crises, the state of the domestic economy, and party affiliation. Moreover, candidates act strategically. Incumbents and challengers respond in opposite directions to changes in the domestic economy and crisis involvement. When crisis involvement goes up, incumbents turn their focus away from foreign policy while challengers become more interested in international events. When the economy takes a turn for the worse, incumbents regain a strong interest in overseas events, while challengers turn their focus back to the domestic arena. Meanwhile, *ceteris paribus*, Republicans have consistently displayed a stronger interest in foreign policy than Democrats.

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To the dismay of many analysts and academics, the American presidential election of 2000 presented a new low in attention to foreign policy issues. Even so, many have worried that foreign policy positions adopted in the heat of the campaign on issues such as ballistic missile defense and the Kyoto accords have since turned into the guiding principles of American foreign policy. There is a common view that sees American foreign policy as a product of the domestic needs of politicians rather than the important demands of the international system. This perspective has recently gained a number of adherents abroad who worry that American foreign policy is increasingly isolationist and driven by the demands of domestic political competition.¹ At the same time, an alternative view holds that the voting public's approach to international events is best characterized by ignorance and indifference. In this equally common view, American politicians and policy makers operate in a relatively permissive environment that allows them to pursue most foreign policies relatively free from domestic constraint.

Building an understanding of the impact of democratic forces on foreign policy making and international relations more broadly is critical in an increasingly democratic world. The defining institution of democratic polities is the electoral competition for political power. It is surprising, then, that the impact of elections on foreign policy making has been relatively little studied. The classic literature on the domestic sources of American foreign policy says almost nothing about the role of elections.² A small literature has recently emerged on the relationship between elections and conflict behavior,³ but a broader understanding of the electoral connection in foreign policy making remains elusive.

A starting point in seeking a handle on this relationship is to try to understand what motivates candidates to campaign on foreign policy issues. Although it sometimes seems otherwise, presidential electoral campaigns are of finite length. The schedule of a presidential candidate is hotly contested territory, with a variety of interests competing for a prominent place on the campaign agenda. Every candidate has to decide just how much to emphasize foreign policy. Time spent on foreign policy is time lost on the host of other issues that are likely to motivate voters. The decision to focus, or not focus, on any given issue is made against the backdrop of the other pressing concerns that will gain or lose their time in the sun.

In a seminal article demonstrating the importance of foreign policy issues to the campaign process, John Aldrich, John Sullivan, and Eugene Borgida suggested that in choosing to focus on international issues, candidates could activate underlying

¹ Christopher Dickey, "Bush's Foreign Affair" *Newsweek International*, June 25, 2001.

² Gaubatz, *Elections and War*, 1999, p. 4.

³ Beer, "American Major Peace, War, and Presidential Elections," 1984. Nincic, "U.S. Soviet Policy and the Electoral Connection," 1990. Gaubatz, *Elections and War*, 1999. Gowa, *Ballots and Bullets*, 1999.

public concerns in this area.⁴ Their approach cannot, however, tell us when candidates will choose to focus on foreign affairs or how much attention these issues will receive. In this paper I show that candidate attention to foreign policy issues is a remarkably consistent and well-behaved function of *both* domestic and international conditions. Although there are numerous complexities and idiosyncrasies that we might expect to obscure candidate behavior in this area, a very small number of factors can explain a large amount of the variance in attention to foreign policy issues.

Explaining Foreign Policy Attention

The factors that might influence foreign policy attention can be grouped into three broad categories. First, there may be factors associated with the characteristics of the individual candidates and their campaigns. Second, there may be factors associated with the international political environment. Third, there may be factors associated with the domestic political environment.

Candidate characteristics are an obvious starting point for an explanation of foreign policy attention. Political actors may choose to focus on foreign policy issues based on ideological or other ideational predispositions. More instrumentally, they may perceive tactical benefits from emphasizing issues that connect to their backgrounds and experiences. Dwight Eisenhower might be expected to gravitate towards foreign policy issues where he could capitalize on his considerable international experience. Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, who both began their quests for the presidency with little international experience on their resumes, might see a tactical advantage in focusing on the domestic issues that resonated most strongly with their previous executive accomplishments.

Domestic and international political factors are each associated with a broad theoretical perspective. On the one hand are the international relations theorists who see foreign policy generated primarily from the exigencies of international relations. The adherents of these theoretical perspectives expect important international events to impose themselves on the domestic politics of democratic states irrespective of the personal interests of domestic actors. For example, although famously denying that realism is a theory of foreign policy,⁵ realist theory has long implied that the imperatives of the international system would overwhelm domestic political factors.⁶

On the other hand are those who see foreign policy making as primarily an extension of domestic political competition. From this viewpoint, political decision-makers are seen as primarily motivated by a concern for their domestic political fortunes. The voting public is notoriously indifferent to international affairs, and therefore, candidates for political office are well advised to put their primary focus on the domestic issues that most immediately impact their constituents' everyday lives.

⁴ Aldrich, et. al. "Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting," 1989.

⁵ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979.

⁶ Gowa, *Ballots and Bullets*, 1999.

To the degree that we can move away from purely idiosyncratic factors, candidate characteristics are likely to have consistent effects across candidates: Candidates with international experience should put more emphasis on foreign policy. Candidates with an ideological enthusiasm for international affairs might be expected to put their focus there.

The Diversionsary Logic

The influence of domestic and international factors may be more complex. The perspectives on domestic and international factors outlined above would expect to see both incumbents and challengers exhibit similar dynamics in foreign policy attention as they jointly react to international and domestic development. When the international environment is more threatening, the political discussion should focus more attention in that direction. At times when domestic issues are particularly pressing, foreign policy is more likely to be crowded out of presidential campaigns.

An alternative view would expect incumbents and challengers to react differently to events because of the differences in their positions within the domestic political environment. In this view candidates maintain an eye on their domestic political needs when making strategic choices about the amount of attention to focus on international affairs. When foreign policy is going well, incumbents should be anxious to highlight their international achievements. When things are going poorly abroad, challengers should be more inclined to point to the foreign policy failings of the current government. Likewise, when domestic policy seems to be keeping the voters reasonably happy, incumbents are more likely to focus on domestic themes and to relegate foreign policy to the background. Challengers, on the other hand, may find this a good time to highlight problems abroad.

This logic is akin to the diversionary theory that has been widely applied to the analysis of domestic politics and international conflict.⁷ One of the most commonly described incentives for politicians to focus on problems abroad is their desire to distract voters from problems at home. The diversionary motivation should apply differently to incumbents and challengers. Incumbent candidates are held responsible for domestic and international performance.⁸ Incumbents should want to highlight the areas in which policy seems to be doing well and downplay those areas in which they are doing less well. Challengers should have just the opposite incentive: highlighting problematic policy arenas and downplaying the incumbent's successes.

⁷ Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War," 1989.

⁸ Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* 1981. Bueno de Mesquita, Siverson, and Woller, "War and the Fate of Regimes," 1992.

Building a Model of Foreign Policy Attention at the Intersection of Domestic and International Politics

To this point, four working hypotheses have been introduced to explain variation in foreign policy attention. The *candidate characteristics hypothesis* attributes foreign policy interest to the characteristics of individual candidates. The *international politics hypothesis* posits that the character of events in the international environment might influence the foreign policy content of American electoral politics. The *domestic politics hypothesis* suggests that foreign policy interest has to be understood in the context of the domestic political issues that are also competing for space on the campaign agenda. Overlaying the domestic and international politics hypotheses is the *diversionary hypothesis* that suggests that incumbents and challengers will react differently to the events in either the international or domestic environments.

