The Electoral Cycle and the Conduct of Foreign Policy

Dr. Benjamin Melusky
Assistant Professor of Political Science
Old Dominion University
The Problem of the Electoral Cycle

• But there is still a constitutionally rooted problem that seriously affects the conduct of foreign policy. It derives from the structure of the electoral cycle.

• The electoral arrangements for the presidency and Congress have rarely been justified by the contribution they make to sound foreign policy. The rationale is almost entirely domestic.
• Gallup “What do you think is the most important problem facing the country today?”
  • Economic Problems (net) 10-14%
  • Non-economic Problems (net) 82-85%
    • Yet foreign issue problems?
The Electoral Conundrum

Generally it is thought of that the impact of foreign policy on elections is rather weak:

1) People are more powerfully influenced by a candidate’s personal characteristics and leadership style than by a specific policy
2) Even when issues do matter, they are more likely to involve domestic affairs, especially the performance of the economy, than foreign relations

Thus for foreign policy to really impact electoral outcomes, 3 conditions need to be met:

1) The public must actually possess coherent beliefs or attitudes about foreign policy.
2) Voters must be able to access these attitudes in the context of an election.
3) The major party candidates must offer sufficiently distinct foreign policy alternatives so that voters who have accessed their available attitudes have a basis on which to make a choice.
Secretary of State Cyrus Vance (Carter Admin)

- From experience in the making of foreign policy in several administrations, I have concluded that a four-year presidential term has serious drawbacks, especially when it comes to foreign affairs. It takes each new president from six to nine months to learn his job and to feel comfortable in the formulation and execution of foreign policy. For the next eighteen months the president can operate with assurance. But during the last year or so, he is running for reelection and is forced to divert much of his attention to campaigning. As a result, many issues are ignored, and important decisions are deferred. Sometimes bad decisions are made under the pressures of months of primary elections. And at home and overseas, we are frequently seen as inconsistent and unstable.
First Year Patterns

• A president and his advisers often begin their term with relatively little background in foreign policy issues.
  • Presidents are not allowed the luxury of taking no position on issues until they have learned enough to make sensible judgments.

• These first definitions of a president's position, often taken in the midst of the campaign, are typically of considerable importance in setting the administration's initial course

• If an issue is treated as important, and if presidential predispositions are reflected in the charting of the initial course, the early months of the new term are likely to be marked by activism

• It also takes time for a president and his advisers to develop a comfortable working style.
  • A high degree of confusion is not unusual in the early days.
Second Year Patterns

• Despite the frequent disappointments of dealing with foreign policy issues in the first year, presidents rarely decide to turn their attention away from the international arena in their second year.

• The difference between the first and the second year shows that experience can be a good teacher.

• By the second year, some of the intrabureaucratic feuding and backbiting is likely to have subsided, or at least a president has had the chance to put it to an end if he/she so chooses.

• During the second year, presidents also begin to realize that mishandling of foreign policy issue.
Third Year Patterns

• During the third year of a typical presidential term, foreign policy issues are likely to be assessed at the White House in terms of whether or not they can help advance the incumbent's reelection bid.

• If the prospects for an agreement do not look good during the third year, the tendency is to cut one's losses and to disengage the president from the diplomatic effort.

• The rush for success, along with the tendency to abandon controversial and costly policies, means that mistakes are often made in the third year.
Fourth Year Patterns

• Most presidents go to great lengths to deny that electoral considerations are allowed to influence their conduct of foreign policy.

• The guidelines for the fourth year with respect to potentially controversial foreign policy issues are thus fairly simple.

• In brief, most presidents recognize that they can hope to achieve little in foreign policy in the midst of an election campaign.
Second Term Pattern

• For a president in his second term, the four-year pattern changes significantly.
  • The first year and a half may be the best time for taking foreign policy initiatives. The president knows as much about substance as he/she ever will. The reelection has provided the proof he/she may feel he/she needed that the public is behind them.

• Late in the second year, however, domestic considerations begin to intrude on foreign policy concern

• At some point in the third or fourth year, the "lame duck" phenomenon is bound to affect the president.
The Trump Difference and 2020

• While foreign policy may not prove to be quite as salient for voters in 2020, as it was in 2016, there are a significant number of reasons why international affairs will be prominent.

• In part, this is because Trump has — unlike many presidents in the modern era put a very significant amount of emphasis on foreign policy in the first three years of his presidency.
  • So far from China to North Korea, Iran to Russia,
  • Multilateral trade from the new US-Mexico-Canada agreement to pulling out the Trans-Pacific Partnership deal.

• This pattern looks set to continue in 2020.
  • The United States is for instance hosting this year’s G7, which will occupy a significant amount of White House attention.
  • Trump is seeking key achievements in coming months in dealing with China, Iran, and North Korea.
    • Example - North Korea remains an open question whether sustained moves toward “denuclearisation” of the Korean peninsula will ultimately prove anything more than a mirage.

• Taken together, this underlines why 2020 could be such a significant year for US foreign policy.
  • Trump
  • Democratic hopefuls
Foreign-Policy Question Averages by Party, 2000-2020

Bars represent the mean or the number of foreign-policy questions asked during primary election debates divided by the total number of primary debates during that election cycle. The 2004 and 2012 elections had primaries for only one party. Based on a Foreign Policy review of debate transcripts and video footage from 109 of 124 debates.
Conclusions

• The American political system was not designed with the conduct of foreign policy in mind.

• Presidents do have great power at their disposal. It is often most usable in the midst of crises, when the normal restraints of political life are suspended, at least for a little while.

• This means that the United States is structurally at a disadvantage in trying to develop and sustain policies that require a mastery of complex issues and call for consistency and a long-term vision to enhance the prospects of success.

• Each president comes to office with a tendency to believe that he/she can reshape the realities of the international environment. In time, they learn otherwise (or perhaps not........)