

Rare for an Election Year: In 2004, Foreign Policy Matters

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ST. PAUL, MINN. – Why are Republicans dwelling on John Edwards's lack of foreign policy experience while Democrats focus on Dick Cheney's role in making the now discredited case for war in Iraq? The answer: For the first time in 30 years, foreign policy matters.

Usually the economy ends up tilting the undecided voters and determining the winner. By this measure, the 2004 election should break in President Bush's favor and, by normal standards, decisively.

Despite earlier worries in Republican circles that voters might not notice the recent uptick in the nation's economy, recent polls show that Americans are more confident about the economy and have improved their rating of Mr. Bush's handling of the economy.

But 2004 is different. Gallup polls since the 1940s have asked Americans to rank the "most important problem" facing the country. Polls taken during the final six months of the last four presidential elections show that Americans barely noticed the issues of war and peace.

Indeed, since the 1976 election, not even a quarter of Americans have, on average, ranked foreign affairs as the country's top problem.

Vietnam, of course, did pique public concern, ranking as a pressing issue in the minds of an extraordinary 40 percent of Americans in 1968 and 30 percent in 1972. Public concerns over the Korean War and the threat of war with the Soviet Union rocketed to more than 50 percent in the four elections after World War II. The alarm of Americans today about foreign affairs is comparable to those levels.

Recent Gallup polls found that about 40 percent of Americans ranked foreign policy issues - led by Iraq and terrorism - as the country's top problems. The polls not only reveal the saliency of the terrorism and Iraq issues, they show real concern over America's reputation in the world and the effectiveness of US policy. A March poll by the Pew Foundation showed that support for US policies in foreign nations had dropped precipitously.

Solid majorities of Americans in recent polls disapprove of Bush's handling of Iraq and question his credibility in making the case for war. Gallup recently found that 54 percent of Americans believe that sending troops to Iraq was a mistake - the same percentage of respondents who in August 1968 thought the deployment to Vietnam was a mistake. Although this discontent with Bush's performance has not translated yet into a major advantage for John Kerry, the president has seen a sharp decline in the advantage on terrorism and Iraq that he once enjoyed. Bush is no longer counting on winning as the wartime president, as his strategists once predicted.

Voters will also compare the candidates on their personal strength, competence, and experience in balancing pragmatism in foreign affairs with American values that favor democracy and human rights.

The most important feature of the 2004 presidential election is that voters expect clear answers on foreign policy. This is a sharp departure from elections since Vietnam, and especially since the end of the cold war, when the candidates knew they had to pass a "leadership" test by showing a command of foreign policy but also knew that the details would not lose an election. Their focus was on the domestic side.

The outcome of the election may well hinge on how voters judge the candidates' credibility and effectiveness in clearly addressing these critical foreign relations issues:

- Unilateralism vs. cooperation: Has the US gone it alone too much? Will a cooperative framework appear weak? Under what conditions and in what ways should the US work with other countries, even if this means accepting constraints on its actions?
- Use of force: Under what conditions and in what ways should the US commit to military force in the future? Is a doctrine of preemptive attack still credible after Iraq? When, if ever, should a president agree to allow US troops to serve under the UN Security Council with a non-US commander.
- Nationbuilding: The world has no lack of urgent humanitarian and security challenges. Under what conditions and in what ways should the US intervene to prevent the collapse of nations or engage in nationbuilding after a conflict?
- Counterterrorism: Which candidate has the most persuasive plan? In what ways should the US further strengthen its military and homeland security? Or, does security primarily rely on a more comprehensive approach using diplomacy, police cooperation, development assistance, and improved intelligence?

The tendency will be for the two candidates to move to the center on these issues. Expect Bush to point to his newfound cooperation with the UN and NATO, and Senator Kerry to show that he is tougher and more pragmatic than Bush. It is quite possible that, in the end, voters will shift their focus to other concerns, but we wouldn't bet on that.

This is the year for foreign policy and the candidates know it. Now it is time for them to demonstrate why we should trust them.

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