The first step in building a model with which to evaluate these hypotheses and come to a greater understanding of the dynamics of foreign policy attention in the campaign process is to consider a set of appropriate operationalizations and measurements.

Operationalization and Measurement

The dependent variable in this analysis is the degree of foreign policy attention in American presidential campaigns. The global assessment of relative foreign policy attention across an entire campaign would be an arduous task fraught with subjectivities. An alternative is to identify a consistent and comparable point of measurement that can capture the tone of a campaign effort. For this purpose, I propose the proportion of foreign policy content in the nomination acceptance speeches of presidential candidates.

Measuring Foreign Policy Focus: The Nomination Acceptance Speech

In the post-war era, every candidate for the presidency has begun his official campaign with a formal speech accepting the nomination of his party. This critical speech outlines the large themes that a candidate (and a legion of advisors) wants to get across to the party and the public. As with the overall campaign, nomination acceptance speeches are of finite length. Candidates make strategic choices about how much emphasis to put on foreign policy in light of the necessary trade-offs between attention to international and domestic issues. Since the nomination acceptance speech represents an overview of the basic positions of the candidate, my operationalization for the attention that candidates believe foreign policy deserves in the campaign process is the simple measurement of the relative amount of attention they devote to foreign policy and international issues in their speeches accepting the nomination of their party.

In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the first presidential candidate to step up to the podium at a nominating convention and deliver his acceptance speech in person. Prior to that, the nominees might make a speech to a notification committee,

as William McKinley did in 1896; send a formal letter to representatives of the party convention, as Rutherford B. Hayes did in 1876; or even just jot a quick note, as Abraham Lincoln did in 1860. The formal style of nomination acceptance speeches did not become standardized until after World War II. In 1900, for example, William Jennings Bryan greeted the notification committee with a now famous address focused almost entirely on the Philippines and the dangers of imperialism.

Even at the beginning of the 1950's nomination acceptance speeches were still relatively idiosyncratic. Consider Adlai Stevenson's somewhat inept speech accepting the Democratic nomination in 1952: after apologizing for his inadequacies relative to the "burdens of the office that stagger the imagination," he called on the public to be prepared for "sacrifices" and "pain" in "these years of darkness, doubt, and of crisis which stretch beyond the horizon." The speech did not really distinguish between foreign and domestic policy, but instead spoke vaguely about concepts like the "long, patient, costly struggle which alone can assure triumph over the great enemies of man--war, poverty and tyranny--and the assaults upon human dignity which are the most grievous consequences of each." In his 1956 effort, he gave a speech with a dramatically more modern feel, with organized policy discussions and a focused foreign policy section. Since then, every nomination acceptance speech has been similarly structured around distinct policy arenas.

The measurement of foreign policy attention within the nomination acceptance speeches is a straightforward word count.⁹ As discussed above, there are some ambiguities in some of the earliest speeches—most noticeably Dewey in 1948 and Stevenson and Eisenhower in 1952. These speeches tended more towards vague affirmation of the mercies of God and the benefits of freedom. The occasional war story can be difficult to classify, although they are generally evocative of foreign-policy content. Some international policy content is tied up in mixed exhortations about the greatness of America. Still, the vast majority of foreign policy content in nomination acceptance speeches comes in organized sections focused on foreign policy themes. Across all of the nomination speeches of the post-war era, 78 percent of the foreign policy content is contained in cohesive foreign policy sections. This significantly reduces the room for coding error.¹⁰

Figure 1 plots the percent of foreign policy content in the nomination acceptance speeches of the incumbent and the challenging candidate in each post-war campaign.¹¹ The raw data is characterized by dramatic variation. Contrast Richard

⁹ Nomination acceptance speeches from 1952-2000 were taken from the *Annenberg/Pew Archive of Campaign Discourse*. The 1948 speeches were taken from *Vital Speeches of the Day*.

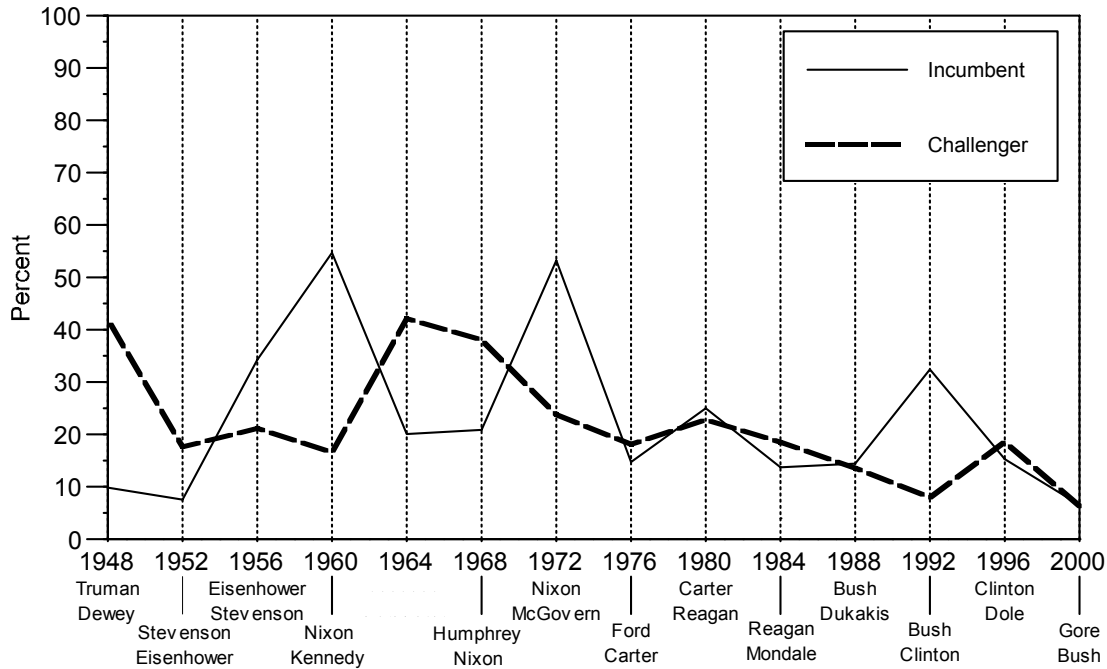
¹⁰ The analysis that follows below was also run using just the proportion of foreign policy content in the main foreign policy section of the speech. The results were robust to this variation.

¹¹ Throughout this analysis incumbency is assessed by party rather than individual. New candidates from the same party as the incumbent usually have to run on the party's record in office. This is particularly true when the candidate is running as the sitting vice-

Nixon’s decisions in 1960 and 1972 to spend more than half of his time on international issues, with the seven-percent solution in the Gore-Bush foreign policy limbo of 2000. Swings of more than twenty percentage points from one election to the next have not been uncommon.

Figure 1

Percent Foreign Policy Content in Nomination Acceptance Speeches
Incumbent v. Challenger Party - 1948-2000



Assessing Candidate Characteristics

There are many candidate characteristics that we might want to include in a model of foreign policy attention. The challenge here is to maintain a parsimonious model that is amenable to objective measurement.

Personality, Experience, and Incumbency

It is tempting to try to incorporate experience or personality into the analysis. Dwight Eisenhower, with his extensive international experience, delivered nomination speeches with an average foreign policy content of 26 percent. Bill Clinton’s first nomination speech, when he brought almost no international experience to the contest, had a foreign policy content of just 8 percent.

president, which is true for every post-war election without a “real” incumbent, with the exception of Adlai Stevenson in 1952.

Richard Nixon presents the strongest case for the possibility that personality matters. His three speeches are three of the four highest foreign policy content nomination acceptances of the post-war era: 55 percent in 1960, 38 percent in 1968, and 53 percent in 1972.¹² These speeches are all extraordinary for their strong emphasis on foreign policy issues. Still, the personality hypothesis cannot explain why the 1968 speech had fifteen percentage points less foreign policy content than either the 1960 or 1972 speeches.

The personality hypothesis is neither very systematic nor is it particularly amenable to objective evaluation. It also has a certain circular character: candidates who are more interested in foreign policy display more interest in foreign policy. Ultimately, we are interested either in getting at why candidates are interested in foreign policy, or why certain candidates might be selected who have a particular foreign policy profile.

The inadequacy of the personality hypothesis is made more apparent when we focus on the other candidates with multiple nominations. As Table 1 shows, presidential candidates who have been nominated more than once have often had significant differences in the amount of foreign policy content in their nomination speeches. Eisenhower, Bush, and Clinton all essentially doubled their foreign policy content from their first to second speech. Adding in the Nixon contrast between 1968 and 1972, suggests the possibility of a trend for incumbents to increase their foreign policy content. This makes sense given the benefits sitting presidents have in projecting experience and maturity in dealing with foreign affairs at the expense of their neophyte challengers. But, Ronald Reagan is the exception to this sensible rule. His foreign policy content dropped by a third from 23 percent in 1980 to just 14 percent in 1984.

¹² Thomas Dewey holds the other top spot; but his was a relatively short speech with relatively vague foreign policy content.

Table 1
Percentage of Foreign Policy Content
in
Nomination Speeches for Candidates Nominated More Than Once

Candidate	First Speech	Second Speech	Difference
Eisenhower	18 (1952)	34 (1956)	16
Stevenson	3 (1952)	21 (1956)	18
Nixon*	55 (1960)	38 (1968)	-17
Carter	18 (1976)	25 (1980)	7
Reagan	23 (1980)	14 (1984)	-9
Bush	14 (1988)	32 (1992)	18
Clinton	8 (1992)	15 (1996)	7

*Nixon gave a third speech as the incumbent in 1972 with 53 percent foreign policy content.

Statistically, the effect of incumbency is quite weak. The simple correlation between incumbency and foreign policy content is just 0.03.¹³ The mean incumbent foreign policy content is about 23 percent, compared to 22 percent for challengers.

More generally the personality hypothesis does not do a credible job of explaining the variation between candidates. George Bush, with exceptional foreign policy experience—dramatic military service in WWII, Ambassador to the UN and China, Director of the CIA, and two terms as Vice-President—devoted only 14 percent of his 1988 speech to foreign policy issues, while Jimmy Carter, with no formal political experience beyond Georgia, devoted 18 percent of his 1976 nomination speech to foreign policy.

Ideology and The Party Hypothesis

Another important factor in the candidate characteristics group is ideology. I have argued elsewhere that under a broad range of circumstances hawks should care more about foreign policy than doves.¹⁴ Directly assessing placement on the hawk/dove continuum is complex and relatively subjective. A surrogate operationalization is to make the simple assumption that Republicans have tended to be more hawkish than Democrats.

¹³ Using personal rather than party incumbency increases this correlation only to 0.11.

¹⁴ Gaubatz, “Political Competition and Foreign Policy Power Sharing,” 2000.

Visually, some of the extreme election-to-election variation, particularly in the incumbent share, can be reduced by looking at the data divided by political party, rather than by incumbency status. This view is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2

**Percent Foreign Policy Content in Nomination Acceptance Speeches
Republican v. Democratic Party - 1948-2000**

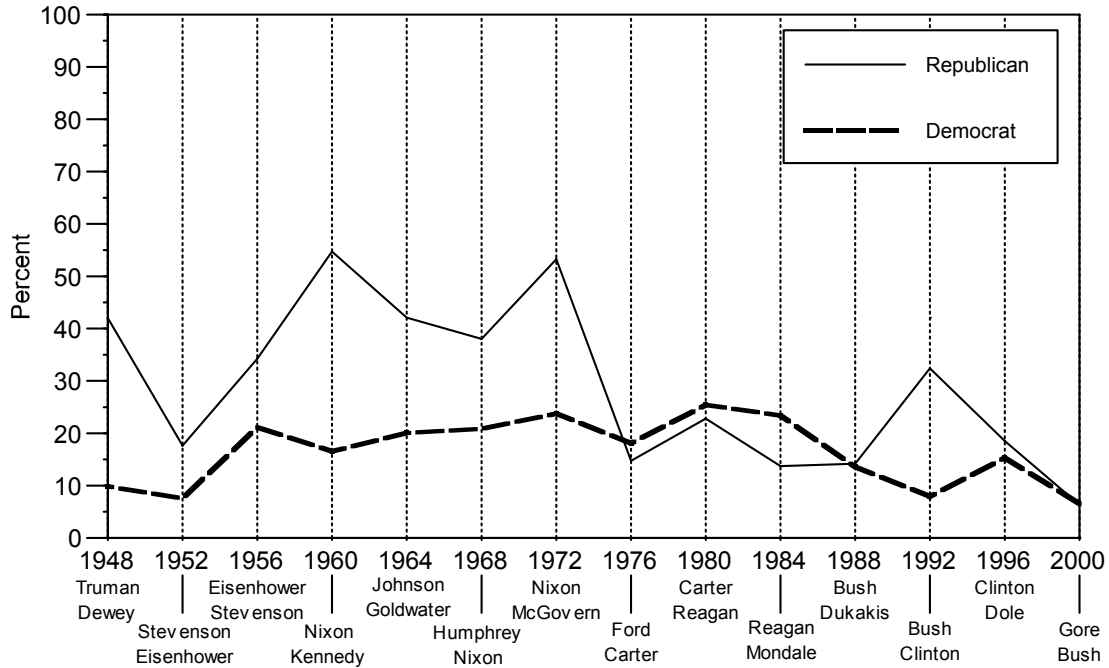


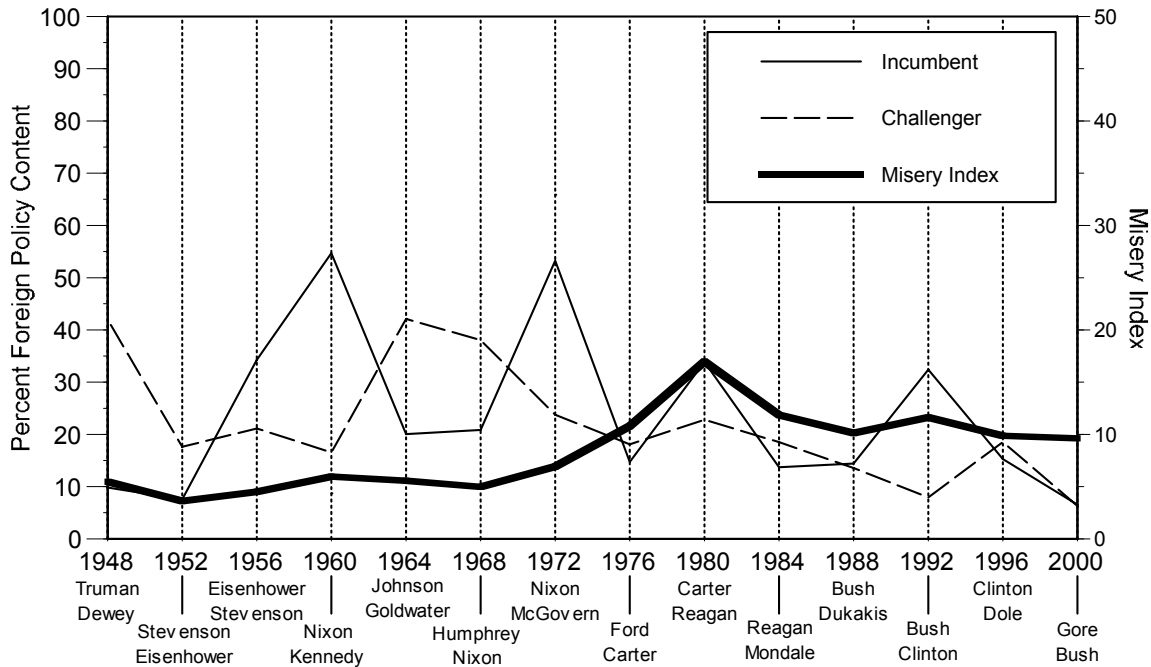
Figure 2 reveals a strong Republican emphasis on foreign policy in their nomination acceptance speeches prior to 1976. Since 1976, however, Republican foreign policy content has dropped to levels that have often been below that of the Democrats. This is particularly surprising in light of the frequent claim that a bipartisan consensus on foreign policy fell apart after the Vietnam War.¹⁵ Under such conditions, we might expect to see more foreign policy competition leaking into the electoral process. Instead, it appears that the Republicans gave up on foreign policy as their bellwether issue after Vietnam. The singular exception is the campaign in 1992 in which President Bush emphasized victories in the Gulf War and the Cold War while soon-to-be President Clinton countered that “it’s the economy, stupid.”

¹⁵ James M. Lindsay, “The New Partisanship,” 2000.

Assessing the Domestic Environment.

This brings us to the domestic environment. Here, again, there are many factors we might like to include in the analysis. As the case of Bill Clinton illustrates, however, the state of the domestic economy has long been viewed as a driving force in electoral politics.¹⁶ There are many measures of the domestic economy we might draw on for this analysis. One indicator that has played a prominent role in presidential campaigns is the so-called “misery index”—the sum of the inflation rate and the unemployment rate. The misery index for the post-war period is displayed in Figure 3 overlaying the foreign policy content of incumbent and challenger nomination speeches.

Figure 3
The Misery Index and Foreign Policy Attention
(Election Years, 1948-2000)



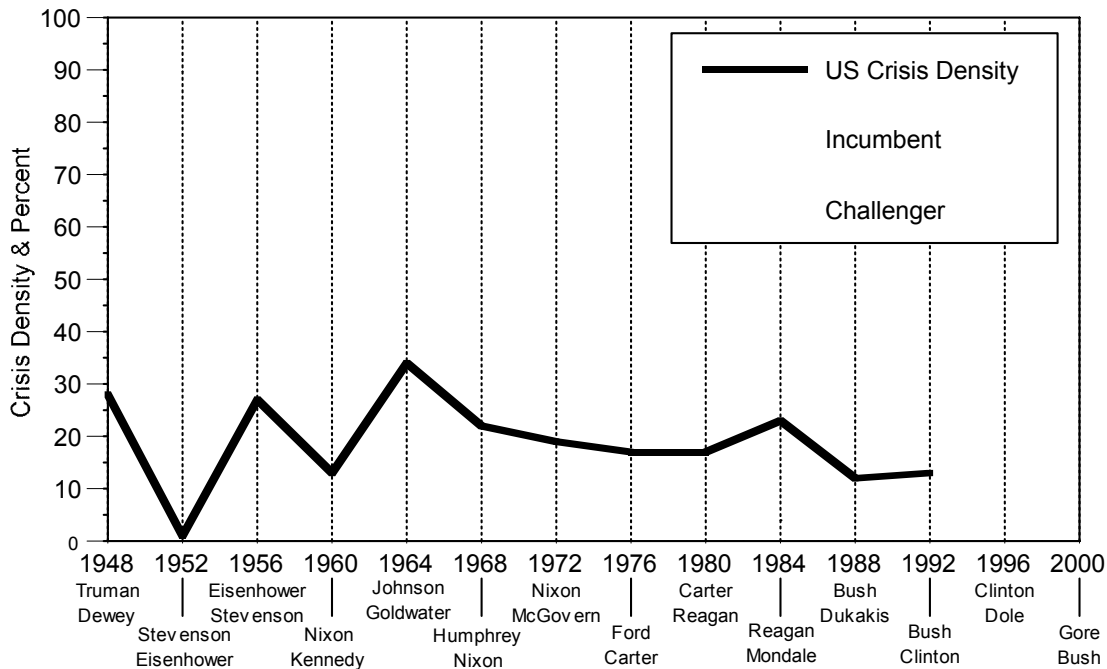
Assessing the International Environment

The international environment also presents a plethora of potentially important factors. For the purposes of this analysis I have focused on the density of international crises in which the United States has had some involvement. Brecher and Wilkenfeld’s International Crisis Behavior project is a standard source for this

¹⁶ Lewis-Beck, *Economics and Elections*, 1989. Hibbs, *The American Political Economy* 1987.

data.¹⁷ Drawing on their data, I created an indicator that sums up American involvement in overseas crises during election years. Figure 4 shows the basic trends in American election year crisis involvement during the post-war era.

Figure 4
International Crises with U.S. Involvement and Foreign Policy Attention
(Election Years, 1948-1992)



A Moment for Methodology

Because the analysis of electoral behavior is a time-series phenomenon, some statistical cautions are in order. Most importantly, there is the danger that broad simultaneous trends could be misinterpreted as evidence for a relationship where none exists. Figure 1 above, for example, shows that the amount of attention to foreign policy in nomination speeches is generally decreasing over time. Therefore, there will be some correlation between this time series and any other factor that is similarly changing over time. Similarly, the problem of unit-roots occurs in time series when variables are correlated with themselves over time. With the exception of

¹⁷ Brecher and Wilkenfeld, *A Study of Crisis*, 1997. I included all crises in which the United States was involved (USINV>2) during the election year. I used a simple weighting system for combining number and severity. Brecher and Wilkenfeld code crises as “no violence,” “minor clashes,” “serious clashes,” and “full-scale war.” I gave each crisis a weight of from 1 to 4 respectively for these four levels, and then summed the weighted number of crises for each election year.

party affiliation, all of the variables under discussion here have a time-dependency component. The solution for this problem is to difference the variables to remove the trend component. This is the simple operation of subtracting lagged values from the original value. What is left is the *change* in the variable for each time period rather than its absolute value.¹⁸

In this analysis differencing is akin to Ronald Reagan’s famous exhortation during the 1980 campaign that voters should ask themselves “whether they are better off than they were four years ago.” Instead of just looking at whether the misery index is “high” or “low” or whether American crisis involvement is “high” or “low,” these factors are measured relative to their values when the incumbent party began its term in office.

Party affiliation is also measured as a change variable against the previous candidate in the same position – i.e., the incumbent as compared to the previous incumbent, the challenger as compared to the previous challenger.¹⁹ When party changes, this variable further indicates if the change is from Democrat to Republican (coded 1) or from Republican to Democrat (coded -1).

A Model of Foreign Policy Attention

With these technical caveats out of the way, we can now turn to the process of building a parsimonious model of electoral attention to foreign policy. The simplest model would be a simple linear construction on the three independent variables:

$$\Delta Attention = \beta + \beta (\Delta Party) + \beta (\Delta Misery) + \beta (\Delta Crises)$$

Where:

$\Delta Attention$ = Change in percent of foreign policy content in nomination acceptance speech²⁰

$\Delta Party$ = 1 if incumbent changes from Democrat to Republican
0 if no change
-1 if incumbent changes from Republican to Democrat

$\Delta Misery$ = Change in the misery index since the previous election

$\Delta Crises$ = Change in the number and severity of crises since the previous election

¹⁸ Augmented Dickey-Fuller tests were used for assessing vulnerability to unit roots. All variables were stationary after differencing.

¹⁹ Recall, here, that incumbency is measured by the party rather than by the individual.

²⁰ Change in measured relative to the previous candidate in the same position – either incumbent or challenger.

This model performs quite poorly. The adjusted R^2 is about .1 and the only significant coefficient is for party affiliation. Diagnostic analysis shows Gerald Ford's 1976 speech to be a significant outlier.²¹ Removal of Ford from the dataset increases R^2 to a more respectable .24, but party affiliation remains the only significant independent variable in this specification.

The Diversionsary Logic

As specified so far, this model treats incumbents and challengers the same. The diversionsary logic outlined above suggests that rather than a unified response to either external events or to domestic economic developments, incumbents and challengers will react to these factors in opposite directions. A visual inspection of the significant differences between incumbents and challengers in many of the post-war elections (Figure 1), suggests that this view might be more tenable than the assumption that incumbents and challengers respond in a unified fashion. While there is some similarity in the proportion of foreign policy attention in the 1976-1988 and 1996-2000 elections, the other eight elections display dramatic differences in incumbent and challenger attention.

Ideally, one might construct independent models to capture the different dynamics of incumbents and challengers. The drawback to modeling challengers and incumbents separately is the problem of sample size. There have been fourteen presidential elections in the post-war period. Differencing takes the first election (1948) out of the useable dataset. The ICB crisis data runs out before the last two elections (1996 and 2000). This reduces the population to eleven elections and twenty-two candidates. Separate models for challengers and incumbents could only work with eleven data points. Instead of running separate models, I have created a structural model that constrains challengers and incumbents to an inverse relationship for the misery index and crisis density. When the misery index or crisis density change, the effects on incumbent and challenger behavior will be equal but opposite.

This structural model can be expressed as follows:

$$\text{Incumbents:} \quad \Delta \text{Attention}_I = \beta_{I1} + \beta_{I2}(\Delta \text{Party}) + \beta_{I3}(\Delta \text{Misery}) + \beta_{I4}(\Delta \text{Crises})$$

$$\text{Challengers:} \quad \Delta \text{Attention}_C = \beta_{C1} + \beta_{C2}(\Delta \text{Party}) + \beta_{C3}(\Delta \text{Misery}) + \beta_{C4}(\Delta \text{Crises})$$

Subject to:

$$\begin{array}{ll} B_{I1} = B_{C1} & B_{I3} = -B_{C3} \\ B_{I2} = B_{C2} & B_{I4} = -B_{C4} \end{array}$$

²¹ The 1976 election has shown up as an outlier in other analyses as well. See, e.g. Aldrich, et. al. "Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting," 1989, p. 131. In this model Jimmy Carter's change in foreign policy emphasis does not qualify as a significant outlier, so this challenger side of the 1976 election is retained in the dataset.

Again, Gerald Ford's 1976 speech is a significant outlier, so this observation is dropped. For the remaining 21 observations, this simple constrained model yields strikingly coherent results. The adjusted R^2 is a quite robust .64. All of the coefficients are in the right direction and are statistically significant, with the unimportant exception of the constant.²²

The following results are generated from the analysis (standard errors in parentheses):

$$\text{Incumbents: } \Delta \textit{Attention} = 1.96 + 17.42(\Delta \textit{Party}) + 3.36(\Delta \textit{Misery}) - .53(\Delta \textit{Crises})$$

(2.19) (3.46) (.83) (.15)

$$\text{Challengers: } \Delta \textit{Attention} = 1.96 + 17.42(\Delta \textit{Party}) - 3.36(\Delta \textit{Misery}) + .53(\Delta \textit{Crises})$$

(2.19) (3.46) (.83) (.15)

The effectiveness of the model in capturing the dynamics of foreign policy attention in incumbent campaigns is displayed visually in Figure 5 for incumbents and Figure 6 for challengers. In each of these figures the actual changes in candidate attention are plotted against the model's predicted changes. The model correctly predicts the direction of change in all of the incumbent speeches, with the exception of the Ford outlier in 1976. For challengers, the direction of change is correctly predicted in seven of the eleven elections between 1952 and 1992.

²² All coefficients except the constant are significant at greater than the .01 level. The regression results are robust on a number of dimensions. There were evaluated for omitted variables using the Ramsey reset test and for heteroscedasticity using the Cook-Weisberg test. Neither test indicated problems. Given the small sample size, the results were also assessed using a bootstrap resampling procedure to generate more robust confidence intervals for all of the coefficients. All of the coefficients, except the constant, remained significant at the .01 level.

Figure 5
Predicted and Actual Change in Foreign Policy Attention
Incumbent Candidates, 1952-2000

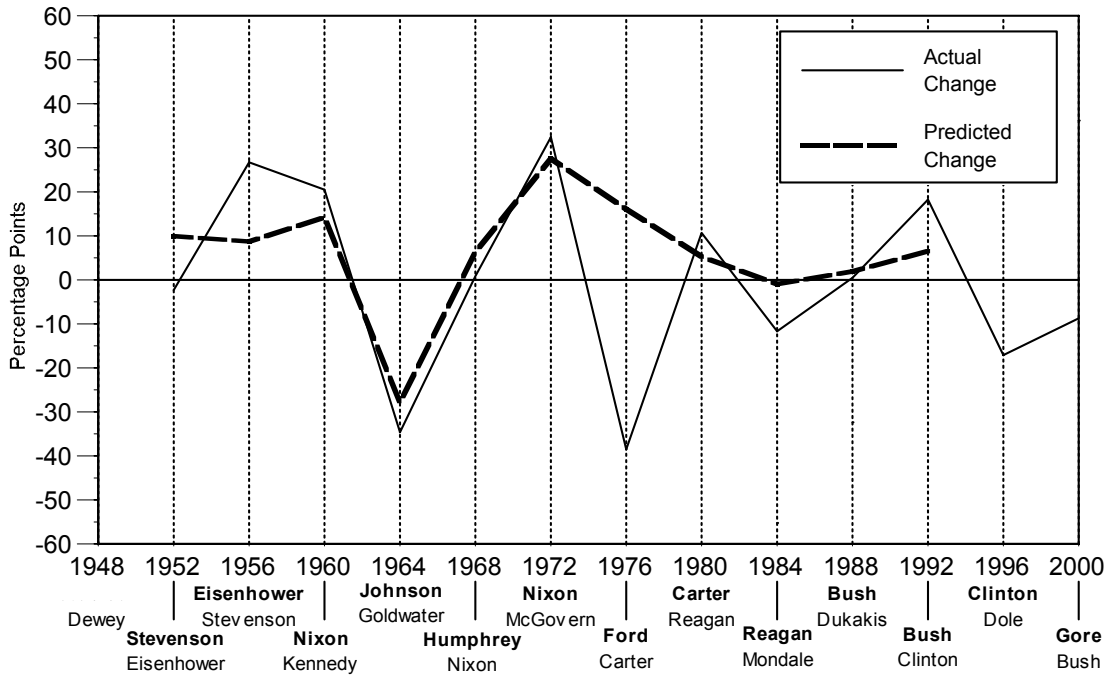
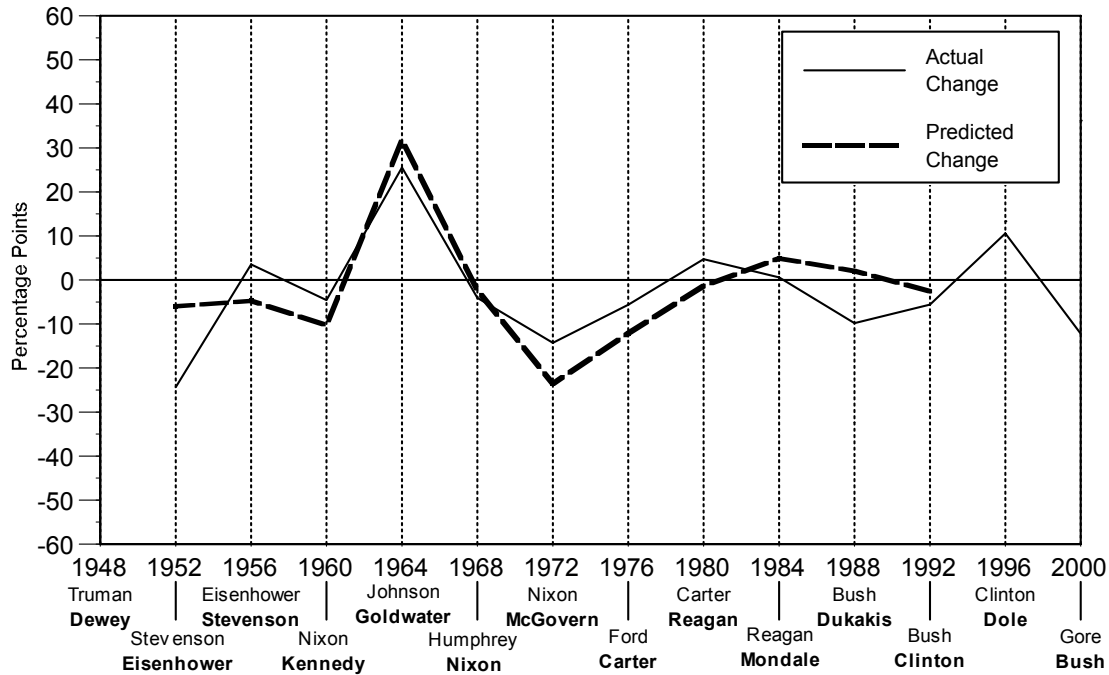


Figure 6

**Predicted and Actual Change in Foreign Policy Attention
Presidential Challengers, 1952-2000**



The model is well behaved and conforms to the hypothesized expectations for all three parameters. Controlling for the mix of events in the domestic and international arena, the Republican candidates display significantly more interest in foreign policy than do the Democratic candidates. When there are more crises incumbents talk less about foreign policy, and challengers talk more. When the economy is in trouble challengers take note, and incumbents start talking about their accomplishments abroad.

The Republican Difference

The strongest effect in the model comes from party affiliation. In Figure 2, above, the difference between Republicans and Democrats appears to disappear after 1972. When we control for variations in domestic and international conditions, however, that difference remains robust. *Ceteris Paribus*, a change from a Democratic to a Republican candidate should lead to a seventeen percentage point increase in foreign policy attention. To the degree that Republicans can be labeled the more hawkish

party, this empirical model supports the argument that hawks should care more about foreign policy than doves.²³

Crises and Foreign Policy Attention

A one-unit change in crisis density is expected to change foreign policy content by about half a percentage point. Political involvement in a single low level crisis would have this level of effect. A more serious crisis would have two, three, or four times this impact. The average absolute value of the election-to-election change in crisis density is 11.2, which would translate to an expected change in foreign policy content of about five percentage points. With an increase in crisis density this would be a five percentage point increase in foreign policy content for the challenger and a five percentage point decrease in foreign policy content for the incumbent. Notably, the average change in the misery index has a slightly larger effect on foreign policy attention than the average change in crisis density.

The Economy and Foreign Policy Attention

When the economy is getting worse, challengers want to talk about it, and incumbents suddenly become more interested in matters beyond borders. A one percentage-point increase in the misery index, which could be caused by a percentage point increase in either inflation or the unemployment rate, is expected to lead to a 3.4 percentage point increase in incumbent attention to foreign policy and a 3.4% decrease in challenger attention to foreign policy. The average absolute value of post-war election-to-election change in the misery index is 2.1 percentage points which would translate to an expected change in foreign policy content for both incumbents and challengers of about seven percentage points. This would lead to a fourteen point increase in the percentage point spread between the candidates' attention to foreign policy.

The effects of all three components – crises, the misery index, and party – can be seen in Figure 7 and Figure 8 for the incumbents and challengers, respectively. These figures show the relative effects of each of the factors on the net change in foreign policy attention for all of the postwar elections between 1952 and 1992. Here we can see that the extreme changes in 1964 and 1972 can be explained by the coincidence of all three components pulling in the same direction, rather than by the admittedly colorful personalities of Goldwater, Johnson, Nixon, and McGovern.

In these two charts we can also see clearly how the effect of party is overwhelmed by the misery index changes in 1980 and 1984. Ronald Reagan had very strong views about foreign policy issues. But in both 1980 and 1984, domestic economic issues overwhelmed the party effect. In 1980, with the misery index soaring, Reagan the challenger urged the voters to think about ‘the altogether indigestible economic stew’ that had been served them by the previous

²³ Gaubatz, “Political Competition and Foreign Policy Power Sharing,” 2000.

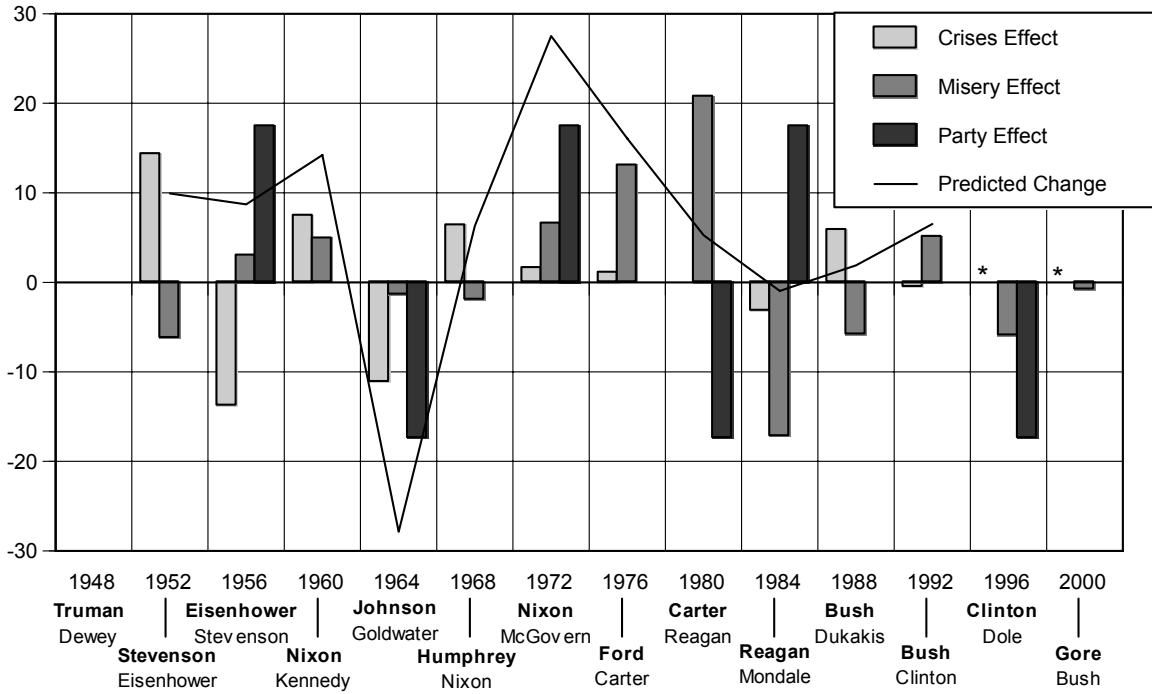
administration.²⁴ Then, running for reelection in 1984, the dramatic drop in the misery index combined with a modest increase in crisis density led the now incumbent Reagan to focus on his domestic accomplishments. Until George W. Bush came along in 2000, Reagan held the post-war record for the lowest attention to foreign policy issues in a Republican nomination acceptance speech.

Similarly, the effect of the drop in crisis density in 1988 is almost perfectly offset by the simultaneous drop in the misery index. George Bush had good news to talk about on both fronts. Consequently, despite his formidable advantages in foreign policy credentials over Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, he maintained the low level of foreign policy content that Reagan had pioneered in 1984.

Figure 7 and Figure 8 also help illuminate the relative importance of the different factors over time. Changes in crisis density played a more important role in the 1952 to 1968 period than they have since. The overall level of American involvement in overseas crises has not changed dramatically in the post-war period. But, since 1968 that involvement has stabilized from election year to election year and foreign policy has become less of an electoral issue. At the same time, changes in the misery index have become more dramatic, and hence more important since the 1972 election.

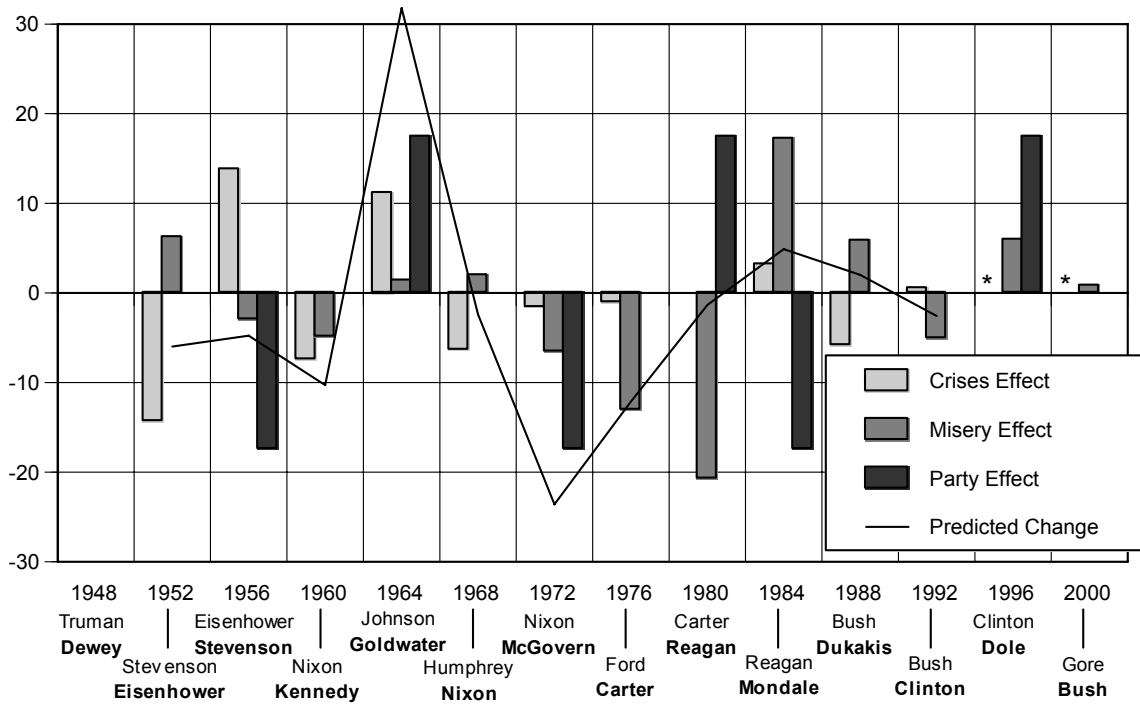
²⁴ In 1980 the extreme economic conditions lead the model to overestimate the impact of the increase in the misery index. While the model predicts a slight decrease in foreign policy attention, Reagan's 1980 speech actually had a little more foreign policy content than Jimmy Carter's 1976 speech.

Figure 7
Components of Predicted Change in Foreign Policy Attention
Incumbent Candidates, 1952-2000



*Note: Crisis data unavailable for 1996-2000

Figure 8
Components of Predicted Change in Foreign Policy Attention
Presidential Challengers, 1952-2000



*Note: Crisis data unavailable for 1996-2000

Figure 7 and Figure 8 show the party and misery index effects for the 1996 and 2000 elections. Without crisis data, these two elections were not used in developing the model. It is an interesting exercise to consider the “predictive” implications of the model for these two most recent electoral contests.

“Predicting” the elections of 1996 and 2000

While the electoral and economic data is current through 2000, the crisis data runs out in 1994. Even in the absence of crisis data, we can gain some insight by looking at the predicted effects of the other variables, and then imputing the necessary changes in the international environment to make the model’s predictions accurate. In 1996, with his status as a democratic incumbent following a Republican incumbent (George Bush) and an almost two percentage point drop in the misery index to brag about, we would expect the incumbent, Bill Clinton, to have dropped the share of his nomination speech dedicated to foreign policy by 26 percentage points. This compares to an actual drop of 17 percentage points. For this model to predict a “just” seventeen percentage point drop in foreign policy emphasis, we would need a

12 unit drop in crisis density. Such an improvement in the international environment would have kept the President talking about his foreign policy successes, at the cost of saying less about the improving economic climate. On the other hand, Clinton's 1996 speech was the longest on record; with too much good news to talk about Clinton may have simply refused to make the trade-off between domestic and foreign policy content.²⁵

Similarly, the model would predict that in 1996 the almost two percentage point drop in the misery index should have motivated the challenger to add almost seven percentage points of foreign policy content. This combined with the fact that the 1996 challenger (Bob Dole) was a Republican, when the previous challenger (Bill Clinton) had been a Democrat, leads to a prediction of a 23 percentage point increase in the challenger's foreign policy content. The actual change is in the right direction--an increase of 11 percentage points--but to "explain" this smaller increase, we would need to have seen a dramatic 23 unit decrease in crisis density since 1992. This is a little more than double the magnitude of the mean change in crisis density over the period (11.2 units). Since crisis density in 1992 was already down to just 13, the magnitude of the predicted change is clearly off.

While the magnitudes are off, the predicted directions are consistent for both incumbent and challenger in 1996. In both cases the model suggests that there was some reduction in crisis density. Alas, our most recent presidential contest does not look as easy to explain. In 2000, Al Gore, as an incumbent Democrat with a slightly improved misery index (-.24), and assuming no change in crisis density, would have been expected to decrease his coverage of foreign policy issues by only one percentage point. To explain the 8 percentage point drop in Al Gore's foreign policy emphasis in the 2000 election, there would need to have been an *increase* in crisis density of about 13 or 14.

The model, like many of the rest of us, would have expected Republican George W. Bush to put a little more emphasis on foreign policy in the 2000 election. To "explain" his 13 percentage point drop in attention to foreign policy issues, there would need to have been an extraordinary *decrease* of 26 percentage points in crisis density for the 2000 election. In addition to these problems of magnitude the direction of change in crisis density required to fit with the other empirical facts is the opposite for the challenger and the incumbent. So, as with many other forecasters and the voting public, the model will have to defer to the Supreme Court for an explanation of the 2000 election.

²⁵ At 7,000 words Clinton's 1996 nomination acceptance speech is almost twice as long as the average nomination acceptance speech for this period (3700 words).

Conclusions

Explaining electoral attention to foreign policy issues is an important foundation for better understanding the relationship between international and domestic affairs generally and the democratic politics of foreign policy making more particularly. On the face of it, this would seem a highly complex phenomenon. Instead, these results suggest that this area of behavior is surprisingly predictable.

Contrary to those models that predict an overwhelming role for external factors, the decision to devote attention to foreign policy issues is a choice that is sensitive to both domestic and international factors. Nor does this analysis suggest that politics stops at the water's edge. Politicians are strategic actors who are as concerned with the political waters in which they swim as with those things that lie beyond the water's edge. As the U.S. becomes more involved in international crises, challengers make foreign policy a more important part of their campaign while incumbents attempt to move voter attention elsewhere.

Despite the presumed complexities and idiosyncrasies of electoral behavior, more than sixty percent of the election-to-election change in foreign policy content can be captured by just three variables: party, the health of the domestic economy, and the density of American crisis involvement. Each of these components is well behaved in the model and operates in a direction and with an intensity that is theoretically plausible. *Ceteris Paribus*, Republicans talk more about foreign policy than Democrats. When the economy is struggling, incumbents attempt to deflect attention outward toward the international environment while challengers turn inward. When the international environment is more crisis-prone, incumbents are more likely to focus on domestic issues, and challengers suddenly become more interested in international affairs.

These results also contribute to our larger understanding of presidential behavior. The essential problem of presidential management is the apportionment of attention in a world of too many issues.²⁶ The relative predictability of presidential behavior in this area points to the rise of the administrative presidency. The observable professionalization and homogenization of nomination acceptance speeches by the end of the 1950s reflects the increasing reliance on specialized campaign managers and advisors who craft the convention appearance of modern presidential candidates.

Presidential candidates respond rationally to the environment in which they find themselves. They make surprisingly consistent choices about how to respond to both international and domestic events. Of course, the model is not so perfect as to suggest that presidential candidates are automatons whose agendas are scripted entirely by party, crisis density, and the misery index. The vicissitudes of international

²⁶ Davenport and Beck argue that attention is the central issue for all managers in complex organizations. Davenport and Beck, *The Attention Economy*, 2001.

events and the particularities of individual candidates can clearly have an effect. The model developed here does not directly incorporate such obviously important events as the wars in Korea and Vietnam, the Iranian hostage crisis, or the end of the Cold War. Still, this straightforward explanation of 64 percent of the variation in candidate attention to foreign policy provides the essential backdrop against which idiosyncratic variation can be more accurately measured and understood.

Finally, these strong results remind us again that understanding foreign policy behavior requires the incorporation of both domestic and international factors, and leads us toward a better appreciation of the strategic choices of political actors competing for control over the levers of foreign policy power.

Data Appendix

Year	Party	Candidate	Incumbent	Incumbent Party	Total Words	Total Foreign Policy Words	Percent Foreign Policy Emphasis
1948	Dem	Harry Truman	1	1	2683	264	9.84
1948	Rep	Thomas Dewey	0	0	1441	605	41.98
1952	Dem	Adlai Stevenson	0	1	1697	128	7.54
1952	Rep	Dwight Eisenhower	0	0	1135	200	17.62
1956	Dem	Adlai Stevenson	0	0	4345	1488	34.25
1956	Rep	Dwight Eisenhower	1	1	2427	513	21.14
1960	Dem	John Kennedy	0	0	5337	2920	54.71
1960	Rep	Richard Nixon	0	1	2560	424	16.56
1964	Dem	Lyndon Johnson	1	1	2296	461	20.08
1964	Rep	Barry Goldwater	0	0	3186	1342	42.12
1968	Dem	Hubert Humphrey	0	1	3839	801	20.86
1968	Rep	Richard Nixon	0	0	3465	1318	38.04
1972	Dem	George McGovern	0	0	4381	2333	53.25
1972	Rep	Richard Nixon	1	1	2610	620	23.75
1976	Dem	Jimmy Carter	1	1	2891	426	14.74
1976	Rep	Gerald Ford	1	1	2933	531	18.10
1980	Dem	Jimmy Carter	1	1	4720	1199	25.40
1980	Rep	Ronald Reagan	0	0	4801	1095	22.81
1984	Dem	Walter Mondale	0	0	5047	692	13.71
1984	Rep	Ronald Reagan	1	1	2167	507	23.40
1988	Dem	Michael Dukakis	0	0	4011	569	14.19
1988	Rep	George Bush	0	1	2896	393	13.57
1992	Dem	Bill Clinton	0	0	4737	1535	32.40
1992	Rep	George Bush	1	1	4362	347	7.96
1996	Dem	Bill Clinton	1	1	7016	1073	15.29
1996	Rep	Robert Dole	0	0	5760	1068	18.54
2000	Dem	Al Gore	0	1	5491	359	6.54
2000	Rep	George W. Bush	0	0	4054	256	6.31

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